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*Dante, a Versatile Latin Writer****

E noi vedemo che in ciascuna cosa di sermone lo bene manifestare del concetto è più amato e commendato: dunque è questa la prima sua bontade. E con ciò sia cosa che questa sia nel nostro volgare, sì come manifestato è di sopra in altro capitolo, manifesto è ched ella è delle cagioni stata dell'amore ch'io porto ad esso: poi che, sì come detto è, la bontade è cagione d'amore generativa. (*conv.* I.xii.13; Dante, 1995)

'And we find that in the matter of language what is always most loved and praised is clarity in the expression of ideas; this, therefore, is its principal goodness. Since, as was demonstrated in an earlier chapter, this goodness is possessed by our vernacular, it is clear that it must be counted one of the causes of the love I bear for it, because, as was said above, goodness is a cause that generates love'. (Ryan, 1989)

Ancora: questo mio volgare fu introduttore di me nella via di scienza, che è ultima perfezione [nostra], in quanto con esso io entrai nello latino e con esso mi fu mostrato: lo quale latino poi mi fu via a più inanzi andare. E così è palese, e per me conosciuto, esso essere stato a me grandissimo benefattore. (*conv.* I.xiii.5; Dante, 1995)

'Moreover, this vernacular of mine set me on the road to knowledge, the highest perfection, in that with its help I made my first beginnings in Latin and with its help that language became clear to me; Latin was then the means whereby I was able to go forward on my own. And so it is evident, and something I gladly acknowledge, that my vernacular has been a wonderful benefactor to me'. (Ryan, 1989)

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*** This article develops further Pade & Ramminge (2021).

These two quotes from Dante's *Convivio* (= *conv.*) show us something about his attitude towards the two languages he used in his writings. In the first, he declares his love for the vernacular, because of its 'clarity in the expression of ideas'. In the second, we hear that the vernacular set him 'on the road to knowledge', helping him to acquire some Latin which enabled him 'to go forward on his own', i.e. study the *auctores* first-hand. It will be no surprise to anybody that Dante, one of the greatest writers in Italian ever, is enthusiastic about the vernacular he perhaps more than any other writer helped develop; it is not unexpected either that Dante fully acknowledges the usefulness of Latin, the international *lingua franca* of his day and the language of scholarship and literature, of politics and the Church. He is not, however, as passionate about it as he is about the vernacular, and his Latin writings have rarely been admired as much as the masterpieces he wrote in Italian, notably the *Divine Comedy*.

Dante's Latin works comprise treatises on matters of government, *On Monarchy* (*Monarchia* = *mon.*), on style and poetics, *On Eloquence in the Vernacular* (*De vulgari eloquentia* = *dve*), and on the construction of the physical world, *On Earth and Water* (*Questio de aqua et terra* = *quest.*), besides epistles and poems. Generally speaking, Dante's Latin is an idiom that corresponds to that of his Latinate contemporaries in terms of orthography and morphology, as well as in syntax and vocabulary. However, it is by no means monolithic; an analysis of his Latin reveals Dante as a versatile Latin writer, not just in his choice of genres and subjects. From the perspective of diaphasic variation (Völker, 2013), this article aims to exemplify how Dante varies his Latin stylistically according to the genre in which he writes (collections of material in Brugnoti, 1971; discussion in Rizzo, 2016 and 2017).

1. *The development of Latin after the fall of the Western Empire*

Whenever Dante wrote in Latin, he made a completely natural choice. In his day, Latin was, as already mentioned, still the language of prestige throughout Western Europe. It was also a language which had not had native speakers for many centuries. This, however, did not mean that Latin was a dead language. On the contrary, it had changed from Ancient Latin (i.e. Latin before 600 BC) in terms of vocabulary,

grammar and orthography, and it would continue to evolve further in the centuries after Dante.

