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LINGUISTIC DIDACTICISM IN THE *NOCTES ATTICAE*
BY AULUS GELLIUS

ABSTRACT. Wolanin Hubert, Linguistic Didacticism in the *Noctes Atticae* by Aulus Gellius.

The aim of this paper is to examine the didactic value of the *Attic Nights* from the linguistic point of view, and precisely, from the point of view of Gellius' teachings on the meanings of words. In this context it has been stated that the author makes his readers aware of new meanings gained by certain words when used in contemporary colloquial idiom, describes and interprets the mechanism which had generated those meanings, evaluates the results of the process of semantic change, and, finally, comments on the way some grammarians assess the usage of certain words in ancient literary texts. In effect, the paper concentrates on the passages where A. Gellius, referring to ancient (archaic and classical) literature, describes the semantic differences occurring in various words, depending on their usage, whether in literary or colloquial language, defines the linguistic mechanism giving rise to colloquial variants of different linguistic items, and presents in a critical light the influence of colloquial language on the way in which interpretation is made of particular words as they occur in literary texts.

Keywords: Gellius; linguistics; semantics; linguistic change.

As is well-known, the collection of Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* published around 169 C.E. and composed of nearly 400 essays is comprised of 20 books. In general, this work constitutes a random collection of notes, reflections, remarks and comments the subject matter of which is various issues related to philosophy, rhetoric, law, literature, history, and other fields. However, as it's been counted, in more than half of the essays (246) various linguistic issues are the central subject or are at least touched upon marginally.¹ These concern phonetics, accent, prosody, morphology (inflexion), and syntax, as well as semantics, etymology and widely understood linguistic correctness (*Latinitas*), with which considerations on *vitia et virtutes orationis*² are related. Although, as we have mentioned, the subject matter brought up in the *Attic Nights* is deliberately disorderly, as it were, from the analysis of places devoted to linguistic issues

¹Cf. Cavazza 1986, 85. According to Springer (1958, 121), issues of descriptive or historical linguistics are a central subject in more than one third of the essays (precisely in 136).

²For a comprehensive review of linguistic issues addressed by Gallius in his *Attic Nights*, vide Cavazza 1986, 90–95.

there emerges a quite consistent picture of a linguistic doctrine to which Gellius tries to win over his readers. The subject of this article is an attempt to present at least several characteristics of this linguistic didactics.

In this context, what can be noted in the first place is that this didactics is conducted by Gellius in several ways; therefore its several aspects or dimensions can be distinguished. Firstly, in his essays he draws attention of his audience to certain specific language facts concerning Latin, particularly his contemporary Latin (this can be defined as factual dimension of his linguistic didacticism). Secondly, he presents his own interpretations of the facts he describes, and processes that effected them; in other words, he instructs about what – in his opinion – certain linguistic phenomena are, what they result from, what they were caused by, and what their origin is (this is the theoretical, doctrinal dimension of his teaching). Thirdly, he subjects the presented linguistic facts and processes to evaluative assessment, formulates opinions on linguistic correctness or incorrectness, and indicates criteria for making such assessments (evaluative and normative dimension). Finally, he directly or indirectly refers to the very method of “pursuing linguistics”, expressing a certain attitude to attitudes and methods adopted by other scholars and commentators of linguistic issues, in particular professional grammarians (methodological dimension). What results from this is that Gellius’ didacticism revealed in the *Attic Nights* covers both linguistics and metalinguistics. So, let us try to specify this linguistic teaching of Gellius by invoking several passages from the *Attic Nights*, while narrowing our exemplification down to one field of Gellius’ linguistic analyses only, namely, the sphere of lexical semantics, i.e. one of word meanings. It must be emphasised here, however, that the passages quoted below often combine more than one of the above mentioned aspects at a time.

