



## On the Origin of Hobbes's Conception of Language: The Literary Culture of English Renaissance Humanism

*Sobre el origen de la concepción de lenguaje en Hobbes: la cultura literaria del humanismo renacentista en Inglaterra*

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# On the Origin of Hobbes' Conception of Language: The Literary Culture of English Renaissance Humanism\*

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## ABSTRACT

Hobbes' education in the literary culture of English Renaissance humanism has been overlooked as an important tradition in understanding his position in Early Modern Philosophy. Against the traditional readings of Hobbes' conception of language as a sequel to Medieval nominalism, I will argue that Hobbes' education in the literary culture of Renaissance humanism and his subsequent developments in this tradition would have allowed him to consider philosophical problems raised by new science in an original way and, thus, to introduce his innovative conception of language as the core of his solution to the problem of social and natural orders. Keywords

Thomas Hobbes, English Renaissance, Language, Early Modern Philosophy, Humanism, Rhetoric.

## Sobre el origen de la concepción del lenguaje en Hobbes: la cultura literaria del humanismo renacentista en Inglaterra

### RESUMEN

La educación de Hobbes en la cultura literaria del humanismo renacentista en Inglaterra no ha sido considerada como una tradición importante en la interpretación de su posición en la temprana filosofía moderna. En contra de las interpretaciones tradicionales de la concepción del lenguaje de Hobbes como una continuación del nominalismo medieval, sostengo que la educación de Hobbes en la cultura literaria del humanismo renacentista y sus desarrollos en esta tradición le habrían permitido considerar los problemas filosóficos generados por el surgimiento de la ciencia moderna de una forma original y, en consecuencia, introducir su novedosa concepción del lenguaje como el centro de su solución a los problemas del orden social y natural.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Thomas Hobbes, Renacimiento inglés, lenguaje, filosofía moderna, humanismo, retórica.

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## Sobre a origem da concepção de linguagem em Hobbes: a cultura literária do humanismo renascentista na Inglaterra

### RESUMO

A educação de Hobbes na cultura literária do humanismo renascentista na Inglaterra não foi considerada como uma tradição importante na interpretação de sua posição na recente filosofia moderna. Contra as interpretações tradicionais da concepção da linguagem de Hobbes como uma continuação do nominalismo medieval, sustento que a educação de Hobbes na cultura literária do humanismo renascentista e seu desenvolvimento nesta tradição o teriam permitido considerar os problemas filosóficos gerados pelo surgimento da ciência moderna de uma forma original e, em consequência, introduzir sua inovadora concepção da linguagem como o centro de sua solução aos problemas de ordem social e natural.

### PALABRAS CHAVE

Thomas Hobbes, Renascimento inglês, linguagem, filosofia moderna, humanismo, retórica.

*Though words be the signs we have of one another's opinions and intentions; yet, because the equivocation of them is so frequent according to the diversity of contexture, and of the company wherewith they go (which the presence of him that speaketh, our sight of his actions, and conjecture of his intentions, must help to discharge us of): it must be extreme hard to find out the opinions and meanings of those men that are gone from us along ago, and have left no other signification thereof but their books; which cannot possibly be understood without history enough to discover those aforementioned circumstances, and also without great prudence to observe them (Hobbes 1969, 39).*

**T**he core of Hobbes' conception of language is the possibility of *creating* things with words, such as sciences or even the Commonwealth, more than *representing* them. According to this point of view, sciences are linguistic artifacts created by human beings to solve specific problems; sciences are neither reflections nor capsules grasping a reality outside us, but useful tools for creating, preserving, and improving human welfare. As I have argued elsewhere, this specific conception of language fitted into the demonstrative requirements of Hobbes' mathematical ideal of knowledge and is closely related to his mechanical conception of reality (Orozco-Echeverri 2010). In this sense, Hobbes' treatment of language appears as his epistemological justification of the mathematical and mechanical traditions of thought growing in the

early seventeenth century, which flourished in what was labeled the "new science."

