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Nauta, Lodi

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Nauta, Lodewijk

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Meaning and Linguistic Usage in Renaissance Humanism: The Case of Lorenzo Valla

Lodi Nauta

1. Renaissance Humanism and the Philosophy of Language

In the history of the philosophy of language Renaissance humanism does not play a prominent role, and it is not difficult to see why. While in medieval times the scholastics had developed interesting theories about all aspects of language, humanists were generally not interested in theoretical issues. Arising in late-medieval Italy, the humanist movement spread across the rest of Europe by the end of the fifteenth century. Humanists studied classical Latin and (to a lesser extent) Greek and their literatures, advocating a return to a classical style in writing and speaking. Education was reformed and based on the *studia humanitatis*, a programme consisting in the study of grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. This programme of study then had a distinctly pragmatic and practical character. Humanists wanted to write and speak as the ancients had done, not only because they thought classical Latin was a semantically rich and rhetorically elegant language but also because they found the Latin as used in the schools and universities of their day barbarous, ungrammatical, and less than a shade of classical Latin. Hence their programme was one of rediscovery and reappropriation of the riches of antiquity. This meant immersing oneself in the texts in order to understand what this or that word meant, and how and when it was appropriate to use this or that grammatical construction. Their studies included ancient rhetorical texts, from which they learned how to argue, how to structure a text, which arguments should be used when and where, and which style should be used on which occasion, and so on. Naturally, the

I am grateful to the editors for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. For a more extensive treatment of the issues treated here, see Nauta (2009).

humanists often encountered problems of a nature that we regard as philosophical, and at times they did not shrink back from offering some reflections on general questions about meaning, but their whole programme was imbued with a pragmatic spirit, and at first sight it does not seem to offer much to the historian of the philosophy of language.

For this reason, it is even more tricky than usual to adopt the language of modern philosophy to categorize and analyse the ideas and work of the humanists. In the case of Scholastic theories about supposition, it has already proved notoriously difficult to categorize them in terms of modern distinctions such as sense/reference or signification/meaning, but at least the type of problems the Scholastics were addressing are familiar to the modern philosopher. Because of the apparent absence of such theoretical concerns among the humanists, it seems even more anachronistic to apply modern distinctions and terminology to their work, which were principally of a philological, grammatical, rhetorical, and literary kind. In the language of this book, we do not see much explicit reflection on linguistic content and on its metaphysical grounding. We do find the humanists paying a lot of attention to the meaning of particular words, but we do not find them offering theories of linguistic content—that is, semantic theories. Of course, they distinguished between the several parts of speech such as nouns, adjectives, and verbs, and they dutifully repeated traditional distinctions such as categorematic and syncategorematic words (“all”, “some”, “not”, etc.), but in general they simply took for granted that words have meaning. For them language can be studied only in context—that is, in the way people actually use language. To abstract from this context and start theorizing about meaning in general was precisely what the scholastic philosophers had done, with all the detrimental effects for the study of grammar, reasoning, argumentation, and language in general.

And yet it would be wrong to see the humanist project as wholly devoid of theoretical interest, and only of interest to the student of the classical tradition, literature, or culture history. There is a good reason to include a chapter on Renaissance humanism in a book on the history of ideas on linguistic content. Some scholars have regarded the humanists’ study of meaning in context—that is, in the way people actually used this or that word or grammatical construction—as an important *theoretical* insight, associating it with the Wittgensteinian idea that meaning is use. Rather than being a mysterious entity that a word *has* and that refers to something else (for example, a thing in the outer world or a concept), meaning is an activity, the kind of work the word “does”. To determine the meaning of a word is to map the rules that govern its use, not finding an entity somehow owned by the word that ties the word to a thing in some mysterious way. It also meant, at least for these modern interpreters, that questions of meaning can be settled only by looking at the normal, ordinary way in which people talk and write. The humanist rejection of the technical jargon of the Scholastics was more than the expression of an aesthetic preference. Their convictions might be compared—according to such a line of interpretation—to that of J. L. Austin, an ordinary language philosopher, who complained that “philosophers often seem to

think that they can just ‘assign’ any meaning whatever to any word”, while forgetting that “our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing” (Austin 1962: 62; 1979: 182).

It is a moot point in the scholarly literature whether we can ascribe such innovative ideas to the humanists. Most scholars continue to see the humanist movement as essentially a literary and rhetorical movement that did not radically change the linguistic paradigm. This chapter aims to show that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Humanists had interesting ideas about linguistic content and language in general, but we should not exaggerate the innovative nature of these ideas nor their anticipation of contemporary views. The best way to show this is to examine the work of one of the most important humanists, Lorenzo Valla (c.1406–57), because the modern debate on the possible philosophical contributions of Renaissance humanism has centred on him. Valla is indeed a central figure. He wrote the first advanced handbook of the Latin language, the *Elegantiae Linguae Latinae* (“The Fine Points of the Latin Language”), which was immensely influential. He criticized scholastic thought from a linguistic point of view in his *Dialectical Disputations*. In his hands, philology became a critical tool for sifting spurious from authentic works and forgeries from real documents, and hence a weapon for attacking established philosophical and theological dogmas and practices. It is the *Dialectical Disputations*, on which Valla worked his entire, itinerant life, that show him at his most polemical but also, willy-nilly perhaps, at his most philosophical. We will look at three issues: the assimilation of words and things, his notion of linguistic usage as the principal criterion for settling questions of meaning, and his grammatical approach to language and argumentation that must show that many philosophical problems are rooted in a misunderstanding of language. We will discuss the question to what extent his ideas resemble those of modern philosophers. (For a more extensive treatment, see Nauta (2009), on which this contribution is largely based, though sometimes with a different focus.) Our discussion will show a common pattern—namely, that Valla is not such a radical reconceiver of language as has sometimes been claimed, yet that his insistence on common usage as the prime parameter is an important idea, something that leads him to conclude that philosophers cannot just invent their own language or assign new meanings to old words. His scholarly contributions aside, his recognition of the varieties of meaning and their grounding in convention and common usage is an important contribution to thinking on the historical and social-cultural embeddedness of language.

