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A New Language for the Natural Light

Translating the New Philosophy in the Dutch Early Enlightenment (1640-1720)

van der Deijl, L.A.

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9 Epilogue

Philopater's aphasia

How did the first Dutch translations of the New Philosophy express the rationalist principle that language is an unreliable medium for rational knowledge? That was one of the key questions I set out to address. In this epilogue, I propose an answer by returning one last time to the reality of an early modern individual: the fictional character of Philopater from the philosophical prose novel *Het leven van Philopater, opgewiegt in Voetiaensche talmeryen* (1691) and its sequel *Vervolg van 't leven van Philopater geredded uit de verborgentheeden der Coccejanen* (1697), commonly attributed to Johannes Duijkerius.¹ Much has been written already about the *Philopater* novels which were the focus of a spectacular controversy after the Church pressured local authorities to ban the *Vervolg*.² But the computational experiments reported in Chapter 8 urge me to discuss the novels once again in more detail: the *Vervolg* was classified closest to the texts included in the Translation Corpus with an exceptionally high consistency when compared with random samples of contemporary texts from the Test Corpus. More than any other text, the *Vervolg* engaged with the themes and vocabularies of translations of the New Philosophy. Another reason to conclude with a close reading of the *Philopater* novels concerns their remarkable contribution to early modern discussions on language criticism and Bible interpretation. Imagining the philosophical impact of new ideas about language as a moment of aphasia, they help us to assess the revision of the relationship between language and

¹ It is questionable, however, whether Duijkerius also authored the *Vervolg*. During the process preceding its ban, he explicitly denied having written the sequel, and the prosecutor either believed him or did not consider it lucrative to fine this poor hack writer and unemployed minister. Fact is, Duijkerius was not convicted, despite attestations about his intentions to bring out a sequel, offered by his own roommates and none other than Balthasar Bekker, who had discussed the first *Philopater* novel bumping into its author in an Amsterdam bookshop. And yet, the differences in style and spelling between the two parts make it difficult to believe that Duijkerius (alone) was responsible for the *Vervolg*, as Leemans already pointed out. See: Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 318; T. Jongenelen, "Philopater. Een daderonderzoek," *Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman* 40, no. 1 (2017), 23; Leemans, *Het woord is aan de onderkant*, 293.

² See: G. Maréchal, "Inleiding," in J. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater, Vervolg van 't leven van Philopater*, ed. G. Maréchal (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991); Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 315-320. Leemans, *Het woord is aan de onderkant*, 292-297; L. van Bunge, "Philopater, de radicale Verlichting en het einde van de Eindtijd," *Mededelingen van de Stichting Jacob Campo Weyerman* 26 (2003) 10-19; Jongenelen, "Philopater. Een daderonderzoek".

reason that took place during the Dutch Early Enlightenment. Philopater's intellectual Bildung can be read, I argue, as an allegory of the philosophical and linguistic problems involved in the quest for a new language for the natural light.

Philopater's misunderstanding of Biblical language

The two novels tell the story of a young man named Philopater, his teacher Physiologus, his friends Philologus and Philomathes, and their search for the truth. Their archetypal names symbolise their intellectual positions. Philopater at first represents orthodoxy: he is the one 'who loves his father' and his principles.³ Physiologus is a 'natural philosopher', Philologus a philologist, and Philomathes a mathematician.⁴ Philopater's journey first leads from Voetian theology to the more liberal Bible hermeneutics of German theologian Johannes Cocceius. The Cocceian approach to Scripture was known for its historical interpretation of Biblical prophecies and its supposition that logical harmony was to be found in Scripture. Cocceius paved the way for a Cartesian theology 'with a light millenarian flavour' among Dutch theologians.⁵ Poor Philopater cannot withstand the Cocceian urge to unravel the hidden signs in Scripture. Like a Dutch brother of Don Quixote, he works himself into a delirious rage, attempting to explain every verse as a hidden prophecy.⁶ Finally, an anonymous 'Proponent', a theology graduate about to be appointed by the Reformed Church, comes to the rescue. He is a liberal theologian, a freethinker who is said to have 'built his studies on entirely different grounds'.⁷ The Proponent relieves Philopater from his superstition in a furious, quasi-Spinozist monologue about the linguistic obscurity of Scripture. Eventually Philopater and his friend accept Spinozism as their future doctrine at the end of the first part.

The second part, the *Vervolg*, stages a more outspoken dialogue about various Cartesian and Spinozist ideas. Besides addressing several contributions to the contemporary debate on Spinozism – such as Balthasar Bekker's *De betoverde*

³ Maréchal, "Inleiding," 45.

