THE INFLUENCE OF MISSIONARY DESCRIPTIONS OF FAR EASTERN LANGUAGES ON WESTERN LINGUISTIC THOUGHT
THE CASE OF CRISTOFORO BORRI, S.J. AND TOMMASO CAMPANELLA

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RESUMEN

El descubrimiento de nuevos mundos más allá de los océanos tuvo como consecuencia el enfrentamiento de los europeos con lenguas totalmente diferentes de todo lo acostumbrado. Mientras que en las dos Américas predominaban las lenguas no escritas, de tipo mayoritariamente aglutinante, en Asia oriental algunas de las lenguas encontradas tenían una larga tradición literaria, eran lenguas ‘clásicas’ para sus civilizaciones respectivas, y pertenecían al tipo aislante. Antes de redactar las primeras gramáticas del chino, los misionarios ya habían estudiado la estructura del vietnamita, lengua que representa el tipo aislante con perfección.

En esta contribución se describe en detalle como el jesuita Cristoforo Borri ha descrito los rasgos tipológicos fundamentales de esta lengua en un libro sobre el reino de Cochinchina que conoció un éxito rápido y duradero en Europa entera a partir de 1631. Esta descripción llegó al conocimiento del filósofo Tommaso Campanella, encarcelado por la Inquisición española en Nápoles. Para él, la estructura del vietnamita era la piedra de toque para una definición universal, y por ende científica, de las partes de la oración: el hecho de que los verbos y los substantivos en esta lengua no son conjugados ni declinados le permite concluir que tales atributos son accidentales, y no esenciales. Así llega a una teoría general deductiva de las partes de la oración, lo que se puede considerar como un preludio de las ‘gramáticas generales’ del siglo XVII y de la búsqueda de los universales lingüísticos en nuestra tiempo.

1. Introduction
The novelty of linguistic thought at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century has two dimensions, a theoretical and an empirical: the appearance of a new rationalism and universalism; and the broadening of knowledge on the languages of mankind. In order to better
understand this twofold intellectual breakthrough, a very brief historical
flashback will be adequate (see Bossong 1990).

In the Middle Ages, linguistic theory was oriented toward the rational
fundamentals of human language. The approach of the scholastic philosophers
aimed at elucidating the relationship between language and thought: how can
the universal principles of the human mind be derived from the structure of
individual languages? The modistic philosophy of language was essentially a
kind of logical semantics. The scholastic philosophers were not interested in
specific languages, but in language in general. Their attitude can be
summarised by an oft quoted dictum of Roger Bacon (c.1220-1292):
"grammatica una et eadem est secundum substantiam in omnibus linguis, licet
accidentaliter varietur" ("grammar is substantially one and the same in all
languages, although it varies accidentally") (Bacon 1902[c.1250]:27)). On the
other hand, however, empirical knowledge as to the true extent of linguistic
variation was extremely limited; reflection on language structure started from
Latin and took Latin grammar as its chief, if not only, illustrative material.
Universals of human language were deduced directly from the idiosyncrasies
of a specific historical language; Latin, the medium of written expression and
the first — and most often only — foreign language to be learned was
inevitably the background for any kind of thinking about the nature of
language. I have called this period the 'first universalism'.

From the very dawn of humanism in Italy, another approach was gaining
ground. With Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), a new outlook on language began,
leading to the Renaissance with its insistence on linguistic diversity. Latin
slowly receded before the spoken vernaculars, as these were more and more
used for domains hitherto reserved to the Classical language. In the Middle
Ages, the term gramma tica was synonymous with Latin (as it was still for the
missionaries), but starting with the publication of Antonio de Nebrija's (1441–
1522) Spanish grammar in 1492, the vernaculars came within the focus of
grammatical description. Nebrija was soon followed by grammarians des-
cribing their native Romance tongues, such as Italian, Portuguese, and French.
The "discovery of the native tongues" (Apel 1963) and the regression and final
eclipse of Latin distinguish the linguistic tradition in the Christian occident
from the Islamic, Indian, and Chinese world where the classical languages held
sway for a much longer time (and, in the case of Arabic, holds it even today).
In the first half of the sixteenth century, the true linguistic diversity of Europe
came to the fore, and the emerging national standards entered a peaceful
competition; this is the epoch to which the French poet and poetologist
Joachim Du Bellay (1522–1560) has given its emblematic formula: défense et
illustration (de la langue française). I have called this period the ‘first particularism’, to distinguish it from the ‘second particularism’ which begins in the eighteenth century with Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and culminates during the Romantic period with the rise of historical-comparative grammar.

The switch of interest from the universal to the particular, from Language to languages, took place simultaneously with the discovery of new worlds across the oceans and of the full extent of linguistic diversity beyond Europe. The travels and conquests of the Portuguese and Spaniards, followed by other European nations, brought Westerners in contact with an amazing array of peoples of completely different cultures and languages all over the globe. Christian missionaries had to learn at least some of these truly ‘foreign’ languages, and so, in the footsteps of Nebrija, grammatical descriptions of exotic tongues began to flourish. Latin ceased to be the exclusive yardstick of logic in language, as its relativity became obvious in contact with unfamiliar linguistic worlds.