2. Word and Thing

One of the basic distinctions in humanist thought was that between things and words (*res* and *verba*). Cicero and other ancient rhetoricians had placed the distinction at the heart of rhetoric: “thing” is, of course, a wide and amorphous category that included anything that could be the subject of linguistic expression: historical events,

the subject matter of one's speech, one's ideas, or whatever one had to put into words. The distinction fostered the idea that speech is an instrument of thought, the clothing of a body, or the translator of the mind. (Cf. Nauta 2011, 2012.) The metaphorical nature of such pictures was hardly recognized: it was taken as a matter of fact that language was an instrument of thought, the verbal expression of what went on inside the mind. But the same rhetorical tradition also stressed the close connection between words and things. Powerful speech that convinces the reader or listener brings the subject to light, and the best orator uses words in such a way that one feels almost physically present at the events described. "Bringing to light" or "before one's eyes" was indeed a common way of referring to this power of speech. The intimate connection between words and things was also underscored in another way: clear thinking was a *sine qua non* for clear speech: confused thinking leads to unclear speech, as everybody agreed.

But now a question arises: if things can be grasped and brought to light and understood only if we use the right language, does this not imply that our view of the world is somehow shaped by language? Such an intimate connection between words and things may render it difficult to distinguish between the two categories. Indeed, the claim has been made that Valla equates them. As one scholar has put it:

Being and meaning, the thing and the word, are in the world of human beings not to be separated... Valla pushes against the limits of the representational power of language, for here is the place where he can no longer maintain linguistically, and therefore logically, the separation of word and not-word and also of thing and not-thing. For the sign and the signified are on both occasions *res*, that is, word and not-word are likewise *res*. (Gerl 1974: 223, 221; quoted Waswo 1987: 108–9; cf. Camporeale 1986: 227: "un tutto inscindibile", an inseparable whole.)

The consequences are radical: "language and the people who use it do not 'represent' a reality but constitute it", leading to a denial of "the correspondence theory of truth and the referential theory of meaning, which is no longer to be sought in objects, but rather in words that name and categorize them" (Waswo 1987: 110, 109).

Is Valla indeed such a radical "reconceiver of language"? The passage on which this interpretation is based comes from the first book of the *Dialectical Disputations*. In this passage Valla presents a metaphysical grounding of meaning by looking at how words get meaning: words are sounds to which we human beings have assigned a particular meaning (Valla 2012: i. 219):

For humans invented the vocal sounds [*voces*] that they adapted to things once they had recognized them, consequently calling them "signs", and the first of those people was Adam when God created him. And they taught them along with their significations [*significationibus*] to their descendants, so that sounds [*soni*] indeed come from nature, but vocal sounds [*voces*] or signs and significations come from a maker... Hence, it follows that the ear perceives sounds, the mind perceives significations and both perceive vocal sounds.

A sound (*sonus*) can thus become meaningful when it is assigned a particular signification (*significatio*); it then becomes an "articulated" vocable sound, that is a

vox. The vocable sound is “like [*quasi*] an image of its signification”, by which Valla seems to suggest no more than that meaning is conventional: “human vocal sound is natural, but what it signifies is conventional.” These signs *with their significations* were taught to later generations, and here Valla starts saying something about meaning rather than giving a grounding of it. Meaning involves the understanding, for, though he does not mention concepts here, his account presupposes the presence of a mental understanding of the thing, and we find him using words such as *sensus*, *intellectus*, and *significatio* almost interchangeably (Nauta 2009: 311 n. 48). This seems to be in line with the medieval notion of *significare*, a notion that goes back to Boethius’ translation of Aristotle’s *De interpretatione* 16^b19. *Significare* means “to make known”, “to reveal”, “to manifest”, “to express”, “to bring something to mind”, “to establish an understanding of it”—all expressions that do not exactly correspond to the modern concepts of reference and meaning. According to Paul Vincent Spade, signification is therefore a species of a causal relation: “The psychological overtones of ‘to signify’ are similar to those of the modern ‘to mean’. Nevertheless, signification is not meaning. A term signifies that of which it makes a person think, so that, unlike meaning, signification is a species of the causal relation” (Spade 1982: 188). This makes signification perhaps too much dependent on the mental process in the speaker’s or hearer’s mind, and other scholars have argued for a different interpretation of the term (see Pinborg 1976; Henry 1999: 143–4; Ashworth, Chapter 8, this volume). In Valla’s account signification turns out to be a complex notion that involves our understanding of a word, and what we understand by a word is derived from or connected to the thing it names.

This last aspect—of meaning being the name (*nomen*) of the thing—leads to an important problem for Valla: words signify things, or, as he puts it: “‘wood’ is the name [*nomen*] of wood,” “knowledge” of knowledge, and so on. But what about the word “thing”? It does not seem to signify in the same way as “tree” signifies a tree. We need a little bit of background in order to understand Valla’s discussion. Very briefly, one of Valla’s aims in the *Dialectical Disputations* is to criticize the metaphysical foundations of what he sees as the Aristotelian–Scholastic edifice: the ten Aristotelian categories of substance, quality, quantity, relation, time, place, and so on; the six so-called transcendental terms such as “being”, “good”, “one”, “true” that transcend the categories (that is, they can be said of each category); traditional distinctions such as form/matter and act/potency, and so on (Mack 1993; Nauta 2009). He wants to defend a common-sense picture of the world in which concrete things take centre stage rather than what he thinks is an abstract ontology of bare substances, essences, quiddities, beings (*entia*), transcendentals, and so on. If we want to be philosophical, we can analyse a thing in terms of substance, quality, and action, but for most purposes we can just speak about “things”, which is a much simpler term than the scholastic notion of “being” (*ens*). He thus wants to reduce the transcendental terms as distinguished by the Scholastics to just one—namely “thing” (*res*), which has the advantage of being a perfectly normal Latin word. He

also thinks that the traditional classification as visualized in the Tree of Porphyry does not make sense: thing rather than substance should be placed at the top of the tree; bare substance does not exist: a thing is always substance plus qualities and actions.