The variant of Latin used by Dante is usually called Medieval Latin, although in many ways this is a problematic term: first, during the Middle Ages Latin was taught using standard antique grammars, but even so another language developed that did not follow the rules of Ancient Latin. Moreover, the term 'Medieval Latin' does not take into account the very large differences between the Latin we encounter in the earliest period (600-700s) and the language used in the late Middle Ages (1300-1500s: what is termed 'late Middle Ages' varies, depending on where in Europe one is situated), just as there are large regional differences in language use. For example, Latin developed differently in the British Isles than it did in mainland Europe (Norberg, 1968; Stotz, 1996-2004; Dinkova-Bruun, 2011). Nevertheless, it is possible to point to certain common traits that we also find in Dante. It will not be possible for us to discuss all the medieval features of Dante's Latin, but we will try to give an idea of how and when his language differs from Ancient Latin, both in vocabulary and syntax, and how his linguistic virtuosity manifests itself in the way he is able to adapt his language to the different genres he uses.

2. *Lexicon*

As is the case with foreign languages we learn today, Dante's Latin vocabulary was influenced by what he had learned in school, by what he could look up in a dictionary, by what he read, and by the words in use in society around him. He also formed new words himself when appropriate or necessary. What was appropriate depended on the genre, as there were strict rules for what was acceptable in both prose and poetry, rules that were scrupulously adhered to both in antiquity and later.

This is perhaps most evident in Dante's eclogues (= *ecl.*), both written as answers to the poet and scholar Giovanni del Virgilio (late 1200s-c. 1327). Giovanni had read the *Comedy* and was taken aback, because Dante whose epic-like poem was filled with references to ancient literature and who himself chose Virgil as his guide through Hell, wrote in Italian. Therefore, in 1319 Giovanni wrote a letter, in

Latin hexametres, to Dante in which he invited him to compose an epic work in Latin – whose fame he, Giovanni, would help secure. Although Dante declined the request, his answer is almost what del Virgilio wanted, because it is written in the form of a Latin eclogue, a genre closely associated with Virgil, governed by strict rules regarding setting, style, lexicon and metre, and traditionally seen as allegorical. It is also a self-referential genre, in the sense that eclogues normally abound with intertextual references to other poems written in the genre. Giovanni answered with an eclogue of his own, and Dante finished their exchange with a second eclogue (Wicksteed & Garner, 1902; Pasquini, 1990).

Thus, when Dante answered Giovanni, he chose a genre, the eclogue, characterised by intertextual references to earlier eclogues and a rigorous adherence to the lexical and stylistic norms found in them. The challenge was to connect the vocabulary and style of the role model (in Dante's case, Virgil) with a new content (in Dante's case, the appropriateness of using the vernacular for poetry), often expressed in allegorical form. This was precisely what Dante succeeded in doing in the two poems; he so to speak put an allegorical veil over his statements about poetry and language, and all in a very Virgilian idiom, as we shall see.

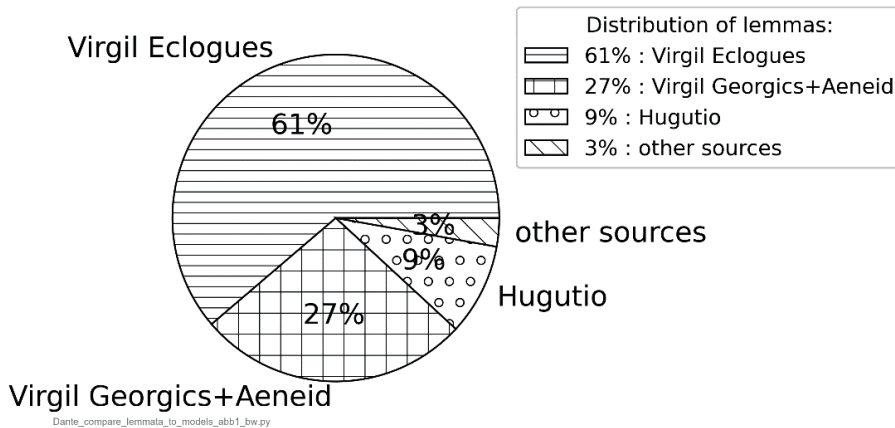


Fig. 1: Distribution of the lexicon of Dante's Eclogues¹.

