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Dante's Evolving Stance on Vernacular

Italian writer, Dante Alighieri, referred to as Dante, has produced a complex body of works which represent an evolution of thought around the concept of language. Tracing his writings chronologically through time, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Convivio*, and *The Divine Comedy*, Dante expresses a wide range of views on the development, use, and manipulation of language. He appears to have an evolution of thought, however, his critical feelings towards different Italian dialects can be traced in through-lines within his works. Passages throughout these three texts reveal Dante's contrasting ideas about why language is important and what elements of language are valuable versus harmful. Dante's texts also raise contemporary questions about how language relates to knowledge and its accessibility by society. It is key to recognize both Dante's evolution, as well as his negative feelings towards the vernacular language and its many facets.

In Dante's first work, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, he introduces his main topic of interest, the vernacular language. Dante defines the vernacular language as something people inherit naturally from birth through hearing sounds, rather than a language that is specifically learned, like Latin. He defends the vernacular for three main reasons, saying "first, because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it, though with different pronunciations and using different words; and third, because it is natural to us while the other is, in contrast, artificial." This reasoning exemplifies Dante's feeling towards the

vernacular and how he supports its naturalness and accessibility. It is important to understand the background of Dante's opinion of language because his stance seems to shift throughout his many works, and even within *De Vulgari Eloquentia* itself. For example, Dante goes on to list many of the vernaculars within Italy in a seemingly neutral tone, only to switch his demeanor in the next passage and begin critiquing many of the vernaculars. He goes on a "hunt" for the most illustrious vernacular, "pruning" and "uprooting" different dialects. Dante seems to not only viciously attack many vernaculars, but also to critique certain peoples and demographics. He asserts a negative connotation around many dialects, showing his disdain for the diversion of language from one mother tongue. *De Vulgari Eloquentia* holds many contradictions in this manner because Dante begins by explaining the nobleness of vernacular, only to attack many of them based on personal biases. These contradicting ideas arise throughout Dante's works, particularly in *Inferno* 3 and 31 where topics such as dialectical cacophony and the Tower of Babel are expanded on. Following Dante's feelings towards the vernacular within his literary works, the *Convivio* reflects on the value of the vernacular and its relation to Latin.

Unlike *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, which is written in Latin for the academic sphere to learn about the importance of vernacular, the *Convivio* is written in Tuscan. This change in language indicates a difference in Dante's intended audience. The *Convivio* is meant to be read by people who understand the Tuscan vernacular and can thus understand Dante's opinion about the search for knowledge. A central theme within this text is bread as a metaphor for vernacular. Dante argues that the search for knowledge, more specifically the vernacular, is a noble quest. Bread is being described as the sustenance and nourishment of knowledge, showing the value of understanding the vernacular. This coincides with Dante's original idea in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* when he expresses the nobleness of the vernacular due to its naturalness and accessibility. Dante

continues to compare the relationship between vernacular and Latin, saying that Latin would never be able to occupy the role of servant to the master vernacular. Dante gives the reasoning that Latin would not be an understanding servant to the vernacular because it does not know it in its particulars, as well as Latin not knowing the friends of the vernacular. This point emphasizes the superiority of vernacular and the faults with Latin. The *Convivio* ultimately shows Dante's positive feelings towards the vernacular. He remains much more neutral within this text than he does in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* because he no longer harshly criticizes different Italian dialects. It is important to acknowledge this shift in Dante because his earlier and latter works seem to have different intentions when being written. One shows criticism of language, while the other represents values of language, which are clearly opposing. However, Dante's opinion about vernacular does not remain static after the *Convivio* and his contradictory ideas will arise again.

