

THE MEANING OF 'FIGURA' AND 'POTESTAS' IN AN ANONYMOUS FRAGMENTUM DE LITERIS FRISICIS

(Some preliminary notes about an old 'phonetical' text)

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the second edition (1681) of the works written by the Frisian poet Gysbert Japicx, the editor S.A. Gabbema added some texts partly not written by the poet (Repr. 1983 by Meinsma). Two of those added texts are written in Latin: a grammar of Frisian and a 'Fargmentum De Literis Frisicis' by one or two authors unknown, presumedly about 1530. 'Fargmentum' is quoted here as it is printed in the text. As a phonetician our attention was called for by this second text. If the text is truly dated about 1530 as the editor of the poetical works and other texts by G. Japicx infers, then this text is one of the oldest grammatico/phonetical texts in the Low Countries, if not the oldest. Particularly because the text remained rather unknown, apart from the circle of Frisian philologists, I prepared a private edition of it for an old friend some years ago. The reprint of the original text took just quite some touching up (Meinsma, 1983). As I finished a translation in Dutch some weeks ago it seemed well-timed to make some preliminary observations about the text on hand which I am prepared to edit before long, reprint, translation and notes.

2. DISCUSSION

The writer is fairly exact in formulating his ideas as such notwithstanding the slipshod printing. The misprintings - maybe an after-effect of misreading by somebody who was not familiar with Latin - do not obscure the fact that the anonymous writer did some careful thinking about the difference between speech-sound and written-character. In Latin we have the word 'litera'. The use of this word by ancient grammarians requires maybe some comment. According to ancient tradition 'litera' has to be defined as and we quote here from a text by Wallis (1653, 1699, repr. 1972):

"Sonus in voce simplex seu incompositu, in simpliciores indivisibilis"

A simple or uncompounded sound in a word, which can not be divided into yet simpler parts.

In the quoted sentence Wallis' text transpires a tradition quite common in humanistic grammarians. It is a grammatical tradition borrowed from Latin grammarians and indirectly showing the influence of ancient Greek 'linguists'. The interpretation of lt. 'litera' is threefold: 'nomen', 'figura' and 'potestas'. The translation of these words is usually given as (see a.o. Abercrombie, 1949, 1966): name, symbol and sound respectively. It might be more appropriate to translate instead: name, shape (or external form) and driving force (as consisting in soundshape).

Let us now return to our text in which the author states:

"Figuris et characteribus, qualibus usi fuerint majores nostri in obscuro est."
It is obscure which 'figurae' and written letters our ancestors used.

In this second sentence of the fragment "characteres" and "figurae" are put side by side in more than only a style of 'speech' (sic). This might be clear from the context. In middle- and neo-latin sources lt. 'charaxare' is used with the meaning 'to write'. In older Latin texts the meaning is 'to scratch'. So we may rightfully translate lt. 'characteres' by 'written letters', while staying clear of the English word: character. The first sentence of the fragment preceding the quoted one reads:

"Incipiemus autem a literis, cui cum duo potissimum accidunt, figura et potestas, de Figura prius dicendum erit."

We will now begin with the 'letters' and because they principally break up in two parts 'figura' and 'potestas' we have to speak about 'figura' in the first place.

We already indicated that it was not unusual for early grammarians to stipulate 'literae' having two essential sides: 'figura' and 'potestas'. In the following sentence 'figura' is divided in 'figura' proper and 'characteres' as we may infer from the second sentence quoted above, in which the author states that is obscure which 'figurae' and 'written letters' our (Frisian) ancestors commonly used. Apart from the first chapter we do not find the word 'figura' again. The second chapter begins with a definition of 'potestas':

"Potestas literarum in ipsa pronuntiatione et sono consistit."

The 'potestas' of 'literae' consists in its pronunciation and in its sound(shape).

The 'potestas' has a dichotomy too according to this text which is remarkable enough and evidence of the authors preciseness in observation and exactness in formulating. However in the first chapter we find :

"... sed etiam veteris linguae Ghotice Fragmenta, Graecis characteribus scripta ..."

... but also the fragments of the old Gothic language, written with Greek 'writing-letters'...

However in the next lines we find several times 'litera' for 'written-letter' or 'written-letter-form'. The meaning 'written-letter' for 'litera' is there contextually determined. It seems indicated that 'figura' has to be understood as: the symbol as symbol on the one hand and as external form of a 'litera', character, on the other. According to Haugen (1972), the unknown 'First Grammarian' who wrote the first grammatical treatise on a Germanic language in C12 "used two words having the technical function of translating the Latin 'potestas', "one meaning referring to pronunciation", the other to "the significance of the sounds in discourse, their 'function', to their sound mass". This is about the same as in our text. It seems to me the word 'figura' in the Frisian text to have a double meaning too in the same way. However while the anonymous author did not translate a latin word into Frisian (the first grammarian did translate from Latin into his own language), he had to accomodate himself with latin words in order to designate the double meaning of the word involved. Moreover the word 'figura' is used commonly for symbol in late Latin sources, which is in this case the more remarkable, because the classical Latin word for symbol is: 'imago' or 'signum'. Abercrombie (1949, 1966) discusses in his essay: What is a 'letter?', the ambiguity through the ages of the word letter in English, referring to several dictionaries and the work of Holder, 1669, Bulwer, 1648, Butler, 1633, Wallis, 1653, a.o. He does not indicate a possible

double sense of the lt. word 'figura'." 'Figura' was the letter as written, 'potestas' as pronounced, and by its 'nomen' it could be identified for discussion or teaching." Caron (1947, 1972) who was one of the first scholars to recognize clearly, that neither early Dutch 'grammarians' and nor most of early scholars had a misapprehension of the difference between 'written letter' and 'spoken letter' as was assumed by a host of modern historians of linguistics, he himself however did not recognize the possible dichotomy in lt. 'figura'. It seems to me that the influence of another, but well known, Frisian: Rudolphus Agricola (1444 - 1485) with his book: *De Inventione Dialectica* played a role in the thinking of the anonymus author of our 'Fargmentum' under scrutiny. The more when we realize that Petrus Ramus (1515 - 1572), the grammarian, considered himself a pupil of Agricola and used dichotomies to the extremes in his own work.

'Figura' falls apart in 'figura' proper, symbol and character, the written letter. 'Potestas' means pronunciation, articulation on the one side and speechsound, the soundproduct of articulation on the other.

NOTES

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