Near the end of the sixteenth century, the pendulum of linguistic thought begins to swing back toward the universalistic approach. Rationalism again gains ground; interest becomes more and more focused on the basic laws underlying language in general, instead of the niceties and subtleties of individual tongues. The publication of the rationalistic Latin grammar Minerva by Sanctius [Francisco Sánchez de las Brozas (1523–1601)] (Salamanca, 1664 [1587]) was an important milestone in this process. With this work, grammar became philosophical again; it inaugurated an evolution culminating in the abundant tradition of grammaire générales et raisonnées, initiated by Antoine Arnauld (1612–1694) and Claude Lancelot (1615–1695) in 1660. I have called this period the ‘second universalism’.

However, this second universalism is different from the first in an important respect: in the meantime, the knowledge of linguistic diversity had increased immensely, both through the discovery of the native tongues of Europe and through the discovery of exotic languages. Rationalistic reflection on the nature of language in general now had to take the structural diversity of the languages of mankind into account. To express it in modern terms: research on linguistic universals took notice of its typological base. Rationalism was becoming empirical.

The encounter of Europeans with indigenous peoples and their languages was completely different in Asia and in America, in every imaginable respect. We can distinguish at least the following three dimensions: orality and writing; cultural influences of classical languages; and typological structure.
With the notable exception of the Maya hieroglyphs, writing was unknown in pre-Columbian America. When trying to formulate grammars of Amerindian languages, the missionaries not only had to learn these languages and analyse them linguistically, they also had to reduce them to writing. The elaboration of appropriate writing systems was an indispensable preliminary condition for missionary activity. In contrast, most of the languages of Asia had long histories as written vehicles of culture before the arrival of the Europeans. Sanskrit has been a written language since the end of the second millennium B.C.; the Indian vernaculars and languages under Indian influence in South-East Asia had used their own writing system for many centuries before the Portuguese set foot on the subcontinent; the Arabic script was in use for islamised languages, such as Persian, Turkic dialects, the emerging Urdu, and Malay; the Chinese logographic script, the oldest still extant in the world, had become the starting point for the elaboration of the Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese writing systems in all their variety. In the Americas, Christian missionaries had to start from scratch; the situation had all the inconveniences — and all the advantages — of a tabula rasa. Asia, on the other hand, was the cradle of some of the oldest and most developed cultures; the Europeans had to face civilisations of the same level as, or a level superior to, their own.

In America, no single imperial language dominated the scene. There were several *linguae francae*, called "lenguas generales" by the Spaniards, such as Nahuatl, Quechua, and Guarani, and the missionaries concentrated their efforts mainly, although not exclusively, on such widely diffused languages. In Asia, the classical languages of the respective civilisations were not only widespread means of communication. They also constituted cultural models which were extensively imitated and left profound marks on the languages under their influence. Arabic (and secondarily Persian), Sanskrit (together with Pali for Buddhism), and Chinese provided the models and categories for virtually every mental activity in their respective cultures. These classical languages had an all-pervading impact which lasted for many centuries, if not for two millennia or more. Both Arabic and Sanskrit loanwords are found in huge numbers in such a remote language as Malay, reflecting the influence of Hinduism first, and later of Islam; Japanese, Korean, and to a certain extent also Vietnamese, draw much of their learned vocabulary from Chinese. The role of these classical languages of the East is similar to that of Greek and Latin in the West. Nothing even remotely comparable can be said of any of the indigenous languages of the Americas.

Asian and American languages also differ in structure, especially if we focus our attention on East and South-East Asia. Applying traditional
typological terminology — and simplifying greatly — it can be stated that Amerindian languages belong overwhelmingly to the agglutinative type, with a great deal of inflection and of polysynthesis. Apart from inflection, which is found in Semitic and Indo-European, East Asia exhibits an unusually high degree of concentration of the isolating type. Classical Chinese, the Chinese vernaculars, and many other languages of the area, including Vietnamese, show this specific structure. While inflection and agglutination still looked somewhat familiar to Western eyes, the isolating type was completely novel for Europeans; there was no parallel either in Indo-European or in Semitic. One can easily imagine the bewilderment of the early missionaries when they became acquainted for the first time with the structure — or with what they would tend to consider as the lack of any structure — of Classical Chinese. The isolating type was a new experience for scholars and clergy alphabetised in Latin school grammar. The absence of any kind of overt morphology constituted a particular challenge to traditional ideas about what was thought to be a prerequisite for a noble, civilised language: long paradigms of regular and irregular declensions and conjugations. Chinese could do completely without such oddities, and still was able to serve as a vehicle of a splendid and sophisticated culture! The encounter with such an exotic linguistic structure was essential for the rise of a truly typological approach to language — of course, ‘typology’ avant la lettre, the term itself to be invented centuries later. (One may note that the same Georg von der Gabelentz (1840–1893), who in 1891 baptized the general comparative approach to language as ‘linguistic typology’ in his work on general grammar, was at the same time a great sinologist and author of perhaps the most important description of Classical Chinese ever written 1883[1960].)

In short, Chinese and other isolating languages of eastern Asia constitute a typological extreme. Knowledge of them is indispensable for a comparative approach which seriously claims to take into account the full range of linguistic diversity. Languages of the isolating type are a kind of eye-opener; they enable the linguist to distinguish what is essential from what is only accidental in language.