But, because everything can be called a thing, the question thus arises: what does “thing” signify? It seems a different kind of term than “tree” that signifies trees or “knowledge” that signifies knowledge. Valla’s answer is that “thing” is a word that “embraces the significations of all other words”: it embraces, for example, the signification of “tree”, because tree is a thing and can be called a thing. But, because “thing” is just one word out of many, is “word” not a more general word? No, says Valla: “word” refers solely to words (a sub-class of things), while “thing” refers to all things (including the sub-class of words, which as sounds are physical things after all). He explains the special status of “thing” in a typically grammatical way: it does not matter whether we ask “What is man?” or “What does the word ‘man’ signify?” To both questions the answer will be the same—namely a definition of man. But with “thing” this is different (Valla 2012: i. 221):

But about *thing* nothing can be asked in this way by “what is thing” and “what does ‘thing’ signify” because “what” is analyzed into “what thing”. Therefore, those who say “what” of “thing” say something foolish. But if I should ask “which vocal sound is ‘thing’”, your correct reply will be “it is the vocal sound that signifies the meaning or sense [*intellectum sive sensum*] of all other vocal sounds.

What Valla in effect is saying is that it is a category mistake to treat the word “thing” as signifying things in the same way as “wood” signifies wood. There is no separate class of things signified by the sign or word “thing” besides stones, trees, and other objects; these are all things, and hence we can apply the sign “thing” to all of them. Since “what” (*quid*) simply means “what thing” (*que res*), it does not make sense to ask “what is thing?” (*quid est res*) or “what does the word ‘thing’ signify?” In the last paragraph Valla once again differentiates between things and meanings. A thing such as man is in space and time, while the signification of the word “man” is not such a thing but enters as a conventional sign in our language and categorizations (“man is an animal”).

What our discussion thus suggests is that Valla is not so radical to assimilate words and things or—to use rather grand terminology—meaning and being, or language and reality. Since he wants to assign a privilege position to the word “thing” as the only transcendental term that he accepts, he has to discuss words and things, but he takes care to distinguish between word-things (parcels of air) and non-word-things (tree, stone), and between words as conventional signs or tokens (*nota*) and the things they signify: “‘thing’ signifies a thing; the latter is signified, the former is the sign or token of the latter; the one is not a vocal sound, the other is a vocal sound” (Valla 2012: i. 221). There is no collapse between words and things, even though Valla is not always consistent, for elsewhere he also calls significations qualities (*qualitates*), which in Valla’s ontology are real things (*res*) (Valla 2012: i. 223–5).

Nevertheless, the general drift of his argument is clearly to distinguish between the conventional sign and the thing it “names”, that is signifies (Monfasani 1989; Nauta 2009). This does not mean that there is nothing interesting going on here. It might not be too far-fetched to say that Valla grapples with the categories of things and words, which are ingredients of any semantic theory, and, while it seems unproblematic—and wholly traditional as well—to say that the one signifies the other, the relationship is not as straightforward as it might seem. Indeed, people tend to say that the meaning of the word “x” is x (or, alternatively, the concept of x), and some of Valla’s statements too suggest this, even though he is also at pains to distinguish words with their meanings from things. (Cf. Mack 1993: 55–6.) This grappling might be inspired by an awareness of the centrality of meanings by which the world of things get mentioned, picked out, talked about, and perhaps observed and categorized. In later humanist texts the things to be talked about are not always easy to distinguish from the words. Discussing Erasmus’ famous text *De copia* (1512), Terence Cave (1979: 21), for example, has argued: “*Res* are neither prior to words as their ‘origin,’ nor are they a productive residue which remains after the words cease. *Res* and *verba* slide together to become ‘word-things’; the notion of a single domain (language) having a double aspect replaces that of two distinct domains, language and thought.” Though not the only source for this development—as already mentioned, it was part and parcel of the rhetorical tradition—Valla’s emphasis on the centrality of words and their impact on how we categorize things was not lost on later humanists such as Erasmus.

3. Latin and the Scope of “Common Usage”

This brings us to a second theme, closely connected to the previous one, where we find the same pattern of an overly radical interpretation versus a more moderate reading of Valla’s semantic ideas. As we have seen, Valla stressed the conventional nature of language. This in itself was a wholly traditional idea: virtually all Scholastics would agree with that, following Aristotle’s account according to which words are conventional while concepts are common and natural. But that meanings are established in society was not something the Scholastics were greatly interested in, while for Valla this was of huge importance. It is here that Valla offered the humanists a model of how to explore the meaning of words by studying closely how words and grammatical constructions were actually used by classical authors. Unlike most medieval grammarians and logicians, who—at least according to the humanist critique—constructed abstract rules first and then assessed the correctness and validity of expressions on the basis of them, Valla stressed that linguistic usage (*loquendi consuetudo*) should sanction the rules of grammar and determine the meaning of words, an opinion that was also developed by other humanists, based, of course, on ancient authorities such as Cicero and Quintilian. While not putting it in these terms, Valla assigns to custom a grounding role for meaning. He repeatedly

states that we should follow the “common language”, “popular custom” (*consuetudo popularis*), or “spoken usage” (*usus loquendi*).

