Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* VIII.1.1-3

The necessity to use good Latin.

**Name of the author:** Quintilian

**Date:** 94 CE to 96 CE

**Place:** Rome

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman

**Literary genre:** Rhetorical treatise

**Title of work:** Institutio Oratoria

**Reference:** VIII.1.1-3

**Commentary:**

Marcus Fabius Quintilianus was born around 35 CE in Calagurris, a city settled in Tarraconensis. He must have moved quite early to Rome to be instructed by the most famous teachers of the time, and, after this, he returned to Spain where he taught rhetoric, probably in Tarraco. From 68 CE onwards, Quintilian went back to Rome – where he stayed – and devoted himself mainly to teaching and to practicing as an advocate. He was particularly famous in Rome, as is attested by the fact that he was the teacher of Pliny the Younger, the grandchildren of Domitian's sister (namely the children of Flavius Clemens and Flavia Domitilla) and probably of Tacitus. In 78 CE, Vespasian appointed Quintilian to “the first public chair of rhetoric” in Rome, which he held until his retreat in 88 CE (Fernández López, “Quintilian,” p. 308; Cousin, *Quintilien, Institution oratoire. Tome I*, p. vii-xxii).

His *Institutio Oratoria* is the largest preserved handbook dealing with rhetoric. Concerning the dating of its composition and publication, Quintilian mentions that he spent slightly more than two years researching and writing it, and that he kept the manuscript for some time before sending it to a bookseller named Trypho (Quintilian, *Letter to Trypho* 1-2). As a consequence, Quintilian may have composed the *Institutio Oratoria* between 93 and 95 or in the very first months of 96 CE, and he may have decided to publish it slightly before Domitian's death (Cousin, *Quintilien, Institution oratoire. Tome I*, p. xxiii-xxviii). The *Institutio Oratoria* is thus a “work of retirement, a reflection of a lifetime's teaching and advocacy” (Russell, *Quintilian*, I, p. 4). Through the writing of the twelve books of this work, Quintilian wanted to gather all the rhetorical techniques, but also all the literary and philosophical background necessary to form the ideal orator, namely a man who is exceptional not only because of his culture and knowledge, but also because he uses these skills to serve his community, by being a major figure in public life. For what concerns the global structure of the *Institutio Oratoria*, it is possible to distinguish three parts (structure presented in Fernández López, “Quintilian,” p. 309). The first is from book I to book III.5, and deals with general considerations about the teaching of rhetoric, the nature of rhetoric, its origins and finally the components of rhetoric and the way to arrange them. The second part explains the five usual "duties" (officia) of the orator: inventio ("invention," III.6-VI.5), dispositio ("arrangement of arguments," VII.1-10), elocutio ("elocution," VIII.1-XI.1), memoria ("memory," XI.2) and actio ("delivery," XI.3). The third and last part deals with the “practice of rhetoric in society” (XII.1-11).

This text comes from the very beginning of book VIII, a book that mainly deals with the importance of elocutio, which Donald A. Russell defines as “the verbal expression of the thoughts which the speaker has 'discovered' and 'arranged'” (Russell, *Quintilian*, III, p. 300). In the preface of this book, we learn that Quintilian wanted to oppose writers or orators who did not have the same conception of rhetoric as he did (see VIII pr. 16-17). For him, rhetoric has to be based on a just use of ornaments, on a real care in the choice of words, and on the respect for the ideas expressed (VIII pr. 20-21). Fitting in with a tradition going back to Aristotle and also developed by Theophrastus (on this point see Russell, *Quintilian*, III, p. 300), Quintilian's presentation of the main aspects of elocutio is based on four virtues: correctness (VIII.1); clarity (VIII.2); ornament (VIII.3-X.7); and propriety or decorum (XI.1). These four virtues are briefly enumerated at the very beginning of the text presented here: “Elocutio is considered both in individual words and in a group of words. For individual words, we have to make sure that they are good Latin (Latina), clear (perspicua), elegant (ornata) and well adapted to our required effect (ad id quod efficere volumus accommodata). For a group of words, [we have to make sure that] they are correct (emendata), well arranged (collocata), and figured (figurata)” (§ 1). This enumeration is thus similar to that exposed in Cicero, *De oratore* III.37.

From § 2 of the text presented here, Quintilian gets to the heart of the presentation and deals with one of the
primary virtues of *elocutio*, namely that of using correct Latin. First, he recalls that he has already dealt with grammar in the first book of the *Institutio Oratoria*, more precisely in I.5. Therefore, Quintilian explains that he is not going to deal again with how to write good Latin free of grammatical errors. Here, he endeavours to recall one basic principle of the usage of good Latin, namely to use “as few as non-Roman (*peregrina*) or foreign (*externa*) words as possible”. Indeed, he considers that people using these words of foreign origin pervert good and true Latin by speaking in a way that is nothing else than “pedantic” (*curiose*).