In the following pages, I will present the impact which the first missionary description of an isolating language had on the development of rationalistic language philosophy and the emerging linguistic typology in Europe. This contribution will elucidate how Borri’s sketch of Vietnamese grammar influenced the language philosophy of Campanella (also see Bosson 1992; 2001).
2. Cristoforo Borri S.J. (1583–1632)

Cristoforo Borri was born in 1583 in Milan. In 1601 he entered the Jesuit order and was intensely prepared for his missionary tasks. His main subjects of study were astronomy and mathematics. In 1610 he set off for the Far East. For thirteen years he lived at the Annamese court in Cochinchina, in the service of the Nguyen dynasty which governed the centre and south of Vietnam. He worked as a court astronomer and predicted the lunar eclipse of 9th December, 1620, and the solar eclipse of 22nd May, 1622. In 1623, he returned to Europe via Macao and Goa. He obtained a professorship of mathematics in Portugal, teaching in Coimbra and Lisbon and publishing treatises on astronomy and on navigation. In 1631 he left the Jesuits and entered the Cistercian order. He died in 1632. As an astronomer, he was evidently interested in the research by Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), and he supported his theses. He corresponded anonymously with him and managed to keep this secret during his lifetime. The contact between Borri and Galileo was only discovered in 1942 by Gabrieli (see the remarks in Firpo’s edition of Campanella [1954:1417]).

Shortly before his death, Borri published a booklet on his experience in Vietnam, dedicated to Pope Urban VIII (1568–1644, pope 1623–1644). The original was formulated in Italian and bears the title: Relazione della novissime missione della PP. della Compagnia di Giesù al Regno del Cocincina; it was published in Rome by Corbeletti in 1631. This was the first description of this kingdom in South East Asia which had remained practically unknown in the West up to that date. The book is written in a clear, highly readable style; it provides precise and detailed first-hand information on this far-away country, its political structure, its geography, trade, and agriculture, the customs of its inhabitants, and its language. Borri’s small book immediately became a tremendous success all over Europe, a kind of best-seller in its time. Everybody was keen to read about this distant, but highly cultivated part of the world. The book was immediately translated into French, and in 1633, two further translations were published in Austria, one into Latin and one into German. In the same year, Robert Ashley published an English version in London which was to become not just a best-seller, but even a long-seller, being reprinted at least five times until 1811 (for details, see bibliography).

Borri first provides information on the name of Cochinchina, its origin and its actual use. I quote from the English translation (1633c; it contains no pagination, therefore reference is to the chapters):

Cochin-China being so named by the Portugals, is called in the language of Originarie inhabitants Anam, which is the West, in regard it is situate on the West of China; in respect whereof the Ipaneses called it by the of Coci, which in their tongue hath the same signification that Anam hath with the Cochin-Chinese: But the Portugals which
This etymology is probably wrong, but it seems to have enjoyed a certain popularity at this historical moment.

The following passage describes the amazement felt by the author when confronted with the high standards of literary and philosophical education, based upon the canonical authors of China, especially Confucius, and on the Chinese examination system:

*Cochin-China* hath many Universities, in which there bee Readers and Schooles and Degrees; to which their Schollers are advanced by examination, as they are in China; teaching the same Sciences, using the same Bookes and Authors; namely, *Ziifa* or *Confus*, as the Portugals call him; being an Author of so sublime and profound Learning and authority with them, as *Aristotle* amongst vs, and indeed more ancient. These bookes are full of Erudition, rare Histories, of grave Sentences, of Prouerbes and such like, all concerning good manners; such as Seneca, Cato, or Cicero here with vs. Many yeares labour is spent in learning the propriety of the Phrase, Characters and Hieroglyphikes in which they are written. But that part which they account most of; and have in greatest estimation, is Morall Philosophy; comprehending the Ethik, Oeconomic and Politick. (From Chapter VI: *Of the Civil and Politicke Gouvernment of Cochín-China*)

Then he goes on with a linguistically relevant observation; he notes the distinctive function of tone, comparing the spoken language with music and even counterpoint; I quote this passage and the following ones in the Italian original and their English translation:

Et è gratiosa cosa verderi e sentirli quando studiano nelle loro sale, leggendo, & recitando le loro lezioni in voce alta in forma di canto, il che fanno per habituarsi, e dare a ciascheduna parola gli accenti suoi propri, che sono molti, e con li quali significano molte cose e molto diverse; la onde per potere parlare con loro, pare, che sia necessario sapere li principii della musica, & del contrapunto. (p. 75)

[And it is goodly sight to see and understand them in their Halls, when they read and pronounce their Lectures aloud as if they sang: which they doe, to accomstome themselves, and to get a habite, to glue to every word his proper accent; of which they have a great number that signifies many several different things: whereby may be gathered, that to converse with them, it is requisite to know the principles of Musick and the Counter-point.] (From Chapter VI: *Of the Civil and Politicke Gouvernment of Cochín-China*)

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the phonemic role of tone in Far Eastern languages was described in a monographic publication in Europe (although Francisco de Pina mentions *toadas* "tonalities" in
Vietnamese already in a letter dated 1622 or 1623.\(^1\) Borri not only formulates the popular impression that Vietnamese is not spoken, but ‘sung’; he also notes that tone has a distinctive function.

In the following passages, Borri describes the main characteristics of the Vietnamese language which he had clearly understood by its own inherent properties, not being influenced at all by misconceptions stemming from Latin school grammar; there is no European bias in his observations; quite the contrary, Borri puts particular emphasis on the points where Vietnamese differs radically from familiar European languages. First, he states that Vietnamese and Chinese are typologically similar, although materially both languages are quite different:

Il parlarne de’ Cocincinesi, benche sia simile à quello de’ Cinesi in vna particolarità, vando così quest, como quelli parole tutte mno sillabe proferite, e pronuntiato con varietà de’ toni, & accenti; con tutto ciò nel materiale istesso delle parole differiscono totalmente, sendo in oltre il Cocincinese più copioso, & abondante de’ vocali, e però più dolce, e più soave; più ricco d’accenti, e toni, e però più melodico, e consonante.

