Jan RÜDIGER (Université de Francfort)

Avoiding the term. Politics and the vernacular in the Middle Ages

Implication — circumlocution — metaphor : so many verbal dodges, so many ways of avoiding saying what you mean. There is a long tradition of using language artfully so that meaning can be conveyed by other means than talking straight. It is called rhetorics. There is also a long tradition, in fact it runs parallel, of distrust of rhetorics. It goes back to fifth-century BC Athens at least, it is a powerful strand of modern thought — the phrase 'that's just rhetorics' is seldom meant commendably — and it has had its varying ascendancies over that other strand, respect and admiration for the artful use of words. 'To call a spade a spade' has during two and a half millennia of Euro-Mediterranean history variusly been regarded a virtue and a deficiency; 'beating around the bush', a nuisance or an accomplishment.

In a long-time history of social rhetoricity, the Middle Ages, as a whole, tend to be seen as coming at its more rhetoricised end. Modern observers view a number of the characteristic features of medieval culture as being of the twisted rather than the straightforward kind. To name a few: insular latinity; high medieval Latin and courtly poetry; scholasticism; chivalric novels, they often fall short of the Attic ideals of modern scholars like Rosario Assunto — or conversely, are admired by modern intellectuals with un-Attic leanings like Jorge Luís Borges or Ezra Pound. Whatever the value judgement attached, explicitly or not: the medieval world would appear as an obvious choice for the study of 'implicit meanings' [cf Mary Douglas].

Among the many possible approaches, I should like to suggest looking at two kinds of implicit discussion of issues of legitimacy, both tied up with the peculiarities of medieval language use: *one*, the issue of choice of language; *two*, the way of coming to terms with issues, a possibly specifically medieval rhetorics of avoiding the term.

It is well-known that medieval Europe was fairly peculiar linguistically. *Too* well-known maybe. We simply take it for granted that the Middle Ages are the period with most sources written in a language no one had as his or her native language, full stop. If we stop and think for a moment, we remember that the Middle Ages are the period when most of the languages that are around and about today first emerged. We then link both ideas together and fuse them into the 'process' of 'the emancipation of the vernaculars'. And that is, more or less, the story.

I'd like to invite you to lean back and look at things more leisurely, maybe so that you will appreciate the peculiarity of things a little more. The more one looks at it, that story, I feel, increasingly takes on a strange kind of improbability.

First point: the Latin West is actually unique in its main linguistic traits. I cannot think of any other part of the world which for roughly a thousand years insisted on using for most prestigious purposes a highly developed language which had an ever diminishing oral side to it. More or less all written sources from the earlier Middle Ages — vernacular literacy is a completely marginal phenomenon up until about 1250 — are written in a language that all its users had acquired.

Now this poses several questions. The most disquieting one is: What relation, if any, did the vocabulary of our Latin sources *[circling on our homepage]* have to the primary language in each of its medieval users' minds? Depending on what we are looking at, this question poses itself more or less urgently. As for theology, for instance, the question of the natural language

of, say, St Thomas Aquinas may give an interesting slant on interpretation but is clearly of lesser concern. But for an inquiry into political language, it *does* pose a problem: Most of the people whom we would normally credit with being political agents — kings, counts, their retinue, armed roughnecks, high-born women — hardly ever got into touch with spoken Latin outside Mass, and were in no position ever to understand the writings which for us are the main body of sources for medieval political language. To put it bluntly: Charlemagne would have remained all but untouched by Carolingian political thought.

On the other hand, these people were perfectly able to speak about matters political, act accordingly, perform speech acts, in Frankish, Saxon, Irish, all kinds of Romance, and Norse. They *did* have political language; it was probably well developed by continuous and widespread usage and as such open to semantical analysis. Only we hardly know it, since it was mainly oral.

What do we do about this? As for orality, there is almost a century of awareness of the field in the humanities, the received opinion being that it was Milman Parry, working on formulaic language in Homer in the 1920s, and Albert Lord in his 1960 study on *The Singer of Tales* (Yugoslav epics), who introduced historians and philologists to the specificities of oral discourse, as highlighted by Walter Ong in his 1982 essay *Orality and Literacy*. More than thirty years' research in the field of medieval studies have provided us with methodological tools with which to approach the matter of orality, and which allow us some limited confidence here.