Then, Quintilian narrates two short anecdotes. The first one is related to Theophrastus, a peripatetic philosopher who lived between 372/370 and 288/286 BCE. He had been a disciple and collaborator of Aristotle, whom he succeeded at the Lyceum (about his life and his work see Schneider, “Théophraste d’Érèse,” p. 1034-1120). Theophrastus was a native of Eresos in Lesbos, and originally his name was Tyrtamos, which was actually not a Greek name (Schneider, “Théophraste d’Érèse,” p. 1039). Aristotle decided to change it to Theophratos, meaning “of divine expression,” thus referring to the quality and correctness of his expression. In consideration of the fact that his name was changed by Aristotle, Strabo writes that it was to protect Greek ears from hearing the unpleasant – because foreign – sound of his name of origin (Strabo, Geography XIII.2.4). The anecdote that Quintilian uses, that of an old Athenian woman who discovered that Theophrasus was a foreigner because of his way of speaking, clearly echoes that narrated by Cicero in *Brutus* 172. Cicero narrates the following anecdote: “Therefore, I am not surprised by the story told of Theophrastus, who asked an ordinary old woman the price of something. After having answered the question, she said ‘Stranger, less is impossible.’ He was offended that his foreign birth has been discovered, although he had been living in Athens for a long time and spoke very correctly. Similarly, I think that, for us, everybody coming from the cities has, as people from Attic, a particular accent.” In both narratives, the authors stress the fact that Theophrastus had very good Attic or was very eloquent. However, their versions differ regarding the reason that the old lady discovered that he was a stranger. Cicero explains it was due to the special accent (*sonus*) of the people from Attic – which Theophrastus did not have. From a different perspective, Quintilian originally explains this by the fact that Theophrastus’s Attic was too good to be true. Obviously, Quintilian distorts the narrative of the original anecdote to fit in with his argumentation: even for the foreigners who succeeded to have a complete mastery of a language which was not their native one, the fact that they could use pedantic or uncommon words – even if they were correctly used on a grammatical and semantic level – could foil them.

The second anecdote narrated by Quintilian is about Livy, whose eloquence Asinius Pollio claimed was influenced by a certain *Patavinitas* (about Caius Asinius Pollio see *RE* 2.2 [1986] s. v. « C. Asinius Cn. f. Pollio » n° 25, col. 1589-1602 [Groebel]). This accusation, attributed to Pollio, has been debated because scholars disagree about its credibility, and, for those who believe it, about the precise meaning of the word *patavinitas*. It has been proposed that it could refer to words coming from a dialect used around Padua or to an accent typical from this region. Some scholars have also proposed that the *patavinitas* should be understood in relation to some kind of “severity,” or “moral pedantry” of the inhabitants of the region (for the bibliography see Adamik, “Remarks on Livy’s,” p. 34). The third interpretation to have been proposed is to understand the accusation of *patavinitas* in the context of the rivalry between Pollio and Livy – Pollio being a follower of the severe Attic style and Livy of the richness of Cicero’s style and diction (see Flobert, “La patavinitas,” p. 202-206; see also Adamik, “Remarks on Livy’s,” p. 34-35). Quintilian does not explain the example he quotes, nor the word *patavinitas*, which could mean that he understood it. He gives no example so as to neither confirm nor reject Pollio’s allegation (Syme, “Livy and Augustus,” p. 76).

It is important to note that it is the second time in the *Institutio Oratoria* that Quintilian mentions this anecdote. Yet in I.55-56, Quintilian develops a discussion about barbarism and solemnis in which he already mentions this anecdote about Livy: “I therefore resume the path which I prescribed for myself and point out that words are either native or foreign. Foreign words, like our population and our institutions, have come to us from practically every nation upon earth. I pass by words of Tuscan, Sabine and Praenestine origin; for though Lucilius attacks Vettius for using them, and Pollio reproves Livy for his lapses into the dialect of Padua, I may be allowed to regard all such words as of native origin” (*Hoc amplius, ut institutum ordinem sequar, uerba aut Latina aut peregrina sunt.* *Peregrina porro ex omnibus prope dixerim gentibus ut homines, ut instituta etiam multa uenerunt.* Taceo de Tuscis et Sabinis et Praenestinis quoque (nam ut eorum sermone utentem Vettium Lucilii usque infectatur, quem ad modum Pollio reprendit in Liuo Patauinitatem): licet omnia Italica pro Romanis habeam; Loeb translation by H. E. Butler, freely available [here](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/search?query=licet%20omnia%20Italica%20pro%20Romanis%20habeam)). Next, Quintilian highlights the fact that many words of Gallic, Punic, Hispanic and Greek origin became usual or had been transposed in Latin (I.5.57-58). Thus, Quintilian develops a theme which is radically different from the idea that the use of Latin enabled to gather a wide range of peoples who had been submitted to Rome or who somehow took part in the Roman Empire (Pline the Elder, *Natural History* III.38-39; Martial, *Liber Spectaculorum* III; about the unifying role of Latin for Christians, see [Commentary on Daniel IV.9](https://www.judaism-and-rome.org)). As it has been noticed by James N. Adams, Quintilian’s position when he says “I may be allowed to regard all what is
of Italic origin as Roman” (I.5.57, licet omnia Italica pro Romanis habeam) is the opposite of that hold by Cicero or even by Asinius Pollio (that is of men who were not themselves born in Rome) and who defended the idea that every Italic or provincial accent was necessarily inferior to the “Roman Latin,” that is the Latin spoken at Rome (see Cicero, On the Orator III.42 and 44; Adams, “Romanitas,” p. 193). Quintilian’s opinion about the existence of an Italian provincial Latin shows that Italian regionalisms were appreciated in a much more neutral way than during the period before the Social War or even two generations after. According to the words of James N. Adams: “… Romanness of Latin does not exclusively reside in Roman Latin in the strict sense, but is also found in the Latin of Italy outside Rome” (Adams, “Romanitas,” p. 194).