⁴ See Maréchal's glosses on their names in: J. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater, Vervolg van 't leven van Philopater*, ed. G. Maréchal (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 140; 101; 146.

⁵ E. van der Wall, "Between Grotius and Cocceius: The 'Theologia Prophetica' of Campegius Vitringa (1659-1722)," in *Hugo Grotius Theologian. Essays in Honour of G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes*, eds. H.J. Nellen and E. Rabbie (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1994), 201.

⁶ 'Ondertusschen onsen *Philopater* vast voortgaende, met alles voor de vuyst wat hem in het N. Testament voorquam (also hy met het Oude gedaen werck had) tot Prophetien te maecken'. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 98.

⁷ 'welckers *Studien* uyt een gehele *andere grond* opgeboeyt [zijn]'. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 114. Maréchal speculates that this Proponent from Franeker has been inspired by philosopher Gijsbert Wessel Duker, who defended a controversial dissertation at the university in Franeker in 1685. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 114.

weerd (1691), Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus's *Medicina mentis* (1687), Willem Deurhoff's *Voorleeringen van de Heilige Godgeleerdheid* (1687) and Willem van Blijenbergh's anti-Spinozist *De waerheyd van de Christelijcke godts-dienst en de autoriteyt der H. Schriften* (1674) – the *Vervolg* also provides a summary and a materialist interpretation of Spinoza's *Ethica* and several parts of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.⁸

While telling a coming-of-age story about Spinozism, these novels also engage with the debate about language and rhetoric as sources of deception and confusion. In the first 'Voorreden' Duijkerius explicitly voices his disdain for the tendency among Dutch theologians and ministers of the Reformed Church to mislead the people with embellished language.⁹ True knowledge of the essence of things did not matter to them at all, Duijkerius observes. It is more important to master the theatrical tone and gestures (*'zytspraek en gester'*) typical for the language of the pulpit. Duijkerius complains that rhetorical skill and fluency of speech were valued more highly than reason and intellect. Linguistic simplicity and transparency – using the word 'ship' for a ship and 'monkey' for a monkey (*'een schuyt een schuyt en een aep een aep'*) – are not considered virtues according to public opinion: the rhetorically gifted will always win the hearts of the people.¹⁰ He adds that there is no difference between the appreciation of written and spoken language. Like sermons delivered in church, learned books are valued most if they feature 'an infinite number of bombastic *words*', and if they are crammed with 'pleasant tales' and 'sweet digressions'.¹¹ Clearly, Duijkerius's ideal for the language of the ratio is the opposite: transparent, direct, and sober.

This opposition between linguistic transparency versus semantic instability becomes visible not only in the prefaces but also in the plot of the *Philopater* novels. Gerardine Maréchal places *Philopater's* life in the literary tradition of confession-

⁸ Based on Hubbeling's interpretation of *Philopater*, Maréchal notes that the novels ignore Spinoza's ideas about the immortality of the soul from part V of his *Ethica*. *Philopater* and his friends explicitly reject the immortality of the soul, thus representing the radical, materialist interpretation of Spinozism that made Spinoza's ideas highly controversial. Maréchal, "Inleiding," 29-30; A.G. Hubbeling, "Philopater, une interprétation matérialiste de Spinoza en Hollande au 17^e siècle," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 93, no. 2 (1988), 200.

⁹ This criticism was probably caused by the author's frustration about his own stuttering, the main reason for his failed career as a minister in the Reformed Church.

¹⁰ Anonymous [= Duijkerius], "Voorreden," in J. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater, Vervolg van 't leven van Philopater*, ed. G. Maréchal (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991), 47.

¹¹ 'De *styl* van schryven heeft hier groote gemeenschap met de *Tong*; en niet selden werden die *boecken* voor de *geleerste* gehouden, die met een oneyndig getal hoogdraevende *woorden*, met *aengenaeme* vertellingen en *liefelijcke* afweydingen, door gelardeert zijn.' Anonymous [= Duijkerius], "Voorreden," 48.

narratives tracing back to Augustinus's *Confessiones* (AD 397-400).¹² As they contain all the traditional elements of these autobiographical memoirs – a description of the protagonist's sins, the moment of conversion, and the confession of the newfound faith – Maréchal proposes to read the first *Philopater* novel as the confession of sin and the second as the confession of faith: a confession of Spinozism, in this case. According to her reading, the conversion, at the end of the first part, becomes a crucial moment in the narrative. It describes Philopater's philosophical *agnitio*, caused by the Proponent's monologue on language and Bible hermeneutics.

