

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from *Historiographia Linguistica* 39:2/3
© 2012. John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way.

The author(s) of this article is/are permitted to use this PDF file to generate printed copies to be used by way of offprints, for their personal use only.

Permission is granted by the publishers to post this file on a closed server which is accessible to members (students and staff) only of the author's/s' institute, it is not permitted to post this PDF on the open internet.

For any other use of this material prior written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

Please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website: www.benjamins.com

Tables of Contents, abstracts and guidelines are available at www.benjamins.com

Review article / Rapport critique Forschungsbericht

The Genius of the Italian Language Politics and Poetics*

John E. Joseph
University of Edinburgh

The word ‘Renaissance’ is a stunningly successful piece of 19th-century propaganda. By embedding the idea of the classical age reborn, it offered a reassuring sense of long-term cultural continuity to a Europe in the midst of ongoing revolutions, whilst reaffirming the legitimacy of 300 years of mass transference of identity, allegiance and power from the triad of Church–Dynasties–Latin to that of Churches–Nations–National Languages. It was in the context of co-legitimizing the new European nations and national languages — not least by denying their newness — that the notion of the *ingenium*, the ‘genius of the language’, came to centre stage, along with debates about its link to the nation which carry on to the present day.

This book is the fruit of several years’ work by Gambarota linking the philosophical, political, linguistic and rhetorical-stylistic aspects of the genius concept from its rise in the late 16th century to its apogee in the 19th. It deservedly won the 2010 Modern Language Association’s Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Publication Award for a Manuscript in Italian Literary Studies, despite being ‘literary’ only in an extended sense.

A consensus has developed over the last decade about how, in 17th-century discourse, the genius of a language became a prominent trope in tandem with the modern conception of nationhood, each reinforcing the other. Neo-Epicureanism awakened interest in the differences amongst languages, where medieval Aristotelianism had focussed on features implicitly taken to be universal; and it placed the senses, hence the body, with its perceptions, passions and phantasms, at the centre of knowledge. The focus on empirical knowledge, immediately available

* On the occasion of: *Irresistible Signs: The genius of language and Italian nationalism* by Paola Gambarota (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), viii, 349 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-4298-0. \$80 (HB).

to any body, had a democratizing effect, extending into the religious and political domains. To quote Gambarota (p. 16), the discourse on the genius of a language

integrat[ed] the particulars of languages, previously regarded as accidents, into organic, autonomous systems [...]. Once the peculiarities of a high-culture vernacular were explained as the intrinsic manifestation of affects and perceptions shaping the genius of the language, [...r]hetorical and grammatical conventions turned into powerful elements of identity, conflating political interest in cultural uniformity and individual self-definition.

Shared genius bound the nation into a body, with the king as its head, rather than just chieftain of the dominant aristocratic faction. It made the literary language, later to be called the standard language, into the expression of the shared national soul rather than the artificial creation of an elite. We need to look further into how deep this democratization went (see Joseph 2012), but Gambarota is right that it is hard to imagine such a question being asked a few centuries earlier, when only those schooled in Latin, or at least a highly Latinized form of vernacular speech, were reckoned to have a language at all.

Her book consists of close studies of four Italian writers, framed by a thematic introduction and an overview chapter at the start, and a brief postscript on the impact of new media as the themes move forward into the 20th century. The overview opens with an epigram from Giorgio Agamben (b.1942), but that is the last we hear from a contemporary continental thinker. Gambarota's intellectual guides are the mainly British historians and anthropologists behind the modern discourse on national identity.