Traditional accounts of Hobbes' conception of language have related his treatment to the nominalist tradition of William of Ockham and Jean Buridan;<sup>1</sup> even some accounts of nominalism list Hobbes as one of its leading modern exponents (Largeault 1971). According to my research, Hobbes' treatment of language can conceptually be related to nominalism, but historically we have no evidence of Hobbes' strong engagement with the texts of Medieval nominalist authors. Indeed, as far as we know, he was not very impressed by Scholasticism when he studied at Oxford, and we have no evidence of his having read Ockham or other nominalist authors. Yet I do not deny the possible influence, *via* Pierre Gassendi and Francis Bacon, for example,<sup>2</sup> of Medieval conceptions of language. However, it is striking that another tradition, to which I will refer in this paper, has not been considered seriously as an important framework for understanding

1 See, for example, Zarka (1999) and Bernhardt (1985). The comparison of Hobbes' conception of language with Ockham's goes back at least to Leibniz, when he says: "If an astronomer can account for the celestial phenomena with few presuppositions, that is with simple motions only, his hypothesis is certainly to be preferred to that of one who needs many orbs variously intertwined to explain the heavens. From this the nominalists have deduced the rule that everything in the world can be explained without any reference to universals and real forms. Nothing is truer than this opinion, and nothing is more worthy of a philosopher of our own time, so much that, I believe, Ockham himself was not more of a nominalist than is Thomas Hobbes now, although I confess that Hobbes seems to me to be an ultranominalist" (Leibniz 1923, 427-428).

2 Bacon's critique of the misuses of language is evidently influential in Hobbes' own conceptions. For more details on Bacon's conception and its influence on this topic in the seventeenth century, see Harrison (2007), especially 172-185.

Hobbes' conception of language. Indeed, the tradition in which Hobbes was educated must be considered to understand the origins of his conception of language: the literary culture of Renaissance humanism in England. In fact, Hobbes was educated in the Classics more than in Philosophy or Divinity, and some of his most important works are evidently contributions to the literary tradition of the English Renaissance. Thus, Hobbes was not only educated in this tradition, but he also heavily contributed to it with important works; he was also a practitioner.

In this paper, I will argue that Hobbes' education in the literary culture of Renaissance humanism and his subsequent developments in this tradition would have allowed him to consider philosophical problems raised by new science in an original way and, thus, to introduce his innovative conception of language as the core of his solution to the problem of social and natural orders.<sup>3</sup>

## The literary culture of the English Renaissance

Because of the complexity of the topic and the growing specialized studies in this field, I will offer only a general outlook on the English Renaissance, which I hope will be enough to locate the setting of Hobbes' education and his early intellectual context.<sup>4</sup> During the sixteenth century, many English communities experienced growing interest in reading and commenting on classical treatises in Rhetoric and, similarly to Continental Renaissances, re-reading Greek and Roman classics, which, more than erudite and academic works, were conceived as the guideline for new educational methods and as the framing of a new society. Erasmus of Rotterdam himself had sketched some models of curricula; but it was Juan Luis Vives, who arrived in England in 1523, who further developed more ambitious methods of education, which were first exposed in his *De tradentis disciplinis* of 1531. The most influential work in England, however, was Thomas Elyot's *The Book named the Governor*, published in the same year as Vives's. Written in the same spirit as Continental humanism, Elyot's book was committed in general terms to the *bonnae litterae*, that is, to

the ideal that the study of Greek and Roman letters could effect an important change in the culture of the ruling classes as when these texts were the rule in Classical Antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Humanism, however, was considered by Elyot as a separate way; in Robert Matz's words: "For Elyot [...] the independent authority of *bona litterae* represents a separate space for learning that is neither clerkly, academic, legal nor medical. Humanist study becomes instead a form of governance itself, both a prerequisite for governing and a body of knowledge that will instruct – and hence govern – the governing class" (Matz 2004, 30).

In this sense, and following the typical style of the Erasmians, the ultimate goal of this humanist education is mastery of the *studia liberalia* or liberal sciences, epitomized in the motto 'vir bonum atque dicendi peritus' (the man who is not only good but also skilled in speaking). According to this view, it was not necessary to abandon the traditional *trivium* and *quadrivium* of the Scholastic curriculum, but the student should be trained as well in five traditional disciplines—rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy (the traditional disciplines in the rhetorical education)<sup>6</sup>—and in grammar (Greek and Latin). The study of these disciplines, then, amounted to careful study, translation, and comment on Greek and Roman classics in each field. Roger Ascham, the private tutor to Elizabeth I before she became queen, specified in his *The Scholemaster*, published in 1591, the way to study the classical texts: the reading of a Greek author was compared—following Quintilian's method of comparison—to his Roman version in genre, for example, Homer to Virgil in epic, or Thucydides to Sallust in history, or Plato to Cicero in moral philosophy. After making the comparison, the student was required to write an original composition in his vernacular tongue. This exercise of creative imitation aimed for the student to become as learned and eloquent in his own language as the best writers were in Greek and Latin. The result of this exercise would be the creation of habits of thought, feeling, and speech similar to the best in Ancient times. This humanist education, however, had the goal of improving *vir civilis* or civic virtue, as understood by Cicero in the context of the Roman Republic and as exposed by Quintilian, following him (Skinner 1996).