The first indicated, factual aspect of Gellius’ linguistic teaching within word semantics largely concerns transmission of information on differences between the writer’s contemporary colloquial language and the literary language of ancient masters. Hence, it concerns differences between the meaning that certain words had been characterised as having by ancient authors, and the meaning they were used in by inhabitants of the Rome contemporary to Gellius. For instance, in essay XIII, 17 we can read about a diffusion of a new, colloquial meaning of the word *humanitas*, which have come to be used to mean “a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction” (“significat dexteritatem quandam benivolentiamque erga omnis homines promiscuam”),³ while previously it meant “education and training in

³The Latin text and English translations are quoted from the following edition: *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius with an English translation by John C. Rolfe*, Harvard University Press 1946–1952.

the liberal arts” (“eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes”); in addition, this new colloquial meaning is identified by Gellius with the meaning of Greek *philantropia*, and the old meaning with the meaning of Greek *paideia*. In essay X, 11 the author informs us that the colloquial meaning which has been established for the adverb *mature* is “hastily and quickly” (“propere et cito”) in place of the former “neither too soon nor too late” (“neque citius est neque serius”). In essay XVIII, 4 he writes about a colloquial use of verb *vanus* with reference to “foolish or dull or silly people” (“desipientis aut hebetes aut ineptos”), where ancient authors used it to specify “liars and deceivers, and those who cleverly devise light and empty statements” (“mendaces et infidos et levia inaniaque [...] astutissime componentes”).⁴

Beside certifying changes that occurred in the language, Gellius also formulates – as highlighted above – certain judgements on what these changed were caused by and what was the mechanism of their origination. For instance, in essay XII, 13 we can read that “the true and proper significations of common words are changed by long usage” (“verborum [...] communium verae atque propriae significationes longiore usu mutantur”). In essay XIII, 30 the author noted:

We may observe that many Latin words have departed from their original signification and passed into one that is either far different or near akin, and that such a departure is due to the usage of those ignorant people who carelessly use words of which they have not learned the meaning.

[Animadvertere est pleraque verborum Latinorum ex ea significatione de qua nata sunt decessisse vel in aliam longe vel in proximam, eamque decessionem factam esse consuetudine et inscitia temere dicentium quae cuimodi sint non didicerint.]

Finally, in essay XV, 5 Gellius states:

Just as many other words, through the ignorance and stupidity of those who speak badly what they do not understand, are diverted and turned aside from their proper and usual meaning, so too has the signification of the verb *profligo* been changed and perverted. For while [...] all who have been careful in their diction have always used the word to express “waste” and “destroy” [...], I now hear that buildings, temples, and many other things that are almost complete and finished are said to be *in profligato* and the things themselves *profligata*.

[Sicut alia verba pleraque, ignoratione et inscitia improbe dicentium quae non intellegant, deflexa ac depravata sunt a ratione recta et consuetudine, ita huius quoque verbi, quod est “profligo”, significatio versa et corrupta est. Nam cum [...] semper [...] eo verbo qui diligenter locuti sunt ita usi sint, ut “profligare” dicerent “prodigere” et “deperdere”, [...] nunc audio

⁴Also, vide for instance I, 22 (*superesse*); VI, 11 (*levitas, nequitia*); VII, 16 (*deprecor*); IX, 12 (*infestus*); XII, 9 (*periculum, venenum, contagium, honor*); XIII, 30 (*facies*); XVI, 5 (*vestibulum*); XIX, 7 (*obessus*).

aedificia et templa et alia fere multa quae prope absoluta adfectaque sunt “in profligato” esse dici ipsaque esse iam “profligata.”]

As can be seen, differences in meaning were shown here as a result of certain dynamic historical process derived from operation of individual words in certain socio–linguistic environment. This process of differentiating meaning originating within the lexis, leading to developing new colloquial word meanings, was presented as peculiar departure of words from their original meanings (“verborum ex ea significatione, de qua nata sunt, decessio”), departure caused by their prolonged, incorrect usage by uneducated and linguistically incompetent people. Thereby, ordinary and improper usage of the language by plain, uneducated speakers is perceived by Gellius as a factor generating new colloquial semantic variants of words.

However, apart from indicating this mechanism deriving new meanings we are dealing here with its evaluation. There is no doubt whatsoever that the presented process of generating (or rather degenerating) meanings receives a very negative assessment from Gellius. This is attested, among others, by the used terminology that identifies the sources and causes of this process as “consuetudo et inscitia temere dicentium” or “ignoratio et inscitia improbe dicentium quae non intellegant.” What results from this devaluing assessment of the origin of the described process is adopting a normative position in whose framework the products of this process (new colloquial word meanings) are contrasted with the meanings of words which were not subject to this process. This normative perspective is thus based on an opposition whose one part is composed of ancient literary correct word meanings specified as “verborum verae atque propriae significationes”, and its other part is constituted by new, colloquial and incorrect meanings characterised as “significationes versae et corruptae”⁵ expressed by “verba deflexa ac depravata a ratione recta et consuetudine.”⁶