We learn from Figure 1 that nearly two-thirds of the vocabulary of his eclogues is also found in Virgil's eclogues and another 27% in other

¹ The statistics count the lemmata, not the actual word forms. For Dante, they are based on the data provided by Rand *et al.* (1912) and those of DanteSearch (<https://dante-search.dantenetwork.it/>), for Virgil on the LASLA corpus (<https://lila-erc.eu>).

poems by Virgil. Another 9% of the vocabulary of the eclogues, Dante would have been able to find in Hugutio's *Derivationes*, the most widely used Latin dictionary of the period. This does not mean that Dante necessarily looked up Hugutio's work to find the right vocabulary, but we do know that he did sometimes use it (Schizzerotto, 1976; for its use in the *Comedy* see Austin, 1935 and 1947). What is interesting in this context is that Hugutio's dictionary represents a form of late medieval standard vocabulary that was in use in the texts usually read. That is why it contains plenty of words found in Virgil, which are shown as separate parts (hatched horizontally and with squares, 61% and 27%) in the graphic in Fig. 1).

Contained in the 9%, that is in the part of the vocabulary only in Hugutio, is a wide range of words that are also found in other classical authors with which Dante was familiar. Some of them were very rare, such as *celator* ('one that hides something') found in the poet Lucan. Some of Dante's readers will no doubt have recognized the primary source and admired his learning. We also see vocabulary that may seem surprising, given the genre, such as *indignatio* ('resentment') that otherwise only occurs in prose texts. Finally, the residual 3% (hatched diagonally) is quite small and contains non-classical words not found in Hugutio either, such as *canneus* ('made of reeds') and *perferbeo* ('to glow', of anger), which Dante may have encountered in medieval heroic poems. Dante probably coined some words himself, e.g. *libratim* ('keeping in balance') and *currigerus* ('carrying the chariot', applied to wheels).

The very last word of the second eclogue, *poymus*, seems completely out of place in a poetic context, but is in fact an ingenious choice on Dante's part:

omnia qui didicit, qui retulit omnia nobis:
 ille quidem nobis; et nos tibi, Mopse, poymus.
 (*ecl.* II, 96-97; Dante, 1960a)

'The whilst, heard all, and all he heard rehearsed.
 He unto us (i.e. 'sang'), and, Mopsus, we to thee'.
 (Wicksteed & Garner, 1902)

As Hugutio had explained, *pooyo* comes from Greek and means to 'put together, invent', and from it are formed words such as 'poetry', 'poet', etc. (Hugutio, 2004: a.v.; regarding Grecisms in Dante, cf. Migliorini, 1971). This etymology was widely known and quoted by later authors, and it must be taken into account when we read the last two verses of the eclogue.

Here we are told by the narrator that he had heard all that he had just told from the shepherd Iollas, who had witnessed it, and ‘he (Iollas) sang to us, and we sing to you (*poymus*), Mopsus’. Using *poymus*, Dante makes a programmatic statement: ‘As others have done before me, so have I written this eclogue, imitating earlier poetry’, and the use of the Greek word may even refer to the Greek origin of the genre. To a modern reader, this play on words may seem unnecessarily complicated, but Dante’s learned contemporaries would have decoded the signal effortlessly and appreciated his mastery in being able to say so much with just a single word.

In Dante’s prose works, the vocabulary is much more medieval, although the style ranges from overwhelmingly ‘baroque’ in some of the epistles to sober, technical language in the three treatises, *On Monarchy*, *On Eloquence in the vernacular*, and *On Water and Earth*. However, it is far from certain that Dante would have opted for a more classical vocabulary, had he known it, for he had the refined technical-philosophical terminology of his time at his disposal. It is important to remember, however, that, well-read as Dante was, he could not have known a number of the texts that 100 years later came to be considered some of the most important sources for a Classical Latin vocabulary, such as Cicero’s letters, his *Brutus*², or Plautus’ comedies. They were simply not available in Italy in Dante’s time.