The first of the studies focusses on Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672–1750) and his projection of an Italian 'republic of letters'. Muratori's linguistic views were a late response to Dominique Bouhours (1628–1702), credited with establishing the modern concept of genius of a language in his *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671) and *La manière de bien penser dans les ouvrages d'esprit* (1687). Gambarota thinks that Italians in the early 18th century did not read Bouhours as the Cartesian thinker perceived by his French contemporaries and most later critics. His 'nationalization' of the link between language and reason into a 'natural' property of the French lies behind "the power of Bouhours's provocation, at least in Italy" (p. 62). Bouhours "finds that [...] Italian is not able to imitate nature as it is and invariably 'embellishes' it ('embellit'). French, rather, expresses things 'exactly as they are' ('exprime les choses précisément comme elles sont')" (p. 63). The grounds for his saying so lie principally in the different morphology and syntax of French vis-à-vis Italian and Spanish (ibid.):

Bouhours not only condemns Spanish and Italian writers for abusing figures of speech, diminutives, and superlatives, but he attributes such faults to the genius of

their languages and ultimately [...] to their national character. [...] He asserts that the Italian and Spanish peoples are caught in the abuse of bizarre arrangements, which they perceive as the quintessence of elegance and are therefore unable 'to achieve that imitation of nature, in which the perfection of language consists'.

Italian poets could make just about any two nouns rhyme by adding one of the readily available diminutive or superlative endings, which does look rather lazy in the absence of any semantic justification. It must have made French poets feel superior, and maybe a little jealous. Bouhours however read far more into what Gambarota calls the "autonomous morphological and syntactical structures" (p. 70) of French: for him, they show it to be "a language that has been formed by a free people rather than by one born in servitude". But, Gambarota explains, this 'freedom' is deceptive: "In his definition, it is the ethnic homogeneity and purity of the polity that counts, not the freedom of its individual members" (ibid.). Indeed, we know from more recent experience that the more homogenous a polity perceives itself as being, the more it is likely to suppress any budding dissent within it.

Gambarota shows how Bouhours pulls off the trick of substituting the polity for the individual by "blurring the distinction between the standardized literary language and the spontaneous speech". The reality of speech was fragmentation into dialects, which written language tended not to reflect because it was still grounded in the Latin in which the literate were educated. But this literary language belonged to 'the people' only in the sense of the conglomerate, the polity, not the individuals who composed it. The much-touted 'universality' of French was socially and geographically shallow. By masking this, Bouhours created the illusion that the souls of all living on the *territoire* converge upward into a single national soul, as their speech converges into a single language — not an abstraction or idealization, but the concrete reality of which spontaneous speech is a shadow.

Muratori rejected Bouhours's comparison of languages, asserting instead that each language's unique genius gives it an incomparable power and character. Where Bouhours "successfully established the monolingual nation as a compelling paradigm of inclusion, a model that would serve France well", Muratori "put forth a polygenic nation and envisioned a more complex but also more truthful model of inclusiveness, which regrettably found scarce appeal among his fellow 'guardians of the nation'" (p. 98). Why the success of one piece of propaganda over another should be 'regrettable' at such a historical remove is unclear — certainly the fact that the loser was more 'truthful' is neither here nor there. In the persuasiveness stakes, an illusion compatible with the prevailing grand narrative will beat an empirically provable truth every time.

The next chapter turns to Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), Muratori's close contemporary who resembles Bouhours in speaking of the 'vernacular' but always illustrating it with forms drawn from literary authors. Gambarota's study

interweaves Vico's professed views on language with his own authorial practice. His decision to write his *Scienza nuova* (1725) in Italian rather than Latin, despite how severely this reduced his potential audience, is just the most blatant example.

At the heart of Vico's conception of language is the notion of 'heroic tropes', words and forms that are not arbitrary but based on an identifiable metaphorical link to the body or some other natural, physical grounding. Vico believed that languages originated with such metaphors, following on from the initial semiotic moment of interpreting meteorological and other natural phenomena. The enduring presence of heroic tropes in a language means that it is still rooted in the soil of its birth, from which it continues to draw vigour. Accepting the widespread view of a close affinity between French and ancient Greek, Vico explains it as the result of these two languages having become civilized too abruptly, triggering a wholesale replacement of concretely-based heroic tropes with mere abstractions, much more than in the Germanic and the other Romance languages, which, he maintained, civilized more slowly. Vico's evolving thoughts on this subject are reflected, Gambarota says (p. 143), in revisions he made to the *Scienza nuova*, where he

accentuated the syncretic element of his thought style, for instance by offering different points of access to his science — visual (the 'dipintura'), geometric or rationalist (the principles, postulates, and corollaries), and poetic (the figurative style and myths) — that targeted different modes of perception and understanding, potentially integrating different sensibilities and ideologies. [...] Vico created his unique language of affections. A language with such features, recalling the historic tropes, not only begot consensus, as he believed, but also mimicked the language of beginnings. It is likely that Vico felt more and more that he himself had to put forward a model of expression and communication that would be able to counter the trend towards cultural and political disintegration.