By cross-reading the passage taken from I.5.57-58 with the text presented, especially with the passage “Therefore, if possible, all the vocabulary and the voice must have the smell of the man brought up in Rome, so that his speech seems to be native Roman (oratio Romana plane), and not given by citizenship (non civitate donata),” Quintilian’s opinion does not seem entirely consistent. In the first passage, Quintilian admits that Latin is nothing else other than the result of a mix of various and foreign languages, but in the other he considers that an excessive use of words of foreign origin has to be avoided by anybody who wants to speak correctly. In addition, in the first excerpt, Quintilian asserts that he considers words of Italic origin as truly Latin; but, in the other, he asserts that the vocabulary and the accent of the man “brought up in Rome (urbis)” are superior to that men who had recently received Roman citizenship and who thus did not come from the capital of the Empire. It has been rightly noticed by James N. Adams that the spirit and some of the words of this sentence (haec urbs, oleo, vox) show that Quintilian must have thought about Cicero, On the Orator III.42 and 44 when he wrote this text (Adams, “Romanitas,” p. 194).

Even though in the first book of the Institutio oratoria Quintilian admitted that many words of foreign origin were commonly used by Latin speakers and that ‘Italian’ words could be put on a par with Roman Latin, at the beginning of the eighth book he adopts a much more conservative attitude that clearly echoes Cicero’s linguistic opinions about the superiority of Roman Latin (Adams, “Romanitas,” p. 194). Thus, fitting in with this tradition, Quintilian recalls first that the use of these words of foreign origin has to be limited. Then, the sentence “Therefore, if possible, all the vocabulary and the voice must have the smell of the man brought up in Rome, so that his speech seems to be native Roman (oratio Romana plane), and not given by citizenship (non civitate donata),” shows how Quintilian was influenced by a Ciceronian tradition and how difficult it was to depart from these kind of classical linguistic judgements. However, the connection that Quintilian makes between the expression oratio Romana and the fact of being born in the Urbs itself, goes against a tendency that started at the beginning of the imperial period and that made that the lingua Romana refers to “the language which had spread with Roman power” and not strictly to “a particular variety of that language restricted to Rome” (Adams, “Romanitas,” p. 195 for the quotation, see also p. 196). Finally, the end of this text is particularly interesting because Quintilian connects a vision of people — by referring to the traditional opposition between long-standing Roman citizens and new ones — with a vision of language. The orator fits in with a conservative conception of Latin, which is typical of that of many grammarians who considered that being a real Roman citizen implied a correct and long-term practice of Latin. This idea that authentic and pure Latin takes part in the definition of true Romanness, and is something to which foreigners could not pretend to, is clearly an idea which echoes the speech of an aristocratic milieu which defended a narrow and exclusive conception of Roman citizenship (see Seneca, Apocolocyntosis III).

Keywords in the original language:

- accommodatus
- civitas
- collocatus
- curiosus
- dico
- disertus
- elocutio
- emendatus
- externus
- facundia
- figuratus
- Graeci
grammatica
hospes
Latinus
loquor
oratio
ornatus
patavinitas
peregrinus
perpicuus
ratio
Romanus
Theophrastus
Titus Livius
urbs
verbum
vitosus

Thematic keywords in English:

- foreign words
- language
- Latin language
- linguistic correctness
- orator
- Roman citizenship
- speech

Bibliographical references:


Other sources connected with this document:

Pliny the Elder, Natural History III.38-39

Praise of Italy.

Read more about Pliny the Elder, Natural History III.38-39

Text

Martial, Liber Spectaculorum III
The international and polyglot crowd paying tribute to the emperor in the Flavian amphitheatre.

- Read more about Martial, Liber Spectaculorum III

Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis III*

Criticism against Claudius’s policy concerning the grant of Roman citizenship.

- Read more about Seneca, Apocolocyntosis III

Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Address of Thanksgiving to Origen I*

The beauty of Roman law and the Latin language

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