For Gellius, the basic criterion of assessing correctness/incorrectness of the meanings of interpreted words is *auctoritas veterum*, “qui diligenter locuti sunt”. Thus, he recognises as his norm the semantic patterns determined in literature by ancient writers, which is nothing strange in the context of his strong bonds with the archaising “Frontonian” trend clearly visible in the literature and culture of the 2nd century and putting on the pedestal the language of Ennius, Plautus, Cato the Elder, Salustius, Cicero, Lucretius or Virgil. However, the reference to *auctoritas veterum*

⁵ Cf. for instance I, 22: “inroboravit inveteravitque falsa atque aliena verbi significatio”; XII, 13: “recepta vulgo interpretatio est absurdissima.”

⁶ It’s worth noting that this type of evaluation stands in clear contrast to the opinion of Horace, who recognised language custom as a crucial criterion of assessing linguistic correctness (“usus, quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi” – *Ars poetica* 71–2). It seems that in this context the fact that in Horace’s times the difference between literary language and colloquial spoken Latin was certainly much less than in Gellius’ times is not insignificant.

as the criterion of linguistic correctness is not exclusively dogmatic in Gellius, but results from purely lingual and theoretical–linguistic premises. According to him, the way ancient authors used words can be a semantic norm as it is characterised by *ratio* (“rationality, validity”) based on etymology and analogy. Essay II, 6 can exemplify the fact of Gellius’ basing his normative judgement on the criteria of etymology and analogy. In this essay, Gellius defends Virgil, who is imputed by grammarian L. Annaeus Cornutus that the word *vaxare* that he used in *Eclogue* VI, 76 with reference to Scylla who tossed Ulysses’ ship about, is too weak (*verbum leve*). Disagreeing with this view, Gellius in the first place underlines the fact of etymological (morphological) derivation of this word from word *vehere* (“carry”) “in which – as he writes – there is already some notion of compulsion by another, for a man who is carried is not his own master (“in quo inest vis iam quaedam alieni arbitrii; non enim sui potens est, qui vehitur”). Then, he states that the word *vexare* deriving from *vehere* “unquestionably implies greater force and impulse” (“vi atque motu procul dubio vastior est”), and provides evidence by invoking other word pairs that are analogous to the pair *vexare* – *vehere*. So, *vexare* expresses more force and more violent movement than *vehere* from which it derives, “just as *taxare* denotes more forcible and repeated action than *tangere*, from which it is undoubtedly derived, and *iactare* a much fuller and more vigorous action than *iacere*, from which it comes, and *quassare* something severer and more violent than *quaterere*” (“sicuti *taxare* pressius crebriusque est quam *tangere*, unde id procul dubio inclinatum est, et *iactare* multo fusius largiusque est quam *iacere*, unde id verbum traductum est, et *quassare* quam *quaterere* gravius violentiusque est”).

However, the above mentioned essay not only documents Gellius’ allowing for the linguistic criterion of etymology⁷ and analogy⁸ as elements composing an *argumentum rationis*, which in term underpins the process of evaluating linguistic correctness, and in the same time justifies a high rank that is held by *auctoritas veterum* in this process. In the conclusion to the referred exposition on correctness of Virgil’s using the word *vexare* one can find also an essential methodological postulate. Arguing with Cornutus’ judgement, Gellius utters the following view:

Therefore, merely because *vexare* is commonly used of the annoyance of smoke or wind or dust is no reason why the original force and meaning of the word should be lost; and that meaning was preserved by the earlier writers who, as became them, spoke correctly and clearly.

⁷Gellius as etymologist was extensively addressed by Cavazza (2004, 65–104). I want to take this opportunity to thank Professor Krystyna Bartol for her kind sharing with me this study and all the other studies published in the above mentioned book, i.e. *The Worlds of Aulus Gellius*.

⁸The fact that Gellius makes extraordinary words and rare forms the subject matter of many of his essays, and often criticizes professional grammarians, has inclined Marache (1952, 208–213) to consider him as avowed anomalist opposing the proponents of the theory of analogy. However, the above example and other examples – see for instance XV, 9 – seem to clearly contradict this. The opinion of Marache is also challenged by Maseli (1979, 11–28), and Cavazza (1986, 97).