But what exactly does Valla mean by these expressions? For some scholars Valla must be regarded as an ordinary language philosopher *avant la lettre*, someone who is interested in how language works by studying the ordinary use of words. Other scholars think that common use for Valla always meant what the learned, the orators and literates, say—that is, the literary practice of the best authors rather than ordinary people’s parlance. Here too the truth lies somewhere in the middle. In this section we will first study what “common” means for Valla, and how he treats Latin, which is obviously the language he is concerned with; in the next section we will look in more detail at the way in which common usage is put to use by Valla in his analysis of meaning in some concrete examples.

Classical Latin is certainly the main theme of Valla’s widely read handbook, the *Elegantiae Linguae Latinae* (“The Fine Points of the Latin Language”), in which he elucidates a great variety of Latin’s morphological, syntactical, and semantic features. Behind the mass of detail, a clear programme can be discerned: the replacement of a philosophical approach to the study of language by a grammatical and philological one, grounded on the premiss that only a close study of the usage of ancient authors can teach us how to use Latin correctly and most effectively. By right use Valla means grammatically correct and rhetorically effective, *elegantia* standing for semantic precision and refinement rather than for stylishness. Throughout the *Elegantiae*, Valla’s main concern is classical Latin, and his observations often presuppose a distinction between Latin as a literate language and the vulgar tongues spoken by the common people (*vulgus, populus*).

This does not automatically entail an elitist privileging of Latin, however. As the language of the Roman Empire, Latin spread far and wide, becoming the language of “virtually the entire human race”, and hence the rule and norm of our speaking and writing (Valla 1982: 386; Nauta 2009: 277–8). While in the *Elegantiae* he speaks of Latin in terms of an *ars*—an invented language that existed alongside but independent from the vernacular languages (to which it added lustre rather than destroying them)—in his *Dialectical Disputations* he occasionally treats Latin on a par with other (vernacular) languages such as Greek, Hebrew, “Punic”, “Dalmatian” (Valla 2012: ii. 84). At its initial stage, Latin was very close to the language of the *vulgus*: in fact it was “practically one and the same” language, “sometimes called ‘Roman’ [*romana*], sometimes ‘Latin’ [*latina*]” (Valla 2012: i. 9). This is also why in antiquity it was much easier to master the learned Latin than it is now (in the fifteenth century), even though—as Valla stressed in a protracted debate with his arch-enemy Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459)—this does not mean that a Roman child did not need instruction and teaching at all: the learned Latin was close to but not the same as the mother tongue learned at home from parents and instructors. (On this debate in which many humanists took part, see Tavoni 1984; Rizzo 2002.) Nevertheless, Latin-speakers in antiquity belonged to one and the same linguistic

community. In later times Latin and the vernacular developed as separate varieties of one and the same language, and both underwent corruption: Latin of the Scholastics as well as the Roman *volgare* of modern times are depraved forms of learned Latin, on the one hand, and the vernacular form of ancient Latin, on the other hand.

Why does Valla link the *sermo popularis* and the *sermo eruditorum* so closely? A probable answer is patriotism. For the Roman Valla, it was in Rome that Latin developed and from whence it had spread. Latin was Rome's gift to the world. It was, therefore, vital for him to argue that "Latin" was the common denominator of both varieties of speech. The vernacular spoken by the masses was Latin too, and, though the learned spoke Latin "more ornately" or "more eloquently", one cannot say that they were "more Latinate" (Tavoni 1984: 266). Denying the existence of a Roman vernacular linguistically independent from Latin was also important for Valla; he insisted that the Roman *volgare* of his own day was a form of Latin, though of a highly degenerate sort. If he had accepted the existence of an independent Roman vernacular vis-à-vis literate Latin, this would have threatened the cultural-linguistic continuum that Latin had established through the ages. It would also have led to a competition between the contemporary Roman vernacular and its Florentine counterpart—a contest that Rome would surely lose (Cesarini Martinelli 1980). For Valla, then, spoken Latin (*latine loqui*) not only referred to the refined Latin of the great authors but also defined Latin more generally—and rather tautologically—as the language of the Latins (both then and now), just as the Gallic language was the language spoken by the Gauls (Camporeale 1972: 522; Tavoni 1984: 263).

The picture is therefore somewhat complicated: we have "Latin" as the language of the arts and sciences (which may have derived from the Latin spoken in antiquity), and we have depraved forms of "Latin" (the Roman vernacular and medieval-Scholastic Latin). What complicates matters even more is that Valla uses the word "natural" in different ways. He sometimes applies it to the vernacular as being the language spoken "at home or in one's city" (Florence, Naples, and so on), but he also uses the term to denote a common way of speaking opposed to the artificial language of the Scholastics (who speak "against nature" (Valla 2012: ii. 231; see also Tavoni 1986: 208–12; Nauta 2009: 277–9)). It is, therefore, not surprising that Valla frequently mentions "the common as well as the learned speech" in one breath (*popularis sermo atque eruditorum* (Valla 2012: i. 106)). His aim may be to contrast both of these categories with the "distorted", technical language of the scholastics. When, for instance, he admonishes us to speak "in a natural way and by popular custom [the way of the people]" (*naturaliter atque hominum more* (Valla 1982: i. 485)) or when he uses expressions such as "speech that is natural, speech commonly used by educated people" (*ad naturalem et a doctis tritum sermonem* (Valla 2012: ii. 208)) or "natural meaning and ordinary usage" (*ad naturalem sensum usumque commune* (Valla 2012: i. 232)), the term "natural" refers not to "vernacular" as opposed to "Latin", but to our common way of speaking and writing Latin, regarded as a natural language, as opposed to the technical and distorted language of the

Scholastics. In his discussion of the various forms of syllogism, for instance, he supports his rejection of the third form of syllogism by appealing “to learned authors as well as the simple, unlearned people, that is, those who speak naturally” (*imperatorum idest naturaliter loquentium* (Valla 1982: i. 548)).

