

Latin as a Common Language: The Coherence of Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Program

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In his critique of the language and thought of the Scholastics, Lorenzo Valla contrasts classical Latin as a natural, common language to the so-called artificial, technical, and unnatural language of his opponents. He famously champions Quintilian's view that one should follow common linguistic usage. Scholars, however, have disagreed about the precise interpretation of these qualifications of Latin. This article argues that, depending on the historical, rhetorical, and argumentative contexts, Valla uses notions such as common and natural in different ways to suit different purposes. Such a contextualized reading has repercussions for an evaluation of the coherence of Valla's humanist program.

INTRODUCTION

WHILE CERTAINLY NOT the first to criticize the language of the schools and universities, the humanist Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1406–57) was the staunchest and also the most comprehensive critic of his generation. Inspired by the great authors of antiquity, in particular Cicero and Quintilian, and dreaming of a world in which Latin would be reinstalled as the language of learned conversation and communication, Valla not only made an in-depth study of all the intricacies of the Latin language and its literature, documented in his influential *Elegantiae Linguae Latinae* (The fine points of the Latin language, 1441), but also attacked what he saw as the ungrammatical, barbarous, and uninformative language of the Aristotelian Scholastics. Like his predecessors, Valla aimed at showing that postclassical developments of Latin had wrought havoc in the arts and sciences, and, in particular, in the trivial arts, philosophy, and theology, where words make all the difference. Hence, a running theme throughout his critique, which he develops in particular in his *Dialectical Disputations* (1439), is the opposition

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between the so-called artificial, technical, unnatural, and distorted language of his opponents and the Latin of the great authors, which he considers a common and natural language.

Valla's position raises some fundamental questions. First of all, how could he claim that classical Latin is a common, natural language? The humanists accused the Scholastics of playing an inward game, with their own invented terminology, rules, sterile examples, and ritualistic formulas, but arguably the humanists were not immune from such criticism either: they promoted a language that was far from common or natural, at least not in the sense of being one's mother tongue or the speech of the masses. Mastery of this language helped to establish a group identity no less than the technical Latin had done for the Scholastics.¹ Of course, Valla lived at a time when classical Latin could still (or again) be viewed as a living language, but the vernacular was on the rise and had a future, while classical Latin would soon be called a dead language.² So how did he argue this point, defending Latin as a natural language in opposition to the language of the philosophers? And if we are to follow the linguistic usage of the ancients—as Valla time and again argues—a further question arises: whose usage exactly, and why their usage? If Latin of one author or a selective group of authors or Latin from a particular period is held as normative for the use of Latin at all times, including Valla's own, how can such a recommendation be squared with a historical approach to language also ascribed to humanists such as Valla? In other words, how can the view of Latin as the timeless language of the arts, sciences, and refined communication—a view that seems to underlie Valla's praise of Latin as the *magnum sacramentum* (the great sacred teaching) in the preface to the first book of the *Elegantiae*—be reconciled with a historicization of language, that is, an approach that sees language as culturally embedded, as something that cannot be separated from the historical contexts in which it functioned?³ Is there not a deep ambiguity in Valla's position, and perhaps in the entire humanist project of treating Latin as the expression of a historically and geographically bounded culture while at the same time regarding it as a timeless medium, transcending boundaries of time and place, and as a *sine qua non* for the development of the arts, science, literature, and refined communication?

Not surprisingly, scholars have been strongly divided over these issues. For Mariangela Regoliosi, Valla's position contains "great aporias" and "contradic-

¹ On language and group identity, see Burke's introduction in Burke and Porter, 15–16. On humanists against the Scholastics, see, among many other studies, Rummel; Wels; Moss; Schmidt; Martin.

² See Faithfull; Considine; Mazzocco, 242n123.

³ Valla, 1962, 2:4 (*Elegantiae* 1.proem).

tions."⁴ She sees a clear conflict between Valla's emphasis on a descriptive, empirical method in the study of Latin and a certain *antistoricismo* (antihistoricism).⁵ Mirko Tavoni, too, has detected something paradoxical in Valla's emphasis on common linguistic usage, while this usage was limited to "the international community of scholars."⁶ On the other hand, Silvia Rizzo has denied any such tensions, claiming that Valla's position is consistent and coherent: Valla's view of Latin as an *ars*—as a highly regimented, secondary, and artificial (from *ars*, for which teachers are needed) language in opposition to the unregulated vulgar tongues—is a coherent position and in line with the equation of Latin with *grammatica*, made by medieval grammarians, Dante, and Leonardo Bruni.⁷ And while Rizzo and other scholars such as Tavoni and John Monfasani have argued that this common linguistic usage invariably refers to the Latin of the learned authors of antiquity, Salvatore I. Camporeale believed that the notion of common linguistic usage had a broader application, and he even identified it with the vulgar tongue.⁸ Camporeale also argued that Valla might have developed a kind of historical grammar, a claim strongly rejected by other scholars.⁹ Even more radical was Richard Waswo, who argued that for Valla "the whole value of the 'common custom of speaking' goes far beyond the particular predominant in the *Institutio oratoria*, to invoke the wider purpose of making semantic distinctions useful in ordinary life."¹⁰ And the debate is still going on.

These interpretations have repercussions for the interpretation of what Valla meant by a word such as *natural*: Regoliosi, for instance, identifies it with Latin, Rizzo with the vernacular.¹¹ It also has repercussions for how one interprets another important but ambiguous term, *ratio* (reason, account, analysis).¹² For those who discern an essentially descriptive project in Valla's study of Latin, based on his vast reading of classical and postclassical sources, reason stands in opposition to usage, and hence does not play a significant role in Valla's thought, certainly not when the notion of *ratio* is associated with the rational reconstructions of lan-

⁴ Regoliosi, 2000, 334–35; Regoliosi, 2010, 114.

⁵ Regoliosi, 2000, 335.

⁶ Tavoni, 1986, 213: "prevalentemente scritto della comunità internazionale dei dotti."

⁷ Rizzo, 2002, 17.

⁸ Monfasani, 323; Tavoni, 1984 and 1986; Camporeale, 190.

⁹ Camporeale, 184, 188–90; criticized by Tavoni, 1984, 149; Tavoni, 1986, 212.

¹⁰ Waswo, 1979, 259; cf. Waswo, 1987, 97–104; Gerl, 223–25; Nauta, 2009, 274–80; Nauta, 2015a.

¹¹ Regoliosi, 2000, 326; Rizzo, 2002, 113.

¹² In Valla, 2012, *ratio* has been translated in many different ways, depending on the context: reason, explanation, (line of) reasoning, account, argument, system, structure, procedure, way, theory, methods, approach, plan.

guage and meaning developed by medieval speculative grammarians, the so-called Modists.¹³ For those who stress the normative aspect of Valla's studies, reason in the sense of a certain rationalization and idealization of linguistic phenomena, not necessarily supported by observation of actual usage, does have a place in Valla's thinking. Lucia Cesarini Martinelli, for instance, has stressed the normative character of Valla's analysis of Latin that often foists "an intellectual scheme" on the linguistic data, creating "a rigorously rational interpretation."¹⁴ Valla let himself be guided by *ratio* no less than by *usus* (usage).¹⁵ On this view, the empirical, inductive, and descriptive aspect is often accompanied by a craving for symmetry, harmonization, and rationalization of diverse and apparently contradicting linguistic phenomena.

This kind of rationalization of conflicting data ascribed to Valla is also something that can be detected among modern scholars, who sometimes seem to feel forced to choose between one or the other position. The aim of this article is to suggest that it is not an either-or question: it is not either descriptive or normative, either reason or usage, either timeless *ars* or historical development. What is required is an examination of the many instances where Valla uses these terms. It will then turn out that, depending on the historical, rhetorical, and argumentative contexts, he stresses this or that aspect, using qualifications such as natural, common speech, and the common people in different ways to suit the argument at stake. An evaluation of the coherence of Valla's program depends, therefore, on how much emphasis is put on some statements rather than on others.

In what follows, Valla's remarks on Latin and on the relationship between Latin and the vernacular will be considered first, focusing on his use of terms such as *linguistic usage*, *common speech*, and *natural speech*. This will show how his criticisms of Scholastic-Aristotelian philosophy are motivated by his ideas about Latin and language in general. Though closely related, the two topics are not the same: Valla's remarks on Latin and the vernacular must be seen against the background of the famous debate among humanists on various issues concerning the use of Latin in antiquity and its relationship with their own linguistic situation, while his attack on Scholastic language must be understood first and foremost as a critical and often-polemical engagement with the Aristotelian *Organon* and its medieval interpreters. But even though these issues—and the contexts in which

¹³ Regoliosi, 2010, 121: "descriptive and not normative"; Marsh, 97 ("rigorous historical perspective"), 106 ("induction"), 107 ("inductive analysis" and "inductive observation"), and so on.

¹⁴ Cesarini Martinelli, 75; cf. *ibid.*, 73. See also Gaeta, 79–126; Gavinelli; Miguel Franco, 21–28.