[Non igitur, quia vulgo dici solet vexatum esse quem fumo aut vento aut pulvere, propterea debet vis vera atque propria verbi deperire, quae a veteribus, qui proprie atque signate locuti sunt, ita ut decuit, conservata est].

Therefore, from the perspective of the polemics with Cornutus, Gellius expressed a view that word meanings established in common circulation, as determined by the context in which they mostly appear, may not make up a sufficient criterion to assess correct usage of words, in particular where this assessment concerns ancient authors, and where it stands in contradiction to the linguistic criterion of etymology and analogy – the most proper tool to identify this “vis vera atque propria verbi, [quae] non debet deperire.” So, what we are dealing with here is a conviction that colloquial language exerts an influence, a negative one, also on the way words and expressions used in literary texts are perceived and evaluated.⁹ In the light of this conviction, colloquial speech contemporary to Gellius gained a status of a dangerous factor generating improper evaluative attitudes, a factor disturbing the correctness and reliability of critical literary judgements. As a result, colloquial language appears to Gellius as a sphere in which a twofold evil has its source. One of them comes from the fact that new improper meanings become established due to the prolonged use of words by carelessly speaking ignorant persons. The other evil comes down to the fact that the way words were used by ancient writers is interpreted from the angle of these new, colloquial meanings, which leads to making erroneous evaluations.

Naturally, both of these evil phenomena were stigmatised by Gellius. However, the fact that the author of the *Attic Nights* perceives his contemporary colloquial language as a factor generating improper word meanings does not mean that Gellius should be considered as an extreme proponent of linguistic conservatism. In his essays, he repeatedly provides evidence of rationalism and hard-headed temperance in this respect, e.g. by ridiculing and condemning a habit of using in colloquial language words that have become obsolete. This attitude can be illustrated, among others, by essay I, 10, in which he approvingly quotes the words of the philosopher Favorinus: “vive moribus praeteritis, loquere verbis praesentibus”, directed at a youngster displaying such archaic and generally already incomprehensible words in ordinary conversation. The intention and message of Gellius’ teaching is that words should be used correctly, in accordance with their intended purpose and in the way untainted by linguistic habits of “those ignorant people who carelessly use words of which they have not learned the meaning”. In implementing this message, he turns to ancient authors, because in them he does see the masters of this way of using words he affirms. As mentioned above, he explicitly rejects the perfunctorily or even

⁹On this vide ibidem (*squaleo, squalor*); VII, 16; IX, 1. For Gellius’ defence of literary texts against unjust attacks of critics, vide Springer 1958, 126–127.

primitively understood archaising, of which yet another expression can be found in an assertion full of reproach and sorrow included in essay XVI, 9: “plerique nostrum quae remotiora verba invenimus dicere ea properamus, non discere.”

And the evil of commenting on ancient literature and evaluating the correctness of the words used in it from the angle of the meanings in which they were used in the colloquial speech contemporary to Gellius has become, in turn, the cause of severe criticism directed by him to pseudoscholars and grammarians who, considering themselves as professional teachers of language and declaring professional knowledge in it, were in reality characterised by ignorance similar to that displayed by Cornutus mentioned above. Gellius manifests his outright aversion and contemptuous attitude towards them by describing them as: *male docti homines* (praef. 20), *vulgus semidoctorum* (I, 7), *turba grammaticorum novicia* (XI, 1), *isti novicii semidocti* (XVI, 7), etc. The reason for his aversion is first of all the superficiality and schematism of their knowledge. Gellius imputes to them the restricting of themselves to reading exclusively (or almost exclusively) contemporary, trendy authors, and ignorance of *auctores veteres* who are much more difficult to read. Thereby, he accuses them of lack of knowledge on the history of language and the history of words, which knowledge is in his opinion the basis of real grammatical culture and condition for formulating correct judgments on language and the way it is used.

So, what was the nature of his linguistic didacticism? An exhaustive answer to this question would surely require allowance for all that part of his linguistic essay writing, which we have not managed to present and discuss in this study. It appears, however, that the presented analysis allows us to state that this teaching was first of all the opposite of scholastic, schematised and superficial teaching which – probably – made up the technical grammatical *artes* modelled on the work by Remmius Palaemon (1st century C.E.). Gellius was not interested in elementary, rudimentary, propaedeutical knowledge or popularisation of this knowledge. What he was interested in was, on the one hand, what’s problematic, ambiguous, what aroused disputes and controversies, and on the other hand, what was wrongly interpreted or not perceived before at all, which was overlooked, unnoticed by professional grammarians and commentators. Hence, this was a reflective and esoteric teaching – not a scholastic, but rather an academic one. Note that Gellius himself characterised in the introduction to his essay collection what their subject-matter was with the following words: “haec neque in scholis decantata, neque in commentariis protrita, [...] nova [...] ignotaque” (praef. 15–16). Perhaps one should perceive Gellius as a representative of this lost current of Roman linguistics, i.e. the original, intellectual, elitist one, originated presumably by Varro.¹⁰