Dependent on the context, then, Valla seems to apply “natural” for the vernacular, the users of elementary Latin, and classical Latin. But, in his fight against Scholastic language—which forms a major theme of the *Dialectical Disputations*—“natural” does not serve to distinguish the language we speak at home from the refined Latin of the learned; it refers instead to our “normal”, “common”, “usual” way of saying things, as opposed to the non-natural, “distorted” language of the Scholastics. Since Valla positions both classical Latin and our common way of speaking in contrast to Scholastic language, it was a short step for him to blur the distinction between learned Latin and the language of the common people, particularly when such an elision aided in his fight against that Scholastic language. Thus, at many places in the *Dialectical Disputations* his appeal to common, natural language does not serve foremost to make a grammatical point about classical Latin (though he does employ classical Latin, of course), but a broader goal: to establish what “we usually say” (*dicere solemus* (Valla 1982: i. 434; 2012: i. 234, 254, 264)).

We must conclude then that Valla’s view of the sources of meaning—that is, where linguistic facts come from—is diverse: local speakers of one of the many vernacular languages in the past and now, the Latin of the elite as well as the lower classes in classical antiquity, the Latin of the educated people of his own day (to be based as closely as possible on classical Latin), and Scholastic usage that does not manage to alter the semantic facts—that is, cannot assign meanings at its own will. Classical Latin was for him, as for all other humanists, of course normative, but it was normative because it was considered to be a common language, a language used far and wide and for a very long time. Linguistic custom was thus used by him in a broader sense than what the great Latin authors had written, as we can see when he pressed the *sermo popularis* and the *sermo eruditorum* into a coalition as the occasion arose (and the polemic required). Would this legitimize calling Valla a kind of ordinary language philosopher, after all, or at least someone who defines meaning in terms of use, or what we ordinarily would say in such and such a situation? As before, the truth lies somewhere in the middle: it is not too far-fetched to see some agreements—at a suitably general level—in basic convictions about the central importance of common usage, which philosophers often misuse or disregard, and that this neglect creates confusions in philosophy. But a closer look will also show important differences, which will be the subject of the last section of this chapter.

4. Meaning and Linguistic Usage

Valla’s appeal to “common language”, to what we normally would say in such and such a situation, is a recurrent feature of his work. He believed that words and

arguments should not be taken out of context, since this will easily change their normal, common meaning and, consequently, will give rise to philosophical problems where none previously existed. And this is precisely what the philosopher does, he thinks. Philosophical speculation—with its technically abstruse, vague, and esoteric vocabulary, with its tendency to disregard the grammatical rules and conventions of the Latin language—soon takes on a life of its own. Leaving the world of common experience far behind, the philosopher employs terminology that can just be handled and understood only by other philosophers. Against this, Valla champions the ordinary conception of the world and of the way it is reflected in Latin. He thus takes issue with what he considers the philosophers' *ficta*, their abstractions and theories, which take terms out of their 'ordinary' semantic network or reduce the richness of language to simplistic models. It is therefore not surprising that P. O. Kristeller, who was hardly an enthusiast for anachronistic readings of past thinkers, conceded that, in the case of Valla, "one is reminded of present-day attempts to base philosophy and especially logic on ordinary language" (Kristeller 1964: 34). Kristeller does not cite modern authors, but one can think of the ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin, who expressed a view that Valla would have shared (Austin 1979: 182):

our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing... they surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of the survival of the fittest, and more subtle, at least in all ordinary and reasonably practical matters, than any that you or I are likely to think up in our armchairs of an afternoon—the most favored alternative method.

Austin (1962: 62) therefore complained that "philosophers often seem to think that they can just 'assign' any meaning whatever to any word". Without first exploring the richness of common language, philosophers abandon too easily and too quickly this powerful and subtle tool and advance theories and ideas that take terms out of their normal context. As Austin writes on a particular philosophical doctrine (the theory of sense-data): "it is a typically *scholastic* view, attributable, first to an obsession with a few particular words, the uses of which are over-simplified, not really understood or carefully studied or correctly described...". Austin even identifies "Scholastic" with "philosophical": "over-simplification, schematization, and constant obsessive repetition of the same small range of jejune 'examples' are not only not peculiar to this case [the doctrine of sense-data], but far too common to be dismissed as an occasional weakness of philosophers." As his close colleague and literary executor, J. O. Urmson (1998: i. 571), summarizes Austin's convictions: "Ordinary language... contains all the distinctions about the world that people have found it necessary to make" and "a much more powerful and subtle tool of thought than philosophers had traditionally recognized"; "philosophers consistently misused and abused ordinary language, blurring and perverting the distinctions it made. When they abandoned ordinary

language in favor of a technical vocabulary of their own, it was usually confused and imprecise, creating confusion and darkness rather than shedding light.”