The conversion scene starts with an encounter between Philopater, Philologus and the anonymous Proponent, who visits the two students in Philopater's home. He and Philologus, buried in yet another exercise in Bible study, ask the Proponent to share his opinion about the return of Christ and the thousand-year Reign of Jesus. In response, the Proponent lectures them about their fundamental misunderstanding of the semantics of Biblical language. He opens with a firm rejection of the Cocceian adagium written in capitals on the titlepage of Philopater's Bible copy: 'the words mean anything what they could mean' ('DE WOORDEN BETEKENEN, ALLES WATSE BETEKENEN KONNEN').¹³ He continues to explain in depth why this axioma (*Grond-regel*) is false: it opens the door to an anything-goes hermeneutics that makes Scripture a puppet in the hands of manipulative readers. And besides this practical risk of misinterpretation and appropriation, there are linguistic arguments against Philopater's hermeneutics, the Proponent argues. Philopater and his friend seem to have forgotten that words merely signify concepts: they are nothing more than 'merckteecken van onse bevattingen'.¹⁴ The Proponent emphasises the point by quoting (without naming the source) the first sentence from Pieter Balling's *Het licht op den kandelaar* (1662): 'the things do not depend on words, but the words on things', proving that the objects in reality precede the words invented to signify them.¹⁵

Besides this arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified – as linguist Ferdinand de Saussure would phrase it more than two centuries later – Philopater and Philologus are asked to consider the possibility that even the language of the Old Testament is 'just a language, merely having all the properties

¹² Maréchal, "Inleiding," 26.

¹³ Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 115-116. Capitals in source.

¹⁴ Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 116.

¹⁵ 'Hier uyt blijkt aen de eene zijde dat de *saecken*, niet om de *woorden*, maer de *woorden*, om de *saecken* zijn; als oock aen de andere dat in order de *saecken* eerder als de *woorden* geweest moeten hebben'. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 116. Wiep van Bunge points at this intertextual reference in his 2003 article. L. van Bunge, "Philopater," 13.

of a language'.¹⁶ 'Hebrew is no exception to the rule in any language that most of the words are ambiguous (*dubbelsinnig*)'.¹⁷ 'Words', the Proponent continues, 'do not reveal anything about the essence of things'. The only justified conclusion Philopater could have reached during his tireless attempts to decipher Scripture, should be that the Hebrew language is among the most thorny and difficult ever 'invented' (*uitgevonden*).¹⁸ The Proponent furthermore overwhelms the naïve students with linguistic arguments against a Cocceian approach to the Bible. They are told to take into account the style and punctuation of the Bible books, but also to read the Biblical 'histories, allegories, analogies, allusions etc.' in the context of the relevant 'places, persons and periods'.¹⁹ And even if the meaning of such style figures can be reconstructed correctly, the Proponent claims, Bible critics lack a decent Hebrew grammar.²⁰ In Platonic terms, the Proponent warns that Philopater and Philologus will only find the 'shadow' of the Bible's truth if they choose to continue on their current path.²¹ Abandoning their false assumptions, on the other hand, would liberate them from superstition and ultimately teach them the truth about 'what God is'.²²

Lodewijk Meijer's plea for a new hermeneutics

The Proponent's monologue appears to be directly inspired by Lodewijk Meijer's 1666 *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres*. Like many of his Dutch contemporaries, Meijer recognised the theological and political potential of Cartesianism. With his *Philosophia S. Scripturae Interpres* he aimed to put an end to theological discord once and for all by applying the Cartesian method to Bible interpretation. Christian

¹⁶ 'Sal 't evenwel daerom niet waeragtig zijn, dat het maer een *Tael* is en slegts alle eygenschappen van een *Tael* heeft?'. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 116.

¹⁷ 'Wijders is 'er wel iets bekender dan dat alle *Taelen*, hoe overvloedig deselve oock in woorden soude mogen wesen, dit met elkanderen gemeen hebben, dat hunne meeste woorden dubbelsinnig en van verscheydene betekenissen zijn.' Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 116.

¹⁸ 'Wijders, gy lieden Monsieurs, die uwe daegelijckse oeffeningen nu so langen tijt op de Hebreuwsche tael hebt geleyt, kunt onmooglijk niets minder ondervonden hebben dan datse een van de distelagtigste en moejelijkste is die er uytgevonden.' Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 116-117.

¹⁹ 'Niet minder dientmen om de Historien, Allegorien, sinspeelingen, gelijkenissen, enz. die'er in voorkomen wel te verstaen op de omstandigheden van plaetsen, personen, en tijden' Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 117.

²⁰ This remark seems to refer to Spinoza's attempt to develop such a grammar, which was included in Spinoza's 1677 Latin *Opera Posthuma*.

