

Studies in the History of the Language Sciences

# History of Linguistics 1996

Volume I:

Traditions in Linguistics Worldwide

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Offprint

## INTERCHANGE OR INFLUENCE GROTIUS' EARLY LINGUISTIC IDEAS

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### 0. *Introduction*

First of all, an explanation should be given for my choice of subject, Grotius' early linguistic ideas, which are to be found in the chapter on language of his Latin treatise *Parallelon Rerum Publicarum*. I was not tempted to think that this juvenile historical work might contain a spectacular view on language, put forward by the prodigy in the field of Latin poetry and philology. On the contrary, it would be easy to ridicule him even for some of his later views on linguistic matters. His claim, for instance, that the Amerindian languages were of Germanic origin not only fails to convince us, but was also refuted by his contemporary Johannes de Laet (1582–1649). Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) was a brilliant scholar, a famous jurist, well-known in Europe as an expert in international law and political theory, but surely he was not a linguist in his own right. Having said all this, I would argue that his early linguistic ideas, as presented in the *Parallelon*, deserve the attention of a historiographer of linguistics who is interested in the reception, dissemination and influence of ideas.

In the seventeenth century, several European scholars and men of letters took an interest in linguistic problems in general and reflected on the value and the function of the vernaculars in particular. Linguistic issues were touched upon and dealt with in all kinds of publications, ranging from scientific treatises, political tracts and literature to grammars and dictionaries. The topics were discussed in both Latin and the vernacular. It is against this background that Grotius' discourse on language in the *Parallelon* has to be seen. Despite the fact that the Latin publications and the non-Latin ones on the whole functioned within different circles, there were ostensibly mutual influences and exchanges of ideas between the two 'traditions'. On closer examination, Grotius' Latin text reveals both his familiarity with previous publications and his relationship with contemporaries. It is my aim to assess to what degree Grotius adopted linguistic ideas from vernacular and Latin sources, in order to shed light on the more general question of mutual influence and exchange of ideas within the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Republic of Letters.

Within the compass of this paper I cannot give a complete survey of the issues covered in Grotius' chapter on language. I will therefore focus on some aspects of his involvement in the contemporary linguistic debate. First of all, I want to discuss his plea for the vernacular. Next, I will examine his views on the antiquity and origin of language. Finally, I would like to show his familiarity with the then current scholarly developments.

### 1. *Language attitude and elaboration of function*

Grotius' *Parallelon*, which was most probably written during the years 1602-1603, offers an extensive comparison of the Greek, Roman and Dutch commonwealths, policies and social mores.<sup>1</sup> Its comparative character comes equally to the fore in the chapter on language. In it Grotius compared, for instance, the attitude of the Dutch towards their mother tongue with that of the Greeks and Romans towards theirs and argued that the Greek and Romans had set a good example by their care for their respective languages. Grotius joined the contemporary debate on the value of the vernacular by referring to the merits of the French who likewise did their utmost to cultivate their mothertongue (Par.84).<sup>2</sup> The language attitude of the Dutch' ancestors should not be forgotten either: they refused to accept funding requests from their sovereign lords, unless they were stated in Dutch.<sup>3</sup> According to Grotius, these excellent examples were in huge contrast with the prevailing attitude towards the Dutch vernacular, a language which he supposed to be unmatched in its richness and its functional possibilities.

After having mentioned the qualities of the Dutch language, Grotius severely castigated the opinion that ideas published in Dutch would be lost for ever. For fear of not being read, his contemporaries did not strive at expanding the use of the vernacular — in modern terms: they did not strive at elaboration of function (Par.84). Grotius' criticism, followed by his appeal for using Dutch as a scholarly and scientific medium, fits in with earlier pleas for the elaboration of the vernacular which is all part of the standardisation process in both the Netherlands and various other West European countries (cf. Van der Wal 1995a:5-41).

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1. The *Parallelon*-manuscript circulated among interested contemporaries. The first and only edition is Grotius 1801-1803 which includes a Dutch translation. For the time being, I will stick to Eyffinger's dating of the manuscript (Eyffinger 1988:46), although I see problems involved.

