LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY AND THE HUMANIST IMITATION OF CLASSICAL LATIN

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The Whorf-Sapir hypothesis

In this contribution I want to examine a claim which one frequently encounters in discussions about the rise and nature of humanism. One of the most striking achievements of the humanists is of course their rediscovery of classical Latin which they sought to imitate and emulate as best as they could. The claim then is that their study and imitation of this language had a formative influence on their thoughts and the way they looked at the world. The replacement of medieval, scholastic forms of discourse by Ciceronian Latin was not just a change of coat, but also affected the contents of the thought expressed by this language. This is a plausible and reasonable claim to make, for at least two reasons:

(i) Humanism initiated new developments in literature, education, ethics, historiography and politics – even though there are debates over the extent of these innovations. The rediscovery and use of classical Latin played a key role in all this – as the humanists themselves were the first to point out. It would be highly implausible to suggest that the rediscovery and use of this language – which is such a central feature of the humanist program – had nothing to do with these other innovations.

(ii) The claim that humanist Latin had a formative influence on their thinking is merely one instance of a widely held view that language is not just a piece of garment which does not affect the body it clothes, but is rather an essential part of its speakers, influencing their thinking and world view.

Nevertheless, I think the claim is less self-explanatory as might appear at first sight. Take only the phrase that 'language has a formative influence on thought'. This contains three problematic terms: 'formative influence', 'thought' and 'language'.

1. What exactly does one understand by the phrase 'a formative influence of language'? Does it mean that language fully determines thought or only that it exerts some influence on it? Moreover, 'formative' suggests a causal connection between language and thought. But does language play indeed a *causal* role in establishing thought patterns or is it merely an exter-

nal verbalisation of an independent mental content, or something in between these views?

2. Next, we may ask: a formative influence on *what precisely*? Do linguistic categories determine our concepts with which we categorise the world or do they also shape our visual perception of the world? Do they influence our beliefs and feelings? Or do they bring about all of these?

3. And thirdly, which linguistic features are held responsible for shaping our thought? The vocabulary of a language or also its morphological and syntactical features, e.g. whether it makes use of number, gender and case tense? And what about style and genre?

Of course, these are big questions, so big in fact that they have not received conclusive answers so far – and perhaps never will. One type of answer that has been attractive to a number of scholars is the hypothesis of linguistic relativity, widely known as the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, named after the two American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. The hypothesis has been interpreted in various ways – indeed, one critic once complained that 'an enterprising Ph.D. candidate would have no trouble in producing at least 108 versions of Whorfianism',[1] not in the least because of different formulations by Whorf himself.[2] The main idea is that the particular language we speak shapes the way we think about the world. As Sapir wrote in 1928:

> It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group … We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.[3]

And again in 1931:

> Language … not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help but actually defines experience for us … Such categories as number, gender, case tense … are not so much discovered by experience as imposed upon it because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our orientation in the world.[4]

And one characteristic statement by Whorf is the following:

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[1] Black, 'Some Troubles with Whorfianism', p. 30.
[2] Cf. Robins, 'Current Relevance', p. 101.
[3] Sapir, 'Status of Linguistics', pp. 209-210; cf. Koerner, 'The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis', p. 180.
[4] Sapir, 'Conceptual Categories', p. 578.

> We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of language … Every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyses nature, notices or neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.[5]

And in his classic paper 'Science and Linguistics', Whorf put his position in the following way:

> the background linguistic system (in other words, grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself a shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade.[6]

The hypothesis is known as linguistic *relativity* because it holds that world views are relative to the use of languages. In the words of Whorf: 'all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated'.[7] Of course, the hypothesis contains several other elements, but these are less relevant to my theme.