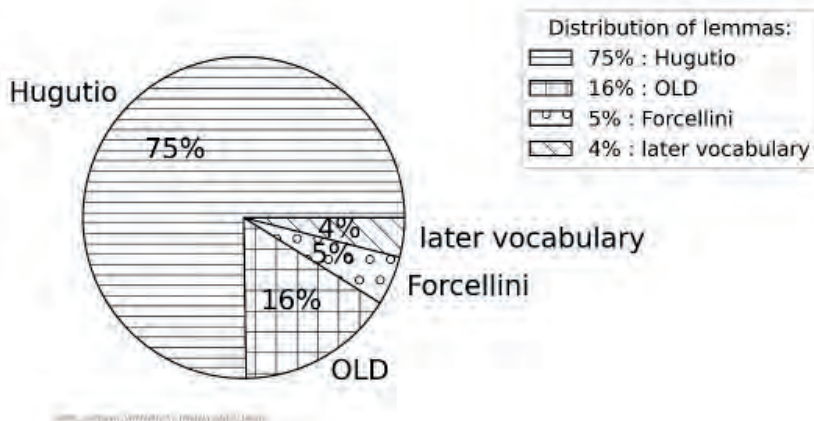


Fig. 2: Possible sources for the vocabulary of Dante’s *On Monarchy*³.

² For the linguistic influence of *Brutus* once it was found, cf. Ramminger (2010).

³ *OLD* covers Classical Latin, i.e. Latin written before 200 AD. Forcellini (1858-1887) Ancient Latin until c. 600 AD.

As Figure 2 shows, three-quarters of the vocabulary in *On Monarchy* is found in Hugutio's dictionary, meaning that it was common in Medieval Latin – which, of course, came mostly from Ancient Latin. A further 21% (of which 16% are in *OLD* and an additional 5% are also recorded in *Forcellini*, see note 3) Dante may have encountered in classical Latin authors or in the Church Fathers. But otherwise Dante's prose – not surprisingly – shows his anchoring in a medieval culture: a term like *disiunctim abmotimque* ('separate and far away', *dve*) smacks of law, as *disiunctim* is often used in the standard medieval legal work, *The Digest*, while *abmotim* was probably coined by Dante himself. *Doctrinatus* ('scholar', a substitute for the classical *doctus* with more syllables), *arteficiatum* ('artifact', instead of classical *arte factum*), and *magistrare* ('to teach', from *magister*, instead of classical *docere*) reflect a medieval stylistic ideal in which longer words are preferred, an ideal far removed from the classical, which rather strives for simplicity.

Dante has a large technical, non-antique vocabulary, e.g. in the political domain: *civicare* ('to live as a citizen'), *plebeians* ('behaving like simple people') and *politizare* ('to participate in public life'). The latter shows Dante's familiarity with the philosophy of his time; he encountered it in William of Moerbeke's Latin translation of Aristotle's *The Politics*, where it was a calque of the Greek *politeuein*. We see here an example of language change, or language enrichment, through translation, in this case from the prestige language Greek. 100 years later, when the early Renaissance saw an explosion in interest in Greek and thus in translations from Greek to Latin, the phenomenon became the subject of fierce debate: was it permissible – and good Latin – to use Greek loanwords, or should a (Classical) Latin equivalent be found by force and violence (Pade, 2020: 61-63)?

In the 1400s, it was also discussed whether new Latin words could be formed when dealing with topics that the ancient writers had not written about. More often than not, the conclusion was that it was inevitable. Dante faced the same problem a century earlier. Thus, when in *On Eloquence in the vernacular* he discussed in which language the first utterance of mankind was made, he coined the word *primiloquium* ('first-speech') for this first utterance.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that we can sometimes discern the vernacular language in Dante's Latin, e.g. *podiare* ('to lean on something'), which in Hugutio is mentioned together with *apodiare*, which is acoustically close to the Italian *poggiare* (and *appoggiare*, 'to lean'), or *stantia* ('dwelling'), which must be connected to the Italian *stanz(i)a* ('room').

3. Grammar

There are a number of points where Dante's syntax and morphology differ from classical standards, but we shall here discuss only a few phenomena which show Dante as both a typical thirteenth-century Latin user and as a learned and refined writer who is able to adapt even his syntax to the genre he writes in.