Elyot, as well as Ascham and other authors of Tudor England, detailed the order of study of the *scientiae* and the readings the student should follow, beginning in

3 Recently, Philip Pettit has suggested Hobbes' conception of language (mainly his artifactual character) is the key to understanding the philosophical significance of his political theory. As it has been appreciated, my own approach, emphasis, and interest in Hobbes' conception of language are different. Cf. Pettit (2008).

4 For more details on the English Renaissance, see the excellent companions by Kinney (2000) and Hattaway (2003). My own overview is heavily based on those materials. On the general context of literature, education, and politics, Levin (2008) has been useful.

5 For a general –and useful– analysis of the circumstances and details of Elyot's book, see Matz (2004), especially pp. 25–55.

6 The disciplines, texts, and their order of study are detailed in Quintilian (1920a y 1920b), who follows in this Cicero's opinions.

the grammar schools. The model was highly influential during the late sixteenth century and, particularly during the 1590s, was in widespread use, but because of the political and social circumstances of early-seventeenth-century England, was ultimately overthrown.<sup>7</sup> Probably as a consequence of this model, late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century England saw an impressive increase in the publication and circulation of Greek and Latin works. At the same time, this humanist education, with its emphasis on “creative imitation,” improved English as a language more adequate for expressing, creating, and feeling as has been pointed in reference to the works of Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Sir Thomas More, Sir Francis Bacon, John Donne, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, and the big names associated with the Elizabethan era. Indeed, one of the main characteristics of these authors is the invention of the English language for poetry, literature, and theater, coining new words from other languages, including Greek and Latin, but also French and Spanish.<sup>8</sup> We can include Hobbes in the spirit of this age, when Richard Tuck claims that,

Hobbes created English-language philosophy. Before his work, there was little written in English on the more technical areas of philosophy – on metaphysics, physics, and even ethics. Only Richard Hooker can count as a precursor, and then merely in one limited branch of philosophy, that of jurisprudence. But after Hobbes, there was no area of human enquiry deemed inappropriate for the English language. This was a remarkable achievement, and one which we tend to take for granted; but it was possible for Hobbes only because he had a thorough mastery of the contemporary debates in the traditional language of philosophy – Latin – and in the new language – French. He wrote continually in both Latin and English, and we cannot really understand his finest achievement (which was to produce, in *Leviathan*, the first unquestionably great philosophical work in our language) without surveying the full range of his intellectual activity (Tuck 2002, n.p.).

Although Tuck does not explain the origin of this important contribution by Hobbes to philosophy and to the English language, we can locate his contribution in the same creative impulse that originated the abovementioned literary, theatrical, and poetical works.

## Hobbes' Renaissance education: the *studia humanitatis*

The most important biographical essays on Hobbes have pointed out his early education in a typical Tudor humanist curriculum.<sup>9</sup> Some scholars have tried to show that Hobbes' early commitment as translator is a minor and not very significant period in his intellectual development before he found geometry and optics and became interested in moral and political philosophy, as is manifest in the *Elements of Law* and *De Cive* after 1640, or they simply omit the references to previous works.<sup>10</sup> Quentin Skinner's detailed studies, in contrast, have traced the continuity between the main subjects and ideals of Hobbes' early humanist readings of Roman classics, such as Cicero and Quintilian, and the major topics developed in *De Cive* and dominantly in *Leviathan* (Skinner 1996 and 2002). However, Skinner has pictured as well a Hobbes closely related not only to the reading but also to the typical practices of English humanists such as translating classical authors and writing poetry, history, and compendiums for teaching (Skinner 1996). Catherine Wilson, in her recent study on Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity, has persuasively argued in favor of the strong influence of Epicurean topics on moral and natural philosophy, particularly of Lucretius, in Hobbes' mature works (Wilson 2008). According to my reading, as has been mentioned above, Hobbes' education and his early works on humanist tradition provided him with not only the major topics of his late moral and political philosophy and some useful argumentative resources but also an important set of conceptions from which he would shape his claim that language is a human ability to create, rather than to represent, a non-human reality.<sup>11</sup>

As I have mentioned above, it is widely accepted that Hobbes received a typical education in the literary culture of Renaissance humanism when he attended grammar

9 Malcolm (2002), Tuck (2002), Skinner (1996), Martinich (1999). As early as 1952, Leo Strauss pointed out the humanism influence on Hobbes' early education (Strauss 1996).

10 For example, Brandt (1928), Goldsmith (1966), and particularly the *Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, edited by Sorell (1996), which does not include more references to Hobbes' early development than those outlined in Malcolm's contribution or the recent book by Tuck (2002), which in his second part explaining Hobbes' works divides them into Science, Ethics, Politics, and Religion, but makes no mention of his works in the humanist tradition.