[Now albeit the Language of the Cochín-Chinois be therein like to that of the Chinois, that they use only words of one Syllable, pronounced with diversity of tones and accents; yet they differ much in this, that the Cochín-Chinois are more fruitful and abounding in Vowells, and therefore more sweet and pleasing: riche in accents and in tones, and so more melodious and harmonious:...]

He goes on with a brief description of the central point in the morphosyntactic typology of Vietnamese: it may be phonetically complex, but the absence of any overt grammatical morphology makes it the most easy language to learn. He makes the following statements:

Per chi naturalmente ha orecchio musico, per capire la varietà de’toni, & accenti, è la Cocincina la più facile lingua d’ogni altra al mio parer; poiche questa non ha varietà alcuna nè di coniugazioni de’verbi, nè di declinazioni de’nomi; ma con vna sola voce, n vocabolo, aggiuntovi vn’aduerbio, n pronome significa tempo presente, n präterito, e futuro, il numero d’vno, e delii più; & in somma supplisce à tutti li modi, a tutti li tempi, à tutte le persone, & alla diversità così de’numeri, come de’cas; e per darne vn’esempio; questa voce Hauere, che in lingua Cocincina si dice Co, senza altra variatione, che d’aggiungerui il pronome significa ciò, che diressimo io hauer, tu hauer, quel hauer, esprimendo co’l nome della persona quello, che noi sogliamo diversificare con mutare la terminazione, dicendo, io hò, tò hai, quello ha: nelle medesima maniera per supplire la diversità de’tempi, diriamo per il presente io adesso hauer, per il präterito, io già hauer, per il futuro, io dopo, o nell’auenire hauere, & così di mano in mano, senza mai variare il Co, dal che si vede con quanta facilità, si possi imparare questa lingua; come successe à me, che in sei mesi ne seppi tanto, che poteuo e trattare,

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\(^1\) See Jacques (2002:136). I thank Otto Zwartjes for having brought this point to my attention.
& anche sentire le loro Confessioni, quantunque non asi perfettamente; perch'è farsene ben padrone vi vogliono per lo meno quattro anni continuati. [p. 78-79]

[...in such sort that they have their ease made for Musicke, proper and apt to distinguish the variety of tunes and accents.

The language of Cochin-China is to my seeming the most ease of all; because it hath neither conjunctions Verbes [sic], nor Declining of Nouns: but with one only word, adding therunto an aduerbe or a pronoun, maketh knowe the time passed, the present, and to come; the singular number and the plural, and supplieth all the Moods, Tenses and persons, as also the diversity of Numbers and of Cases. As for example, this word Haue (which in the Cochin-Chinois tongue is expressed by Co) without other variation but adding a Pronoun, will serve all occasions: and so that whereas we should say by Coniugation, I haue, thou hast, he hath; they contenting themselves with the Pronoun, without varying the Verbe, would say, I haue, you haue, he haue: In like manner to supply the diversity of the Tenses, they will say in the Present, I now haue; for the passed, I heretofore haue; and for the future, I hereafter, or in time to come haue; and so from one to the other, without ever changing their Co; whence it easily appeareth, how easie this tongue is to be learned, as indeed, in six Months whiles I was there; I learned as much was sufficient to treat them, and to understand their Confessions; though I had not the perfect knowledge thereof; for to say the truth, foure whole yeeres were no more the requisite to make one exact, and excellent therein.]

(From Chapter VI: Of the Civill and Politicke Gouvernement of Cochin-China)

Borri was truly perspicacious in his analysis, describing straightforwardly and without any eurocentric bias the essential property of an isolating language like Vietnamese: person and tense in the verb, case in the noun, and number in both can, but need not, be expressed by independent words, such as pronouns and adverbs. The lack of irregular morphology makes it easy for the beginner to learn the language; of course, for a full command of it much more time and effort is needed, and this is a general rule valid for all languages: there are differences of ease or difficulty in the beginning, but these differences are levelled out in later stages of learning — in the end, all languages are equally difficult! Be this as it may, from the lines quoted above it can clearly be deduced that Borri had an immense admiration for the beauty and the elegance of Vietnamese, and that he considered the irregularities of European languages as something profoundly superfluous.

Let us add that the verb co "to have" is indeed one of the most important function words of Vietnamese even today. It is spelled có in the modern orthography, based on the Latin alphabet with numerous diacritics. This orthographical system, known as quoc-ngu, had been devised by the Portuguese missionaries Gaspar de Amaral S.J. and Antonio de Barbosa S.J.; later on, the famous French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes S.J. (1591–1660) improved and completed it. As is well known, this missionary orthography
(with minor modifications) is still in use in present-day Vietnamese, having completely supplanted the traditional Chinese script during French colonial rule.