¹⁵ Cesarini Martinelli, 75; see also *ibid.*, 78; cf. Fubini, 1961, 544, who speaks out about "a strongly intellectualistic component."

they arose—are not the same, I will suggest that Valla applies some of his ideas, developed in the humanist debates on Latin, to his analysis and critique of Scholastic language.

It is expedient, therefore, to look closely at a number of passages, distinguishing between pairs of terms that he uses in a variety of argumentative contexts. These two issues also have something in common, viz. their rhetorical and polemical nature, which makes it not always easy to see what Valla's own opinion is, in particular in his debates with his archenemy Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459). Invectives are not the place to look for well-formulated and well-argued positions, and the same is true for Valla's polemical attacks on the Scholastics in the *Dialectical Disputations*. Given these considerations, it would be ill-advised to turn Valla into a philosopher of language and expect him to develop clearly delineated and well-argued positions on language, language acquisition, and the rise of the vernaculars, as well as the relationship between language and thought and between language and the world. But behind the polemics a serious position can be detected based on the conviction that philosophizing must be conducted in a natural, common language, and that classical Latin is the perfect vehicle for doing so. Many people then and now do not share this conviction, arguing that humanists such as Valla failed to see the need and usefulness of a technical vocabulary. From a historical point of view, however, the humanist critique cannot be ignored: it was repeated time and again in the early modern period, and it helped to prepare the way for the rise of new philosophical and scientific ways of thinking and writing by criticizing Scholastic Aristotelianism. The aim of this article is to analyze an important first step in this critique of technical language and the possible tensions such a critique contains.¹⁶

LATIN AND THE VERNACULAR: THE DEBATE

The humanist debate on Latin, as has often been described, started in the ante-chamber of Pope Eugene IV (1383–1447) in Florence in 1435, where several humanists discussed the question of what kind of language the common people in ancient Rome had used.¹⁷ Did a sharp distinction exist between the *vulgaris sermo* (common speech) of the *illitterati* (illiterate) and the *sermo litteratus* (learned, lit-

¹⁶ I have treated the theme of this article much more cursorily in Nauta, 2009, 276–80, and more recently in Nauta, 2015a. For some key moments in the history of this language critique, see Nauta, 2015b (on Vives) and 2016.

¹⁷ On the debate, see Grayson; Fubini, 1961; Tavoni, 1984; Dionisotti; Mazzocco, 30–105; Coletti; Pittaluga; Fubini, 2003, 9–42. The relevant texts are conveniently assembled in Tavoni, 1984.

erate speech) of the learned and educated people, or did they use more or less the same kind of language, with due recognition of differences in the quality of their style and words depending on their cultural and intellectual background? And how did this issue translate to their own times, also characterized by diglossia, with the resurrected classical Latin next to—and sometimes in opposition to—the many vernacular tongues? Several humanists expressed their opinions on these issues in the following years. The point of departure was the position of Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), who had argued for a clear separation between the two languages in antiquity.¹⁸ The *illitterati* in ancient Rome could not speak *latine et litterate* (Latin and literate)—that is, they could not conjugate verbs, inflect nouns, and make well-formed sentences. It was tempting to see the *volgare* of their own time as a descendant of this ancient *sermo vulgaris* (common language), but Bruni did not explicitly argue for such continuity, even though he was interpreted in this way by other participants in the debate and by modern scholars.¹⁹ As a Florentine, a user of the vernacular himself, and a translator, Bruni certainly had much sympathy for the vernacular (that is, his own Florentine, of course), but he saw a clear contrast between the two—just as there had been a clear contrast in antiquity—and he defined this contrast in terms of *ars* and *natura*, between regulated and unregulated language, identifying Latin with *grammatica* as many medieval writers, including Dante, had done.²⁰

A somewhat different position was taken by the Roman humanist Flavio Biondo (1392–1463), who argued in his *De Verbis Romanae Locutionis* (On the words of Roman speech, 1435) that the people in antiquity were members of the same linguistic community: the common people were able to understand plays and speeches.²¹ Rather than a clear-cut separation between the two types of languages, Biondo believed there was a variety of usages of the *latina lingua* from common people at one end of the spectrum to orators and poets on the other end. Independent vernaculars only arose much later out of Latin, when barbarian tribes invaded Europe. The Latin had therefore to be reconquered and purified from vernacular contaminations.

The details of the debate between these and other protagonists, such as Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), Guarino Guarini (1374–1460), and Poggio Bracciolini, need not be discussed here; what has been said is enough to locate Valla in this

¹⁸ On Bruni's position, see Tavoni, 1984, 3–41 (discussion), 216–21 (texts).

¹⁹ Tavoni, 1982, 238.

²⁰ On Dante, see Corti; Rosier-Catach in Dante, with extensive literature. On Bruni's vernacular writings and translations, see Hankins.

²¹ See Tavoni, 1984, 197–215 (text), 3–41 (commentary); Mazzocco. For a critical edition, see Biondo.

debate.²² From several of his writings, in particular the *Elegantiae*, the *Apologus* (1453), the *Oratio in Principio sui Studii* (Inaugural lecture, 1455), and some scattered remarks from the *Dialectical Disputations*, the following picture of Valla's views can be distilled, but it is certainly not always clear-cut. Before the rise of Latin in antiquity, there were many languages, as the story of Babel, to which Valla makes incidental reference, testifies.²³ In the Italian Peninsula the *italica lingua* (the Italian language) was "diverse and manifold."²⁴ Initially, Latin was close to the language of the *vulgus* (common people). Talking about Greek and Latin, Valla writes, "of course Greek at that time was practically one and the same for common people and for the learned [*vulgi et litteratorum*]²⁵—just as it was with the ancient Romans, whose language is sometimes called 'Roman' . . . and sometimes 'Latin.'²⁵ This seems to imply that, as the language of learned communication, literature, the arts, and the sciences, Latin developed as a highly regulated form of Latin from this common ground. The masses could not speak or write this grammatically correct and eloquent language of the poets, the orators, and other learned people. The existence of schools and teachers in antiquity is proof enough for Valla that it had to be learned; it did not come naturally or spontaneously to people. Still, they all belonged to one linguistic community of Latin users. The learned people can be said to have spoken "more ornately" or "more eloquently," but they were not "more Latinate [*latinus*]."²⁶

Valla does not say much about the relationships between the pre-Latin languages, the *sermo vulgaris*, and the *sermo litteratus*. In the *Elegantiae* he suggests that Latin existed alongside but independent from the vernacular languages ("to which it added luster rather than destroying them").²⁷ And in his *Apologus* against Poggio Bracciolini he writes that the pre-Latin languages yielded or gave precedence to Latin during the time of the Roman expansion, without explicitly

²² *Debate* might not be the right term, since it implies that the protagonists knew (directly) of each other's contributions. In the case of Valla, this was probably not the case: Tavoni, 1984, 128n26.

²³ Valla, 1982, 2:433 (*Repastinatio* 1.19.10); Valla in Rizzo, 1994, 196. See Nauta, 2009, 56; Tavoni, 1984, 155.

²⁴ Valla, 1962, 1:384 (*Apologus* 2); Tavoni, 1984, 263: "diversa ac multiplex."

²⁵ Valla, 2012, 1:9 (*Dialectical Disputations* [hereafter *DD*] 1.proem.12). The equation of Roman with Latin was not accepted by Poggio Bracciolini for whom *romana lingua* (the Roman language) referred to the vernacular spoken in Rome in his own time: see Tavoni, 1984, 123–24.

²⁶ Text in Camporeale, 525, 529; Tavoni, 1984, 266, 271.

²⁷ According to Valla, the people conquered by the Romans deplored the loss of their freedom but recognized that Latin did not diminish, but rather enriched, their language: Valla, 1962, 1:3 (*Elegantiae* 1.proem). On this theme, see De Caprio; Fisher.

saying that later, probably after the Roman Empire, they developed into the vernacular languages as he knew them from his own time.²⁸ He recognized that Italian, French, and Spanish “have a certain affinity,” stating that Spanish derived from Italian.²⁹ What Valla did not want to suggest is that classical Latin transformed or developed into these vernacular languages. It had been there since antiquity, and though knowledge of it had dramatically declined with barbarian invasions and, later, with the rise of medieval schools and universities, it was Rome’s semipermanent gift to the world. Valla lived in a Latin universe, and all later postclassical languages—the (Roman) vernaculars and medieval Latin—could be regarded only as depraved, corrupted versions of Latin. It might seem strange that he considered the modern vernaculars as a kind of Latin too, but this probably had something to do with his Roman patriotism. If he had assigned an independent status to the vernacular in antiquity, this would have jeopardized the cultural-linguistic continuum that Latin had established through the ages. It would also have set the Roman vernacular of his own day in opposition to other vernaculars, in particular the Florentine one, a contest that Rome would surely have lost.³⁰ Valla’s Latin perspective was thus all-inclusive and led him to label the modern vernaculars as a form of (depraved) Latin too.³¹

Valla’s position seems thus to steer a middle course between Bruni and Biondo. At times he seems to agree with Bruni that there was a considerable distance between the *sermo vulgaris* and the *sermo litteratus* in antiquity, just as there was diglossia in his own day; Latin in the more specific sense of a highly regulated *ars* was something different from the more natural speech that the masses spoke. But at other times he stresses the continuity between what may be called lower and higher forms of Latin, seemingly thinking of a more gradual situation. Because Valla also applies Latin to the variety (or varieties) of language used by the common people, he could not identify Latin with *grammatica*, as a regulated language as opposed to the vernacular—an identification that Bruni and medieval authors including Dante had made. Not being a Florentine, Valla also does not share Bruni’s fairly favorable judgment of the vernacular and, like Biondo, he does not show a great interest in the vernacular.

