

The Politics and Semiotics of Etymology in Varro's *De Lingua Latina*

Recent analyses of the etymological catalogues of *De Lingua Latina* (*LL*, Books 5-7) have emphasised the work's historical setting, suggesting that the complex and polyphonic character of the text is firmly rooted in contemporary Roman civic experience (e.g. Dench 2005, 316-321; Spencer 2011; cf. Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 67-8). It is increasingly clear that Varro's work offers an important commentary on the divisive final years of the Republic, but how do we understand this information in the context of Varro's wider linguistic theories? And what of Varro himself, in his dual capacity as both Roman statesman and philosopher? In this paper, I consider these questions in the light of Book 5, which contains etymologies pertaining to the categories 'place' (*locus*) and 'body' (*corpus*). In this book, Varro's etymologies supply an involved account of Stoic physics, and describe how both the Latin language and Roman institutions abound with obscure philosophical information about the structure of the cosmos. While Varro's allegorical explanation of language, society, and the cosmos entails a comprehensive and detailed theory of semiosis, however, it is devised in order to emphasise the need for the kind of philosophical intervention Varro provides: as a defense against the disarray of linguistic and semiotic forms, and, by extension, the decline of the Roman Republic.

The key section of Book 5 for understanding Varro's etymological method is the first part of the *corpus* segment, in which he treats 'immortal bodies' (*LL* 5.57-74). In this exegesis of the Roman pantheon, Varro explains that the gods, in his view, allegorise processes at the atomic level, which etymological analysis reveals (cf. van Nuffelen 2010). Venus, for example, as the goddess of love, is derived from *vinctio* ('bonding', *LL* 5.61-2) and related to *vita* ('life', *LL* 5.63), since she represents the conjunction of hot and cold elements in the process of biological

reproduction. In this analysis, Roman mythology is transformed into an account of Stoic physics (Dahmann 1964, 14-35), but so, it appears, are a number of other Roman institutions: marriage rites, for example, also allegorise elemental relationships, because they similarly employ wedding torches and water to correspond to the male and female elements of human reproduction (*LL* 5.61). Elemental bonding is thematically central to Varro's account since it explains how words, atoms, Roman social and political institutions, and the gods converge into a single, unified sign system governed by *coniunctio* – which explains lexical and syntactic conjunction, elemental compounds, kinship and marriage (hence *coniunx*), and mythology. Elsewhere in contemporary Roman philosophy, we might note, Cicero also envisages *coniunctio* in a similar function: as a calque of a similar Stoic system of cosmic semiosis, *sympatheia* (e.g. *Div.* 2.34; 2.142).

Varro's etymological analysis therefore entails a dense, even convoluted, theory of semiosis, since it asserts that the nuances of the Latin language can only be properly grasped by the application of esoteric Greek philosophical knowledge, and, in particular, an understanding of the workings of *natura*. Privileging this knowledge, I argue, is precisely the point: in the preliminary sections of Book 5, Varro explains that there are “four levels of explanation” (*quattuor explanandi gradus*, *LL* 5.7), and that his kind of exegesis, therefore, cannot be comprehended by those at the lowest levels: the people and the grammarians (*LL* 5.7-9). As a philosopher at the third level, however, Varro is uniquely positioned to intervene against the decline of the Latin language into decrepitude (*LL* 5.5), as well as the “total discord of words, old and new” (*verborum novorum ac veterum discordia omnis*, *LL* 5.6). Such resonant language is to be understood not merely as a mundane linguistic principle, I conclude, but as a strategy for coping with the increasingly hostile divisions in Republican and imperial politics. Yet Varro

knows that his philosophy can only be conjectural: like a doctor, he can offer well-educated guesses to his patients, but not secure knowledge (*scientia*, *LL* 5.8). That kind of total mastery of Latin semiosis, he ominously observes, can reside only at the highest level of the hierarchy: the “shrine and rites of a king” (*adytum et initia regis*, *LL* 5.8).

Works Cited

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