If we substitute “Latin” for “ordinary language” and “Scholastics” for “modern philosophers”, we can easily understand why scholars have associated Valla with ordinary language philosophy. Let me give some examples. Valla denounces Aristotle’s account of number. Aristotle had said that one is not a number but the principle of number. Valla appeals to common usage to argue that this is ridiculous. In everyday practice one is counted as the first uneven number, and Valla provocatively adduces the example of “mere women” dividing eggs and taking one as the first (uneven) number, “so mere women sometimes have a better sense about understanding of words than mighty philosophers” (Valla 2012: i. 32; see also Rizzo 2002: 112); the former employ words for a purpose (*ad usum*), the latter just for a game (*ad lusum*). We find the same contrast between two ways of speaking (*loquendi formulam*)—that of the ordinary people (*populus*) and that of the philosophers—in Valla’s discussion of place (Valla 2012: i. 264). The first is the most proper and correct one, says Valla, for they have “the choice and norm of speaking” (*arbitrium et normam loquendi*) on their side. We say, for instance, that a jar is empty when it lacks liquid and that the market is empty when there are no people, while philosophers deny that a jar or a market can ever be empty, since they are full of air. However, we never call something “full” when it contains nothing but air, except when the air performs a clear function: sails full of wind or a ball full of air. (The example may have been borrowed from Cicero’s *De fato* 11.24.) Valla thus objects to an arbitrary restriction on the meaning of words, as if philosophers can assign, by stipulation, a meaning it normally does not have.

Philosophers do not only restrict the meaning of individual words; they also arbitrarily restrict the range of relevant words in their logical studies. They only admit “all”, “some”, and “no one” to express the quantity of a proposition, and only “not” to express quality (negation versus affirmation). To express modality they usually treat only six terms: “possible”, “impossible”, “true”, “false”, “necessary”, and “contingent”. Valla’s criticism of such restrictions is that (a) the Scholastics often do not understand the working of these words in Latin, and (b) they forget that Latin is much more resourceful in expressing quantity, quality, and modality of propositions. The validity of such criticisms aside, Valla’s explorations of the use and function of such words, including negation in all its variety, is an impressive achievement.

But philosophers not only arbitrarily restrict the meaning of words or range of words; they also assign new meanings to words—that is, use these words in contexts in which, Valla claims, they are not at home. “Matter” (*materia*), for instance, is erroneously applied to God. Indeed, to speak of God as an Unmoved Mover, as Aristotle and his followers had done, is to apply concepts of rest and movement outside their normal field. God does not move or rest, nor does the soul move (except in a metaphorical sense). In the same vein, final causes should not be applied to inanimate objects, as if a stone has a purpose in falling down; inanimate things lack a

“purpose of mind”. And to apply the term *pati*, being acted upon or to suffer, to the senses is also an abuse of terms, as if the eyes suffer when they see an object. We should apply this word to the senses only when they really suffer—for example, in a case of too loud a noise or too bright a light. In all such cases, philosophers have “no regard for usage and custom in speaking” (*usum consuetudinemque loquendi* (Valla 2012: i. 88)). In his chapter on the virtues he makes the point that Aristotle goes against linguistic usage (*loquendi consuetudo*) when he says that—Valla cites the Greek—“happiness is an activity”, since, according to Valla (2012: i. 172), “good action is not happiness or enjoyment but one gets to happiness through good action and, above all, through teaching and knowledge, part of which is prudence.” In this case linguistic usage does not even refer to Latin, which shows that, for Valla, it does not always refer to the literary practice of the best authors.

The appeal to linguistic usage also recurs in Valla’s long chapter on the Aristotelian categories (substance, quality, action, quantity, relation, place, time, and so on). As we have already seen, Valla wanted to defend a common-sense picture of the world that consists of things that we can analyse as substances qualified by qualities and actions: we can describe a thing as a substance having certain qualities and doing or undergoing some things. From a grammatical point of view, however, “two metres long” can be considered a quality just as “white” or “father”. Hence we do not need separate categories of quantity, relation, and so on: “Linguistic usage itself confirms this. For when some someone asks ‘what kind of field did you buy’, you answer, ‘oblong at the start, then wider, two furrows long and of varying width’” (Valla 2012: i. 245). Valla uses linguistic usage also to criticize a number of other Scholastic notions and distinctions such as the six transcendental terms (true, one, good, and so on), the distinction between abstract and concrete terms (fatherhood/father, whiteness/white), virtue as a mean between two extremes.

This reduction of the categories to substance, quality, and action shows another feature of Valla’s approach—a feature that also concerns meaning but at a different level. Ancient and medieval grammarians distinguished word-classes such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, and so on, trying to relate these word-classes to aspects of reality. Verbs were generally said to signify actions, nouns substance plus quality, pronouns substance without quality, and so on. Because Valla thinks reality exists of only substances that we come to know by their qualities and actions, he tries to relate words to these three categories. In this case the search is not for a particular meaning of a (Latin) word but for the meaning (*significatio*) of a type of word. Valla finds that verbs, for instance, often “indicate” (*indicare*) a quality even though they seem to signify an action—for example, “he writes well” indicates the quality of being a fine writer rather than the action of writing. Some verbs always signify a quality: “to be cold” signifies “I am cold”, “to redden” signifies “I am red”, and so on. This is also the case with verbs such as “feeling happy”, “hoping”, and “loving”. In some cases the signification may change from action into quality, as when an oration, which is an action when spoken, becomes a quality when read (Valla 2012: i. 232–4). In other

cases, verbs seem to refer to the absence of action, such as “to sleep”, “to lie”, “to stand”, “to feel sorrow”, or “to rest”, but this does not make sleeping, lying, and so forth less of an action (Valla 2012: i. 234–6). Such an analysis also enables Valla to reject a separate Aristotelian category of passion of which Aristotle had given the examples “being-cut” and “being-burned” (*Categories* 2³3). Valla warns us that the passive mood of a verb does not mean that it signifies passive things. Being-affected is nothing else than to feel a passion, that is, *to act* in a certain way: “because feeling an affect is an action” (for example, understanding a danger), “or else it will be just that affect that is now a quality” (Valla 2012: i. 277). In all these cases Valla is exploring not so much the meaning of this or that (Latin) word but the meaning of words in terms of a particular state of the world: does the word signify an action, a substance plus quality, or the quality only? Consequently, it is not so much linguistic usage that is at stake here but rather the way in which our grammatical categories map onto the world. This grammatical categorization thus pertains to meaning at a different level from that of the individual (Latin) word.