11 Skinner's suggestion of the influence of Hobbes' early education are pre-eminently oriented to the topics of argumentative resources and moral philosophy: “Hobbes is revealed not as a product of the scientific culture to which he later contributed so extensively, but rather as a student and exponent of the predominantly literary culture of humanism.” (Skinner 2002, 38). Wilson (2008) adds to Skinner's studies topics in natural philosophy and the influence of Epicurean conception of the world.

7 For more details, see Brink (2003) and Skinner (1996).

8 For further analysis on this point, see Blake (2003).

school. There, we are told, he learned Latin and Greek and developed the exercises of the basic elements of the *studia humanitatis*: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Aubrey's anecdotal life of Hobbes tells us he was a very advanced student who quickly mastered Latin and Greek: "[B]efore he went to the University, he had turned Euripides' *Medea* out of Greek into Latin iam-bics, which he presented to his master," Robert Latimer, a young man who was nearly twenty years old when he returned from Oxford and established a private school at Westport, which Hobbes attended "in the evening till nine o'clock." Latimer was, according to Aubrey, "a good Græcian scholar" (Aubrey 1998, 150).<sup>13</sup> After his early education, Hobbes was admitted to Magdalen Hall at Oxford, where for the first time he faced the traditional curriculum shaped by Scholastic and Aristotelian philosophy. We have scattered information about Hobbes' studies at Oxford, but we may conjecture, in sharp contrast to Descartes and other seventeenth-century thinkers, there were no significant findings and surprises in the curriculum for him. Hobbes himself, in his *Vita*, mentions he attended lessons and exercises in logic, but he soon stopped going to his classes in physics because he "turned instead to more agreeable studies, and began in particular to revolve in my mind once more the books to which I had earlier been introduced, but which I still did not know very well" (Hobbes 1845a, lxxxvii). These books to which he was introduced before were the Greek and Roman classics which led him to meet with Robert Latimer. In fact, Hobbes' decision not to pursue a master of arts (a requisite for remaining at the university) or to develop a career in the Church, his immediate intellectual development after completing his bachelor of arts, and his early occupation as secretary and tutor to an aristocratic family (a very typical way of life of a Renaissance humanist, rather than a position at the court, more adequate to natural philosophers or even to mathematicians):<sup>14</sup> all these ele-

ments give us the idea Hobbes' early encounter with the university was not very influential in his subsequent intellectual development. At the least, the university did not cause an important change in his interests, readings, and, mainly, his way of life.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, Hobbes' earlier readings and the autobiographical references to them show that in the period from 1608 to 1640 he had a typical humanist way of life and concerns. After his education at Oxford, Hobbes was appointed in 1608 as tutor to the young William Cavendish, the second son of William Cavendish, then the first baron of Hardwick (Malcolm 1994). However, records and letters show Hobbes acted more as traveling companion and secretary for the family than as tutor to the young earl. When Hobbes returned from his trip to the Continent serving the family, which ended in 1615, he devoted himself again to studying the works of the history, poetry, and grammar of the Roman and Greek classics, as he himself says in his *Vita carminis*:

Thus I at ease did live, of books, whilst he  
Did with all sorts supply my library.  
Then I our own historians did peruse,  
Greek, Latin, and convers'd too with my muse.  
Homer and Virgil, Horace, Sophocles,  
Plautus, Euripides, Aristophanes,  
I understood, nay more; but of all these,  
There's none that pleas'd me like Thucydides.<sup>16</sup>

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the employee or retainer of a great noble household – a somewhat old-fashioned career pattern that gave him access to a higher social world without making him a member of it, and which kept him for months at a time in physical seclusion from the metropolitan intellectual scene" (Malcolm 2002, 2). To understand the emergence of new ways of life, with the independence of the Church and the universities, it is useful to consult Tuck (1998). On employment as tutor and servant of aristocratic families, *vide ibid* especially pages 11–15.

12 Quentin Skinner has shown in detail how Hobbes was educated in this tradition when he attended grammar school, how this education was interrupted by the traditional scholastic curriculum he found at Oxford, and, finally, the way Hobbes undertook in his early period (before the 1640s) work on the *studia humanitatis* and contributed to it. Cf. Skinner (1996).