As for individual vernaculars, the attention they have received are considerable, maybe disproportionate considering the ascent Latin continued to have over the later 'national languages'. All scraps of evidence for them have been turned over and over again in the attempt of showing each vernacular's 'process of emancipation' from, and thus interaction with, Latin. So we have recourse to a vast body of scholarship in linguistics and literary history wherever we look. However, due to the master narrative mentioned above, there is sometimes a lack of emphasis on the fact that vernacular literacy in Latin script constituted both a novelty and a considerable extra effort. It is never the easy option to write in the vernacular. All who did could have written in Latin instead. And in many regions, they never did otherwise. The question has to be, why?
[maps with distribution of vernacular literacy]

These coincide, roughly, with the overlap of three zones: Christianisation, hence Latinity + non-Romance + outside Frankland/Carolingia. The first is obvious. So is the second, but it needs consideration. If Latin is *the* written language, in fact is more or less synonymous with literacy – then why should anyone want to write the vernacular at all? Since Western Christendom for a variety of reasons has decided to detach mission from language – contrary to Byzantine practice, think of Gothic and Slavonic –, there is no need to translate, and things normally aren't translated. The famed translations under King Alfred in 9th-century England are indeed an exception, but no more than that. But in most instances, the written vernacular is a marker of orality. It is one of several ways to slip the spoken word into a written text.

There are others. A highly skilled Latinate author may put spoken words into his chronicle in literary Latin, which would imply a calque either on classical Latin historical writing, on the Old Testament, on earlier medieval chroniclers, probably on all of them to degrees. A less skilled Latinate author may put them into writing in a form that mirrors the vernacular in syntax and semantics to some degree. A skilled Latinate author may still use a Latin marked by the vernacular. This was common practice in Romance-speaking regions, such as Southern

Gaul where 10th- and 11th-century Latin is notoriously 'bad' from a normative perspective. But in the words of Philippe Martel, at Montpellier, 'le latin est mauvais par commodité communicationnelle'. Meaning, it was easier for everyone to use the written Latin if it was 'bad': people with some limited knowledge of Latin would be able to understand it if read, and more importantly, it would have been easier to retranslate it into the vernacular when reading out if required.

Or again, the writer might take the full step and attempt to write the vernacular with Latin characters. According to regions, more or less stable traditions developed to this purpose from the 10th century onwards. Not earlier than that. This wants explaining. I believe that the fact that there is no tradition, no expansive practice of writing the vernacular – as opposed to single instances – anywhere in the Europe under Frankish sway, including its non-Romance parts, is part of what I like to term "Carolingian Exceptionalism". It is never easy to argue *ex negativo*, but the distribution of areas of vernacular literacy is conspicuous enough to call for explanation. To outline it in some hypotheses: Contributing factors may have been

(i) the need to integrate a vast and plurilingual empire
(ii) the characteristical Carolingian predilection for spolia with imperial shades — in this instance, the well-known commitment to Latin learning.

So, from the times of Charlemagne onwards, a certain Carolingian mode of rule was linked to the exclusive use of Latin for literate purposes. It came to mark the Post-Carolingian lands right up to the 13th century. Along with other traits of Carolingianism, it came to be emulated by neighbouring zones: in the re-formation of the Asturias; in Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary; in Denmark, and later, Sweden; in post-conquest England — actually, a little earlier than that, with Edward the Confessor. Conversely, anxiousness about Carolingianism may have resulted, among other things, in a certain effort in vernacular literacy. Regions just outside the sway of Carolingian or Carolingianist powers are conspicuous for their development of the vernacular as an *alternative literacy* : for example, the surge of saga writing in Norway under the pressure of the Danish Empire which in the course of the 12th century went all 'Carolingianist', complete with a high-flying royal idealogy and an impressive competitive Latinity to match. Or various parts of Iberia, but most notably Occitania, nominally within a post-Carolingian realm of course, but to all intents and purposes outside West Frankland apart from the most superficial bonds right up to the 12th century when Angevin and Capetian expansionism really made itself felt. It is not surprising if Norse and Occitan both developed vernacular lay oratory to a fine art during this period: because that is really what troubadours, skalds and sagas are about.

And both languages developed their own treatises on grammar and rhetoric at about the same time: the first Norse grammar is about 1150, the Occitan *Razós de trobar*, about 1180. In a master narrative of European linguistic history, they stand out as the 'first' grammars of vernaculars in a series, rapidly to be followed by others. But at the time, the author of *De vulgari eloquentia* was not yet born, so in a historical analysis the emphasis should not be on future trends but on the contemporary: Two parts of Latin Europe developed a linguistic standard designed to compete with the *lingua sacra* on the same level, thereby claiming an alternative but no less viable legitimacy. Using them, to the detriment of Latin, carried meaning.