In breaking from what Gambarota calls "the refinement of the Italian Arcadia", in favour of a new aesthetic and politics based on national affections, Vico helped lay the foundations of modern Italy.

Fast forward another 40 years to another significant moment in that break, as Melchiorre Cesarotti (1730–1808) finds inspiration in the poems of Ossian, "the greatest genius that ever appeared on the poetic stage", according to Cesarotti. Embraced across Europe as the Celtic Homer, the mythical Ossian was based on oral traditions of a long-ago bard who sang the legends of his warrior father Fingal. James Macpherson (1736–1796), who claimed to have discovered these texts in the Scottish Highlands, published his English prose 'translations' of them starting in 1760 and culminating with *The Works of Ossian* in 1765.

Cesarotti recognized that these were more than translations, but neither were they the 'forgeries' they were soon accused of being — and are still dismissed as by some, even though it is now 60 years since the late Derick Thomson (1921–2012)

established their genuine Gaelic sources (see Thomson 1952, the validity of which has more recently been reaffirmed by Moore 2003). From the variant bits of legend and song he gathered, Macpherson had striven to reconstruct an *Ur*-version, and any such reconstruction demands more construction than one may wish to admit. In any case, Ossian's impact was massive, no less so on the continent than in Britain and her colonies. To understand why, consider first the opening lines of the 'Ode to Peace' published in 1760 by the Scottish poet and philosopher James Beattie (1735–1803):

Peace, heaven-descended maid! whose powerful voice
 From antient darkness call'd the morn,
 Of jarring elements compos'd the noise;
 When Chaos from his old dominion torn,
 With all his bellowing throng,
 Far, far was hurl'd the void abyss along [...]
 (*Original Poems and Translations*,
 London: A. Millar, 1760, p. 1)

The allusions are classical and Christian: heaven-descended, Chaos, abyss, angelic choirs and Saturnian reign. Poetic is the syntax, all manner of inversions displaying. Compare now these lines from Ossian's 'Sul-Malla of Lumon,' telling of Fingal's arrival at Cluba:

Not careless looked the blue eyes of Cluba at his stately step. In white bosoms rose the king of Selma, in midst of their thoughts by night. But the winds bore the stranger to the echoing vales of his roes. — Nor lost to other lands was he, like a meteor that sinks in a cloud. He came forth, at times, in his brightness, to the distant dwelling of foes. His fame came, like the sound of winds, to Cluba's woody vale. (*The Works of Ossian, the Son of Fingal*, "Translated from the Galic Language by James Macpherson", vol. II, 3rd ed., London: T. Becket & P. A. Dehondt, 1765, p. 226).

No classical or biblical allusions, just those of Ossian's own Celtic universe, and natural phenomena which readers themselves might experience. Poetic inversion remains, though not all-pervasively: Gambarota (p. 160) notes Macpherson's claim that in his "extremely literal" translation, "even the arrangement of words in the original has been imitated, to which must be imputed some inversions in the style, that otherwise would not have been chosen". Most striking, of course, is the absence of all the formal requirements of poetry in a text that manages nonetheless to be poetic. To the passage cited above Macpherson appends a note containing the remark:

[A] traveller of penetration could gather more genuine knowledge from a tour of ancient Gaul, than from the minutest observation of all the artificial manners, and elegant refinements of modern France. (Ibid., p. 227n.)