²⁸ Valla, 1962, 1:384 (*Apologus* 2); Tavoni, 1984, 263. For the context of the debate with Poggio Bracciolini, see Wesseling’s introduction in Valla, 1978, 25–39; Camporeale.

²⁹ Valla, 1962, 1:388 (*Apologus* 2); Tavoni, 1984, 272; Valla, 1962, 1:29 (*Elegantiae* 1.29).

³⁰ On the rivalry between Rome and Florence in the language debate, see Cesarini Martinelli, 35–42; Mazzocco, 78–81.

³¹ See Tavoni, 1984, 140. On Valla’s disregard for the vernacular, see Regoliosi’s introduction in Valla, 1981, lx; Mazzocco, 81; Rizzo, 2002, 115.

“COMMON LANGUAGE”

From the discussion so far it is clear why Valla thinks Latin to be a common, natural language: it was—in one form or another—the language of Roman antiquity, either as the *sermo vulgaris* of the common people or the *sermo litteratus* of the learned. It was also common in the sense that it had been the international language of learned communication and scholarship throughout the ages. Vernacular languages do not enter into the picture as serious alternatives as they are all to be regarded as depraved forms of Latin. When Valla uses the term *sermo vulgaris*, he does not as a rule mean the vernacular. To refer to Latin as a common language, Valla employs different terms such as *sermo vulgaris*, *sermo communis*, *sermo popularis*, *communis loquendi consuetudo* (common linguistic usage), *sermo omnium* (the speech of all people). As will be seen, these terms are used often interchangeably. I will start with *sermo vulgaris*.

In classical Latin *vulgaris* means “of or belonging to the great mass or multitude,” “general,” “usual,” “ordinary,” “everyday,” “common,” “commonplace,” “vulgar,” and so on. Quintilian used *vulgo*, for instance, in the sense of “usually” or “commonly.”³² The same meaning is found in Valla. Expressions such as *sermo vulgaris* (common language), *vulgo dicitur* (it is said commonly), *ut vulgus ait* (as the common people say), and *vulgus testante* (as testified by the common people), usually refer to Latin.³³ For example, he criticizes Poggio Bracciolini who thinks, “with the people” (*cum vulgo*), that the word *perpendere* means “to understand” rather than “to weigh carefully.” In the *Elegantiae* he comments on the use of *quidem* (indeed, also, but), mentioning a third way of using this word, “which makes the *sermo vulgaris* clear,” giving an example from Cicero.³⁴ He observes that *quippe* and *utpote* are “commonly” or “generally” (*vulgo*) taken to mean “certainly” (*certe*), a use that Valla does not completely reject, he says, though he prefers to take them *pro causativis*, that is, introducing a fact that gives a reason or cause, meaning “for” or “because.” In a discussion on the difference between *quidam* / *aliquis* (a certain/someone) he writes, “we commonly say” (*vulgo loquimur*) that “a certain one wrote to a certain one,” in which *quidam* rather than *aliquis* is used;³⁵ this is “the common expression” (*vulgaris sermo*). Such examples can easily be multiplied. In

³² Quintilian, 5:208 (*Institutio oratoria* 12.1.24).

³³ For the examples that follow in this paragraph, see the references in Tavoni, 1986, 200n1. Tavoni also gives examples of words, explained or mentioned by Valla, of which a vernacular equivalent exists, but he argues that this is clearly irrelevant: “Valla reasons in Latin.” *Ibid.*, 201.

³⁴ Valla, 1962, 1:60 (*Elegantiae* 2.23); cf. *ibid.*, 1:107 (*Elegantiae* 3.52), a chapter entitled “On a Common Usage of ‘to Me’ and ‘to You’ with Two Ciceronian Examples,” mentioned by Tavoni, 1986, 202n5.

³⁵ Valla, 1982, 2:461 (*Repastinatio* 2.3.12); Valla, 2012, 2:41 (*DD* 2.5.18).

all such cases Valla is not thinking of the vernacular but of more or less acceptable forms of Latin attested by texts and practice, without, however, giving a clear reference to a particular variety or a particular historical period.

When Valla wants to refer to the vernacular he usually uses expressions such as *illiterate loqui* (speaking illiterately), *idiotarum more loqui* (speaking in the manner of the unlearned, unlettered, lay people), *vernacula lingua* (vernacular language), or *lingua materna* (mother tongue); *litteratus* and *idiota* form a clear opposition in his mind.³⁶ Only in a handful of cases does he use *vulgo* to refer to the vernacular: *indulgentia* (forbearance) is commonly (*vulgo*) accepted for *venia*; those who were called *argentarii* (money-changers) in antiquity are commonly (*vulgo*) called *campsores*; *margarita* (pearl) is commonly (*vulgo*) called *perla*.³⁷ There are also some cases where it is not easy to determine whether Valla was considering a particular word as a *volgarismo* or still a form of Latin; from a theoretical point of view, he considered, as noted above, all these languages or types of language as Latin. What is clear, however, is that in the vast majority of cases where Valla uses *sermo vulgaris* he is thinking and talking about Latin.

“COMMON LINGUISTIC USAGE”

With these findings in mind I will now turn to the important notion, frequently invoked by Valla, of the *communis consuetudo loquendi* (common linguistic usage) and closely related expressions such as *consuetudo popularis* (popular custom), *mos loquendi* (the usual manner or custom of speaking), and *usus* (practice or convention). Valla frequently employs this notion of linguistic usage to argue against the Scholastics. His sources of inspiration are of course the great orators of Roman antiquity, Cicero and, in particular, Quintilian, who must be briefly discussed.

In a famous discussion in the first book of his *Institutio oratoria* (Institutes of oratory), Quintilian, following Cicero, had defended linguistic usage as the governing principle for accounting for linguistic phenomena, including irregularities and anomalies in grammar and morphology (e.g., declensions and conjugations), against grammarians who had prescribed certain forms on the basis of analogy or reason—that is, a set of highly regular patterns of word formation. In general, Ro-

³⁶ Valla, 2012, 2:124 (*DD* 2.18.4). To give just one example: “to see” is called “lo vedere” by lay people or the uneducated (*idiotis*); *ibid.*, 1:70 (*DD* 1.5.10). Valla also uses *rusticanus loqui* to refer to the vernacular; *plebeius loqui* can refer to both, while *quotidianus sermo* clearly refers to Latin: Tavoni, 1986, 210–11. Yet in Valla, 2012, 1:171 (*DD* 1.10.71), the term *idiota* seems to be used to refer to (some form of) Latin: “as when uneducated people [*idiotas*] say ‘I’m doing well in my affairs [*bene ago res meas*].’”

³⁷ For these examples, see Valla, 1962, 1:127, 138, 235 (*Elegantiae* 4.18, 4.44, 6.64); and in Tavoni, 1986, 202.

man grammarians took the side of analogy, orators the side of anomaly. Grammarians proposed, for example, to change *ebur* (ivory) and *robur* (strength), found among “the highest authorities,” into *ebor* and *robor*, because their genetives are *roboris* and *eboris*, and because *sulphur* (sulphur) and *guttur* (throat) keep the *u* in the genitive.³⁸ Quintilian was against such active interventions from teachers of grammar:³⁹ “Analogy was not sent down from heaven to frame the rules of language when men were first created, but was discovered only when they were already using language and note was taken of the way in which particular words ended in speech. It rests therefore not upon Reason but upon Precedent; it is not a law of speech, but an observed practice, Analogy itself being merely the product of Usage.” After some more examples, Quintilian famously concludes that “speaking Latin is one thing, and speaking grammatically quite another.”⁴⁰ It is from observation of linguistic usage and custom that rules for speaking and writing must be derived. Usage is “the surest teacher of speaking, and we should treat language like money marked with the public stamp [*publica forma*].”⁴¹ Before Quintilian, Cicero had used the image of the balance: “For this oratory of ours must be adapted to the ears of the multitude, for charming or urging their minds to approve of proposals, which are weighed in no goldsmith’s balance, but in what I may call common scales [*populari quadam trutina*].”⁴²

But what is usage? It cannot be defined as “what most people do,” Quintilian says, for there are enough practices in life found among the majority that we should not want to follow, such as “plucking the hairs of the legs or armpits, arranging one’s coiffure in tiers, getting dead drunk at the baths.”⁴³ “So too in speech,” he continues, “we must not accept as a rule of language any bad habits which have become ingrained in many people. To say nothing of the language of the uneducated, we know that whole theatres and the entire circus crowd often commit Barbarisms in the shouting they make.” Quintilian defines usage in speech “as the consensus of the educated, just as Usage in life is the consensus of the good.”⁴⁴ Language as a reflection and expression of good manners was of course central to Quintilian’s oratorical outlook. His analogy between language and a coin with a popular stamp was not meant as a plea to follow the majority, let alone the uneducated people: this *publica forma* (public stamp) of current linguistic usage refers to the agreed practice of the educated people.