On to my second point: the question of the properties of lay political language. It is not necessarily tied up with the choice of language; therefore, I choose not to dwell on Norse or Occitan, or indeed any of the vernaculars, but look at the Latinate-Frankish part of the

continent. As I have said, the spoken vernacular need not pass into writing in its vernacular form. I have touched upon the conditions of this passage. Let's now get down to context. Say, two mighties make a deal. A pact, a peace, a *conventum*. In all probability, words will be used in the process, alongside other forms of expression, mimic, gestic, dress and the like. All of these are semantical, they carry meaning and obey to certain systems of encoding and decoding. Most of which is lost for us, so we must be clear about the fact that we simply are unable to approach Political Language in the Middle Ages semantically, except for fairly narrow sections of it. It's all we can do to look at the words, and be thankful for any supplementary information.

The words may be recorded in writing in several ways, as I have just outlined. There are several ways of dealing with them. For instance, it might be possible to check whether word use in a given elaborate Latin *historia* or *chronica* varies significantly according to whether we are in an oral situation. Maybe the authors of those histories, advertently or not, let the actors 'speak their minds' in direct or indirect discourse.

On the other end, there are vernacular texts pure and simple. They are either literary forms that are characteristic of the vernacular and which pointedly have *no* Latin counterpart, such as troubadour songs. Or they represent the other main type of lay élite literacy, namely chivalric romances such as the Arthurian cycle, riddled as they are with direct discourse, are easier to accommodate to sources of my type 2 – 'bad' Latin –, or rather what might be termed 'pragmatic Latinity' or some such thing. For instance, the rich documentary sources of Southern Gaul, or narrative texts such as the *Conventum* between Count William of Poitou-Aquitaine and Hugh of Lusignan, a fairly obscure text which I single out here because of its renown among scholars of medieval history which it owes to havibg been studied in depth by Stephen D. White. **[example + rough translation :]**

Hugh came to the count and told him: "My lord, a lot of bad it is to me that the lord whom I made by your counsel has just taken away my possession. I beseech you and I admonish you by the faith that a lord shall help his man: do me either a good conflict resolution or let me have my possession like you pledged to me; or give me back the hostages which I commended to you; and on top of that help me like you pledged to me." The count, however, did not help him nor gave him a deal, nor did he give him back his hostages, but gave them freely [meaning: without anything in return] to Bernard [Hugh's adversary]. And after that the quarrel grew between Bernard and Aimery and Hugh.

They are interesting enough for a number of reasons.

For one, on a linguistic level, the distribution of word categories varies considerably. Roughly speaking, it seems that such texts, especially when containing a lot of dialogue, have a slightly lower proportion of nouns compared to Learned Latin, a higher proportion of verbs, and a very low proportion of adjectives and adverbs. This of course effects co-occurrences and collocations, the tools of the trade of semantic analysis.

Second, it is a fair hypothesis that variety in co-occurrences will be much lower – obviously so, because it is the very essence of formulaic language that words tend to come in pairs or groups.

Third, this means that one of the main features of vernacular language might be something that I hope to have shown for one particularly developed political language, 12th-century courtly Occitan: namely, that semantics do not operate at the level of the single word, or

lexeme, but on the level of collocations. If generalisable, this would mean that there is an overall semantical 'lop-sidedness' between Literary Latin on the one hand, and Pragmatic Latin as well as the vernaculars on the other. They do not match. Meaning, translation becomes if not impossible, at any rate a difficult cultural endeavour – maybe comparable to translation to and from non-Western languages today.

Fourth, even on the lexematic level, this type of latinity, closer to the lay actors as it were, differs considerably from the learned/clerical body. Let's take a look, for instance, at the word use in the *Conventum* I have just mentioned. **[Folie *Wortgebrauch*]**
1 absence of Learned latin vocabulary
2 other terms prominent
3 tune down high number for *honor* (meaning possession) → that leaves us with *fides*, *conventum* and the right/wrong vocabulary. All three I had expected to come high; on the other hand there is one term I had expected to come high: *amor*. Here at 0.24 %. — Compare to courtly romance: Chrétien de Troyes, Erec and Yvain (roughly speaking, a century and a half later): the amor world field is not very diversified (mainly *amor, amer, ami(e)*): both at 0.35 %. I do not hastily deduce that *amor* is, after all, not a central concept of vernacular political language. It is a pointer towards how implicit language works.
4 in contrast, high concentration of certain verbs. 'To do' tops them all.
— Another characteristic of (near-) vernacular political language is its being bound up with action. As I have pointed out, lay political language (that is, saying words) is only a part of political semantics, one not readily to be detached from its mimic and gestic context. Even in its written form, it remains within this context, in that *doing* things remains central. Hence the hypothesis that verbs are much more prominent in the key vocabulary than they are in Learned Latin — maybe they are more central in 'structuring the discourse' than nouns.