Two applications of linguistic relativism to humanist thinking and writing: Michael Baxandall and Ronald G. Witt

Although modern historians and Neo-Latinists working on humanism do not usually refer to this hypothesis, they often seem to accept such an idea in a more or less strong version of it. Not being philosophers, it is only natural that they in general do not examine its philosophical and linguistic presuppositions or are acquainted with recent developments in linguistics and philosophy. But the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis is a highly controversial one which has been criticised by a number of linguists and philosophers. One may therefore surmise that if these criticisms are justified, this would have

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[5] Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, pp. 213-214 and 252.
[6] *Ibidem*, p. 212.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 214. Penn distinguishes between a strong and a weak version: determinism and relativism (*Linguistic Relativity*, pp. 28-32). According to Robins, the strong version is *a priori* untenable: 'On a priori grounds one can contest it by asking how, if we are unable to organize our thinking beyond the limits set by our native language, we could ever become aware of those limits. Empirically the admitted possibility of translation between languages of diverse structures spoken by people of different cultures is scarcely compatible with total linguistic determinism' (Robins, 'Current Relevance', p. 101).

implications for the debate on the formative role of classical Latin or Neo-Latin on the humanists' thinking. In what follows, I shall examine the idea as it occurs in two books: Michael Baxandall's *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition* (1971) and Ronald Witt's '*In the Footsteps of the Ancients'. The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (2000).[8] Both are highly erudite and learned works, and by looking critically at their use of the idea of linguistic relativity, I do not mean to say that this is the most central aspect of their works or that they would always accept the implications which I draw from their words. But I think the argument – to use the language of the theme of my paper – has a formative influence on their thought and interpretation of humanism. Because so much depends on formulations in this argument, I will have to quote their works frequently.

Baxandall's main thesis is that early Renaissance art criticism was deeply influenced by the humanists' rediscovery and mastery of Ciceronian Latin. A humanist who had mastered this difficult language and had learnt how and when to use terms such as *ratio*, *proportio*, *ars* and *ingenium*, *candidus*, *lucidus*, *pulcher* and so forth, focused necessarily on different aspects of reality than a medieval scholar, who had mastered a completely different vocabulary with corresponding concepts, such as *mesura* and *maniera* or *pulchrificatio* and *deiformitas*. The influence of classical Latin on the description of reality did not stop at the level of words and concepts, but extended to grammar (especially morphological and syntactical features) and style. Baxandall famously suggests that Leon Battista Alberti applied the literary concept of *compositio* to paintings, that is, he projected the fourfold structure of a Latin sentence on paintings. Just as a sentence is built out of clauses, clauses out of phrases and phrases out of words, so a painting consists of pictures, pictures of bodies, bodies of members and members of planes. As Baxandall writes: 'Alberti is treating the art of Giotto as if it were a periodic sentence by Cicero or Leonardo Bruni, and with his powerful new model he could put painting through an astonishingly firm analysis' (p. 131). Baxandall's interpretation of the term *compositio* as used by Alberti, however, has recently been questioned by the distinguished art historian Charles Hope.[9] But I will leave this question to art historians.

Baxandall's ideas recur in Witt's study, which is not surprising given Witt's explicit acknowledgement that 'the influence of Baxandall's book … on my thesis that style exercised a formative influence on humanist thinking

[8] I will quote these works simply by inserting page numbers in my main text.

[9] *Compositio* in Alberti is the process of distinguishing 'the separate surfaces that make up any three-dimensional object and then outlining them separately'. It has to do with the 'representation' of the visible world on a plane surface'. This initial stage, Hope says, is not present at all in literary composition' (Hope, 'Composition', p. 38).

will be obvious throughout this book' (p. 23, note 49). But he also makes it clear that he thinks Baxandall's claim that the imitation of ancient Latin style effected a 'reorganization of consciousness' goes too far. Witt does not want to claim that style 'fully' determines (p. 23, note 49) thought or exerts 'a pre-emptive influence' (p. 24) on it – an idea which he associates with the linguistic determinism of Whorf and, so it seems, also with Baxandall (e.g. p. 418, note 57). What he does wish to claim is that the humanists' study of Ciceronian language ultimately had a great impact on their thinking and feeling and on the development of a secular view of morality and politics. Yet, I think some of Witt's formulations would also commit him to a rather strong version of the linguistic relativity hypothesis. Let us therefore look more closely at some ideas which I have extracted from their works.