³⁸ Quintilian, 1:171 (*Institutio oratoria* 1.6.22). On this debate, see Marsh, 98.

³⁹ Quintilian, 1:169 (*Institutio oratoria* 1.6.16).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:173 (*Institutio oratoria* 1.6.27).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1:163 (*Institutio oratoria* 1.6.3).

⁴² Cicero, 1942a, 313 (*De oratore* 2.38.159).

⁴³ Quintilian, 1:183–85 (*Institutio oratoria* 1.6.44).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:185.

Valla knew this chapter 6 of the first book of the *Institutio oratoria* very well—indeed, he claimed to know the entire *Institutio* virtually by heart.⁴⁵ In his dispute with Poggio Bracciolini, who had misunderstood Quintilian's position and had criticized Valla's *Elegantiae*, Valla defends linguistic usage, siding with the anomalists and stressing that linguistic usage should sanction the rules of grammar and determine the meaning of words. Valla uses various terms more or less interchangeably: we should follow the *communis loquendi consuetudo* (common linguistic usage), *sermo communis* (common or ordinary speech), *consuetudo popularis* (common usage), *usus loquendi* (spoken usage), *usus et consuetudo loquendi* (usage and custom in speaking), or *quotidiana communisque loquendi consuetudo* (everyday and communal practice of speaking).⁴⁶ But what exactly does Valla mean by these terms? As already explained, the vernacular does not play any serious role in Valla's Latin world, and, when it comes to Latin style, Valla often defends the *consuetudo peritorum* (the usage of the learned people), referring to the best authors (*maximi auctores, summi auctores*) and the orators, who spoke and wrote the best Latin.⁴⁷

Following Quintilian, who had insisted on observation rather than on hard and fast rules, Valla explains his method in the *Elegantiae* as follows: "Throughout this work, I am not pursuing the license of the poets so much as the usage of the orators. And it should not be held against me if discrepant readings are found in the best writers, for I am not framing a law as if one never wrote otherwise, but noting what was most frequently observed, especially by Cicero and Quintilian."⁴⁸ It is the *sermo litteratus* that is usually Valla's object of study. As he writes in the *Dialectical Disputations*, referring again to Quintilian: "As for us, we must speak according to a grammatical standard, speaking not so much grammatically as in Latin—following not so much the rules of an art, in other words, as the usage of the educated and cultured people, which is the best art of all. And who does not know that speaking is based mainly on usage and authority."⁴⁹ Valla then cites Quintilian's comparison of money and language. And after having inserted a long quotation from Quintilian in the third book of his *Dialectical Disputations*, he explains why he had done so: "In this book, and in the one before, I have taken on his teachings as the best and most definitive not only because they are indispensable but also because they are suited not just to dialecticians and philosophers but also to the civil law and all the arts and to the everyday and communal

⁴⁵ Valla, 1981, 42; Valla, 1962, 1:477 (*Antidotum in Facium*).

⁴⁶ Valla, 2012, 2:395 (*DD* 3.15.42), 1:89 (*DD* 1.8.1), 1:231 (*DD* 1.16.7).

⁴⁷ E.g., Valla, 1962, 1:385 (*Apologus* 2).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:22 (*Elegantiae* 1.17), translated in Marsh, 107. See Quintilian, 1:168 (*Institutio oratoria* 1.6.16).

⁴⁹ Valla, 2012, 2:85 (*DD* 2.11.6).

practice of speaking [*quotidianae communique loquendi consuetudini*]. For when dialecticians teach about this topic and give their examples, they seem to be singing (if singing it is, and not croaking) to themselves."⁵⁰

In these passages Valla's aim is clearly to champion the Latin usage of the educated and cultured people, and this is how most scholars have interpreted his position. A more detailed look at Valla's work, however, suggests that the picture is more complicated. Terms such as *common* or *popular linguistic usage* and related terms such as *natural language* and *common people* turn out to be flexible tools that, depending on the argumentative and polemical context, can bring about an unlikely—and un-Quintilianesque—coalition of the educated people and the common, uneducated people to contrast natural language with what Valla sees as the artificiality and unnatural character of Scholastic language and argumentation.

REASON, AUTHORITY, AND COMMON LINGUISTIC USAGE

Though Valla closely associates common linguistic usage with the orators and the best authors (*maximi auctores, summi auctores*), he does not always identify the two with each other. In line with Quintilian's statement that "language is based on Reason, Antiquity, Authority, and Usage [*sermo constat ratione vetustate auctoritate consuetudine*]," Valla often distinguishes between these sources of speech, apparently taking antiquity and authority together.⁵¹ A particularly good example is the reduction of the ten Aristotelian categories to substance, quality, and action—the only three that Valla admits. To understand this, it will suffice to note that in the ancient and medieval grammatical tradition it was quite common to accept these three categories as ultimate referents of words and word classes. The question was, for instance, how nouns, adjectives, verbs, and pronouns refer to one or more of these categories. Verbs, for instance, were supposed to refer to actions, nouns to qualified substances, and pronouns perhaps, as Priscian had argued in his *Institutiones grammaticae*, to substance without quality.⁵² How grammatical categories map onto the world was of course a major question for grammarians, and throughout book 1 of the *Dialectical Disputations* Valla is often asking the same question: does this word (or word class) refer to substance, to quality, or to an action (or to two or three categories at the same time)? This grammatical approach is prominently at work in his reduction of the individual accidental categories to his triad; in his reduction of the six transcendental terms to just one, namely *res* (thing); and in his analysis of abstract terms, terms of logic

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2:395 (*DD* 3.15.42).

⁵¹ Quintilian, 1:161 (*Institutio oratoria* 1.6.1).

⁵² Priscian, 2:60 (*Institutiones grammaticae* 13.6.29); see Robins, 71; Law, 52–93.

and argumentation, and distinctions such as matter/form and act/potency.⁵³ In many of these discussions Valla frequently quotes the usual authorities, but he also appeals to “common linguistic usage” or “how everyone talks” (*sermo omnium*) as something with its own argumentative force, often introduced by “we say” (*dicimus*) or “we are used to saying” (*dicere solemus*).⁵⁴ As will become clear in what follows, linguistic usage usually refers to Latin, but sometimes it refers to the way in which people speak and write, regardless of which language they use.

I will first give some examples where the context is clearly Latin. When he argues that the Aristotelian category of quantity should be reduced to that of quality, Valla first cites Cicero and Quintilian, and then states that “linguistic usage itself also confirms this”—namely, that “quantity is entirely a matter of quality”: “For when someone asks ‘what kind of field did you buy,’ you answer, ‘oblong at the start, then wider, two furrows long and of varying width.’”⁵⁵ Later on Valla makes more or less the same point: “Mind you, it is not just me but the greatest authorities as well who say that this is quality, which linguistic usage [*loquendi consuetudo*] itself—the best guide—affirms and reason [*ratio*] does not resist.”⁵⁶ “We speak” (*dicimus*) of a great heat, little coldness, long sound, and so on,⁵⁷ and quantitative predicates (“is big,” “is two years old,” “is five feet tall”) are used to qualify a thing. A few paragraphs later Quintilian is quoted on the same point, one that is obvious “even to ordinary people [*vulgus*]: “For them, if someone asks ‘what kind of voice did Stentor have,’ you answer ‘big,’ ‘large,’ ‘huge.’”⁵⁸ He continues to suggest that quantitative terms such as *length*, *width*, and *depth* are much the same, differing only “by some sort of quality”: “Because of this we usually say [*dicere solemus*] of certain plots of land that ‘they are longer on the sides than at the ends,’ which is also how geometers talk about the earth.”⁵⁹ In short, from a grammatical perspective, terms of quantity, just as terms of relation (e.g., *father*), qualify a thing no less than qualitative terms such as *good* or *red* do.

Likewise, the reduction of the Aristotelian category of having (of which Aristotle gives as examples *armed*, *having shoes on*) to quality is supported by “how everyone talks” (*sermo omnium*): “For even though arms, clothing and shoes are bodily things, they still introduce a quality into the man since this is how everyone talks: ‘that one defenseless, and not the kind to go into battle armed.’ . . .

⁵³ For discussion, see Mack, 42–58; Nauta, 2009, 82–125.

⁵⁴ Valla, 1982, 2:434 (*Repastinatio* 1.20.1); Valla, 2012, 1:234 (*DD* 1.16.16), 1:254 (*DD* 1.17.21), 1:264 (*DD* 1.17.38), out of many examples.

⁵⁵ Valla, 2012, 1:245 (*DD* 1.17.7).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:247 (*DD* 1.17.9).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* (*DD* 1.17.11); the examples are Valla’s.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:255 (*DD* 1.17.19).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (*DD* 1.17.21).