²¹ Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 123.

²² 'In tegendeel, so ge uw geest uyt dese dreck opbeurt en tot hoger dingen te bespiegelen gewent, [...] het waengeloof sult ge alsdan verfoejen, de blinde superstitie veragten; en ge sult dan regt leren kennen *wat God is*'. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 123.

theologians of all denominations, ages and areas, Meijer complains, have always employed their intellect only to prove their superiority over others who happened to read the Bible differently.²³ They have been falsely projecting their personal thoughts and feelings onto God's Word. Meijer's Cartesian approach led him to dismiss all those external opinions and to search instead for an unquestionable ground upon which a rationalist theology could be based. He argues that the text of the Bible offers this axiomatic foundation: theological claims should be grounded in Scripture and Scripture only. The 'Palace of the most holy Theology' was to be built on rock instead of sand.²⁴

This is where linguistics enters the arena. Proper insight into the function of language is considered a prerequisite for a reconstruction of the origin and meaning of the Bible books. After a brief introductory chapter, Meijer's *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres* begins with three chapters about linguistics, discussing (1) the basic elements of language; (2) semantic problems in general; and, (3) semantic problems in Scripture in particular. The Proponent from the *Philopater* novels follows the same line of argumentation. His aforementioned statement that words are nothing else than signs invented by humans ('merckteecken van onse bevattingen') seems to be borrowed from Meijer's second chapter, where proposition 4 states that words are 'signs of our concepts' ('merckteecken der dingen, of eerder, gelijk wy achten, der bevattingen').²⁵ This definition leads both Meijer and the Proponent to the claim that most words in almost any language are ambiguous. Meijer establishes, quoting Roman rhetorician Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, that there is no word to be found with only one meaning ('in voegen dat eenige Philosophen achten dat 'er niet een woort is, 't welck niet meer dingen beteekent').²⁶ The Proponent, in turn, claims that in any language, however rich its vocabulary may be, most words are ambiguous ('dat hunne meeste woorden dubbelsinnig en van verscheydene betekenissen zijn').²⁷ Meijer continues discussing several examples of linguistic ambiguity. Both Meijer and the Proponent

²³ 'Dit is oock oorsaek van dat de Christelijcke Theologanten van alderhande soorten, ouderdom en gewesten in hun disputatien altijd voornamelijck hier meê besich hebben geweest, en alle de krachten van hun vernuft en geleertheyt hier op ingespannen hebben, dat sy soudē vroedmaecken en toonen dat de Schrift het geen, dat sy, en niet dat hun tegenstrevers seggen, wil beteekenen en te kennen geven.' Anonymous [= L. Meijer], *De philosophie d' uytlegghster der H. Schrifture*, trans. anonymous [= L. Meijer?] (S.l.: s.n., 1667), 4[v].

²⁴ 'want ons voorneemen was het Paleys van d'alderheyligste Theologie niet op het sant, maer op de steen te bouwen'. Anonymous [= L. Meijer], *De philosophie d' uytlegghster der H. Schrifture*, 4[v].

²⁵ Anonymous [= L. Meijer], *De philosophie d' uytlegghster der H. Schrifture*, 5.

²⁶ Anonymous [= L. Meijer], *De philosophie d' uytlegghster der H. Schrifture*, 20; quoted again on page 35.

²⁷ Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 116.

argue that Biblical language is not exempt from this universal ambiguity in any language. In Chapter 4, Meijer claims that the examples of linguistic ambiguity he discusses in Chapter 3 are as likely to occur in Scripture as in any other text. It is therefore beyond doubt that even Scripture is ‘obscure and ambiguous’.²⁸

Philopater’s aphasia

The Proponent’s lecture hits home. He leaves Philopater and Philologus speechless for almost a full hour.²⁹ The verbose, talkative students with their fancy terminology are suddenly at a loss of words. Their conversion to Spinozism is represented as a purely mental process, taking place beyond the linguistic realm. A fragment from the *Vervolg*, referring back to the moment of the revelation, again highlights the speechlessness it caused and compares the frozen Philopater and Philologus to ‘busts of old Roman emperors’.³⁰ Rationalist language theory and Spinozist Bible criticism opened their eyes to the truth, causing a muting, petrifying experience that immediately rendered their worldview as outmoded as those Roman statues. The Proponent not only introduced Philopater to a different worldview but also initiated him into a new language. When the protagonist finally opens his mouth to speak, he utters: ‘Well my friend, wat do you think, this is a completely different language, than the one we have heard over the course of our *Studies*’.³¹ Philopater’s philosophical quest is fulfilled, culminating not just in a philosophical conversion but a linguistic one as well. After a long moment of speechlessness, the old language is replaced by a new one, enabling him to rebuild his philosophical system entirely anew.