(1) Some languages are richer and more refined than others, not only in their vocabulary but also in their syntax and semantics. Thus classical Latin is said by Baxandall to be 'more precisely differentiated within itself' and 'more elaborate in its syntactical resources than the vernacular languages of the time' (p. 2; cf. pp. 20 and 30-31). Similar judgements occur frequently in Witt's book, which for instance speaks of the 'richer syntax of ancient Latin' (e.g. p. 144).[10]

(2) The more refined a language is, the better it enables speakers to express complicated thoughts and to describe complex aspects of reality. Thus, according to Baxandall 'in 1300 a man could not think as tightly in words as he could by 1500; the difference is measurable in categories and constructions lost and found' (p. 6). And he continues: 'To retrieve these facilities, to repossess the concepts involved not just in words like *decus* and *decor* but in a mood like the Latin subjunctive – concepts often not transferable with any available in languages then current – was much more than a grammarians' *tour de force*; it implied a reorganization of consciousness on a more complex level' (p. 6).[11]

For Witt too it is *because* classical Latin is such a rich, refined and semantically precise language that it enabled humanists to make precise and detailed descriptions of reality. Ultimately this transformed one's under-

[10] Such a hierarchy of languages is certainly *not* part of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis.

[11] While Baxandall and Witt often write that Latin is more refined and precise than medieval Latin or the vernacular, they also hold that each language has its own domain. Latin was an artificial, highly specialised language which catered in particular for literary interests. Baxandall, for instance, emphasises that the vernacular remained important in other domains, in particular in affairs of daily life. In fact, it was not a true bilingual situation. As he writes: 'Latin was not a language co-ordinate with Italian but a secondary language of great prestige, particularly in certain situations' (p. 47; cf. Witt, p. 155). So, the frequently stated opinion that *more* things could be said in Latin than in the vernacular should perhaps be read as: *different* things were said in Latin.

standing of reality, of one's sense of history, of one's self-identity. While not the only element in this process, the study and imitation of classical Latin must be counted as fundamental and as a necessary condition for this process. To take two examples, Albertino Mussato and Leonardo Bruni. Witt claims that the study of classical Latin enabled Mussato to order temporal events, which eventually led to a new sense of history, a new awareness of the temporality of life. As Witt writes:

> Through his reading, Mussato discovered the more exacting ways of expressing sequential relationships afforded by the richer syntax of ancient Latin. Especially to the extent that he appreciated the ancients' discriminating use of moods and tenses; participles, gerunds, and gerundives; and finite and infinitive verbal forms, he found himself better able to capture the complex flow of historical time. The weaker syntactical arsenal available to previous Italian historians helps explain the loose, meandering character of Rolandino's historical account' (p. 144).

The complexity of Latin grammar and style is crucial:

> From them [i.e. the ancient historians] he learned how to articulate semantically complex historical phenomena by using clausal constructions to assign each semantic element its proper valence. Mussato's grasp of the various nuances of modes and tenses heightened his ability to capture the temporal relationships involved in constructing historical discourse.[12]

All this 'deepened and transformed his consciousness of the historical process', leading to 'a new kind of self-identity constructed from the ordered sequencing of personal experiences' (p. 172).

The same perfect match between reality and the language can be seen in the writings of Leonardo Bruni. As Witt writes: 'Fixed on imitating the Ciceronian period, having internalized the rules of rhetoric, humanists felt called upon when confronting reality to conceptualize apparently refractory multiplicities in ordered propositions composed of nicely balanced clauses, each one receiving its proper valence, but organically unified' (pp. 417-418, clearly itself a beautiful, almost Ciceronian sentence). Again, the implication is clearly that the categorisation of reality was shaped by the structure of Latin grammar and style.