¹⁰Cavazza 1986, 85–86, 90, 95–100. For more on links between Gellius’ linguistics and the Roman grammatical tradition, vide Maselli 1979, passim.

And how today, from the present-day perspective, can we evaluate the didacticism of Gellius' linguistics? Surely, any information he furnished on the condition of Latin of his times is very precious to us. His testimony concerning the way certain words were used in his contemporary times provides scholars with valuable data that allow them to more precisely and comprehensively reconstruct the history of the Latin language, identify its developmental tendencies, and clarify the origin of a number of phenomena present in Roman languages. Also, we should acknowledge his linguistic doctrine – at least the part that we have already presented and exemplified. Drawing normative conclusions with reference to etymology and the principle of analogy testifies to rationality and intellectual discipline. The concept of changing word meaning under the impact of certain environmental contexts is commonly accepted today as one of the rules governing the evolution of lexical semantics. Although currently this type of change is not considered as the degeneration of language, but rather as a development stimulated by a necessity to adjust to new requirements,¹¹ nevertheless aren't we slightly like Gellius complaining so often about widespread deterioration of language, particularly among the youth, but also among opinion-forming circles, mass media or the world of politics? It's also worth noting that largely positive is the very fact of Gellius' perceiving a diachronic plane of language, his acute consciousness of the process of changes that occur in it over time, and first of all his allowing for diachronic relationships and different language registers (varieties) in interpreting and evaluating certain linguistic phenomena. So, it appears that Gellius, antiquarian and amateur philologist, was not a complete dilettante in the field of grammar, a chaotic gatherer of information and uncritical compiler as many scholars have believed he was, and which perhaps he actually was with reference to other *artes* he dealt with.¹²

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¹¹ Compare a commentary on this by Springer (1958, 126): "If there is any criticism to be made of Gellius in his study of linguistics, it is that he is prone to draw a sharp line between the educated and uneducated and to minimize the contribution made to the language by the uneducated. He never fully appreciates the position of vulgar speech in the total picture of linguistics. It is for this reason that Gellius is led to an error in saying flatly that words change meanings because of careless use by uneducated people."

¹² Cavazza 1986, 99.

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to examine the didactic value of the *Attic Nights* from the linguistic point of view, and precisely, from the point of view of Gellius' teachings on the meanings of words. In this context it has been stated that the author makes his readers aware of new meanings gained by certain words when used in contemporary vulgar language and gives testimony to the process of dissemination and perpetuation of particular semantic variants appearing in the colloquial idiom for given words. What is more, he also describes the mechanism which had generated those meanings, and evaluates the results of the process of the semantic changes; in his opinion, the mechanism responsible for the generation of changes in meaning within lexical items, leading up to the establishment of new, colloquial meanings for particular words, is the protracted misuse of language in the mouths of simple and uneducated people. So, he sees "consuetudo et inscitia temere dicentium or ignoratio et inscitia improbe dicentium quae non intellegant" as a factor giving rise to new, colloquial, and at the same time incorrect meanings of words. And finally, commenting on the way some grammarians assess the usage of certain words, especially in ancient literary texts, he gives some methodological, metalinguistic remarks. In particular, when defending Virgil against the accusation levied by the grammarian L. A. Cornutus that the verb *vexare* is too weak to be used with reference to Scylla tossing Ulysses' ship since it is commonly used of the annoyance of smoke or wind or dust, Gellius, referring to the argument of etymology and analogy, stresses that the meaning of a given word as perpetuated in colloquial idiom cannot be treated as a sufficient criterion for the assessment of the correctness of a given usage, especially if that usage appears in literature. Thereby he presents in a critical light the influence of colloquial language on the way in which interpretations are made of particular words as they occur in literary texts. Contemporary speech is shown as a dangerous factor which gives rise to inappropriate approaches to the question of value, and which interferes with the correctness and soundness of literary assessment.