The verb có has a similar meaning and range of functions to the Chinese verb yǒu (see Li & Thompson 1981:510ff.). The basic meaning is “to exist”. As a monovalent verb, it is usually translated as “there is”; as a bivalent verb, it can be translated either as “there is”, with a locative expression in subject position, or as “to have” with an animate or inanimate subject. Meaning and function in Chinese and Vietnamese are virtually identical; this verb represents a semantic categorisation typical of Far Eastern languages which cuts across genetic boundaries among language families. Here are a few examples for illustration:

có [kó]: “to have, possess, exist” (Nguyễn-Văn-Khôn 1966, s.v.)

Đây có nhiều người.
“There are many people here.”
[Ch. zhèlǐ yǒu hěnduō rén]

Việt-nam có nhiều người.
“Vietnam has many people.”
[Ch. Yuèn-nán yǒu hěnduō rén]

Ở Việt-nam có nhiều người.
“In Vietnam there are many people.”
[Ch. zài Yuèn-nán yǒu hěnduō rén]

Nhà có năm phòng
“the house has five rooms.”
[Ch. jiāngwū yǒu wǔge fāngjiān]
(Thompson 1965: 226; Nguyễn Phú Phong 1975: 45; Mandarin translations mine, GB)

3. Tommaso Campanella (1568–1639)

Borri’s description of Vietnam and the Vietnamese language came to the attention of the famous philosopher and poet Tommaso Campanella, and it had a profound impact on his linguistic thought. Let me first give a brief overview of his life.

Tommaso Campanella was born in 1568 in Stilo (Calabria). He entered the Dominican order in 1582. In 1589 he came to Naples. His first philosophical work, Philosophia sensibus demonstrata (1591) made him suspect to the Inquisition. In 1593 he fled to Padua. From 1598 on, he was head of a Calabrese insurrectional plot against Spanish domination. He was captured and had to feign madness in order to save his life. From 1599 to 1626 he was
incarcerated by the Spanish Inquisition in Naples. Afterwards, he tried to have his ideas recognised by the Papal authorities in Rome. In 1634, the discovery of a new anti-Spanish revolt in Calabria forced him to flee to Paris, where he was well received by Richelieu and Louis XIII. He died in Paris in 1639. Campanella defended Galileo publicly (Apologia di Galilei, 1631), and is the author of extended philosophical works, written in Latin, but his lasting renown is mainly based on his utopian work La città del sole, written in Italian. He was also one of the greatest poets of his time and wrote extensively on rhetoric and poetics.

For decades, Campanella elaborated an all-embracing philosophy on a rationalistic basis. He tried to reconstruct the medieval trivium on a new base, namely one on inherent rational principles directly deducible from the subject matter in question, not on traditional authorities. This magnum opus was one of his main occupations from his youth until the year before his death. When Campanella was in prison, he was under the control of the Inquisition; therefore earlier versions of his work exist only in manuscript form. The work as a whole could only be published in book form when he was in France, under the protection of the French crown, in the last years of his life. The Philosophia rationalis finally appeared in print in Paris in 1638, one year after Descartes’ Discours de la méthode.

The first part of his Philosophia rationalis is devoted to grammar, in accordance with the order of the trivium; its title is simply Grammaticalia. Up to now, this work has not yet received the attention it undoubtedly merits; it was carefully edited and provided with useful historical notes by Firpo in his 1954 edition of Campanella, but it has never been studied in depth, neither by philosophers nor by historiographers of linguistics. At the time of its publication, the work did not have a great echo, in contrast to the highly popular utopian work La città del sole. It was never reprinted, and today its original is extremely rare in the libraries of Europe. This situation contrasts sharply with the reception of Borri’s work, commented on above. Probably the main reason for this lies in the fact that it was formulated in Latin. Like Galileo and Descartes, Campanella wrote part of his work in the classical language, and part of it in the vernacular; all these authors had a much broader audience with their works written in Italian and French than with their Latin works.

In the history of linguistic thought, Campanella’s book on Grammaticalia is an important landmark. As we shall see, this work provides for the first time a definition of the parts of speech not founded on the overt morphology of the classical languages, but on underlying universal principles.
Campanella was well aware of Borri’s report on East Asian civilisation. He quotes his work textually several times and in different contexts. Let us first consider briefly a passage where Borri is mentioned as an astronomer. At that historical moment, astronomy was the main vehicle of enlightenment; nature had become calculable, and this led to the refutation of any kind of superstition. The movements of the stars and such spectacular events as eclipses were no longer thought to be due to some obscure divine forces or to the enchanting songs of priests; from now on, they could be predicted precisely. The Copernican turn in cosmology had taken place, and as we have mentioned, Borri as well as Campanella defended the theses of Galileo against ecclesiastical prosecution. Here is the passage in question:

Ex eclipsis eventibus fabulati sunt veteres potuisse carminibus lunam obscurari et auxilium a nobis requirenc: quod ex ignorantia causarum eclipsis ortum duxit et ex superstitionisorum iactantia, ut Ambrosius tempore suo factitatum narrat et nunc Borrus in Cochinchina. (Poëtica, Firpo 1954:962)

[Concerning the events of eclipse, the ancients said that the moon could be obscured and asked for help by spell-songs; this comes from the ignorance of the cause of eclipses and from the arrogance of the superstitious, as Ambrose told to have happened in his time, and now Borri in Cochinchina.] (English translations mine, GB.)