Since things that are part of the body itself produce quality, why be surprised at things that come from the outside? When asked 'what kind of man is that,' we answer 'stout, fat, plump and hairy.'"⁶⁰ From a grammatical point of view, there is no reason to make a difference between such words, and hence no reason to make an ontological difference between the categories: a quality such as stout is on a par with a quality like armed. While Valla's point obviously refers to Latin and is made in Latin, it is broader than that: it is premised on the belief that things are qualified substances, something that is reflected in the way people speak.

Valla also appeals to what "we are used to saying" in the reduction of the category of passion (or being affected) to action. Even if we stand, rest, or do nothing, we do something, and hence such verbs signify action: "when asked 'what's going on,' a normal answer for us [*respondere solemus*] is 'standing,' 'lying,' 'sitting,' 'resting,' or 'stopping.' . . . Elsewhere Cicero also asks 'what better can I do, particularly when doing nothing?' While doing nothing we do something, then, and even sleeping must also be called an action of some sort."⁶¹ Being affected, Valla argues elsewhere, is an action "because feeling an affect is an action in exactly the same way as understanding a danger."⁶² Valla's point then seems to be a conceptual one about actions, a point that guides his grammatical observations.

That linguistic usage is not always identical to authority can also be seen in Valla's discussion of the difference between *quidam* (a certain) and *aliquis* (someone). Using *consuetudo loquendi* and *vulgaris sermo* interchangeably, he writes: "If what they want is ordinary language [*consuetudo loquendi*], I say the same thing about this as about other particulars, and here it is in everyday speech [*vulgaris sermo*]: 'there is not someone luckier than me.' . . . If they require authority, we find examples whenever these terms occur. . . . If analysis [*ratio*] is what you want, it is easy to produce."⁶³ While the plain, normal, daily way of speaking about things is not always identical to the usage as found in authorities such as Cicero, Virgil, and Quintilian, Valla claims that the former is often corroborated by the latter.

The difference between *quidam* and *aliquis* is also corroborated by reason (*ratio*), Valla says, by which he means here the reason why a particular usage reflects the situation particularly well. In the example of the distinction between *quidam* and *aliquis* rational analysis comes close to rephrasing the right usages of these terms and their negations; "with a negation 'some' [*aliquis*] is generally universal"; "when I say 'some one [*aliquis*] of you called me,' I signify, while speaking in turn

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1:241 (DD 1.17.1).

⁶¹ Ibid., 1:235–37 (DD 1.16.16).

⁶² Ibid., 1:277 (DD 1.17.57).

⁶³ Ibid., 2:61–63 (DD 2.8.2–5).

to each one, that either you, who are some one [*aliquis*] of these people, have called me, or else some other you, also some one of them. Therefore, when I deny that I have been called by some one [*ab aliquo*] of you, I signify that neither you, nor you and so on has called me, and this means nothing else than that non-any [*nullus*] of you has called me.”⁶⁴ In the example quoted above about the reduction of quantity to quality, reason is basically the fact (or, rather, Valla’s claim) that “quantity is contained in quality,” hence that quality is the overarching category, a fact reflected by linguistic usage.⁶⁵ As said, part of Valla’s project is to explain how grammatical categories map onto the world—how verbs usually refer to actions, for instance. Reason can then be broadly understood as the explanation of how the Latin language, as found among the good authors, maps onto the common world of things (substances, qualities, actions) as Valla understood it.⁶⁶ In this sense, reason is not quite the same as reason in the context of the debate, mentioned above, between analogists and anomalists, in which reason stands for the regularity of morphology and strict grammatical rules versus observation of linguistic usage, or, in other words, between an a priori approach in analyzing speech versus an a posteriori, empirical one. When this approach becomes so abstract that it transcends the level of particular languages, reason becomes something wholly negative as when Valla accuses the medieval speculative grammarians, the so-called Modists, of following reason without paying any attention to the differences in the various languages.

In many other places Valla appeals to common or ordinary usage on its own, without invoking reason and authority as other criteria. In discussing qualities cognized by the senses, he comments on the misuse of the name of the sense for the name of its object by appealing to what we normally say: “We call [*dicimus*] a touch ‘hard,’ ‘soft,’ ‘rough’ and ‘smooth’ although being so belongs not to the sense that perceives but to the thing perceived.”⁶⁷ He continues: “in ordinary usage [*ad communem loquendi consuetudinem*] ‘lightness’ and ‘heaviness’ refer to weight, as in ‘light weight’ and ‘heavy weight.’” When he criticizes Aristotle’s distinction of act and potency, he exclaims: “How much better it would have been to keep the ordinary way of speaking [*communem loquendi consuetudinem*]: ‘this wood can be made into a box!’”⁶⁸ Criticizing the application of the term *materia*

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 1:247 (DD 1.17.11).

⁶⁶ See Nauta, 2009, 46–47, 80–81. I will come back to reason below; for a discussion of some uses of Valla’s use of *ratio*, see Cesarini Martinelli, 47–79; see also Regoliosi, 2000, with a critique by Rizzo, 2002, 107–18; Regliosi, 2010.

⁶⁷ Valla, 2012, 1:207 (DD 1.14.3). Regoliosi, 2010, 121, notes that in the *Elegantiae, usus* is by far the most common notion, and that Valla often refers to it without even mentioning reason.

⁶⁸ Valla, 2012, 1:231 (DD 1.16.7).

(matter) to God or the sun, he comments that “ordinary language [*sermo communis*] treats ‘matter’ like the wood in a box, the stones in a house.”⁶⁹ From all these examples it is clear that in these discussions Valla is working within the sphere of Latin.

THE WAY OF THE PEOPLE VERSUS THE WAY OF THE PHILOSOPHERS

In other passages, however, linguistic usage refers to the way in which people actually speak and argue, seemingly regardless of which language they use. The contrast is between the way of the people and the way of the philosophers, between a natural way of using words and arguments versus a so-called artificial, contorted, and twisted way of using words and analyzing arguments. Talking about the number 1, for instance, Valla sneers at the Aristotelians who consider 1 not a number but the principle of number. “Mere women” (*mulierculae*) know better: when they divide up their eggs, 1 is of course considered to be a number, the first (uneven) number: “so mere women sometimes have a better sense about understanding words than mighty philosophers. Women actually put words to use [*ad usum*], while philosophers play games with them [*ad lusum*].”⁷⁰ In his discussion of the Aristotelian notion of place, Valla makes the same contrast between philosophers and common people, including children: philosophers think that a barrel or a storehouse cannot be empty because it still contains air even if everything has been removed. The common people (*populus, vulgus*) have of course no problem in saying that the barrel is empty:

What form of speech shall I follow? What path shall I take, the well-worn and ordinary [*tritumne et vulgare*], or the one taken by those who philosophize? Not keeping to custom is proud; straying from the straight way is scandalous! But let us see who speaks better, the ordinary person or the philosopher. The ordinary person says that he calls the barrel “empty” when it lacks liquid. . . . Let the ordinary person respond that his is “the right to decide standards in language,” and that he does not call such things “full” when there is nothing but air in them, except when the air itself is of some importance, as when the sails of ships or a ball or balloon for playing games are full.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid., 1:89 (*DD* 1.8.1).

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1:33 (*DD* 1.2.26).

⁷¹ Ibid., 1:267 (*DD* 1.17.38), with reference to Horace’s *Ars Poetica* 70–72: Horace, 457. Therefore, *populus* does not always connote users of Latin (pace Tavoni, 1986, 207). The example derives from Cicero’s *De fato*, 11.24: Cicero, 1942b, 221.

Valla thus concludes that the “ordinary person [*populus*] speaks better than the philosopher, then, and all the best writers agree, calling the air above us sometimes ‘empty,’ sometimes ‘void,’” and he gives quotations from Virgil, Quintilian, and Cicero.⁷² And while this last addition shows that Valla, naturally, has Latin in mind, his point about the use of the word *empty*, just as the word *one*, seems to be language independent.

The way of the common people is also the perspective in Valla’s criticisms of the Aristotelian distinction of act and potency. Things can be turned or made into something else, as even a child knows, but what is the point of turning this simple fact of life into a metaphysical doctrine expressed in technical terminology?⁷³

He [i.e., Aristotle] actually says that “this wood or this tree-trunk is a box not in act but in potency.” Go ahead, Aristotle, make a box out of this wood. Will we say that “this wood is a box *in act*?” Has anyone ever talked that way? . . . What is the point of adding “in act”? Obviously, you reply, because for the wood to be a box is something else. Has anyone ever talked this way either, since reason does not even permit the locution? For it is one thing for wood to be *able* [*posse*] to be made into a box, another for it to be a box *in potency* [*potentia*]. In saying that it is “able to be made into a box,” we already declare that it is not a box since, once it has been made that, it is not able to be made again into what it already was. How much better it would have been to keep the ordinary way of speaking [*communem loquendi consuetudinem*]: “this wood can be made into a box”! In other words, “the form and shape of this wood is *changeable* into the form and shape of a box.”⁷⁴

Valla’s grammatical perspective leads him then to review words ending in *-able*, like *changeable*, *breakable*, and *drinkable*; such words sometimes signify “a potency” (*potentia*), “possibility” (*possibilitas*), or “aptitude” (*aptitudo*).⁷⁵ This aptitude or nature of a thing, however, is a quality rather than an action: “What Aristotle should have said, then, is ‘this tree-trunk is convertible into a box,’ not that it ‘is a box in potency.’” After a similar critique of *entelecheia*, another term traditionally standing for action, act, or working, Valla says “good-bye to

⁷² Valla, 2012, 1:269 (DD 1.17.42).