13 See also Martinich (1999).

14 Skinner has widely detailed the implication of Hobbes' appointments as secretary and tutor to the Devonshire family as an undoubted sign of his commitment to Renaissance humanism as a cultural practice different from a career at the university. Cf. Skinner (1996): "Perhaps the most obvious reflection of Hobbes' humanist allegiances can be observed in his choice of career [...] the most usual pattern of employment for humanist intellectuals in Renaissance England was either to act as teachers of the *studia humanitatis* in the grammar school and universities, or else to serve as tutors and secretaries in the household of the gentry and nobility." Malcolm adds: "He [Hobbes] was content to remain

15 However, it was his education at Oxford and successful studies that gave Hobbes his first appointment as tutor in the Cavendish family. Cf. Aubrey (1998) and Malcolm (2002).

16 The English translation of the original Latin appeared a year after the publication of the latter in 1679. It has not been possible to identify the translator, but according to Curley, "there is reason to think that in some respects it is closer to Hobbes' intentions than the Latin original" (Curley 1994, xlvi). I quote it from Curley (1994). This is the Latin text: "ille per hoc tempus mihi præbuit otia, libros/ Omnimodos studiis præbuit ille meis./ Vertor ego ad nostras, ad Græcas, atque Latinas/ Historias; etiam carmina sæpe lego./ Flaccus, Virgilius, fuit e mihi notus Homerus, / Euripides, Sophocles, Plautus, Aristophanes,/ Pluresque; et Scriptorum Historiarum;/ Sed mihi præ reliquis Thucydides placuit" (Hobbes 1845, vol. 1, lxxxviii). A similar reference occurs in the *Vita* in prose: "Itaque cum in Anglia reversus esset, historicos et poetas (adhibitis gramaticorum celebrium commentariis) versavit diligenter; non ut floride, sed ut Latine posset scribere, et vim verborum cogitatis congruentem invenire; itaque verba disponere, ut lectio perspicua et facilis esset" (Hobbes 1845a).

According to this, it is not surprising that the most important production of this period is Hobbes' translation of and comment on Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, published in London in 1629. The translation, written during Hobbes' service to the young earl, fulfills the demands of the humanist tradition regarding the reliability of the source—the best available Greek text—and the rhetorical rules for the introduction, following and quoting heavily from Cicero. After a short interruption in the appointment to the Cavendish family, Hobbes returned to act as tutor to the third William Cavendish, earl of Devonshire. In this new period serving the family, Hobbes developed education strategies for the young earl that reveal Hobbes' humanist tendencies: the choice of readings, exercises, and recommendations and his paraphrase and translation of Aristotle's *Rhetorica* in particular, which can be considered another exercise in the humanist tradition. As a matter of fact, those two most important early works bear all the characteristics of the humanist tradition, in sharp opposition to the Scholastics and 'new science' topics and achievements, and can be considered typical exercises in the wider context of the English Renaissance.<sup>17</sup> After centering his interests on civil philosophy and, in a wider context, on the problems of the 'new science,' such as optics and mechanics, Hobbes was engaged in exercises typical of humanism. However, his new interests did not eclipse his old concerns. In fact, after some decades of being involved in polemics about liberty, natural philosophy, and mathematics, after having published *Leviathan* and other influential works, Hobbes undertook his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, the first published in 1673 under the title *The Travels of Ulysses* and the second published in 1676 as *Homer's Iliads in English*.<sup>18</sup> According to this overview, we can see Hobbes was deeply engaged in humanist habits and exercises. From the sources of his works, we can also identify interesting elements concerning language.

## Hobbes' humanist works and his conception of language

Hobbes' translation of Thucydides' *Eight Books of the Peloponnesian War* (Hobbes 1839–1845b) is indeed a sharp exercise in the humanist ideal that to master *ars grammatica* is to make translations of classical texts.<sup>19</sup> But more than arguing in favor of the evident connection

between this work and the English Renaissance (a task very well done by Quentin Skinner),<sup>20</sup> I am interested in showing in this section how in the Ancient resources employed in the introductory texts to this work we can identify antecedents to Hobbes' earlier conceptions of language, particularly in the way it was first presented in *Elements of Law* and in *Leviathan* and later merged with the mathematical ideal of knowledge in *De Corpore*.

As I have mentioned, Skinner has carefully analyzed the interests and characteristics of Hobbes' translation of Thucydides and has detailed the way Hobbes' introduction and comments follow the rules of English Renaissance humanism regarding rhetoric. What is important for my argument is that, in so doing, Skinner has emphasized Hobbes' early influence by Greek and Roman thinkers and particularly by Cicero. In fact, it is common to find Hobbes resorting in virtually all his works to classical authors, either to develop philosophical concepts from classical anecdotes and dictums<sup>21</sup> or to illustrate and exemplify the use of his theories in classical writers<sup>22</sup> or to forge English philosophical concepts, not only from Greek and Latin standard words but also from his specific usages.<sup>23</sup> His recourse to Greek and Roman classics in his introduction to Thucydides' *War*, "Of the Life and History of Thucydides," however, aims to support his rhetorical

20 Skinner's (1996) analysis of the humanist characteristics of Hobbes' translation, comments, and introduction of Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* is found in *Reason and rhetoric in the philosophy of Hobbes*.