When he arrives at the description of the accents of Greek, Campanella is able, thanks to Borri’s work, to compare them with the much more elaborate tonal system of Vietnamese. Here we find a first sketch — albeit still in a very rudimentary form — of a typological comparison of tonemes in different languages. At that time, such an approach was completely novel. Again, Borri is explicitly named:

Ponendae etiam sunt notulae tonorum, qui dicuntur accentus, ut pronunciatio non aberret. Sunt autem tres: acutus, qui acuit elevatque syllabam; gravis, qui deprimit; circumflexus, qui componitur ex acuto et gravi. Pluribus abundant Cocinchineses, quoniam illis monosyllaba sunt omnia vocabula et plura significant pro plurali varietate accentuum: testi Patre Borro. (Ibid. 692)

[One has to put small notes for the tones, which are called accents, so that the pronunciation does not go astray. They are three: the acute, which makes the syllable acute and elevates it; the grave, which presses it down; and the circumflex, which is composed of the acute and the grave. The Cocinchinese have abundantly more, since all their words are monosyllabic and have several meanings according to the manifold variety of accents: my witness is Father Borri.]

Borri’s description of the Chinese script gave Campanella an opportunity to draw a sketch of a general typology of writing systems. This typology is still in an embryonic stage, since no exact knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphs or of
Babylonian cuneiform was available. Nevertheless, he clearly recognised the fundamental difference between the logographic and the phonographic principle:

Alii quidem uno charactere scribunt vocabulum unum, et hoc dupliciter contingit: vel delineazione imitando, ita ut verbi gratia, «о» significet panem et «вин» vinum, sicut Chinesibus usurpatur, ex quibus ille doctior, qui plures characteres scit, quoniam plura vocabula et res ascendent autem characteres quas ad octies milés. Alii vero utentur figura consimili, ut Aegyptii, vel symbolica, quomadmodum Chaldæi. ... Alii imitantur particulam vocis individualis, ut Hebræi, Chaldæi, Latini, Graeci. (Ibid. 680)

[Some people write one word with one character, and this occurs in a twofold way: either by imitating through design, as when, for instance, «о» means “bread” and «вин» means “wine”, as is usually done by the Chinese, among which a man who knows more characters is considered more cultivated, because he knows more words and more things. The number of characters amounts to about 8,000. Other people use a similar figure, as the Egyptians, or a symbolic one, as the Chaldeans [= Assyrians and Babylonians]. ... Other people imitate the individual particulars of the voice, as the Hebrews, Chaldeans [= Arameans], Latins and Greeks.]

The number 8,000 seems to come directly from Borri, although this author says that Chinese has ottantamila different characters, which undoubtedly means 80,000. This last number is of course greatly exaggerated; the most extensive Chinese dictionary, the Kang Xi cédian, contains about 48,000 characters, many of them doublets or spurious forms. An educated mandarin would in fact need to be conversant with about 8,000 characters. Perhaps Campanella has corrected the number given by Borri, according to complementary information he had at his disposal.

The formulation “imitantur particulam vocis individualis” is noteworthy as an early attempt to provide a general definition of the phonographic principle, the term ‘sound’ (in contrast to ‘letter’) not yet being available.

In accordance with his rationalistic approach to all domains of philosophy, Campanella provides an outline for a rationalistic philosophy of language, too. He conceives an axiomatic theory of language structure, trying to deduce essential properties of language from a few fundamental premises. This kind of ‘grammar’ stands in sharp contrast to the description of languages for practical purposes; to express it in modern terms: linguistic theory and structural analysis are totally different from didactic grammars and textbooks. Campanella emancipates linguistic theory from the tradition of Latin school grammar; reflection on universals of language has nothing to do with language learning. In this context, he proposes a distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘philosophical’ grammar, classifying the former as an ‘art’ (in the sense of the
Greek τέχνη, and only the latter as a true ‘science’ (in the sense of the Greek ἕπιστήμη):

Duplex grammatica: alia civilis, alia philosophica. Civilis, peritiam est, non scientiam: constat enim ex autoritate usque clarorum scriptorum. Philosophica vero ratione constat; et haec scientiam olet. Est enim investigantis intellectus et notantis investigata, caputanimque et dirimentis res, prout in natura reperuntur, methodus. [...] Grammatica civilis habet actum in qua viget et illam amplificatur grammatici [...] At philosophica non agnoscit actum linguae, sed rationalitatem, amplificatur vocabula omnium temporum. (438-442)

[Grammar is twofold: civil and philosophical. The civil is a craft, not a science, because it relies on the authority and usage of famous writers. But the philosophical relies on reason, and therefore it has a touch of science. It is a method of the intellect which investigates and notes down observations, establishing relationships and distinctions between things as they are found in nature. [...] Civil grammar has its age when it is valid, and the grammarians only grasp that age. But the philosophical grammar does not care about the age of language, but about its rationality, and grasps the words of all ages.]

To put it in modern terms: the deep structure of Language (Saussure’s langage) underlying the surface variety of languages (Saussure’s langue) is not subject to change since it is based on the eternal laws of reason. However, in order to be able to distinguish the immutable, universal properties of language from the historically contingent, particular ones, it is necessary to acquire concrete knowledge about the real diversity found in the world’s languages. This becomes especially evident in the case of the definition of word classes, traditionally called ‘parts of speech’ (partes orationis, according to the Greek μέρη λόγου).