⁷³ Ibid., 1:229–31 (DD 1.16.6–8).

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1:231 (DD 1.16.7). “Reason” (*ratio*) here seems to refer to internal consistency. Valla seems to suggest that “to be a box in potency” is internally inconsistent: it is either a box or it is not.

⁷⁵ Ibid. (DD 1.16.8), for this and the following quotation.

these finicky and evasive terms of Aristotle's,"⁷⁶ admonishing us to turn to a description of things that is "simpler" and "better suited to natural meaning and ordinary usage."⁷⁷ At other places Valla also appeals to ordinary usage where the question does not seem to be a particular word of Latin—when, for instance, he criticizes the dialecticians' account of contraries: "in ordinary usage [*communi consuetudine*], we call a statement 'false' when it has something false in it."⁷⁸ Likewise, he appeals to "normal use of human language" (*consuetudine sermonis humani*) to defend questions such as "what was before time?" and "what is beyond the heavens?"⁷⁹

"THE STRICT STANDARD OF TRUTH" VERSUS "OUR COMMON WAY OF SPEAKING"

Closely related to but not identical with the contrast between the people and the philosophers is a distinction between speaking according to the *lex veritatis* (the strict standard of truth) and *vulgaris consuetudo* (our common way of speaking), a distinction that Valla borrows from Cicero, Seneca, and other classical sources. Speaking according to the standard of truth is not wrong—indeed, as the phrase suggests, it can be an adequate reflection of a state of affairs—but it is not common usage. Someone might say, for instance, that one thing is "more necessary" than another but "strictly speaking [*ad legem veritatis*], one thing is not more or less necessary than another, though perhaps it may be in ordinary usage [*ad vulgarem consuetudinem*]."⁸⁰ Likewise, in another chapter Valla comments on the applicability of *more* or *less*, defending words such as *rotundius* (more round), *plenius* (more full), and *triplicius* (more triple), as well as expressions such as "nothing is more perfect than the perfect." We are allowed to use these words, "especially if we speak according to common linguistic usage [*ad usum communem loquimur*];" for "it is one thing to speak in accordance to the very standard of truth [*legem ipsam veritatis*], it is another thing to speak in accordance to popular custom [*ad consuetudinem popularem*], common to virtually the whole human race."⁸¹ In a later version of the *Dialectical Disputations*, this passage becomes, "if we were speaking like Stoics by the strictest standard of truth, we would not use" such words.⁸² Valla alludes here to the reputation of the Stoics as being stern, even

⁷⁶ Ibid., 1:233 (*DD* 1.16.10).

⁷⁷ Ibid. (*DD* 1.16.11): "ad naturalem sensum usumque communem accommodatus."

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2:101 (*DD* 2.14.3).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 2:361 (*DD* 3.14.14).

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2:137 (*DD* 2.19.15); cf. Valla, 1982, 2:495 (*Repastinatio* 2.15.15).

⁸¹ Valla, 1982, 2:386 (*Repastinatio* 1.7.10).

⁸² Valla, 2012, 1:287 (*DD* 1.18.9).

rigid, philosophers,⁸³ and he also again refers to Cicero's opinion that the orator must not weigh his words in the goldsmith's balance but rather in common scales.⁸⁴ Roughly the same contrast is found in a discussion on the notion of the "middle," provoked by the Aristotelian doctrine of virtue as the middle between two extremes: "Perhaps there will be no middle between these things [viz. between daytime and nighttime, sleeping and waking, living and dead, healthy and ill, uneducated and educated, sober and drunk], by the standard of truth [*ad legem veritatis*], but in common understanding [*communem intellectum*] there is a middle between them."⁸⁵

The difference between this contrast of the strict standard versus the common way of speaking and the contrast between the philosopher's use of terms such as *one* and *empty* versus the common way of the people is that in the first case the philosophical use is acceptable (though not in line with common practice) but is rejected in the second case. But in both cases common understanding and common language go hand in hand, and are contrasted with philosophical analysis and language.

All these examples show that Valla uses the same terms in different contexts for different purposes. In some contexts, the distinction is between the Latin of the best authors and the Latin as the *sermo vulgaris* (or *sermo popularis*); especially in grammatical contexts the *consuetudo* to be followed is that of the best authors. In other contexts, the contrast is between Latin and the vernacular (however called by Valla). In still other contexts, good Latin is opposed to the so-called barbarous Latin of the Scholastics, an opposition that often takes the form of a contrast between a natural way of using language (any language) versus the unnatural, uncommon, and contorted way of using language and analyzing arguments of which the Scholastics are accused. These contrasts often overlap, so that when Valla wants to criticize the language of the Scholastics as artificial, unnatural, uncommon, and ungrammatical, he contrasts it with what is natural and common—

⁸³ In letter 59, Seneca contrasts the *publica verba* (everyday meaning) to the *significatio Stoicorum* (meaning according to the Stoics): Seneca, 162. For Cicero's negative judgment of Stoic dialectics, see, e.g., Cicero, 1942a, 59, 313 (*De oratore* 1.83, 2.159). Without using "Stoicism" in a historically and doctrinally accurate sense, Valla had identified it with an abstract, rationalist position in moral philosophy in his *De Vero Bono*.

⁸⁴ Cicero, 1942a, 313 (*De oratore* 2.38.159). Tavoni, 1984, 144n49, argues that Valla disapproves of the *popularis trutina* (common scales), but Valla clearly sides with it in the equivalent passage in the earlier version (Valla, 1982, 2:386). In this specific example of the use of superlative, Valla criticizes the application of the superlative to things not of the same gender or number, an application he finds in many good authors. As can be seen from the first version, Valla's meaning is that the common scales are better than a strict, Stoic usage.

⁸⁵ Valla, 2012, 2:291 (*DD* 1.19.3).

suitably flexible terms that can refer, depending on the context, to the speech of the orators and the best authors, to the speech of the common people, and even, as just noted, to that of simple, uneducated folk. Hence, the following three cases may be distinguished: first, when Valla wants to show that certain Scholastic vocabulary is ungrammatical, he appeals to the Latin of the best authors. Second, when he wants to show that Scholastic Latin is abstract (and often, though not necessarily, ungrammatical), he appeals to the common linguistic usage of the people, often referred to as the *sermo vulgaris* or *sermo communis*, closely related to but not identical with that of the authoritative authors. Third, when he wants to argue that the way in which the Scholastics analyze and categorize forms of argumentation does not reflect the actual way in which people think, argue, and speak, he appeals to the way in which “we normally speak” (*solemus dicere*), either in more cultured and literary forms, such as orations, or in more mundane, daily contexts, independent of the language at stake. So it depends on the context of the discussion with what the so-called barbarous language of the Scholastics is compared, but whatever it is that comes at the positive side of the comparison, this is considered natural and common.

NATURAL SPEECH

This flexibility is reflected by Valla's use of the term *naturalis* (natural), which he applies to different categories. It is a recurrent word in Valla's critique of Scholastic logic in books 2 and 3 of the *Dialectical Disputations*. He thinks, for example, that some syllogistic forms (or parts of them) can be detected in the talk of all kinds of people: “But the form of the syllogism is not the clever thing cleverly disputed by me to describe the nature of the syllogism—you may gather how easy it is not only to understand but also to construct even when children talk among themselves, though they generally leave out the conclusion. I am talking about real syllogisms: for most of what is taught about syllogisms goes against nature and everyone's usage [*omnium usum*].”⁸⁶ Some syllogistic patterns can therefore be accepted since they can be observed in the speech of “even peasants, even women, even children.”⁸⁷ In an earlier version of this passage Valla had made the same point, saying that he had noted the moods of which he approves, “not only in books and in the talk of the learned people but also in that of the uneducated (that is, those who speak in a natural way [*imperatorum idest naturaliter loquentium*]).”⁸⁸ But to note and reconstruct syllogistic patterns in the speech of people is one thing, to insert fully fledged syllogisms in one's speech is another; at least, this

⁸⁶ Ibid., 2:231 (*DD* 3.2.15).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 2:269 (*DD* 3.9.4).

