

## Picking Words with Care: Hypercorrection in the Language of Trimalchio

The character of Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon* is one marked by excess and the tasteless deployment of wealth: a parody of the wealthy freedman based on both real-world and literary models. Beginning with Veyne (1961), scholars have noted that the most important feature of the character is not just the economic details of his swift and uninterrupted rise, which is not unparalleled in historical sources, but his desire to establish and present himself as a landed proprietor, like members of the upper classes, and the social implications therein (cf. Cicero's description of agriculture as the noblest means of livelihood in *De Officiis* 1.151). As scholars have noted through observations of Trimalchio's dress, commercial activity, and juridical status, despite his fortune and the well-to-do stylings of his business ventures, Trimalchio can never escape his own status as a *libertus* and his attempts to do so are maladroit, even laughable (Veyne 1961; Finley 1973; D'Arms 1981).

In this vein, I aim to analyze how Petronius uses speech and language as another device to characterize Trimalchio as a socially aspiring, yet tactless freedman clumsily attempting to adopt the mannerisms of Roman elite. Working from detailed studies of the language of the freedmen in Petronius done by Dell'Era (1970) and Boyce (1991) and sources of colloquial or 'vulgar' Latin such as Pompeian inscriptions (Väänänen 1966) and the *Appendix Probi* (Baehrens 1967), I will show how in addition to numerous phonetic, morphological, and syntactic markers characteristic of popular Latin, Trimalchio's speeches contain a uniquely high concentration of hypercorrections - mistakes resulting from the overproduction of perceived grammatical rules. These hypercorrections can be distinguished from other markers of popular Latin the freedmen guests regularly display in that they are found only in Trimalchio's speeches and work in the opposite direction of trends found in colloquial Latin. For example, words

ending in *-eus/-ea* often are realized as the semivowel [y] and appear as *-ius/-ia* among vulgar speech (e.g. *vinea non vinia*, in *Appendix Probi*). In anticipation of this, Trimalchio mistakenly overcorrects *Corinthus*, as Petronius has it elsewhere (31.9; 50.1), to *Corintheus* (50.2; 4, 5). Trimalchio's other hypercorrections include transforming feminine nouns into neuter nouns, treating active verbs as deponents, and employing the subjunctive in place of the indicative, all of which are unique to him and are inversions of common vulgarisms found both in Petronius and other sources of popular Latin.

I argue that in having Trimalchio's language display common vulgarisms alongside these hypercorrections at specific points throughout the *Cena*, Petronius seeks to highlight both Trimalchio's humble origins and his vain attempts to adopt the mannerisms of a higher class. The correlations between speech and social class have been well documented in linguistics, such as Labov's famous study of social stratification in New York City (1982). Among his findings, Labov observed that although speakers tended to associate the speech habits of members of the upper classes with more correct speech and modeled their own careful speech on that of upper-middle class speakers, members of the lower-middle class in fact would produce certain sounds, such as [r], at higher rates than upper class speakers in certain settings. Labov attributed this hyper-corrective tendency to a "linguistic insecurity." This same phenomenon, I posit, is reflected in Petronius' presentation of Trimalchio and is part of the author's commentary on the growing class of wealthy freedmen. Through analysis of Trimalchio's speech habits, we gain insight on both Petronius' sensitivity towards language as well as his commentary on class and social stratification during the reign of Nero.

## Bibliography

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