With these examples we are now in a better position to see why Valla’s semantic–grammatical approach has been associated with ordinary language philosophy. Like ordinary language philosophers Valla’s insists on common usage as prime parameter in questions of meaning. Because language is essentially a social phenomenon, meaning can be established only by examining the multiple ways in which words are actually used. To us it might seem strange to launch a programme of study and use of language based on a dead language, classical Latin, but this was of course not the point of view of a humanist such as Valla, who was in daily contact with users of Latin. He also looks like a modern ordinary language philosopher when he criticizes the Scholastics for assigning their own meaning to existing words, for creating a jargon that often raises more problems than it solves, because it invites us to postulate abstract entities as referents of these technical words.

Hence, scholars have seen—though on a much weaker textual basis than offered in the preceding paragraphs—“strong parallels between Valla and Wittgenstein’s sense of ‘usage’”, and between “Wittgenstein’s aphorism ‘Philosophy leaves everything as it is’” and “Valla’s meticulous authentication of usage” (Struever 1992: 110 n. 23, 119). Valla’s effort is said to be “comparable to that of the most radical reconceiver of language in our time, the later Wittgenstein”, whose *Philosophical Investigations* offered “a virtual summary of Valla’s main theses and attitudes” (Waswo 1979: 268) or at least “not dissimilar to the way in which Wittgenstein talks about ‘the grammar of the word’” (Camporeale 1986: 233). But agreements can be deceptive, and in the last section I will indeed suggest, once again, that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. The examples I have adduced demonstrate Valla’s impressive sensitivity to semantic nuances and to the way language works—but we should not forget that his grammatical approach also had ancient roots, something that makes a close association with ordinary language philosophy problematic.

5. Valla and Ordinary Language Philosophy

Ordinary language philosophy was, of course, not a monolithic movement, and it is probably incorrect to group Wittgenstein under this label at all. This type of philosophizing was strong in the 1950s and 1960s, often called “Oxford philosophy”, and the most famous proponents were J. L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle (Hacker 1996). For many reasons, it fell into decline, and today not many philosophers would present themselves as such. Yet the type of analysis that we find in their works is still of value (and to some even more than that). For all their differences, what such philosophers have in common is the conviction that the analysis of concepts should start with a careful mapping of the ways in which these concepts are used in ordinary contexts. Ryle (1949: 10) called this mapping the “logical geography of our concepts”:

To determine the logical geography of concepts is to reveal the logic of the propositions in which they are wielded, that is to say, to show with what other propositions they are consistent and inconsistent, what propositions follow from them and from what propositions they follow. The logical type or category to which a concept belongs is the set of ways in which it is logically legitimate to operate with it.

Ryle argued, for instance, that many of our mental concepts are treated as if they are a kind of physiological or physical process that can be clocked and measured. Much of his work thus aimed at putting concepts back in their proper category, correcting what he famously called “category mistakes”: concepts such as enjoying and disliking do not belong to the same category as having pain (they are not sensations or feelings); seeing does not belong to the same category as pain or knee jerk (it is not an activity, a process, or a state); mental concepts such as intelligent, careful, inventive, and so on, do not refer to mysterious or occult episodes as causes of which observable actions and utterances are the effects; the doctrine of fatalism can arise because logical necessity is applied to events, and so on (Ryle 1949, 1954).

In this Ryle was inspired by Wittgenstein, who also tried to explicate and delineate the boundaries of concepts by closely examining the ways in which they are used in language. Wittgenstein famously called such enquiries “grammatical”. Among these concepts studied by him were knowledge, belief, pain, perception, thought, certainty, doubt, evidence, the “I”, cause and effect, intuition, meaning, promising, pretending, acting, colour, and many more. Wittgensteinian grammar tries to evoke the rules that govern our concepts by closely paying attention to the many ways in which we ordinarily use these concepts in language and in forms of life (Hacker 1996; McGinn 1997: 14). Thus, if we want to understand the concept of knowledge, we need to consider how and when we speak of knowledge, when we use phrases such as “I know *p*”, and consider (imaginary) contexts in which the phrase can and cannot properly be used; other, related concepts (for example, doubt, certainty), must be taken into account as well: “When philosophers use a word—‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition’, ‘name’—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must

always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home" (Wittgenstein 2009: 53^e, §116).

With this all too brief indication of the type of conceptual analysis that these philosophers pursued, we can now see the differences between them and Valla's grammatical-semantic method. For a start, Valla does not show much interest in the type of conceptual analysis these modern philosophers practise. He is mainly interested in the Latin language, and, even though he treats it often as a common language—opposite to the esoteric, technical language of the Scholastics—he does not use this common language to philosophize about concepts such as truth, meaning, knowledge, virtue, emotion, doubt, evidence, belief, pain, and so on. Indeed, in much of what Valla says about general philosophical themes, he does not examine the concepts in any great detail. In his discussion of virtue, for instance, he simply equates virtues with emotions (affects), and the virtue fortitude with a whole range of terms such as love, charity, happiness, and beatitude. When he speaks about the soul Valla does not embark on a Wittgensteinian analysis of how and when we speak of the soul, but states—conventionally enough, of course—that it is an incorporeal substance. In his brief discussion on time he states that time is a kind of action—a type of claim that an ordinary language philosopher would characterize as highly problematic. The same is true for many other statements such as that truth is, among other things, a quality of the mind. On many such topics Valla, while often critical of particular theories, follows well-established traditions (for example, the Augustinian tradition on soul and perception), without aiming to map the "logical geography of our concepts".