(3) This categorisation of reality as a consequence of the use of a particular language resulted in different views of reality. Here we come to the *relativity* aspect of the linguistic relativity hypothesis. Language focuses one's attention to those very qualities and aspects of reality which are cap-

[12] It may only be a slip of the pen but, unlike what Witt writes, *historical* phenomena can never be *semantically* complex, of course; only linguistic descriptions can.

tured by one's language. In words clearly reminiscent of Whorf's, Baxandall writes that 'words divide up our experience into categories. Each language makes this division in a different way, and the categories embodied in the vocabulary of one language cannot always be transferred simply into the vocabulary of another language' (pp. 8-9). Applied to the concepts and grammatical categories of classical Latin this becomes: 'People who have trained themselves in the labels *decor* and *decus* will approach a painting by Giotto with a predisposition to look for, distinguish, and recall qualities different from someone equipped with the terms *maniera*, *misura*, and *aria*' (p. 48). This refers to the qualifications which are used by Guarino of Verona in Latin and by a certain Angelo Galli in Italian of a painting of Pisanello. Galli is said to direct attention to qualities in Pisanello 'which Guarino could not, even if he had so wished, have verbalized in Latin' (p. 11).

Witt too seems to subscribe to this aspect of *relativity* in the linguistic relativity hypothesis when he writes that 'Ciceronianism was a self-contained language game in which a whole range of medieval preoccupations could find no voice, because their expression lay outside the game's bounds' (p. 441). Medieval writers had their own cultural goals and values, but these are not ours, he writes, while those of the humanists 'in important ways, are' (p. 29). And this has everything to do with the different languages one used.

(4) The formative influence of language on thought was far-reaching. We have already mentioned Baxandall's interpretation of Alberti's application of rhetorical concepts to art. In similar fashion, Witt sees Bruni applying aesthetic criteria to contemporary political reality, leading to a reinterpretation of the political structure of Florence. The *ordo*, *elegantia* and *concinnitas* ['harmony'] of the Ciceronian sentence are applied to the Florentine constitution, that is the 'three divisions of the Florentine government, executive, judicial and legislative … combined in their operations to create political and social order, elegance and harmony …'. Thus, 'mastery of the periodic sentence had heuristic consequences, leading Bruni to reinterpret the political structure of Florence in the light of an aesthetic and functional ideal' (p. 414).

The use of classical Latin also brought in its train a secularisation of thought and feeling. Here Witt follows in rather ancient footsteps, namely those of Burckhardt and many scholars after him who regarded humanism as an essentially secular movement, constructing a secular morality and a secular view of politics:

> While Ciceronianism did not initiate a move toward secularism, the secular tendency among humanists, already encountered in Vergerio, was enhanced by what we may call a shift in linguistic paradigms initiated by Florentines like Bruni and Poggio, a shift that generated a vocabulary ill-suited to Christian re-

> ligious expression' p. 393); 'Secularization of language and thought would become pervasive' (p. 383).

Some criticisms

I will now offer some criticisms of these ideas.

(1) What scholars as Baxandall and Witt take for granted is that classical Latin is more complex, refined, elaborate, detailed and precise than, for instance, medieval Latin or contemporary vernacular languages and *therefore* is more capable of describing complex aspects of reality. It is a common assumption that we find not only in the authors I have discussed so far. James Hankins writes for instance that

> if the vocabulary of a language is rich and precise, and its syntax sufficiently complex to express the subtler nuances of thought and feeling, then the men who speak that language will more easily be able to communicate, and hence to think, with clarity, beauty and force. Thought is moreover affected not only by the extent of the linguistic resources of the language to which it is allied, but also by their qualities.[13]