One example is the use of the accusative with infinitive which in Ancient Latin is more or less obligatory after *verba dicendi ac sentiendi*. The construction is far from disappearing in Medieval Latin, but it is often replaced by object phrases preceded by the conjunctions *quod*, *quia*, *quoniam* or *ut* (Stotz, 1996–2004: IV, 392–396). Dante primarily uses the conjunction *quod* to initiate object sentences, such as «Propter quod *sciendum* primo *quod* Deus et natura nil otiosum facit» (*mon.* I.iii.3, 'For this reason one must first of all *know that* God and nature do nothing in vain'); «Et si *dicatur quod* pice adhuc et alie aves locuntur, *dicimus quod* falsum est» (*dve* I.ii.7, 'And if anyone would *say that* woodpeckers and other birds speak, I *say that* it is untrue'); or «et probant *dicendo, quod* ascendendo malum vident eos» (*quest.* 5, 'and they support this by *referring to the fact that* they can see them [scil. the mountains] by climbing up the mast'). We have chosen here three examples from *On Monarchy*, *On eloquence in the vernacular* and *On water and land* respectively, and this is no coincidence. One finds object sentences preceded by *quod* also in the epistles, but relatively few, and there are none at all in the eclogues. It would therefore seem that this use of *quod* phrases is also a stylistic feature. We encounter it most frequently in the treatises, while Dante uses it less in the epistles, and he avoids it altogether in the eclogues, where he has a clear classical model, Virgil. A statistical study shows that *quod* accounts for 2.3% of the total number of words in *On Monarchy*, 2.17% in *On eloquence in the vernacular* and 2.6% in *On Water and Earth*. In the epistles, on the other hand, *quod* represents only 1.4% of the total number of words, and in the eclogues as little as 1%. By comparison, *quod* accounts for 1% of the total number of words in Cicero's *On the Duties* (a treatise widely read in the Middle Ages) and only 0.15% in Virgil's *Eclogues*⁴.

Another point where Dante's Latin differs markedly from the

⁴ It should be emphasized that in these statistics we have not distinguished between *quod* in the sense of 'that' and the other functions that the word can have in Latin (causal conjunction, relative pronoun, etc.).

classical language norm is the use of infinitives. In Classical Latin, as a rule only the gerund is used with prepositions. Dante also uses the gerund, but he often lets a preposition govern an infinitive, which would be very awkward in Classical Latin. However, it becomes widespread in later Latin, from where the construction passes into the Romance languages (*TLL* s.v. *ad*, c. 559,61-67, has examples, but cf. *DMLBS* s.v., § 10c). In *On Monarchy* we find, for example: «[...] et queritur an *ad bene esse mundi* necessaria sit» (*mon.* I.ii.3 ‘and it is debated whether (the *On Monarchy*) is necessary for the world to be well’), where the infinitive even has the genitive *mundi* (world) attached to it. The expression *ad bene esse mundi* occurs as many as seven times in *On Monarchy*, and in *On eloquence in the vernacular* we find ‘*ad bene esse*’ (*dve* I.i.4). Another relatively frequent expression is ‘*in esse*’: «genus humanum Deus eternus arte sua, que natura est, *in esse* producit» (*mon.* I.iii.2 ‘with His craft, which is nature, the eternal God brings the human race into existence’). ‘*In esse*’ occurs five times in *On Monarchy*. Dante also likes to use ‘*ad esse*’, e.g. «quantum est *ad esse*» (*mon.* III.iv.18 ‘as to its existence’), which, in addition to in *On Monarchy*, appears three times in the epistles⁵.

With the infinitives governed by prepositions we see the same pattern that we could observe in Dante’s use of *quod* phrases instead of the accusative with infinitive: they are far more frequent in the treatises than in the epistles, and Dante completely avoids this non-classical construction in the eclogues.