To illustrate this let us take a brief look at some examples. Ryle's discussion of emotion is aimed at showing that emotions are not the sort of thing to which we have, in some mysterious way, private access: they are not "the sorts of things which could be among the direct intimations of consciousness, or among the objects of introspection, as these factitious forms or Privileged Access are ordinarily described" (Ryle 1949: 115). Such a category mistake arises because we are often associating emotions with moods and inclinations. The details of Ryle's analysis are not important here, but it is clear that Valla's claim about emotions as virtues (for reasons we do not need to go into either) is of a wholly different kind; from a Rylean point of view Valla's statement is no less a category mistake than saying that emotions are "direct intimations of consciousness". Another example comes from Wittgenstein (2009: 26e, §47):

Asking 'Is this object composite?' *outside* a particular game is like what a boy once did when he had to say whether the verbs in certain sentences were in the active or passive voice, and who racked his brains over the question whether the verb 'to sleep', for example, meant something active or passive.

Valla turns out to be such as boy. As we have seen, it was this very question about verbs in the passive and verbs seemingly indicating a lack of action such as "sleeping"

that he asked, standing as he did in an age-old grammatical tradition. This background makes all the difference, as we can see when we compare Valla's question about verbs such as "sleeping" with Ryle's analysis of a particular kind of verbs that he called "achievement verbs" such as "seeing", which are "not process words, experience words, or activity words", even though they are often treated as such. "They do not stand for perplexingly undetectable actions or reactions, any more than 'win' stands for a perplexingly undetectable bit of running" (Ryle 1949: 145–6). Without going into detail, his analysis might look a bit similar to Valla's question about the category to which "sleeping" belongs: both Valla and Ryle seem to point to the possibly misleading surface grammar of certain verbs—"seeing" looks to stand for a process (Ryle), "sleeping" seems to signify an absence of action (Valla)—but the context is wholly different. Valla asks the typically grammarian's question: "Does this (type of) word refer to substance or quality or action?" He wants to have language refer to reality—that is, to his three categories: substance, quality, or action (all called "things", *res*). Ryle's investigation is of a wholly different kind and comes to a wholly different conclusion (cf. also Ryle 1954: 93–110). As said, he wants to map the logic of the concept of perception by showing that a psychological or physiological account of it puts us on the wrong track. "Seeing" is not like running: it does not stand for a bodily or psychological process. It does not refer to a process at all or to a state of being; the whole idea of looking indiscriminately for a referent "out there" is wrong. It is precisely to look for a referent "out there" that characterizes Valla's grammatical approach.

In spite of the label "ordinary language philosophy"—a label never used by the philosophers in question themselves—ordinary language is not considered sacrosanct, and this brings us to another way of seeing the differences. As Austin famously wrote: ordinary language must be the "first word" but it "has no claim to be the last word" (Austin 1979: 185), and he himself said at one point that "modern scientists have been able...to reveal its [i.e. of ordinary speech] inadequacy at numerous points" (Austin 1979: 203); hence "we may wish to tidy the situation up a bit, revise the map here and there, draw the boundaries and distinctions rather differently" (Austin 1962: 63). Similarly, Ryle also thinks that the surface grammar may lead us astray; indeed, expressions in the common language may be "systematically misleading," as the title of his famous paper from 1931 has it. Hence, a philosopher is engaging in "rectifying the logic of mental-conduct terms" (Ryle 1949: 17). Wittgenstein, too, thought that language embodies "pictures" that may mislead us into thinking, for instance, that the mind is a kind of stuff, that meanings are things in the head, or that perceiving is a bodily state. He famously spoke of the "bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language" (Wittgenstein 2009: 52^e, §109). Valla would have been greatly puzzled by these statements. For him the language that he considers as the "ordinary", common language—the *sermo eruditum* closely associated with the *sermo popularis*—is not "bewitching" at all. He is not treating what modern philosophers call "the surface grammar" as misleading or

bewitching. It is the contorted, ungrammatical, and unnatural language of the scholastics that is misleading, something that can be cured only by having restored Latin to its former beauty and expressiveness. Valla is not using classical Latin as the common language to see—to quote Ryle again—what the logical geography of concepts is in order to rectify the map. What he is doing is something else: Valla's categories—substance, quality, and action—are real aspects of reality, so that, when he attempts to relate words to one of these three categories, he is doing something entirely different from what Ryle describes as bringing concepts in their categories or “logical types”—that is “the set of ways in which it is logically legitimate to operate with it” (Ryle 1949: 10). Valla would perhaps agree with the idea that we ought to struggle “against the bewitchment of our understanding by our resources of language”, but he would not share Wittgenstein's notion (2009: 7^e, §5) that it is also the common language—and not only the technical jargon of “scientific” philosophers—that bewitches us and becomes a “fog” obscuring from view how our concepts are used and misused.

Valla's originality, therefore, is not that he anticipated the kind of analysis propagated by modern philosophers. He did not come up with revolutionary ideas about meaning nor did he engage in Wittgensteinian “grammatical” enquiries or Rylean “conceptual cartography”. His significance was rather that—together with other humanists—he launched a new approach towards the study of Latin, which emphasized the careful examination of the language, starting from the premiss that language is essentially a social phenomenon and hence should be studied against the background of the shared rules that govern its use. But it had its philosophical significance and implications: a turn towards language led to a growing awareness that language is a shaping force of our thinking about the world as well as an instrument in shaping other people's ideas and feelings about the world. With a grounding in human conventions, meanings—in all their variety—become glasses through which the world is seen.

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