The assumption is mistaken, however, based as it is on a dubious idea, which has long been rejected by linguists, namely that some languages are more 'complex' and 'refined' than others. For how should one measure 'complexity' or 'precision'? By the number of cases or inflections, by the presence of gender, number or moods (such as indicative and subjunctive)? Chinese, which is a wholly uninflected language, would score poorly on this scale, in contrast to highly inflected languages such as Sanskrit, Greek and Latin. And indeed such a hierarchical evaluation was popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but was already criticised by Wilhelm von Humboldt. It has been abandoned in the late nineteenth century, when empirical studies of so-called 'primitive' or 'exotic' languages gave evidence of the great variety of linguistic representation. No longer put in the straightjacket of West-European grammatical categories, languages were studied as complete systems on their own terms.[14] Normative qualifications such as 'pure', 'crude', 'ambiguous', 'simple', 'precise', 'rich' applied to syntax, semantics or vocabulary tell us more about the background of the user of these qualifications than about the languages which are being compared to each other. It also often leads to the use of different measures; thus, what is praised in one language as richness (for instance a classical Latin term has a *rich* connotation) is deplored as vagueness and ambiguity in an-

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[13] Hankins, *Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, p. 197.

[14] Penn, *Linguistic Relativity*; Elffers, *Historiography of Grammatical Concepts*; Wardy, *Aristotle in China*, esp. pp. 1-68; Koerner, 'Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis' has an extensive bibliography.

other language.[15] Of course, we need not conceal our aesthetic and moral judgements about a particular language, but we should be wary of projecting them on the languages themselves.

Of course, it is admitted by Baxandall and Witt that medieval Latin had its own domain, in which it served the cultural goals of its users. But apart from the many formulations in their works, which clearly compare it unfavourably to classical Latin in terms of precision, adequacy of representation and refinement, this is an over-simplification of medieval Latin. As Baxandall himself admits, there is no such thing as medieval Latin (p. 3). The technical Latin as used by scholastics in the universities is just one species of it; John of Salisbury's classicizing Latin is another. If a language were to be judged in terms of precision and refinement at all, it should be measured against its function in that particular culture.

(2) My second point concerns the relativity aspect, which holds, roughly speaking, that because language is intrinsically bound up with a particular culture, translation from one culture (let's say medieval, scholastic culture) to another (humanist culture) is almost impossible. Even if Guarino had so wished, Baxandall writes, 'he could not have verbalized in Latin' what Galli had said in Italian about a painting of Pisanello (p. 11). And medieval preoccupations could find no voice in Ciceronianism, Witt writes, because their expression lay 'outside the bounds' of the humanists' language game (p. 441). Such a notion, however, is problematic. To take just one but telling example: Aristotle's *Categories*. It has been argued that Aristotelian categories such as substance, quality, quantity and relation closely reflect the linguistic categories of Greek, and that its metaphysics is intrinsically bound up with West-European languages. Hence, it is hardly conceivable that such a text can be adequately translated into a language with vastly different linguistic resources, such as Chinese. Yet, recent research into Chinese philosophy, including a seventeenth-century Chinese translation of the *Categories*, has suggested that there are no fundamental barriers here.[16] Thus, if Guarino had so wished – to return to Baxandall's example – he could very well have explained to Galli what he meant.

(3) It is also highly questionable, as linguists and philosophers have pointed out, to infer from the absence of terms and distinctions to the ab-

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[15] Wardy, *Aristotle in China*, pp. 1-10 on claims (or complaints) that Chinese is 'ambiguous'. Cf. Friedrich's review of this book.