2. The abbreviation "Par. x" refers to page x of the *Parallelon* in Grotius 1801-1803, volume III.

3. This political language issue played a role since the so-called Great Privilege of 1477 (cf. Van der Wal 1994).

So Grotius' plea for the Dutch language was not at all uncommon at the time, but what may surprise us is that it was made in a Latin text. In Latin he argued that the greatest progress had always been made when knowledge and scholarship were practised in everyday language as had been done, for example, by the Greek and the Romans (Par. 104). The Greek did not waste any time in learning a foreign language and this Grotius said to be the reason why they had been so successful. Learning sciences in one's mother tongue would be a great gain in time and efforts. So, why not follow the Greek example? Before jumping to the conclusion that Grotius' statements were insincere, we have to realize that a plea for scholarship in the vernacular does not necessarily exclude the use of Latin. Using Dutch or Latin both had its assets and liabilities for different circles. Those who did not know Latin could benefit from Dutch publications, whereas Latin was the indispensable medium for scholars all over Europe (cf. Pörksen 1983 and Van der Wal 1995a:79-90; 97-100). In other words, while Latin was an impediment to one group of readers, Dutch was not an appropriate vehicle for the exchange of scholarly knowledge to the other. Small wonder that not only Latin publications were translated into Dutch, but also Dutch ones into Latin. I note that Grotius himself made a contribution in this respect by translating a Dutch publication on navigation at sea, Simon Stevin's *Havenvinding* (1599), into Latin.<sup>4</sup>

Up to this point, Grotius' statements on both language attitude and elaboration of function were chauvinistic and emotional. He yet had to give arguments to support the claim for the excellence of the Dutch language. In the prevailing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century view a good language had to possess certain qualities, according to which languages were ranked (see Hüllen 1995 and Van der Wal 1995c).

## 2. *Language qualities: antiquity*

Grotius discusses antiquity, which, as we know, is an important criterion in the evaluation of languages. The older the language, the better it was supposed to have preserved the qualities of the first, undoubtedly perfect language. Grotius referred to an unnamed scholar from the southern Netherlands who had ventured to maintain that Hebrew derived from Dutch (Par. 85). There can be no misunderstanding about the identity of the scholar involved: the Flemish physician Joannes Goropius Becanus (1518–1572), who had strongly advocated the important status of the Germanic languages and had tried to demonstrate that *Duyts*, which at the time indicated both Dutch and German, was the oldest language, not Hebrew. Whether Grotius had actually read either Becanus's *Origines Antwerpianae* of 1569 or his

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4. His translation *Limenheuretikè sive Portuum Investigandorum Ratio* was published in 1599.

posthumously published *Opera* of 1580 cannot be determined. The rather vague reference may indicate that he relied on second hand information.

What is important here is that Grotius touched upon a discussion which had been going on for centuries, pivoting around the question whether Hebrew or any other language was the first and primeval language. Grotius criticized Becanus's idea of the oldest language and this criticism raises the question as to Grotius' own opinion on the age of language. On the one hand, in passing he characterized Hebrew as the oldest existing language, on the other he stated that his own language (which he equated with the German language) represented the early times best, had spread most and could not be traced back to any other language. These two statements seem irreconcilable, but they are not the only information available.

Grotius discussed both the origin and character of language and maintained that after the Flood the earth had been divided among the survivors, who, when they developed into peoples, had made a language from inarticulate sounds, forced by a feeling of necessity (Par.87). Words and names for things were invented, with which the sounds were given a meaning. The origin of language was supposed to date from the time when towns were built and laws were made. Grotius concluded that both languages and states, the two bonds of human society, were born at the same time (Par.87-88). Language was a human product, made as there was the need to have a language; it was a gift we owed to the ingenuity of our ancestors. The possibility of a divine gift is not even mentioned. Earlier in his treatise Grotius had assumed that peoples showed different capacities for devising meanings for words. Therefore language could be a measure of a people's reason. A nation which had invented the most appropriate words to express things should be considered the most intelligent (Par.81). Unfortunately, Grotius has not given us any indication of criteria by which to measure the appropriateness of words.

Dealing with the origin of language, Grotius also took sides in the question of whether language is a matter of nature or convention. He had, beyond any doubt, a conventionalist view and put forward arguments against the nature-view. If the meaning of words was based on Nature, all peoples would have the same language, as the same things were to be found everywhere. Moreover, it would not be possible to refer to one thing with different words. Consequently, put in our terms, synonymy would and could not exist. Likewise, one word could not have several meanings, which implies that ambiguity could not occur either. In one respect Grotius allowed nature to appear on the scene, although subordinated to human ingenuity. Human ingenuity imitates "the nature of things" when derivating one word from another and compounding words (Par.88). Both in derivation and compounding the state of affairs in reality is copied. It is worth mentioning that Simon Stevin (1548-1628), the many-sided engineer who wrote nearly all his scientific work in Dutch, also assumed a relationship between the word and the

thing it indicates. He likewise argued that complex things in reality were represented by compounds in language (cf. Van der Wal 1995b).