Within Inferno 3, Dante uses his and Virgil's journey through Hell to make commentary on language and its effect on the sinners who reside in Hell. Within this canto, Dante and Virgil are in the threshold of Hell, a liminal space, where souls who were neither good nor evil reside. Dante describes the sounds he hears as "Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements, accents of anger, words of suffering, and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands—" This liminal space reveals Dante's critique on moral ambiguity, as well as his idea of what true suffering is. This horrible space is full of contrasting dialects and disturbing noises, showing Dante's disdain again for the diversion of the mother tongue. He has weaponized language as a tool to torture sinners, again revealing his conflicting feelings towards vernacular. He praises the search for vernacular in *Convivio*, yet uses it as a weapon of suffering in Inferno 3. Dante seems to revert back to the critical mindset he once held in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. He wavers about whether vernacular is valuable or harmful, ultimately making his arguments seem convoluted and contradictory.

Similarly to Dante's work in Inferno 3, Inferno 31 also reflects a negative connotation of vernacular.

Within Inferno 31, Dante and Virgil are in the eighth circle of Hell, which contains giants who are essentially extensions of Satan. A key figure within this canto is Nimrod, a giant who is responsible for bringing confusion of language to the world. When Nimrod attempts to speak to Dante and Virgil it comes out as gibberish, which Dante says "for which no sweeter psalms would be appropriate." This statement is intentional because Nimrod is unable to speak a language that is understandable as punishment for causing the Tower of Babel, the event which caused languages to be confused. This punishment reflects Dante's disdain for the way in which diverse languages were formed. As my classmate, Emma Herold, discusses in her forum post, "Referring to [Nimrod] as 'O stupid soul,' truly demonstrates the fact that Dante, and Christianity as a whole, seems to have a close minded view of a variety of languages." I found this post's commentary enlightening because she discusses how Nimrod is viewed as an intellectual inferior due to his speaking a different dialect. Adding onto her post, this also brings up contemporary questions about how society views people who speak different dialects. The interpretation of certain languages as intellectual and others as stupid shows that Dante's negative description of Nimrod has modern day implications. Dante has returned back to the criticisms that appear in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, and his contempt for certain aspects of the vernacular have not disappeared. However, within later sections of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante starts to show a change of demeanor.

Inferno 32 and Paradiso 26 show an evolution of Dante's thoughts surrounding language. Within Inferno 32, Dante and Virgil are in the ninth circle of hell, Caina, where traitors to their kin are receiving punishment. Dante expresses that, "it is not a task to take in jest, to show the

base of all the universe—nor for a tongue that cries out, “mama,” “papa.” This statement draws significance to *De Vulgari Eloquentia* where Dante says that words such as “mama” and “papa” are unsophisticated and should essentially not be used. It is not accidental that Dante used these words specifically with canto 32. The Inferno seems to be a place where Dante’s old criticisms have manifested, which may show how his thought has changed in comparison to his past literary works. Paradiso 26 displays a similar thought pattern. Within this canto, Dante speaks to the biblical figure Adam who provides a surprising opinion on the function of language. Adam gives wisdom to Dante on the topic of vernacular, when he expresses, “That man should speak at all is nature’s act, but how you speak—in this tongue or in that— she leaves to you and to your preference.” This response is key to revealing Dante’s evolution because Adam is a key biblical figure within the text. He holds knowledge and wisdom that Dante avidly seeks out, and he holds a positive connotation around the diversity and variety of language. Adam says “how you speak” should be by peoples’ “preference”, showing how Dante is learning by the end of the *Divine Comedy* that certain vernaculars should not be critiqued and shamed.

Ultimately, is it imperative to understand that Dante’s line of reasoning surrounding the art of language is not linear. He, throughout *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, *Convivio*, and the *Divine Comedy*, shows a variety of opinions that are often conflicting and contradictory. These texts relate to one another in unique ways, and show how, although his evolution is not linear, Dante does seem to have a more open-mind on vernacular by the end of *The Divine Comedy*. Dante’s conflicting opinions address modern-day issues surrounding how society views language and how accessible it is to different cultures and demographics. Analysis of Dante’s literary works may help us understand our own internal biases towards language and how we view language in relation to academia and culture.