[16] Wardy, *Aristotle in China*, esp. pp. 69-152. See also Reding, 'Greek and Chinese Categories': 'the hypothesis of the influence of language on the structure of categorial distinctions has revealed itself as false. Different languages have different means of distorting logical categories, but the distorted categories are, so far as we have seen in this study, the same. The structure of language only influences the way in which categorial structures may be discovered and the extent to which these structures are unveiled' (p. 371).

sence of the corresponding concepts. As the philosopher Max Black once wrote: 'inferences from vocabulary to cognitive capacities are always precarious. If the presence of a word actively in use suggests the existence of a corresponding concept, absence of a word shows almost nothing';[17] likewise with grammatical, syntactical and morphological features of a language. Thus, when it is claimed that the study of classical Latin eventually led to the discovery of a new kind of self-identity, because Latin enabled them 'to conceptualize apparently refractory multiplicities in ordered propositions composed of nicely balanced clauses' when confronting reality (to quote Witt, pp. 417-418, again), the implication is clearly that the alleged absence of such a self-identity in previous times has much to do with the absence of the use of classical Latin. But the absence of clauses, moods, tenses etc. or the 'loose' or 'incorrect' use of them (measured with the yardstick of classical Latin) does not say anything about the presence or absence of concepts or cognitive capacities. Whoever has read – to mention just one example – Abelard's story of his adversities (*Historia calamitatum*) knows that one can also tell a well-ordered story consisting of individual events, without having recourse to the layered structure of a Ciceronian sentence.

(4) Another point concerns the status of Latin. Latin was never one's mother tongue but remained a specialised language, used by the literary elite and later by broader groups of people. In fact, it was never a true bilingual situation. As Baxandall writes: 'Latin was not a language co-ordinate with Italian but a secondary language of great prestige, particularly in certain situations' (p. 47; cf. Witt, p. 155). Both Baxandall and Witt stress the fact that the imitation of classical Latin, at least at the beginning, constituted an autonomous activity, to a large extent independent from everyday experience. As Baxandall writes, humanist discourse 'was able to exercise with a quite unusual independence of verification against un-literary experience. Even more than is usual in any language, a humanist remark is shielded from reality by a series of other interlocking remarks composed of the same categories and constructions' (p. 47); but then, Baxandall adds, 'it was never intended as a breathless statement of fresh perceptions of the world' (*ibidem*). Take for instance the Ciceronian periodic sentences, which has so many slots to be filled. Reality was easily adapted to fill these slots, and Baxandall gives a good example from Leonardo Bruni.

Yet, on the other hand, Baxandall's central claim is that language has a formative influence on the way people categorise reality. 'Observation is linguistically enforced' (p. 9), referring to a classic but controversial study by Lenneberg and Roberts of colour concepts, in which it is argued that people recognise and remember colours more easily if they have separate names for them.

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[17] Black, 'Linguistic Relativity', p. 249. The point has frequently been made. Cf. William, *Shame and Necessity*, pp. 21-49.

Thus, on the one hand we have statements which suggest that the use of a particular language determines our perception of reality, on the other hand we have statements which stress the distance between language and reality, highlighting the relative independence of perception of reality from linguistic representation in humanist writing.

This inconsistency can be explained, I think, by realising that the general ideas on which Baxandall draws refer to natural, spoken languages and their relationship to thought and culture, while he applies them to Neo-Latin which never was a natural language. Indeed, the whole debate on the linguistic relativity hypothesis centres around natural, spoken languages, for it is our mother tongue which is used for expressing our feelings, emotions and world view. It is therefore somewhat surprising to read that the development of such very basic concepts as self-identity and historical sense as well as feelings and emotions are said to be closely linked to and even stimulated by grammatical and stylistic features of a non-natural, specialised, secondary language like Neo-Latin.[18]

(5) This brings me to my fifth point. Though it is easy to presuppose a strong influence of language on thought, it is much more difficult to test such a hypothesis. It is no accident that the linguistic relativity hypothesis is still called, after all these years, a *hypothesis*. For how does one prove that there is a causal connection between a particular language and a particular cognitive view (let us say a world view)? One should then be able to compare a world view as expressed in language with that same world view unmediated by language but studied in itself, as a kind of raw data. But it is easily realised that this is very difficult, if not in principle impossible. This is of course not to deny the important role of language in human activities. The point is that it is one thing to couple changes in languages to changes in world view, but another thing to prove the *causal* role of the former on the latter, which is what a linguist relativist is committed to.