The word *artificial* here contrasts with the preceding line's *genuine*, which shares a root with *genius*. Amongst the things implied is the genuineness of Ossian versus the artificiality of poetry such as Beattie's, where nothing indexes Scottish origins. Indeed, Beattie's manners, elegance and refinement are indistinguishable from those of, *horribile dictu*, a Parisian. So it is especially ironic that the natural, authentic genius of Ossian should have been rejected as an embarrassing hoax by those who first embraced it, when Macpherson, challenged to produce the original written Gaelic text, could not even name a unified source for what was, after all, the product of a composite oral tradition.

Cesarotti translated Ossian in 1763 to great success, yet felt the need to revise it twice, the last time in 1801. He sensed that the Italian language let him down through what he called its excessive timidity. Gambarota points out that “[d]enouncing the Italian poetical language was almost an act of national treason [...], heavily undermining the Italian canon, or the true foundation of national identity” (p. 164). Cesarotti steadily experimented, stretching the limits of syntax, lexicon and especially versification, gradually pushing his translation closer to Macpherson's original, but with an essential difference: Cesarotti's versions were in verse, a choice that Gambarota interprets as moving beyond Macpherson and back to the original Gaelic songs.

Cesarotti's translation shows striking inconsistencies of style, which critics have taken as signs of his limitations. Gambarota makes the case that they are the deliberate choices of a connoisseur of contrasts, who described the translator's task as “rubbing different national tastes against each other” so as to “sharpen his readers' sense of differences and their intuition of universals” (p. 173). She even adduces passages from his correspondence explaining how he has landscaped the park in his villa so as to create starkly contrasting scenes.

This chapter, arguably the strongest in a formidable book, concludes with a discussion (surprisingly brief, compared to the Ossian sections) of Cesarotti's *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue* (1785), his direct intervention in the debate over the genius of the language. Like virtually every linguistic treatise of the period, it took as its foundation Condillac's (1714–1780) *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), itself inspired by Locke's (1632–1704) *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Gambarota contends that Cesarotti's departures from Condillac can be traced to his long experience with translating Ossian. For Condillac, the genius of a language expresses the national character and dispositions which have formed it, in conjunction with climate and various *idées*

accessoires, notably the people's form of government. Although he allowed that the genius of the language can be developed by great writers, this can only happen once the deterministic factors have already raised that genius to a high level. Hence, Gambarota believes, "Condillac's requirements do not really grant writers much agency. [...] The man of genius finds the character of language, rather than contributing to its creation" (pp. 180–181).

Cesarotti's was "an almost opposite vision" (p. 181). He proposed a distinction between a language's grammatical genius, which writers must respect and preserve, and its rhetorical genius, which it is their duty constantly to modify, in order to bring it closer to perfection. Here, Gambarota believes, "Cesarotti intuits the difference between *langue* and *parole*" (p. 183). His concept of grammatical genius may have been Condillacian in its determinateness, and as immutable as Saussure's *langue*, but he strove to keep it to a minimum, focussing instead on articulating "The Writer's Rights in Relation to the Language": the right to revive old words, create new figurative meanings, invent neologisms, borrow from languages ancient and modern as well as from Italian dialects — even to appropriate certain idioms, a radical proposal since, up to then, idioms had been considered strictly language-bound.

The discourse of 'rights' returns us to the political context. Cesarotti "resisted not only Condillac's autarchic monolingualism but also the nascent nationalistic ideology that posited the cultural uniformity of the polity" (p. 187), arguing instead for a 'polyphonic nation'. One of Cesarotti's intellectual touchstones, Jean-François Marmontel (1723–1799), had asserted in his *Discours sur l'autorité de l'usage sur la langue* (1785) "[q]ue le caractère du Peuple est uniforme dans les pays de despotisme, & qu'il est *multiforme* dans les pays de liberté" (the nature of the People is uniform in despotic countries, and *multiform* in free countries), not the typical French view. But neither was this what Italians wanted to hear in a time when the pressing issue was how to become a country at all. "The contrast between the enthusiastic response to *Ossian* and the hostility aroused by *Saggio sulla filosofia delle lingue*", Gambarota writes (in the passage that appears to have prompted the book's title), "reveals the irresistible rise of the nationalistic myth of the organic monolingual nation on the Italian intellectual scene" (p. 189).