Grotius presented his ideas on the origin of language without referring to any source, which does not imply that they came out of his own head. As far as I can see now, they show striking similarities with ancient statements on this matter. The view that language is a product of human ingenuity and related to the development of societies is found as early as in Plato's *Protagoras*. Peter Matthews' description (in Lepschy 1994) of a similar theory, presented as traditional in an ancient source from the first century BC, the general history of Diodorus Siculus, is revealing. Cf. the following quotation:

Starting from a vocal expression that was meaningless and confused, they [men] gradually articulated words and agreed on a token for every object, so that there was an accepted form of communication. This happened separately in many different places, and therefore there exist forms of speech (dialektoi) of diverse kinds. (Lepschy 1994:22)

Nearly all the elements of Grotius' explanation occur in this quote (the first, meaningless sounds, the invention of tokens and the occurrence in different places) which makes some indebtedness to ancient texts probable.

What does Grotius' 'theory' of language development imply for the contemporary question of which language was the oldest? In my opinion, it does not tally with that question. After the Flood various languages were born, or rather made, at different places. Does this not imply that we should speak of several 'oldest' languages? At this point Grotius leaves his readers in the dark. It is worth noting, however, that he did not rank Hebrew high for its linguistic qualities. After all, the position of Hebrew, and that of any possible primeval language, remains unclear in *Parallelon*. It was not until the end of his life that Grotius explicitly stated that none of the existing languages were to be considered as the primeval language (cf. Borst 1957-1963:1298).

### 3. *Sources and influence: Simon Stevin*

Several ideas, so to speak, were in the air at the beginning of the seventeenth century which makes it not easy to trace sources and establish influence. The only resemblance with Stevin which I pointed out till now, might not convincingly demonstrate Grotius' indebtedness to him. Close scrutiny of the *Parallelon* and Stevin's previously published works, however, reveal a score of striking similarities. It is not within the scope of this paper to deal with Stevin's ideas in any detail now, but I will give a few examples. Firstly, Grotius argued that in language monosyllabic words did not suffice: as the number of things was infinite, derivation and compounding of words were needed too (Par.96). Precisely the same idea is to be

found in Stevin's work (cf. Stevin 1955-1966, I:88). Secondly, Grotius evaluated a language on its aptness of derivation and compounding (Par.97); Stevin had applied the same criterion. Thirdly, Grotius formulated the rule governing compounding (Par.100): — in modern terms — the first element is the modifier and the second element the head. Stevin had illustrated the very same rule with contrastive examples such as *jachthondt* 'hunting-hound' against *hondjacht* 'hound-hunting' (cf. Stevin 1955-1966, I:84). Grotius explicitly noted that the rule even applied to compounds consisting of more than two elements. Fourthly, Grotius stressed that one did not need to possess a special ingenuity to create new compounds. People acquired this ability during their language acquisition process. It was in fact so simple that playing children often dropped such new words, which were readily understandable (Par.101). It cannot be a coincidence that Stevin had more elaborately referred to playing children in his textbook on logic, the *Dialectike ofte Bewysconst* ('Dialectics or the Art of Demonstration') of 1585 (cf. Stevin 1621:154-155). Likewise Grotius' remark that a translator would need four or five words to render a newly created Dutch word with only two syllables, corresponds with Stevin's comparison of the Dutch *topweer* 'a good time to spin/play with a top' with Latin, French and Spanish translations (*Commodum tempus trocho ludendi; Temps commode de toupier; Tiempo oportuno para peonçar*).

These examples to which I could have added more, show beyond any doubt Stevin's influence on Grotius' linguistic views. In passing I note that Stevin is known to have been a close friend of Grotius' father, Jan Cornets de Groot (1554-1640). They shared scientific interests and performed experiments with the spheres, which they dropped from the tower of the "Nieuwe Kerk" at Delft in order to study the law of gravitation. We should not forget, however, that Grotius wrote his *Parellelon* after having studied at the University of Leiden, at a time when many illustrious scholars such as Bonaventura Vulcanius (1538-1614), Franciscus Raphelengius (1539-1597) and, above all, Josephus Justus Scaliger (1540-1609) held chairs. Grotius proves to be familiar with relatively new discoveries which Leiden scholars were discussing in their correspondence and their Latin publications.

#### 4. *New discoveries: Gothic and Persian*

While Grotius, in tune with contemporary ideas, erroneously assumed that the Dutch language had spread over a large territory, he commented among others on Crimean Gothic and Persian. This is interesting, as important discoveries concerning these two languages were not made until the second half of the sixteenth century. After the main Gothic manuscript, the Codex Argenteus, had been rediscovered in the middle of the sixteenth century, copies of text fragments circulated among scholars and Becanus had included Gothic fragments in his *Origines Antwerpianae*

of 1569. Ghislain de Busbecq (1522–1592), ambassador in Constantinople, had discovered that people on the Crimean peninsula were still speaking a form of Gothic. The Crimean Gothic words, recorded by Busbecq, were listed in Bonaventura Vulcanius' book on the Gothic language, *De literis & lingua Getarum sive Gothorum* of 1597 (cf. Van de Velde 1966: 24–25; 68). Grotius was familiar with the presence of a Germanic language in the Crimea, which he considered to be Dutch. Both the Dutch language and several Dutch characteristics, such as tidiness and ingenuity, were said to be found on the Crimean peninsula, which Grotius accounted for by an alleged emigration (Par.92).