In traditional Latin school grammar, stemming from Donatus (Ars maior and Ars minor, ~350) and Priscian (Institutiones grammaticae, ~500), which dominated Western linguistic thought for more than a millennium, the division of words into different classes formed the base of grammar. Eight parts of speech were usually distinguished, but there was also a general awareness of the fact that the noun-verb distinction is more fundamental than anything else. Besides the most widespread eight-class model we also find a three-class model (verb, noun, particle) which ultimately stems from a Platonic tradition reinforced in the Renaissance by the influence of native traditions in Arabic and Hebrew grammar.

For Campanella, the noun-verb distinction is essential. However, the question remains as to how to define it. In this context, the testimony of an isolating language like Vietnamese was essential for his thinking. Borri’s short description gave him the decisive stimulus for going beyond traditional school
grammar. He was able to take the step from ‘civil’ to ‘philosophical’ grammar in the definition of word classes as he became aware of a concrete, really existing example of a language which could do without the usual attributes of verbness and nowness, namely conjugation and declension. The structural configuration found in Vietnamese led him to the conclusion that a universal definition of word classes had to be founded on other principles than morphology. Accordingly, he developed the hypothesis of a system of axiomatic elements, the different combinations of which formed the logico-semantic base for defining the parts of speech.

Here is Campanella’s universal definition of the verb:

Hinc vides quantopere falluntur grammatici, dicentes verbum esse partem orationis declinabilem, et demnde non loquentur amplius de declinacione, sed de coniugatione. Item, dicunt verbum esse significativum actionis et passionis, cum verba substantialia et neutra, etiam ipsorum testimonio, non dicant actionem neque passionem. Quod autem addunt grammatici: “verbum est pars orationis declinabile, quod cum modis, formis et temporibus agendi vel patienti significativum est”, non pertinet ad definitionem, sicut in Logica declaratur; non enim ex hoc est verbum, quod habet modos et tempora, sed ex hoc, quod actum fluentem ab essentia: et quidem verbum substantialia non habet neque significat tempus: et multa verba heteroclita: et tempus accidit eis ex hoc, quod actus non subito fit, ut alibi docemus. Praeterea in lingua Chinensium et Cocinichensium verba non declinantur personis, nec temporibus variantur, sed notulis, ut suo in loco aperiemus: ergo accident haece verbo, non essentiam verbum. (Grammaticalia, ed. Firpo 1954:528)

[So you see to what extent the grammarians are in error when they say that the verb is a declinable part of speech, and then they do not speak more in detail about declension, but about conjugation. In the same way, they say that the verb signifies action and passion, whereas by their own testimony the substantive and neutral verbs express neither action nor passion. But what the grammarians add, namely, that “the verb is a declinable part of speech because it expresses meaning by modes, forms, and tenses of action and passion”, does not belong to the definition, as is explained in the Logic; for a verb is a verb not because it has modes and tenses, but because it denotes an act flowing from an essence: the substantive verb and many heteroclitic verbs even do not have nor express time at all; and time is accidental to them because the act is not immediate, as we will show elsewhere. Moreover, in the language of the Chinese and of the Cocinchinese, verbs are not declined according to person, nor are they modified according to tense, but only by particles, as we will make clear in its place: all these features are accidental, not essential for the verb.]

Neither tense nor mode nor person is essential. The basic point is that the verb signifies “actum fluentem ab essentia”. A noticeable feature of this passage is the formulation “accidunt haec verbo, non essentiam verbum”, with the typically scholastic verbs accidere + DAT and essentiare + ACC.
As for the noun, Campanella refers not only to East Asian languages, but also to the nearby and familiar example of the Romance vernaculars and the Semitic languages, all of which, according to him, lack case. He is (partially) mistaken with respect to Arabic, since in the classical, written language case endings have been preserved, although in the spoken form of the language and in the modern ‘dialects’ these have disappeared. In his discussion of the definition of nouns and verbs, Campanella quotes almost literally Borri’s description of the structure of Vietnamese:

Quemadmodum in lingua Hebraica, Itala, Arabica, Hispana et Gallicana non dantur casus nominum, sed loco ipsarum ponuntur articuli, sic etiam in lingua Cœnicchinarum et aliarum orientalium non dantur declinationes verborum aptandae personis, neque temporum varietas, neque varietae verborum aptandae temporibus, et ideo omne verbum est instar impersonalis vel infinitivi. Distinctio autem fit per adverbia temporalia, ut si dicerem ‘nunc amo, impostrum amo, ante amo’, sic in personis situm ‘ego amo, tu amo, Petrus amo’, ita quod non dantur concordantiae temporum, nec personarum, neque casuum, sed particulae adverbiales et agnuminales totam orationem construunt et distinguunt, mirifica brevitate ac dicendi facile. [ibid. p. 600]

[Just as Hebrew, Italian, Arabic, Spanish and French lack nominal case endings, putting articles instead of these, in the same way Vietnamese and other oriental languages have neither verbal endings referring to person, nor a variety of tenses, nor a variety of verbs referring to the different times, and so each verb is like an impersonal verb or an infinitive. However, the distinction is made by temporal adverbs, as if I would say “now love, later love, before love”; likewise, for referring to persons they say “I love, thou love, Peter love”, so that there is no concordance of tenses, nor of persons, nor of cases, but adverbial and adnominal particles construct and differentiate the whole sentence, resulting in an astonishing conciseness and ease of speaking.]

Campanella not only quotes Borri’s structural description, he also shares his admiration for a language reduced to the necessary minimum. Borri’s enthusiasm for things Vietnamese had been contagious! Borri had stressed the ease with which a language of the isolating type could be learned; Campanella goes further; he also mentions the facilites of speaking, but his delight in the mirifica brevitas of this language has a philosophical touch. A language devoid of all superfluous oddities is the dream of a philosopher.