21 The sharpest example of this is his introduction to *De Cive*: "It was the speech of the Roman people, to whom the name *king* had been rendered odious, as well by the tyranny of the Tarquians as by the genius and decretals of that city; it was the speech, I say, of the public, however pronounced from a private mouth (if yet Cato the censor were no more than such): *that all kings are to be reckoned amongst ravenous beasts*" (Hobbes 1991, 90).

22 As it happens, for example, in *Leviathan*; when developing his conception of representation, Hobbes gives meaning to his point resorting to Cicero: "So that a *person* is the same that an *actor* is, both on the stage and in common conversation; and to *personate* is to *act*, or *represent*, himself or another; and he that acteth another is said to bear his person, or act in his name (in which sense *Cicero* useth it where he says *Unus sustineo tres personas: mei, adversarii, et iudicis*, I bear three persons: my own, my adversary's, and the judge's)" (Hobbes 1994, 101). Note Hobbes' quotation of Cicero comes from Cicero (1948, 102).

23 When defining imagination, Hobbes appeals to the common usages in the Latin and Greek traditions: "For after the object is removed, or the eye shut, we still remain an image of the thing seen, though more obscure than when we see it. And this is it, the Latins call *imagination*, from the image made in seeing, and apply the same, though improperly, to all the other senses. But the Greeks call it *fancy*, which signifies *appearance*, and is as proper to one sense as to another. *IMAGINATION* therefore is nothing but *decaying sense*, and is found in men and many other living creatures, as well sleeping as waking" (Hobbes 1994, 8).

17 For further references on Hobbes' early works, see Skinner (1996 and 2002).

18 On the translation of Homer's writings, see Martinich (2001).

19 See Skinner (1996) and Matz (2004).

analysis of the work translated and, thus, to reinforce the ideal of Thucydides as the model for doing history.<sup>24</sup> I will not deal here with the possible continuity between those Greek and Roman authors and Hobbes' own political ideas and categories. This has been done since Leo Strauss's time, and recently with better material and more perspicuous analysis by Skinner, in the case of Cicero and Quintilian, and by Wilson, in the case of Epicurus and Lucretius.

The most salient feature of the ideals of Roman writers recovered by English Renaissance humanists, and quoted by Hobbes in the introductory texts of his translations, is that language is central in human life, in creating society and educating citizens.<sup>25</sup> In fact, as we have seen, the English humanist ideal of education was founded on the Roman style according to which it was necessary to master the language (*dicendi peritus*), to be a cultivated man but also to become a citizen in its broad sense, that is, a man endowed with civic virtues. However, these three elements cannot be considered independently because to the Roman writers the elements are closely related. Quintilian takes up this ideal from Cicero and expresses it plainly in his *Institutiones Oratoria*:

My aim, then, is the education of the perfect orator. The first essential for such a one is that he should be a good man, and consequently we demand of him not only the possession of the exceptional gifts of speech, but of all the excellences of character as well. For I will not admit that the principles of upright and honourable living should, as some have held, be regarded as the peculiar concern of philosophy. The man who can really play his part as a citizen and is capable of meeting the demands both of public and private business, the man who can guide a state by his counsels, give it a firm basis by his legislation and purge its vices by his decisions as a judge, is assuredly no other than the orator of our quest. (Quintilian 1920a, 8–19).

24 "It hath been noted by divers, that Homer in poesy, Aristotle in philosophy, Demosthenes in eloquence, and others of the ancients in other knowledge, do still maintain their primacy (...) And in the number of these is justly ranked also our Thucydides; a workman no less perfect in his work, than any of the former; and in whom (...) the faculty of writing history is at the highest. For the principal and proper work of history being to instruct and enable men, by the knowledge of actions past, to bear themselves prudently in the present and providently towards the future" (Hobbes 1839–1845b, viii). Note the parallel with Hobbes' later conception of history as a kind of knowledge and the mechanical physiology that will support it.