The Dutch language had spread even further than the Crimea. Grotius pointed out similarities with the Persian language so striking that some merger of the two peoples must have taken place in the past. Therefore, he argued, either the Persians might have conquered the territory of our ancestors or our ancestors that of the Persians (Par.94). Which option is the most likely, Grotius gladly left to specialists. Still he proved to be in favour of the latter option, as he corrected his own phrase by speaking of “words, which we adopted from the Persians, or *more appropriately put*, the Persians from us” (Par.94–95). Words which the two languages had in common were by all means no rare words, but, on the contrary, words belonging to the central lexicon. Grotius mentioned only briefly examples of words which, with a slight difference, were said to be Dutch, Persian and Latin. For more examples he referred to the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch) in Persian.

Dutch (or Germanic), Latin and Persian similarities do not surprise the modern linguist with knowledge of the Indo-European language family.<sup>5</sup> What is underlying Grotius' reference to Moses' five books in Persian, however, is not clear at first sight. Moreover, we may wonder where Grotius obtained his information on Persian.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century hardly any knowledge of the Persian language was available in Europe. This situation changed rapidly when in 1584 Franciscus Raphelengius, learned in the Oriental languages, got hold of a Pentateuch, published in 1546 by a Jewish printhouse in Constantinople.<sup>6</sup> It was a polyglot which comprised a central Hebrew text and corresponding texts in three other oriental languages, among which a Persian translation by Jacob ben Joseph Tâvus. The Persian text was written in the Hebrew alphabet, which was common practice among Persian Jews. Behind the Hebrew letters Raphelengius discovered a language that showed striking lexical similarities with Dutch (cf. De Bruyn 1990:5–8).

5. Grotius' examples *dens* [*sic*] “god”, *labium* “lip”, *mors* “death” and *novus* “new” belong to the common Indo-European vocabulary; *cista* “chest” and *mustum* “must (wine)”, on the contrary, are Latin loans in Dutch.

6. Raphelengius, who was the official university printer, held the chair of Hebrew from 1586 till his death in 1597 (cf. Juynboll 1931:39).

Raphelengius informed several fellow scholars of his discovery. On 18 May 1584 he wrote to the Latinist Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), who did not pay much attention to the data at the time. Vulcanius, who held the chair of Greek, proved to be interested: he comprised a list of Persian words and the beginning of Genesis in Persian translation in his *De literis & lingua Getarum sive Gothorum* (Vulcanius 1597:87-88).<sup>7</sup> Vulcanius had obtained the Persian data from Raphelengius himself, since he explicitly stated that his examples of words similar in the Persian and the “Teutonica lingua” were just a few out of the many more collected by Raphelengius. Scaliger, Lipsius’ successor in Leiden and Grotius’ main tutor at the university, dealt with Persian extensively; he administered the scholarly legacy left by Raphelengius on the latter’s death in 1597 (cf. De Bruyn 1990:10).

In the late sixteenth century knowledge of Persian was well available to the Leiden scholarly circle. Without indulging in source-hunting, I realize that still remains to be established from whom or from what specific source Grotius obtained his information. Either one of the Leiden scholars, Raphelengius himself, Vulcanius or Grotius’ main tutor, Scaliger, may have drawn his attention to the Persian language and its similarities with Dutch or Grotius may have learnt the Persian data from a publication or from scholarly correspondence. If it was not a matter of oral communication, which of course is difficult to determine, Grotius possibly owed his information to Vulcanius *De literis & lingua Getarum sive Gothorum*. Examining the examples given in both Raphelengius’ letter to Lipsius and Vulcanius’ list in *De literis*, I noticed that only some of the words Grotius mentioned coincide with those in the letter to Lipsius, whereas all Grotius’ examples (and even more) are listed in Vulcanius’ book.

## 5. Conclusion

In discussing some aspects of Grotius’ view on language, I hope to have demonstrated that he moved in two worlds. He was familiar both with the scholarly humanist circle and the non-Latin circle, represented in my paper by Simon Stevin, and adopted linguistic ideas from both sides. It is worth noting that Grotius’ positive attitude towards the vernacular, which may have been influenced by personal contact with Stevin, did not wane in the course of time. In his prime he brought his plea for elaboration of function into practice by writing treatises in Dutch and coining Dutch law terminology. After having examined some aspects of the *Parallelon*, we realize that the germs for his later contributions were already present in his juvenile work.

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7. This book was published by the Leiden branch of the Plantin printhouse, that is to say by the university printer Franciscus Raphelengius, son-in-law of the well-known Antwerp printer Christopher Plantin.

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