Rationalist language theory thus takes centre stage in the crucial scene of Philopater’s conversion to Spinozism. A plea about the historicity of Biblical language and the instable relationship between words and concepts provides the spark that ignites Philopater’s (partial) embrace of Spinoza’s metaphysics in the *Vervolg*. Philopater’s philosophical *Bildung* mimics the philosophical argument developed by some of the language theorists and early Spinozists discussed in

²⁸ ‘t is buyten alle twijffel, niet alleenlijk dat de Schrift duyster en twijffelachtigh is, maer dat oock, dewijl sy uyt woorden bestaet, alle d’opgetelde soorten van duysterheden en twijffelachtigheden daer in plaets kunnen hebben, is ’t niet alle, ten minsten het grootste deel, en de voornaemsten’. Anonymous [= L. Meijer], *De filosofie d’ wytleghster der H. Schrifture*, 38.

²⁹ ‘Byna een geheel uur lang was’er niemant van hun beyden, die een enckel woordt sprack.’ Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 123.

³⁰ ‘dat ze beide de *figuur*, zoo *stom* al of ze *borstbeelden* der *oude roomsche keizeren* waren, vertoonden’ Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 133.

³¹ ‘Wel mijn vriendt wat dunckt uw, dit is een geheele andere tael, als die we geduurende den loop van onse *Studien* gehoort hebben’. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 123.

Chapter 1. These theorists regularly opened their philosophical treatises with a reflection on the semantic instability of words – including Pieter Balling, whose work *Het licht op den kandelaar* was quoted in the Proponent’s monologue, ‘*dat de saecken, niet om de woorden, maer de woorden, om de saecken zijn*’). The Proponent furthermore seems to allude to Koerbagh’s *Een ligt schijnende in duystere plaatsen* (finished in 1668 but never printed) as he pretends to quote St. Peter when calling Scripture ‘a light shining in dark places’ (*‘een ligt, schynende in een duystere plaetse’*).³² Duijkerius was clearly familiar with the debates about language in Spinoza’s circle.

Language and scepticism in the history of knowledge

The *Philopater* novels imagine a conversion to Spinozism as a moment of aphasia caused by a revelation about the true nature of language. A rejection of language and rhetoric on philosophical grounds is answered with speechlessness. I consider this imagination an apt representation of the scepticism about language which emerged after the Reformation and preceded the Enlightenment. Historians of science have explained this shift as a crucial phase in the history of knowledge.³³ For example, in his global history of human knowledge *Een wereld van patronen. De geschiedenis van kennis* Rens Bod describes how late Medieval manuscript hunters and humanists such as Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) and Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457) paved the way for the discipline of philology, which offered a systematic method to study, but also undermine, the authenticity of Ancient and Biblical texts:³⁴

‘We find that during the first century of humanism (about 1350 to 1450) the attitude regarding texts changes dramatically. Whereas in Petrarch we find an uncritical respect for anything related to Antiquity, in Valla such respect has turned into a sceptic position. Not a single text is sacred to him. Sources could have been corrupted, or forged, and it is up to the humanist to separate the wheat from the chaff.’³⁵

³² Maréchal mentions the allusion in a note in her edition of the *Philopater* novels. Duijkerius, *Het leven van Philopater*, 117.

³³ R.H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*.

³⁴ On Poggio see S. Greenblatt, *The Swerve. How the Renaissance began* (London: Vintage, 2012).

³⁵ ‘Waar we bij Petrarca een kritiekloze eerbied voor alles wat naar de oudheid riekt aantreffen, is deze eerbied bij Valla omgeslagen in een sceptische houding. Geen enkele tekst is heilig voor hem. Bronnen kunnen zijn gecorrumpeerd of vervalst, en het is aan de humanist om het kaf van het koren te scheiden.’ L.W.M. Bod, *Een wereld vol patronen. De geschiedenis van kennis* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2019), 263.

According to Bod, the early philologists were the first to develop the empirical cycle that would enable the natural sciences to make such revolutionary progress during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.³⁶ Both in Philopater's conversion and in the (Western) history of science at large, linguistic scepticism was the main prerequisite for finding the foundation on which true, rational knowledge could be built.