(6) My last point concerns the effects which the study and imitation of classical Latin are believed to have wrought. Let me quote Witt, whose position, I think, is shared by many Renaissance scholars:

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[18] The tension is less clearly visible in Witt's account, because he frequently stresses the gradual development of what he calls the humanists' 'language games' (p. 29): by immersing oneself in a different language and a different culture one eventually internalized the classical thought patterns. The imitation of the new style, he writes, nourished 'new linguistic patterns conditioning the humanists' ways of feeling and thinking' (p. 23); and 'years of training oneself to filter ideas through a Ciceronian linguistic grid would ultimately effect how the humanists' thought and felt' (p. 24). Nevertheless, already the first humanist, Mussato, as we have seen, is credited with developing a new sense of identity and historical sense, evoked by his studies of the ancient style and grammar. Thus, even at the beginning of the movement the effects were already profound, in spite of the highly stylised character of the humanists' aesthetic exercises.

> I do not deny that innumerable writers of medieval Latin may have wielded a language that admirably served their own cultural goals. Their goals, however, are not ours, whereas the humanists', in important ways, are. We also share values. Like the humanists, for example, we regard issues of individual and societal reform as urgent, favor secular over supernatural arguments, and take a critical stance toward the authorities whom we cite. Historians in particular share with the humanists an awareness of historical contingency and of humans' multifaceted experience of historical time. (p. 29)

I think these qualifications of what is essentially medieval and what is essentially humanistic and modern are problematic. To take only the claim that humanists 'favor secular over supernatural arguments'. If there is one movement which favoured rational, secular arguments it was scholasticism rather than humanism. An appeal to supernatural arguments did not count in the scholastic debate culture, while important humanists such as Salutati (late in life), Petrarch, Valla and Erasmus – each in their own way – tend to embrace a fideistic position which did stress the supernatural power that is God, which can hardly count as a secular, rational argument. It is therefore not surprising that modern analytical philosophers often cite and discuss arguments from Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham and so many other medieval philosophers. So not only humanist values, but also medieval values can be 'our values' – it all depends on which values we are speaking of. But it is not these qualifications which I want to dispute here but the role of language, for it is the study and imitation of classical Latin, with its moods, clauses, inflections, and vocabulary which is believed to have functioned as a catalyst for the development of all these innovations.

Of course, I do not want to say that the rediscovery and the imitation of classical Latin was not a major event in the history of thought and scholarship, let alone belittle the linguistic and literary achievements of the humanists. Nor do I deny the point – which is almost a truism – that the learning and use of a language brings with it the vocabulary and grammar of that language and that language is embedded in culture and history.[19] What I want to qualify, however, is the idea that the humanists achieved all this *because* they had recourse to a language which was supposedly better equipped than other languages for talking about and describing the world or for expressing one's feelings. Language is an extremely important vehicle for expressing one's views, thoughts and feelings, and it is beyond dispute

[19] As Moss writes in her excellent book *Renaissance Truth*, p. 7: 'language is contextually embedded in culture, in history, in the situation of the utterance, and its reception'. But though Moss emphasises what she sees as a close correspondence between the turn to humanist Latin and changes in cognitive modes of thinking as reflected in rhetoric, dialectic, grammar, literary studies and theological discourse, she does not seem to locate these changes in the grammatical structure of classical Latin (or Neo-Latin) vis-à-vis medieval Latin.

that the intensive study and imitation of classical Latin effected changes in the intellectual and moral concepts which the humanists employed. But there is nothing *intrinsic* in the language itself – inflections, tenses, moods, periodic sentences or whatever – which would render the language a sine qua non, a necessary condition for the rise of all the innovations which are arguably associated with humanism. The changes in the cultural, political and intellectual climate, which took place over a long period, often found expression in that language (as well as in other languages), but this is not to say that these changes are intrinsically bound up with the structure of that language.