⁸⁸ Valla, 1982, 2:548 (*Repastinatio* 3.12.8).

is what Valla seems to mean when he explains in a different passage—and in apparent contradiction to what he had said in the passages just quoted—that “those who speak naturally [*naturaliter*], like orators, very rarely use the syllogism.”⁸⁹ But while people naturally speak and argue in ways that show at times patterns of syllogistic reasoning, the art of dialectic that has arisen, so to speak, out of this fact is completely “against nature”: “most of what is taught about syllogisms goes against nature and everyone’s usage.”⁹⁰ Nobody would argue, for instance, in accordance with the patterns as laid down in the third figure of the syllogism (every man is a substance; every man is an animal; therefore, some animal is a substance). Likewise, in criticizing examples such as “Plato is every animal” (*Plato est omne animal*) and “Plato is no animal” (*Plato est nullum animal*), Valla comments: “Let us speak naturally and in the way people speak.”⁹¹ Introducing his critique of the art of dialectic, however, Valla applies the word *natural* to the speech of the educated people, admonishing modern philosophers “to turn back to speech that is natural, speech commonly used by educated people.”⁹²

“STATUTES AND CUSTOMS OF LANGUAGE AS A KIND OF CIVIL LAW”

This is therefore the reason for this flexible use of the term *natural*. Because Valla thinks the language of the Scholastics is often not only ungrammatical but also unnatural and distorted, he sometimes presses the educated and the uneducated into a coalition of people who, arguably, follow nature (*natura*) in their speech and thinking. Unlike the Scholastics, the educated and the uneducated do not twist and distort the established meanings of words or the usual patterns of human argumentation and thinking. These two levels—first, linguistic usage in Latin (in which, as observed above, Valla distinguishes between the *sermo vulgaris* and the *sermo litteratus*) and, second, natural speaking and arguing more generally, regardless of the language being used (but always opposed to the so-called

⁸⁹ Valla, 2012, 2:228 (DD 3.2.12). In the same vein, he criticizes Boethius for giving an example of an enthymeme “abhorrent to the orator’s practice, or rather to ordinary human understanding [*a communi hominum intellectu*]:” *ibid.*, 2:423 (DD 3.17.10).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:231 (DD 3.2.16).

⁹¹ Valla, 1982, 2:485 (*Repastinatio* 2.12.15): “*naturaliter atque hominum more.*” Cf. Valla, 2012, 2:113 (DD 2.15.14).

⁹² Valla, 2012, 2:209 (DD 3.proem.3): “*ad naturalem et a doctis tritum sermonem.*” There is one place where Valla applies the word *natural* to the vernacular, with a reference to Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 12.2.1); Valla, 1962, 1:437; and also in Valla, 2007, 395 (*Raudensiane Notae*); he refers to his own *Elegantiae*: see Valla, 1962, 1:5 (*Elegantiae* 1.7).

artificial, unnatural way of speaking and arguing in philosophy)—thus run easily into one another or are combined somehow if it serves Valla's polemical goals.

This blending of levels can also be seen in Valla's claim that whatever language people speak, they must always conform themselves to the usage, custom, and conventions of our community: "Anyone who abandons it [i.e., usage] must be hooted out of the company of educated people, no less than the scofflaw and scorners of custom must be expelled from the community. And just as nations and peoples have different customs and different laws, so do the natures of languages differ, each one sacred and unsullied among its own. Therefore we must rely on usage, as if it were a kind of established practice in the community [*tanquam quodam more civili*]." ⁹³ Here Valla is moving smoothly from the sphere of Latin ("the educated people") to languages in general. He feels that his point is valid for any kind of language: it is usage that accounts for the structure of a language, creating a community of language users. That is also the reason why a general theory of grammar, here called by Valla *ratio*, such as developed by speculative grammarians, the so-called Modists, must fail: "In fact, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Punic, Dalmatian and other tongues differ not just in the words that are spoken, but in how speech is constructed, and this happens because of *practice* [*usu*], not theory [*ratione*], except in a few cases. We can no more give a theory for grammar (as some of those idiots do, including those who write about 'modes of signifying') than for the different words that different peoples use." ⁹⁴ Not only must a general theory of grammar valid for all the different languages fail, but also the imposition of any type of language or terminology that does not reflect the established practices of the community.

This is precisely Valla's accusation: the so-called barbarous, distorted, and technical language of the Scholastics does not reflect such a *mos civilis* (established practice in the community). By inventing their own language they have placed themselves outside the community. Because their language does not reflect the linguistic usage of the community, it has been able to engender the strange puzzles, sophistries, sophisms, forms of unnatural argumentation, and artificial problems that seem to form almost the *raison d'être* of the philosopher's existence. In criticizing their *captiones* (sophistries), Valla condemns their philosophical practice and language again in terms of fraud and transgression of the law: "As long as I speak according to the usage of educated people, I cannot be rebuked, and if you attack me with sophistries, I shall appeal to the statutes and customs of lan-

⁹³ Valla, 2012, 2:89 (*DD* 2.11.14).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:85 (*DD* 2.11.7). See Law, 172–79, for a basic introduction on the Modists; and Rosier for a full treatment. For a humanist attack on the Modists, see Alexander Hegius's polemic edited in IJsewijn. For Valla and medieval grammar, see Gavinelli; Codoñer Merino; Lo Monaco.

guage as a kind of civil law. In civil law there is no place for sophistry, in fact, and if anything is done with intent to defraud, the ruling will be to rescind it and make it null and void. But to oppose sophistries we should examine them in detail and ponder the weight of their words.”⁹⁵ Once again, Valla is defending here his program of a reform of Latin and the study of Latin grammar by appealing to the usage of the educated people. But as part of his defense he is also treating Latin—next to elevating Latin to the status of an almost sacred language⁹⁶—on a par with other languages (“Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Punic, Dalmatian and other tongues”), each with its own structure, usage, conventions, and community—a linguistic *mos civilis*. Both strategies ensure that Scholastics are to be regarded as outsiders and outlaws.

Valla’s remedy is captured by the title of the chapter from which this last quotation is taken: “That special consideration is to be given to the weight of words.”⁹⁷ It is only through a careful study of language as it has been used and ought to be used that the sophistries and the philosophical problems can be resolved, since these are the result only of a misunderstanding of language: these philosophers are “incapable of grasping any doctrine clearly, since they have too little skill in their own language—Latin, that is,” let alone any skill in Greek, the language of their own master, Aristotle.⁹⁸ It is Valla’s ambition, then, to show the linguistic roots of the philosophers’ problems and their mistakes: “These dialecticians of yours, then, these philosophizers, should no longer wish to persevere in the ignorance of certain terms that they use, and they should turn back to speech that is natural, speech commonly used by educated people, especially since they will make no progress if they do otherwise, now that I have uncovered the truth about the many words that are the source of most mistakes.”⁹⁹ Words and arguments should not be taken out of context, since this will easily change

⁹⁵ Valla, 2012, 2:355–57 (*DD* 3.14.5–6).

⁹⁶ Valla, 1962, 2:4 (*Elegantiae* 1.proem).

⁹⁷ Valla, 2012, 2:353 (*DD* 3.14).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:11 (*DD* 1.proem.17). Aristotle too is accused of having little skill in his own language, taking Greek words and expressions sometimes in ways that do not reflect the linguistic custom, though Valla does not say which custom he has in mind. He vaguely speaks of “the Greeks,” using even Latin quotations to make his point: *ibid.*, 1:171 (*DD* 1.10.69); cf. *ibid.*, 1:173 (*DD* 1.10.74–75). In *ibid.*, 1:9 (*DD* 1.proem.12), the translation is incorrect: it is Aristotle rather than “some Latins” who is criticized for having paid no attention to “learning foreign languages, not even his own so much.”

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:209–11 (*DD* 3.proem.3). Cf. *ibid.*, 1:7 (*DD* 1.proem.9): “Even if they [Avicenna and Averroes] were great men, how much authority should they have when the meaning of words is in question, as in most problems in philosophy.”

their normal, common meaning and, consequently, will give rise to philosophical problems where none existed.

CONCLUSION

In the context of Valla's critique of Aristotelian-Scholastic thought, expressions such as *common* and *natural language* (and *common linguistic usage*) usually refer to the language of the educated people, as testified by phrases such as "speech that is common as well as learned [*popularis sermo atque eruditorum*]" and "speech that is natural, speech commonly used by educated people [*ad naturalem et a doctis tritum sermonem*]."¹⁰⁰ The category of educated people includes all writers who have adopted the Latin of the great authors from antiquity. Yet in spite of his vast learning and reading, many of his examples come from a rather limited range of authors, among whom—in spite of his professed predilection for Quintilian—Cicero takes pride of place in terms of sheer number of quotations, at least in the *Elegantiae*. Archaic writers, poets, and late classical authors (including Christian ones) are discarded, while Seneca, Tacitus, and the two Plinys are rarely cited (and if so, often criticized).¹⁰¹ But while he often cites the great Latin writers, Valla also at times clearly distinguishes between authority and linguistic usage, taking the latter frequently in a broad sense of what we are used to saying (*solemus dicere*) in Latin or—because Valla's universe is a Latin one—simply what we are used to saying. As has been shown, he often speaks about Latin as the *sermo vulgaris*, without, however, having a particular variety or a particular historical period in mind. If it suits his argument and polemical point, he may even take a broader look, widening the scope of the natural and ordinary to include the speech and linguistic habits of children, "mere women" (*mulierculae*), and uneducated people, in order to contrast that with what he thinks is the outlandish, unnatural, and esoteric attitude and language of the (Scholastic) philosophers. In drawing on the old topos of the vanity and folly of the learned versus the real wisdom of the simple, common folk, Valla presents himself at times as the defender of the common people because they use language in accordance with the customs of their society, using words "for a purpose, not for a game."¹⁰² But it would of course go completely against his Latin world view to defend their language over and above that of the learned and educated people, for it is in the latter's community that Valla naturally situates himself.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 1:107 (*DD* 1.9.7), 2:209 (*DD* 3.proem.3).