An elaborate theory of this historical process following the emergence of humanism was developed by Michel Foucault in his *Les mots et les choses* (1966, translated as *The Order of Things*). He describes two major breaks in the Western history of thought: the beginning of the so-called 'Classical age' around the second half of the seventeenth century and the advent of the 'modern age' at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His theory presents the pre-Classical, the Classical and the Modern age as different stages in a long, gradual detachment of language from the world it is thought to represent. From Foucault's point of view, not much had changed in the general attitude towards language between 'Babel' – the Biblical creation of languages described in Genesis 11 – and the sixteenth century. Originally, Foucault contends, language was considered a system of signs that offered absolute transparency as it resembled the things it designated. God had deprived language of this transparency after Babel, but up to the early seventeenth century its relation to the world remained one of similitude. During the sixteenth century, Foucault explains, language and text were still 'the locus of revelations', 'the area where truth is both manifested and expressed'.³⁷ The language was not just an 'arbitrary system': it remained an integral part of the non-linguistic world. God's universe was viewed as a 'Book of Nature' one could *read* in order to find the truth of the natural world. This metaphor also signified 'the reverse and visible side of another transference [...], which forces language to reside in the world, among the plants, the herbs, the stones, and the animals'.³⁸ The prime source of knowledge about the natural world was mediated in text. As a result, nature was imaged textually and text was considered naturally.

Foucault recognises the pre-Classical attitude towards language in the earliest humanist sciences, preoccupied with the rediscovery of the original meaning and form of historically corrupted Ancient texts. Sixteenth-century scepticism was not oriented at the representative abilities of language per se, but at the available representations in which knowledge happened to have survived. Scholars were

³⁶ Bod, *Een wereld vol patronen*, 298.

³⁷ M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the human sciences* (London: Travistock Publications, 1970), 36.

³⁸ Foucault, *The Order of Things*: 35; For a detailed study on the origin, function and development of this metaphor 'Book of Nature' in the Dutch context, see E. Jorink, *Het boek der natuere*.

dedicated to ‘dig out the ancient Word from the unknown places where it may be hidden’ which they expected to find in deeper layers obscured by the textual surface.³⁹ And as its default mode of analysis assumed a relation of similitude, the pre-Classical era was stuck in repeating and commenting upon existing knowledge: ‘sixteenth-century knowledge condemned itself to never knowing anything but the same thing’.⁴⁰

But then, the Classical Age introduced a new attitude towards language and representation. Language lost its status as an unproblematic sign system designating the world in a relation of resemblance. Instead of similitude, language in the Classical Age relies upon difference between things and words. The rupture is so dramatic that the already verbose Foucault allows himself a highly metaphorical elaboration:

‘The age of resemblance is drawing to a close. It is leaving nothing behind it but games. Games whose powers of enchantment grow out of the new kinship between resemblance and illusion; the chimeras of similitude loom up on all sides, but they are recognized as chimeras; it is the privileged age of *trompe-l’oeil* painting, of the comic illusion, of the play that duplicates itself by representing another play, of the *quid pro quo*, of dreams and visions; it is the age of the deceiving senses; it is the age in which the poetic dimension of language is defined by metaphor, simile, and allegory.’⁴¹

During the seventeenth century, language was recognised as arbitrary and its relation to the non-textual reality as diffuse. Language became representation, or more specifically, it was ‘deployed within representation’, and as such, it became rootless from the world from which it traditionally acquired its meaning: ‘[A]ll that remains is representation, unfolding in the verbal signs that manifest it, and hence becoming *discourse*.’⁴² This realisation of the fabricated function of language as representation coincided with an increasing awareness that indeed historical individuals may have fabricated, manipulated, or used language to one’s own advantage. As language turned into discourse, it was liberated from the need to find the ‘original’, the ‘primary Text’ supposedly enclosed in it, and thus opened up to new modes of writing, representation, and, by extension, thinking. Instead, the attention shifted towards the *function* of language.

³⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 63.

⁴⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 30.

⁴¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 51.

⁴² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 80.

The Classical Age simultaneously liberated and confined the abilities attributed to language. On the one hand it dismissed the relevance of exegesis, of ‘commentary’, and by extension the truth monopoly claimed by theologians and their linguistic and methodological lingua franca. Yet, on the other hand, it left an urgent need for a language or sign system in which the inevitable biases and illusions were at least explicit, which resulted in the emergence of a *criticism* of the discursivity of knowledge. ‘Commentary’ still believed in the possibility of finding obscured essences in its object of analysis, the ‘Word’ of God – Philopater’s Cocceian search for hidden prophecies exemplifies this outdated desire. With the advent of the Classical Age, however, language lost its visible, self-evident ‘existence’. Commentary became pointless because it dismissed the object of commentary to the world of nonexistence. Language needed to be scrutinised as a function, rather than an ‘expression’ or an external ‘manifestation’ of an internal source (thoughts, ideas). It was to be viewed as an independent, self-reflexive system which functions could be made visible, analysed: ‘Criticism would appear to contrast with commentary in the same way as the analysis of a visible form with the discovery of a hidden content’.⁴³ We may view Spinoza’s historicising analysis of Biblical language in his *Tractatus Theologico Politicus* (questioning Moses’s authorship of the Tora on linguistic and stylistic grounds), or Meijer’s demonstration of the fundamental semantic instability and ambiguity of Scripture, as examples of ‘criticism’ in the Foucauldian sense.