For the founding fathers of linguistic typology, Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845) and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), as well as for their imitators and successors all through the nineteenth century (such as Schleicher, Steinthal, Misteli, Finck) inflection represented a linguistic ideal. Sanskrit was thought to be the most perfect language, with all the exuberant glory of its profuse declensions and conjugations. Romanticism was ages away from the sobriety of rationalism and
enlightenment, which had produced the ideal figure of the grammairien-
philosophe. From this latter’s point of view, an inflectional language of the
older Indo-European type is rather a nightmare, whereas the ideal type of a
philosophical grammarian would be the isolating one — a type which was later
(dis)qualified as ‘formless’ by Friedrich Schlegel!

Interestingly, the perspective of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century
linguistics, which had been superseded by the Romanticists’ typological
tradition, has been revived in recent times by the Russian typologist Boris
Uspsenskij, who has postulated a universal metalanguage as a kind of ‘standard/
measure/rule’ according to which all concrete languages can be compared; he
calls it jazyk étalon, using the French term ‘étalon’. The isolating type comes
closest to this ideal standard of all languages; the analytical structures of this
language type best meet the requirements of a philosophical ‘standard
language’. Uspsenskij’s theory can be regarded as a late echo of the discussions
on isolating language structures of the seventeenth century.

The passage just quoted bears the title De concordantia in nationum linguis
et quae demuo institui possunt (“About the concordance in the languages of the
nations, and what can be inferred anew therefrom”). The concordance in the
languages of the nations is exactly what linguistic typology and universals
research aims at: the “great underlying ground plans” of human language, as
Winfred Lehmann once put it. In the same vein, the dream of an artificial
language capable of overcoming the Babylonian confusion of mankind has to
be based on true universals of linguistic structure. And these can best be
detected in isolating languages.

The last words of the passage quoted above are as follows:

Quapropter, qui novam linguam invenire studet, haec notabit et quae dicta sunt, dum de
partibus orationis loqueremur. [ibid. p. 600]

[Therefore, whosoever desires to invent a new language, will have to take note of this
and of what is said when we speak about the parts of speech.]

The question of a universal artificial language was in the focus of interest in
the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (see Eco 1993). Surely Campanella
was right when postulating that such a universal language should
resemble Chinese or Vietnamese rather than inflectional Indo-European. Espe-
ranto, for instance, has remained profoundly European; it is a far cry from a
truly universal ‘standard measure’ language, as implicitly postulated by
Campanella. Surely, English is closer to that ideal, and this may partly explain
its success as the ‘universalese’ of our time.
4. Outlook

Two generations later, another philosopher, one of the greatest of all times, dreamt of a universal artificial language: Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) (for just a few titles on Leibniz and China, see Merkel (1952[1920]), Perkins (2004), and Widmaier (2006). He was fascinated by all things Chinese, and was an avid reader of missionary reports on the Middle Kingdom. He saw Chinese as a model for a universal language, less so because of its internal structure, but rather because of the logographic nature of the Chinese characters which in principle work as a language-independent universal code. The dream of using the Chinese script as a universal code has not come true on a worldwide scale, although in East Asia the script has gained wide currency as a means of encoding with the same, unchanged characters languages of very different natures.

Leibniz also took an active part in the so-called ‘rites controversy’ where the relationship between Chinese religiosity and the monotheistic revelation was an object of bitter and intense discussion: could the Roman Catholic church, on which the missionaries evidently depended entirely, accept the rites of the Chinese? If these were to be considered as true manifestations of a religion, this was impossible; it could have been done only if the rites were considered as a kind of folklore without genuine religious content. Rome, the far-away centre of power, decided not to tolerate the traditional system of rites and forbade missionaries to do so. This soon led to the end of all missionary activities in the Chinese Empire, since no Chinese ruler could have accepted the abandonnement of the rites.

Another debate of immense relevance in which Leibniz took part is the question of the translation of basic concepts of Christendom, especially the notion of ‘God’, into Chinese. This was a field where worlds collided: how can the idea of a personal God be reconciled with the idea of a universal ‘way’ (dào) of nature? Is translation possible? With this question, missionary linguistics touches a point of fundamental importance for the dialogue between East and West.

All these matters cannot be discussed here. Let me simply conclude by stating that Campanella transformed Borri’s vivid and colourful description of Vietnamese into the cornerstone of a new rationalistic conception of language and linguistic philosophy, which preceded later discussion on language universals by decades. I think it is important to unearth such connections. Missionary linguistics is a promising field, providing many unexpected and hitherto unexplored perspectives on language and philosophy as well as on religion. Questions of grammar, semantics, and the historiography of
linguistics can have general implications of great importance. The accumulation of knowledge of ‘exotic’ language structures led to a deeper understanding of language in general. In his remarkable book on the encounter of the Europeans with the rest of the world, Urs Bitterli wrote: “Die Einsicht in die Relativität unterschiedlicher kultureller Lebensformen traf den philosophischen Leser wie eine Erleuchtung.” (Bitterli 1976:209). What was valid for ‘cultural forms of life’ in general, was valid also for linguistic structures: Europeans became aware of the relativity of the languages they were familiar with, and so came closer to an understanding of the real unity of human language beyond linguistic diversity.

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