25 See Blake (2003), Levin (2008) and Matz (2004).

The education of the citizen is, then, the education of the orator, who governs himself and, thus, who can govern the city. But how is language conceived in this context? We do not find an explicit reflection on the nature of language. Indeed, in Cicero as in Quintilian, the education of the orator is heavily based on reading history, poetry, and moral philosophy, but we have no definition of what language is. However, an important statement at the beginning of *De Oratore* gives us an idea of the underlying conception of language that can be found in Cicero:

For the one point in which we have our very greatest advantage over the brute creation is that we hold converse one with another, and can reproduce our thought in word. Who therefore would not rightly admire this faculty and deem it his duty to exert himself to the utmost in this field, that by so doing he may surpass men themselves in that particular respect wherein chiefly men are superior to animals? To come, however, at length to the highest achievements of eloquence, what other power could have been strong enough either to gather scattered humanity into one place, or to lead it out if its brutish existence in the wilderness up to our present condition of civilization as men and as citizens, or, after the establishment of social communities, to give shape to laws, tribunals, and civic rights? And not to pursue any further instances – well nigh countless as they are – I will conclude the whole matter in a few words, for my assertion is this: that the wise control of the complete orator is that which chiefly upholds not only his own dignity, but the safety of countless individuals and of the entire state (Cicero 1948, 24–27).

Cicero highlights, in the first sentence, that man can "hold converse one with another." The idea that men are superior to other creatures because men possess language, and then, because they can understand themselves, is a recurrent topic that can be found at least since Aristotle. Indeed, in *Politics* (a text we know Hobbes read), Aristotle had claimed that "animals lead for the most part a life of nature, although in lesser particulars some are influenced by habit as well. Man has reason (*lógos*), in addition, and man only. For this reason nature, habit, reason must be in harmony with one another" (Aristotle 1984, 2114). What is different in Cicero, however, is that the accent on the conversational character of man is not placed in the understanding and the agreement among men but in its "strong power to gather scattered humanity." Language is powerful because it is able to elevate men from wil-



derness to civilization and to reunite them under rules and laws. After claiming this, Cicero exposes a debate whether language is capable or not of creating society. His conclusion is that, in fact, language is responsible for gathering men in a coordinated way and for improving society in civilization (Cicero 1948, xvi).

After claiming this, Cicero adds that human superiority is due as well to our ability to “reproduce our thought in word” (*quod exprimere dicendo sensa possumus*). The single idea that language can reproduce our thoughts holds the full weight of the second part of the quotation. In this context, the eloquence is but the development of this “power” that can be improved by resorting to the rhetorical education. To understand this claim, we must look at the subsequent development of Cicero’s arguments. Next to this latter quotation, the dialogue in *De oratore* flows in discussing whether rhetoric is properly a field of knowledge or a mere ornament of speech, that is, if the orator requires some knowledge or if it is enough for him to know the formal rules of rhetoric to become an orator. Cassus, the speaker-man of Cicero in the following dialogue, sheds light on this point:

The sole distinction will surely be that the good speakers bring, as their peculiar possession, a style that is harmonious, graceful, and marked by a certain artistry and polish. Yet this style, if the underlying subject-matter be not comprehended and mastered by the speaker (*si res non subest ab oratore precepta et cognita*), must inevitably be of no account or even become the sport of universal derision. For what so effectually proclaims the madman as the hollow thundering of words – be they never so choice and resplendent – which have no thought or knowledge behind them? (*nulla subiecta sententia, nec scientia?*) (Cicero 1948, xii)

Following this passage, to be eloquent is not only to discourse correctly according to the rules of rhetoric but also to do it about something well known. According to this view, there is no possible distinction between speaking correctly –that is, following the rules of rhetoric and speaking with sense– that is, about something well known. In this passage, a reinforcement of the thesis can be appreciated (and is emphasized in the Latin text) according to which language stands in the place of thoughts, and only if something underlies (*subest*) the words does the speech have sense and is persuasive. In fact, as is evident in the quotation from Quintilian, knowledge and moral topics are not “peculiar concern[s] of philosophy,” but are integral parts of the orator’s background and speech. In other words, knowledge and

moral topics must be the endowment of his speech if he is going to be considered a man capable of thinking, a bearer of civic virtues, capable of leading society to civilization, in short, an orator for Cicero.

These topics were important in Hobbes’ thought, and since his early works, we can find an assimilation and a reinterpretation of them. There is no doubt that these texts were well known to Hobbes.<sup>26</sup> The idea that language distinguishes humans from animals because thanks to it we can create civilization, but also because we can reproduce our thoughts, is plainly presented in the opening sections of *Leviathan* concerning language:

[T]he most noble and profitable invention of all other was that of SPEECH, [in the Latin edition *sermone*] consisting of names or appellations, and their connexion, whereby men register their thoughts, recall them when they are past, and also declare them one to another for mutual utility and conversation, without which there had been amongst men, neither common-wealth, nor society, nor contract, nor peace, no more than amongst lions, bears and wolves (Hobbes 1994, 15–16).