The consequence of the turn from commentary to criticism was, in short, that scholars no longer primarily scrutinised the things represented in language but the representative role of language itself. During the seventeenth century, they asked *how* rather than *what* language represented. Foucault distinguished four different forms of the ‘representative role of language’ that were subjected to this analysis. The attitude of criticism first involved a suspicion towards words, from the supposed ‘impossibility of constructing a science or a philosophy with the received vocabulary’.⁴⁴ Other linguistic elements were questioned as well: the grammatical order, the forms of rhetoric and the ‘relation with what [written language] represents’. All these dimensions are part of the linguistic programme propagated by Koerbagh, Meijer and Balling. In other words, Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* offers a theoretical explanation of the quest for a new language for the natural light during the Dutch Early Enlightenment.

⁴³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 80.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 80.

A New Language for the Natural Light?

Philopater can be read as an allegorical story about the changing linguistic scepticism that became fundamental to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century revolutions in the history of knowledge. This image of the philosopher who abandons their previous worldview – supported by a historiographical grand narrative like Foucault’s – offers a compelling narrative about the history of knowledge as a series of revolutionary breaks with the past.

I hope to have demonstrated in this dissertation, however, that this fundamental scepticism concerning language and rhetoric did not apply to everyone involved in the Dutch translation and dissemination of the New Philosophy. If we take into account not just the intellectual but also the social and linguistic dimension, we might come to the conclusion that many Dutch intermediaries of Descartes, Spinoza, and Hobbes *embraced* the powers of language and rhetoric. With the wide range of Dutch translations and responses, the New Philosophy was integrated in various rhetorical forms and discourses. Glazemaker, Balling, Van Berkel, Koerbagh, Meijer – none of them separated the discourses of theology from philosophy like the early Cartesians at Dutch universities or Spinoza himself. Translations of Descartes, Spinoza, and Hobbes were just one category in the often diverse oeuvres produced by the translators. As they introduced and appropriated the New Philosophy into current, local Dutch debates – about freedom of conscience, political sovereignty, medical discoveries, et cetera – the texts were adjusted for specific readers and specific habituses. I used Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ to account for that ability to adjust: the translator’s agency to negotiate with the linguistic and intellectual conventions of his target culture while also reproducing those conventions in his texts. Translators not only amplified the ideas of the New Philosophers; they employed them in discourse that sometimes had nothing to do with the rationalism of those canonical thinkers.

At the same time, I observed – using computational text analysis – that all translators adjusted their language to the socio-linguistic or purist norms that were often informed by rationalist ideas about the relationship between language and reason. Glazemaker consistently translated in a purist style, complying to (or inspiring) the rationalist language programme of Koerbagh and Meijer. The purism in Balling’s and Blankaart’s works was less consistent, but they still used significantly fewer loanwords when they translated Spinoza or Descartes. Van Berkel was not a purist translator at all, but he did alter the rhetorical structure of his source when translating *Leviathan* – which I read as an attempt to adhere to the mercantile rhetoric typical to the Leiden circle of the De la Court brothers. Such style features and lexical preferences are to be viewed, I believe, as symptoms of an attempt to reduce confusing and misleading elements in the Dutch language, which was in turn

based on the conviction that language was fundamentally unreliable as a medium for communicating rational knowledge. So, these translators certainly did contribute to the development and application of a new language for the natural light.

But their attempts were not very successful or influential. Computational text analysis reveals that their philosophical or purist vocabularies were neither common in contemporary discourse nor necessarily specific to other Dutch texts engaging with the New Philosophy. I have demonstrated how computational experiments are helpful, perhaps even necessary, to test historically informed hypotheses about the relationship between individual texts, styles, vocabularies and the discourses that shape them. Computational discourse analysis enabled me to contextualise the practices and social context of individual translators in larger linguistic conventions. It helped me to arrive at my conclusion that yes, rationalist debates about the relationship between language and reason certainly did at first impact the vocabulary and style of (some) translations of the New Philosophy – but these vocabularies and styles did not last.