4. Address and greeting formulas

In Classical Latin, the greeting formulas in letters were very simple, typically sender in the nominative, recipient in the dative and the greeting itself in the accusative: ‘Seneca Lucilio suo salutem’ (Seneca

⁵ Other similar expressions are «*propter non se habere* immediate ad lucrum» (*mon.* I.i.5 ‘because it is not immediately suitable for profit’), «*propter esse*» (*ep.* VII.7 ‘because they are’), «*propter transcendisse* humanum modum» (*ep.* XIII.78 ‘because it had crossed the limit of the human being’), «*propter admirari*» (*quest.* 61 ‘because they wondered’), «*propter condescendere omnes ad medium*» (*mon.* I.xv.6 ‘because everyone seeks the center’), «*propter coadscendere omnes ad circumferentiam*» (*mon.* I.xv.6 ‘because everyone seeks the perimeter’), «*propter simul moveri*» (*mon.* I.xv.6 ‘because they move simultaneously’), «*propter magis propinquare*» (*quest.* 4 and 20 ‘because it approaches more’).

sends a greeting to his Lucilius), all without titles, and the recipient is always addressed with *tu*, second person singular. In Dante's day, however, the polite form of address had long been second person plural, or a periphrastic expression was used in which the possessive pronoun for second person plural was followed by a noun as we know it from English expressions such as 'Your Excellency' (Stotz, 1996-2004: III, 452-453; Pade, 2014: 7; Ramminger, 2016: 64-66). And in letterheads, all the titles and laudatory adjectives that could be scraped together were used. A prime example of this is found in Dante's epistle (= *ep.*) VII:

Sanctissimo gloriosissimo atque felicissimo triumphatori
et domino singulari domino Henrico divina providentia
Romanorum Regi et semper Augusto, devotissimi sui Dantes
Alagherii Florentinus et exul inmeritus ac universaliter omnes
Tusci qui pacem desiderant, terre osculum ante pedes. (*ep.* VII.1,
Dante, 1960b)

'To the most glorious and most fortunate Conqueror, and sole
Lord, the Lord Henry, by Divine Providence King of the Romans,
and ever Augustus, his most devoted servants, Dante Alighieri, a
Florentine undeservedly in exile, and all the Tuscans everywhere
who desire peace, offer a kiss on the ground before his feet'.
(Toynbee, 1966)

As in the classic Latin letter, the greeting formula has three parts, here first the recipient in the dative – but with titles and laudatory adjectives this takes up almost two lines, from *Sanctissimo* to *Augusto* –, then the senders in the nominative – and they too take up two lines, from *deuotissimi* to *desiderant* –, and finally what the recipient gets (*terre* [...] *pedes*), directly translated 'a kiss on the ground before his feet'.

The most common form of address in the letters is, as expected, *vos*, second person plural, but in epistle III, where Dante writes to a friend, he uses *tu*, which appears natural. What seems astonishing, on the other hand, is that Dante also addresses the future Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII himself with *tu*, precisely in epistle VII, which has the elaborate form of greeting we have just discussed. The explanation for this must lie in the epistle's ambitious style; it is filled with rhetorical figures and quotations from the Bible and from the Latin classics such as Virgil, Ovid and Lucan. These quotes underline Henry's historical role and Dante's hope that he would restore the Holy Roman Empire and make Rome once again the center of the world. For the lofty subject, the classic letter style fits with the epithet *tu*, which in antiquity was used

for everyone. The epistle even has an antique style of date which Dante normally does not use: «Scriptum in Tuscia sub fonte Sarni *xv Kalendas Maias*, divi Henrici faustissimi cursus ad Ytaliam anno primo» (*ep.* VII.31 ‘Written in Tuscany, from beneath the springs of Arno, *on the fifteenth day before 1 May* (= 17 April), in the first year of the most auspicious passage of the holy Henry into Italy’).

5. *Some conclusions*

In this brief review, we have only been able to give a few examples of features that we think are characteristic of Dante as a Latin writer, but nevertheless a clear picture has emerged: Dante’s Latin is typical of a thirteenth-century Latin user, showing the language change that had occurred since antiquity, in terms of both vocabulary and syntax. Our studies also show that Dante must have been very aware of this language development, for he could, so to speak, jump back and forth between a more ancient idiom and the Latin of his contemporaries. The three treatises, linguistically, are by far the most medieval, while the epistles, which often aspire to a higher, more classical-sounding style, contain a lower ratio both of *quod* phrases, instead of an accusative with infinitive, and noun infinitives. Finally, the two shepherd poems stand out: here Dante jokingly identifies with Virgil and therefore writes a much more Classical Latin.

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