That language distinguishes humans from animals had been stated in a central position in *The Elements*, when claiming that, in sharp contrast with animals, humans had signs—voices or words—to recall past conceptions, and using signs, humans were capable of creating society and sciences.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, language is capable of gathering elements in a unit, as is the case of universal names: “One universal name is imposed on many things for their similitude in some quality or other accident; and whereas a proper name bringeth to mind one thing only, universals

26 In his introductory texts to Thucydides’ translation, for example, we find important quotations from Cicero’s main texts. From this, we can suppose Hobbes knew them in considerable detail. I think there is no need to mention the quotations again, which appear in subsequent works, such as *De Cive* or *Leviathan*, which can be read as the deep and persistent impact the Classical ideas had on it.

27 Cf: “The experience we have hereof, is in such brute beasts, which, having the providence to hide the remains and superfluity of their meat, do nevertheless want the remembrance of the place where they hid it, and thereby make no benefit thereof in their hunger. But man, who in this point beginneth to advance himself above the nature of beasts, hath observed and remembered the cause of this defect, and to amend the same, hath imagined and devised to set up a visible or other sensible mark, the which when he seeth again, may bring to his mind the thought he had when he set it up [...] By the advantage of names it is that we are capable of science, which beasts, for want of them, are not” (Hobbes 1969, 1–4).

recall any one of those many” (Hobbes 1994, 17).<sup>28</sup> I will not emphasize the power of language to create society; I consider Hobbes’ finest scholars have carefully worked this point.<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding my perspective in this research, it is important to note here, by the exigency of the argument, that Hobbes considered language a necessary condition for creating society, because this latter can only be founded upon a covenant made with words between men. This is sharply expressed in the seventeenth chapter of *Leviathan*:

The only way to erect such a common power as may be able to defend them [men] from the invasion of foreigners and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort as that by their own industry [...] is to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will, which is as much as to say, to appoint one man or assembly of men to bear their person, and every one to own and acknowledge himself to be author of whatsoever he that so beareth their person shall act, or cause to be acted, in those things which concern to his will, and their judgement, to his judgement. This is more than consent, or concord; it is a real unity of them all, in one and the same person, made by covenant of every man with every man, in such manner as if every man should say to every man *I authorise and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.* This done, the multitude so united in one person is called a COMMONWEALTH, in Latin, CIVITAS. This is the generation of that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speak more reverently) of that *Mortal God* to which we owe, under the *Immortal God*, our peace and defence (Hobbes 1994, 109).

This often-quoted passage, read in the context of the power of language, can be seen as a development of the point stated by Cicero in *De Oratore* previously quoted. Indeed, Hobbes highlights how the Commonwealth, the foundation of society and civilization among men, rests upon the covenant and, thus, on the human ability to speak. But this is so because the covenant is not

only a promise of “every man with every man”; it is also the foundation of a real unity, that is, the *creation* of the Commonwealth, understood as the erection of institutions entrusted to take care of men, guaranteeing their safety and welfare.<sup>30</sup> Language, then, makes possible the creation of that artificial unit that gathers men “in one person.” ↵

## Conclusion

The textual and contextual convergences between Hobbes and Renaissance humanism in England allow us to seriously consider certain strong links between points and arguments in Hobbes’ conception of language and statements common in the classical models on which English humanism was founded. I think that the connections I have emphasized are not mere coincidences or putative relations, but traces of the intricate paths followed by modern thinkers in constructing early modern science and philosophy, in shaping that (new) comprehension of men, society, and nature during the Scientific Revolution. As I have previously pointed out, Hobbes can be considered a practitioner of Renaissance humanism, because of the humanists’ early contributions in the form of translations and comments; but also because he took up important humanist topics again and merged them into the language of the ‘new science’ up to a point to be almost invisible to our historical sight.

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28 See also the most extended reflection in *De Corpore*: “And a common name, being the name of many things severally taken, but not collectively of all together (as man is not the name of all mankind, but of every one, as of Peter, John, and the rest severally) is therefore called an *universal name*” (Hobbes 1839-1845a, 19-20).

29 See, for example, Skinner (2007), Skinner (2002), Mintz (1962), Ryan (1996), Pettit (2008), Malcolm (2002), Zarka (1999), and Strauss (1996).

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30 Cf.: “For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE (in Latin CIVITAS), which is but an artificial man (...) for whose protection and defence it was intended (...) the *pacts and covenants* by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that *fiat*, or the *let us make man*, pronounced by God in the creation” (Hobbes 1994, 1).

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