To explain this failure, we might want to consider the possibility of a shifting attitude concerning language and reason among the first generation of translators and authors involved in Spinoza's circle. At the end of the 1660s and the beginning of the 1670s, Balling and Koerbagh were dead, Van Berkel no longer openly sympathised with the radical ideas of his student years, and Bouwmeester and Meijer were increasingly devoting themselves to the activities of theatre society *Nil Volentibus Arduum* (founded in 1669). Shocked by Koerbagh's fate and the response to the Latin edition of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza no longer allowed his friends to produce Dutch translations while he was still alive. After, 1670, translations of Hobbes and Spinoza only appeared anonymously, if they appeared at all, and mostly circulated privately in manuscript copies.⁴⁵ After writing and translating several Dutch dictionaries, theological treatises, and philosophical texts in the past fifteen years, the remaining members of Spinoza's circle may have found their rationalist programme coming to a dead end. While Spinoza had never expected much from the country's theological elites, let alone the 'common people', many of his friends had always believed in the political necessity to enlighten the uneducated and liberate them from superstition and religious dogma. Intellectual emancipation was possible by translating and writing rationalist books and developing a transparent and purist version of the vernacular. Such high ambitions may have been a recipe for disappointment. Holding on to their optimism must have been increasingly difficult when their books started being banned and

⁴⁵ Van der Deijl, "The Dutch Translation and Circulation," 230.

Koerbagh ended up dead in a prison cell. Given these circumstances, who would not change their mind?

Thomas Hobbes had found himself in a similar situation two decades earlier and arrived at a similar conclusion: ‘that, faced with interest and ignorance, reason and science have little chance of being heard.’⁴⁶ Inspired by Quentin Skinner’s work, I described Hobbes’s change of mind in Chapter 1 as a realisation that reason required rhetoric because reason alone was not persuasive enough. I argued that several members from Spinoza’s circle similarly followed this pragmatic approach to the relationship between reason and rhetoric: they underwent their own Dutch version of the Hobbesian turn. In contrast to Descartes and Spinoza, who fundamentally dismissed language and rhetoric as unreliable and misleading, authors and translators like Balling, Glazemaker, Meijer, Balling, and Bouwmeester explored the possibilities of the vernacular to educate and uplift their readers with the light of reason. However, at the end of the 1660s, the combination of translating the New Philosophy while purifying the vernacular ended up being not a very happy marriage after all: their books were banned, confiscated, and misunderstood.

I consider it plausible that another revision of the relationship between reason and language occurred among the members of Spinoza’s circle during the 1660s – a second ‘Hobbesian turn’, perhaps, and one with more far-reaching implications. From the early 1670s onwards, the old programme for linguistic reform had lost its value. Instead, new genres and rhetorical means were now being employed for the rationalist cause. During the politically and morally turbulent 1670s, the need to liberate the less educated from their *Unmündigkeit* became more pressing than ever. Spearheaded by Bouwmeester and Meijer, the theatre became an additional space for philosophical education and social reform:

‘a forum for grandiose schemes intended to connect all the arts with philosophy and the sciences in a manner leading to a general reform of Dutch high and popular culture with a view to elevating and fusing both into a new freedom-loving and life-enriching moral and political consciousness.’⁴⁷

Rationalism, including Cartesian and Spinozist ideas, informed the theatrical programme of *Nil Volentibus Arduum* as well as a variety of other artistic and intellectual influences including Aristotelian poetics, French-classicism, and Neo-

⁴⁶ Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 433.

⁴⁷ J. Israel, “Spinoza, radical enlightenment, and the general reform of the arts in the later Dutch Golden Age: the aims of *Nil Volentibus Arduum*,” *Intellectual History Review* 30, no. 3 (2020), 403.

Stoicism.⁴⁸ Further study is necessary to show how the stage accommodated their philosophical, literary, linguistic and artistic ideals – whether the ‘second’ Hobbesian turn was more successful than the first.

But for now it seems safe to conclude that the result of the Dutch Early Enlightenment was not a new language for the natural light. It was a diversification of the media and discourses in which rationalist ideas could be negotiated – in which reason could be used publicly. Unlike Philopater’s aphasia following his conversion to Spinozism, the dissemination of the New Philosophy did not depend on a sober, purist language stripped of all rhetorical embellishments. Instead of being lost for words, the natural light refracted into an abundance of language.

⁴⁸ The relationship between rationalist ideas, Spinozism and French-classicist theatre propagated by *Nil Volentibus Arduum* has been thoroughly documented by T. Holzhey, “‘Als gy maar schérp wordt, zo zyn wy, én gy voldaan’. Rationalistische ideeën van het kunstgenootschap Nil Volentibus Arduum 1669-1680,” (Dissertation University of Amsterdam, 2014).