

Language in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and his Use of *Sermo*

Pliny, in his *Natural History*, curates aspects of the natural world that have implications for how the Romans might perceive or interact with their environment. In this vein, Pliny highlights the importance of language throughout, noting that writing is one of three cultural universals (along with shaving and time-keeping). In this paper, I examine the semantic range of the word *sermo* in the *NH* with an eye toward distinguishing between common and unusual usages. By explicating certain programmatic usages of *sermo*, I show that Pliny conceives of language as a system that facilitates boundary crossings, whether they are the boundaries between species or civic borders. I conclude that language is ideological for Pliny. It provides a standard for determining who counts as human and, thus, who is worthy of being conquered. Moreover, Pliny conceives of language as a commercial and imperialistic tool for the Roman state that can help it unite disparate peoples divided by language.

Sermo has a range of meanings, from “a written dialogue” (*OLD* 3.b) to “gossip” (*OLD* 4). As such, it presents Pliny with ample opportunities for use. What unifies the different meanings of *sermo* in the *NH* is its use in demonstrating how language plays a role in boundary crossings (that is, if we discount Pliny's rare use of the stock phrase *sermo ... est* to change the subject of discourse). Pliny's Troglodytes “lack a common use of language” (*sermonis commercio carent*) (5.45) and are thus sub-human. In contrast, nightingales take on human-like qualities due to their ability to imitate human speech (*imitantem sermones hominum*) (10.120). Speech is a human quality, and Pliny presents different living beings as attaining a greater or lesser degree of humanity based upon their facility with language. In this respect, language is a definitional system that aids Pliny in navigating amorphous categories – an important tool since Pliny frequently discusses subjects that defy strict categorization. Additionally, *sermo* plays a

role in other categorical exchanges, such as language's part in cultural boundary crossings. In 33.49, Pliny highlights the shame one should feel at code-switching from Latin to Greek due to Greek's more sophisticated vocabulary for discussing luxurious vessels inlaid with silver and gold. In his most fervent endorsement of an ideology of conquest, moreover, Pliny posits that the Latin language would be a uniting force, a gift from Italy to the rest of the world. Pliny argues that Rome will unite the discordant dialects of the world "by means of a common use of [the Latin] language" (*sermonis commercio*). The exchange or commerce of language implied in the phrase *sermonis commercio* is what will make Italy the *patria* of all peoples throughout the whole world (*una cunctarum gentium in toto orbe patria fieret*). Language, while not necessarily militaristic, is imperialistic. Pliny's weapons are dialogue and exchange. Without *sermo* Rome may have the sword, but no pen.

In this paper, I wish to unite two heretofore distinct strands of scholarship. Pliny's imperial ideology has received recent attention, most notably by Naas 2011 and Fear 2011. I build upon their efforts at situating Pliny's imperialism with a Flavian context (be it intellectual or militaristic) in order to address the role that language plays in Pliny's ideology. My paper, therefore, also looks to join the work of other scholars in recuperating Pliny's style. As early as Campbell 1936, scholars have been attempting to treat Pliny's language with a greater degree of nuance than he had traditionally won. Recent articles by Healy 1998, Sinclair 2003, and Pinkster 2005 have added notable contributions. Their work provides a foundation for me to discuss how Pliny conceives of language on a conceptual level in this paper.

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