¹⁰¹ Cesarini Martinelli, 66.

¹⁰² Valla, 2012, 1:33 (*DD* 1.2.26).

To stress the natural and common character of classical Latin (to be regained in his own times)—as opposed to the allegedly unnatural character of the Latin of his opponents—Valla appeals to terms and arguments (natural, common, the people, community, rules and conventions, custom, law) that are arguably more at home in the domain of naturally spoken languages of people who do not usually belong to the literate and educated (though in Quintilian’s time the situation was different, of course). Valla’s flexibility in using these terms thus creates at times an uneasy coalition of learned authors and the uneducated people. This flexibility also suggests that the debate among modern scholars is not so easily resolved: as noted in the introduction, some scholars think that Valla’s use of the term *natural*, for instance, refers to Latin, others to the vernacular, but as this article has shown Valla does not use these terms always with the same meaning. These terms are used in different argumentative contexts, with different aims, and sometimes with a different target in mind (fellow humanists, Scholastics, grammarians, and so on).

As discussed in the introduction, scholars have also disagreed about the nature of Valla’s program: is it a purely descriptive, empirical approach that focuses entirely on the observation of the best practices of classical authors, or is it a normative program that aims at a certain rationalization and idealization of linguistic phenomena, based on—but not always necessarily supported by—observation of actual usage? From the argument developed here it turns out that Valla’s program can be called both, depending on which aspect one stresses. It is descriptive in that it describes, with a plethora of examples, linguistic usage of classical authors, and it is normative in that it takes this kind of Latin as the norm to be followed. It is also normative in the sense that it rationalizes or emends this usage—even Ciceronian usage—if Valla thinks certain linguistic constructions can reflect the state of affairs in a more transparent way. Analyzing Valla’s discussion of, for example, the superlative and the comparative, the use of possessive pronouns, the use of *quam* (how) and *valde* (very), and the use of *ecce* (see!), Lucia Cesarini Martinelli has concluded that Valla frequently attempted to “reconstruct the rational coherence of language,” showing at times a certain creativity in formulating rules and even inventing examples to get rid of ambiguities or contradictions in the Latin he was analyzing.¹⁰³ Such examples, however, should not lead to belittling the empirical character of Valla’s approach toward Latin, for he always based himself on authoritative writers; but

¹⁰³ Cesarini Martinelli, 58, 69, 71, 75, 77. In such instances, Valla is often found saying “I would rather like to say” (*malim dicere*) or “such I would not have said” (*non dicerem*), which indicates how he thinks his own rule or analysis reflects the facts in a more transparent way. See, e.g., Valla, 2012, 2:362 (DD 3.14.18)—one among many examples. See also Fubini, 1961, 544–45.

again, the descriptive and the normative are found to go together: the expression that is found most in use among the authorities is the one to be preferred.¹⁰⁴

This brings me to the last and perhaps most fundamental question in this whole debate: is Valla's program internally not inconsistent in its historicizing tendencies, while presenting an almost frozen kind of Latin, only slightly updated with some new words to describe postclassical things such as *bombarda* (canon), as the yardstick for his own times?¹⁰⁵ The notion of Latin as a universal language that could apparently transcend time and place seems difficult to square with the notion of Latin as a historical phenomenon that developed in a particular time. Likewise, in his more polemical moments Valla's defense of the common people (whatever language they use, "each one sacred and unsullied among its own"¹⁰⁶), who express the truth of the matter in a better way than the philosophers do, seems difficult to reconcile with the unique and privileged position of Latin as the *magnum sacramentum* (great sacred teaching).

Whether one feels a strong tension here depends on how to interpret the interdependence of the different contexts that, as observed above, sometimes become conflated in Valla's more polemical moments: the context of the restoration of classical Latin and the context of thinking about language as a naturally evolving social practice used by a living community of speakers that can be presented as the common people (*vulgus, populus*). In the sphere of Latin, Valla studies ancient writers not (or not primarily) for purely disinterested, historical, or scholarly reasons but for reasons of imitation, replication, and restoration. The stress on linguistic usage or what is found most often in use in the preferred classical authors must not solely be taken as an indication of such a disinterested, empirical study of a historical phenomenon. Rather, from the rich soil of classical usage Valla selects—and emends—what he takes then as the norm (because it is represented by the best authors in the most cases—clearly a circular argument here), and this norm has to be somehow fixed (and then learned and taught): a shifting norm is not a good norm. Hence, later forms of Latin are not acceptable; the *usus* to be imitated is limited to the classical period, and must be regularized by *ratio*. As Valla argues, the existence of schools, teachers, and grammar books in antiquity shows that a child was not able to learn good Latin solely from observation of

¹⁰⁴ Cesarini Martinelli, 75: "the usage of a linguistic form by the majority of the authoritative writers seems to have its own theoretical legitimization. . . . The law of the majority thus stabilizes not only what is the case for the majority but also what should be the case for the majority [*non solo ciò che, per lo più, è, ma anche ciò che per lo più deve essere*]."

¹⁰⁵ "New things demand new words": Valla, 1981, 106; also in Valla, 1962, 1:504. See Wesseling; Besomi; Gaeta, 79.

¹⁰⁶ Valla, 2012, 2:89 (*DD* 2.11.14).

usage (*usus*).¹⁰⁷ For the same reason the vernacular is not a viable option either, as it is subject to continuous, spontaneous change; *usus* in this sense of actual usage without any kind of grammatical structure and order cannot stabilize and guarantee the correctness of speech; *ratio* in the sense of grammatical rules is required. The vernacular is clearly not an *ars*.¹⁰⁸ Valla's descriptive and historicizing approach thus has its chronological limit, serving the higher goal of restoring Latin to its most ideal form.¹⁰⁹ Valla clearly believes in Latin as a universal language, an *ars*, governed by rules that are based on usage. (And where these rules allow too much exception they must be tidied up a little bit, as Valla seems to suggest.) Hence, as seen, these two important sources—*usus* (based on authority) and *ratio*—do not contradict but complement each other.¹¹⁰

In other contexts, as discussed above, Valla makes a different, almost sociolinguistic point, viz. that language cannot be invented or prescribed at will by a small group of people on the fringe of society. Language is a social practice, and should be treated as such, for “to the ordinary person [*populus*] belongs the mastery of language and a rule [*arbitrium et normam loquendi*].”¹¹¹ This is true for any language and linguistic community. For Valla this means hooting the Scholastics out of the company of the educated people. While this suggests a confirmation of Latin as an *ars*, his picture of Latin as a common, natural language—a social practice, ruled by conventions and customs—can be seen as an example or illustration of this broader, sociolinguistic insight. Latin can then be treated on a par with other languages—“Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Punic, Dalmatian and other tongues,”

¹⁰⁷ Valla in Camporeale, 527 (*Apologus* 2); Cesarini Martinelli, 60.

¹⁰⁸ In the absence of grammatical rules or rules of correctness, one cannot say that one speaks Venetian better (*emendatius*) than another, or that one speaks Florentine better than another. See Valla in Camporeale, 525 (*Apologus* 2); see Cesarini Martinelli, 61–62.

¹⁰⁹ Defending his translation of a passage from the New Testament, Valla claims that his translation is “more Latin, hence clearer and no less true [*Latinius et perinde apertius nec minus verum*]”: Valla, 1978, 112 (*Antidotum* 1), quoted by Cesarini Martinelli; for other examples, see Cesarini Martinelli, 71. The background is of course the classical discussion of the qualities of good Latin style. From Pseudo-Cicero's *Ad Herennium*, Valla takes over the notion of *elegantia*, which comprises Latinity (*Latinitas*) and clarity (*explanatio*). As is well known, this is a notion of semantic correctness and refinement. See Marsh, 100.

¹¹⁰ But there are some cases where usage is not supported by reason. For one example, see Valla, 2012, 1:41 (*DD* 1.3.8): “This I would call amazing, scarcely supported by reason [*ratione*] but completely borne out by usage [*usu*]: that these very words [such as ‘the white,’ *album*], whose concrete signification I deny, I admit to have concrete signification in the plural.” For a discussion of Valla's chapter on abstract and concrete terms, see Nauta, 2009, 74–77.

¹¹¹ Valla, 2012, 1:266 (*DD* 1.17.40): “Respondeat populus penes se esse arbitrium . . . et normam loquendi.” The phrase goes back to Horace's *Ars Poetica* 70–72: Horace, 457.

“each one sacred and unsullied among its own.”¹¹² Whatever language we speak, we must conform ourselves to the usage and conventions of our community. The tension that can be detected between Latin as one of the natural languages, ruled by conventions shaped and developed by their communities, and Latin as an *ars*, based on *usus* but also governed by *ratio*, reveals the two basic options that developed only after Valla's death: the use of the vernaculars also as languages of arts and science, and Latin as a “dead,” artificial language, useful or even vital for the growth of the republic of letters, but no longer presented as a common, natural language.

¹¹² Valla, 2012, 2:85 (*DD* 2.11.7), 2:89 (*DD* 2.11.14).

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