The last of Gambarota's studies is the only one devoted to a figure who has survived as a major poet in the modern Italian canon, Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837). It is surprising that she gives no attention to his poetical practice, but focusses exclusively on the content and style of his *Zibaldone di pensieri* (c.1817–1832), the notebooks containing his philosophical observations. Rejecting notions of genius and primitive authenticity that had by now become received ideas, Leopardi establishes a dichotomy between "free, imaginative languages that are varied, associative, and flexible", such as English, German and ancient Greek, and

“geometric languages that are rigid, analytical, and uniform” (p. 197), of which French is the example *par excellence*, along with Latin. As for Italian, it is neither fish nor fowl: it was “formed with a free character” in the 14th century, when “it drew from the imaginative and varied idiom of the common people” (p. 199), but in modern times has been sapped of its flexibility by pedants subjecting it to French-derived shackles. This has left it unable “to express contemporary contents, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions” (p. 201), resulting in what Leopardi saw as the decline of both literature and science in Italy.

The solution he called for was to *remake* the language, appropriating and naturalizing linguistic elements, along with their concomitant qualities, values, and virtues, from wherever in Europe they might be found. He believed that most of the linguistic resources could be drawn from Italy’s vast dialect treasury, but his concern was ultimately with the end product rather than historical origins. Gambarota reads this view, unusual for the time, in conjunction with

his ideas of *assuefazione* (habit) and second nature, two concepts that emerge in very different contexts (including moral, social, and psychological) and are rooted in his relativistic perspective as well as in his vision of history as a movement away from nature. While his analysis of language disavowed the conflation of mother tongue and literary language, a core component of the myth of the genius of language, his systematic reflections on habit and second nature undermined the innate understanding of character. These reflections ultimately articulated his most consistent critique of the natural nation. (205–206)

For Leopardi, if human beings have any ‘innate’ faculty, it is adaptability (*assuefabilità*), the capacity to form habits in response to external circumstances. By implication, most of what we hold to be essential and immutable, including national character and linguistic genius, is in fact contingent and changeable — though once formed into an acquired habit, its power to regulate an individual’s behaviour is no less strong. He realized that any remaking of the language would require a tremendous effort, and would not be accomplished in a single generation. On the other hand, he thought that the undertaking would have the tide of history on its side, since “he noticed that all civilized idioms were rapidly adopting not only similar syntactic structures but also a common vocabulary connected to the new disciplines and to the modern European sensibility” (p. 218). He saw national characteristics too as converging, and believed optimistically that the death of nations was within view, to be replaced by ethical societies on the idealized model of the Greek *polis*.

Gambarota does a masterful job of bringing out Leopardi’s contemporary relevance without beating readers over the head with it. After her clear and patient exposition it would be hard not to accept her conclusion that “Leopardi’s

monumental effort to destabilize accepted notions of language, character, and nation, strenuously reversing any expected conclusions, was certainly an attempt at breaking through thought habits, even his own” (p. 226). The best compliment one can pay to the book under review is that the same holds for Paola Gambarota. *Tanto di cappello*, as the Italians say, apart from those who prefer the more universal *Chapeau bas*.

REFERENCES

- Joseph, John E. 2012. “Small Universes and Big Individuals: Locating Humboldt in evolving conceptions of language and *Individualität*”. *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Individualität und Universalität* ed. by Ute Tintemann & Jürgen Trabant, 95–111. Munich: Wilhelm Fink.
- Moore, Dafydd. 2003. *Enlightenment and Romance in James Macpherson’s The Poems of Ossian: Myth, genre and cultural change*. Aldershot, Hampshire & Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate.
- Thomson, Derick S. 1952. *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson’s ‘Ossian’*. Edinburgh: Published for the University of Aberdeen by Oliver & Boyd.

Author’s address:

John E. Joseph
Linguistics and English Language
University of Edinburgh
Dugald Stewart Building
EDINBURGH, EH8 9AD
United Kingdom
e-mail: john.joseph@ed.ac.uk