So much for this overview on the characteristics of the vernacular or near-vernacular material.

By way of conclusion, I'd like to put this into some more general observations on my third and final point: diglossia. The term is commonly used to denote a specific kind of bilingualism, namely one where the two languages are used in different ways. A typical modern situation of diglossia is dialect vs standard language. But also, of course, medieval Latin vs. any vernacular. This is, I think, uncontroversial. But we seldom stop to consider what the specific properties are that put these languages in a situation of diglossia – which essentially means that users were not free to use either one or the other in a given context. Or rather, context was created to a large extent by choice of language.
So what are those distinctive features that shape the communicative context? To round this up and start the discussion, I'd like to condense some properties of vernacular political language into headwords: it is

1. ***vocal*** – and not simply oral/aural: it depends on words spoken out aloud, chanted, sung, carefully pronounced with an intent of driving home a point. Even in its written forms, vernacular political language not only retains its basic indebtedness to oral discourse but tends to highlight it.

2. ***performative*** – and therefore entirely contextual. Words cannot be used outside a specific situation; by taking away the situation, the words become literally meaningless. Of course it is a basci rule of modern semantics that « les mots n'ont pas de sens, ils n'ont que des emplois ». But a culture that has no techniques to recreate context medially, usage is irredeemably situational. A modern reader can find perfectly legitimate enjoyment by reading a pocket edition of the *Chanson de Roland*; a putative medieval reader would have felt silly.

There is therefore no way that 'talking politics' can be recorded in writing without losing its essential layers of meaning. This means that there can be no political treatise in the political vernacular. Any discussion of, say, legitimacy in explicit nominal terms in anything approaching Aristotelian or post-Bodin style is simply not feasible.

3. ***material*** – and therefore even further removed from the possibility of entering into a lexematic repository. This is a difficult topic to approach, but it must not be disregarded. Words that are not normally stored on a parchment leaf until needed are (unless carved into stone on burial slabs, church porches or rune stones) essentially physical, kinetic events. They are modulated air. It is no wonder, then, that a number of forms of word magic must have appeared infinitely more plausible to such (semi-) oral cultures as medieval Europe than we can imagine. Spells bound, maledictions killed, simple greetings cured. The 'speech act', a common practice even today ('I declare this bridge open'), must have been both more diversified and more portentous. Even the fact that someone was speaking at all (instead of staying silent) was, in the Middle Ages and a lot of more recent European societies until the advent and the generalisation of continuous talk as an everyday mode of interaction, often fraught with consequence. I am not making the claim that the idea of the magic quality of uttering certain words in certain ways was always a decisive feature of medieval vernacular political language. But it may be just as well to remember that a society that hardly uses the written (and preserved) word, knows and uses fewer words overall, and puts more store by each utterance, will tend to develop ideas rather different from ours about the qualities and properties of words well spoken.

4. ***episodic*** – and therefore implicit, non-abstract, and bound up with describing action, thereby focusing attention and intellectual alacrity on the 'deciphering' on complex chains of events rather than chains of lexematic argument. As Walter Ong has reminded us, in an oral culture, a word cannot be 'looked up' in a dictionary, that is, any attempt at conceptual clarity transcending each particular situation of word use is simply impossible even to conceive of. 'Without a writing system, breaking up thought – that is, analysis – is a high-risk procedure.' Therefore, lexemes always carry a situational surplus: they are always made to mean more than they do. In extreme cases, they can cease to 'mean' anything at all on a lexematic level, their meaning being reduced to the fact of their being spoken. A lot of futile controversy about time and extent of 'feudalisation' has at least partly resulted from a lack of receptiveness to the fact that magnates and scribes could be pretty indifferent to what actual words they said (and not 'terminology employed') in high-stake situations where quite other considerations mattered. Two armed chieftains surrounded by their retinues in a public spot, exchanging or brandishing words, do so in a way markedly different from both modern political communication and their own contemporaries', Abaelard's and Bernard of Clairvaux' way of using dispute in a power struggle.

These differences ceased to apply during the century roughly between 1250 and 1350, the period of the so-called 'emancipation of the vernaculars' from Latin predominance. In my opinion, what happened was precisely the opposite: the Latinisation of the vernaculars, their realignment along the wirtten model, which towards the later Middle Ages seems even to have changed lay political oratory beyond recognition. Now kings and counts began to talk politics in a way which previously only clerics had used. It was a shift between two different political semantics. The new one allowed for explicit use of nominal terminology. It is still prevalent in modern political discourse.

Thank you very much.