

“Ad captum vulgi”. The Meaning and Limits of a Spinozian Syntagm

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Abstract Spinoza’s question of language is examined through the use of the syntagm *Ad captum vulgi*, a recurring theme in various passages of his works. The first rule of life set forth in the TdIE requires the philosopher, guided by prudence, to adapt language to the understanding of the common people, both for the practical benefits it can bring and to more easily dispose the common people, dominated by ignorance and passion, to listen to the truth. However, the common people are rigorously excluded from his written works, in which philosophy is explored and promoted with its own demonstrative language inspired by the mathematical model. In his written works in particular, the philosopher’s interest is not in language, but in the “things” or doctrines to be communicated.

Keywords Language. Common people. Philosophy. Revelation. Prudence.

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I know that these names, in common use, mean something else. My purpose, however, is not to clarify the meaning of the words, but the nature of things, indicating them with those terms whose usual meaning does not entirely exclude the meaning in which I wish to use them. Let this warning suffice once and for all.
(E III, AfDef 20, expl)

1 Introduction

Spinoza does not formally define ‘language’ but he does address the spoken and written word and signs. These are understood both as conventional symbolic representations and as spontaneous or controlled behaviours that, in a given context, acquire meaning and communicative value. We could therefore offer Spinoza a definition of ‘language’ as a system of signs developed for knowledge, communication and action.

This system of signs is elaborated mainly by the imagination, while intellectual knowledge is produced by the pure mind, unfettered by words and images, i.e., immediately, as occurred in the intellect of Christ;¹ but if this is so, how is it possible to express the concepts of the pure mind with signs? The question has not been ignored by interpreters and has even given rise to opposing positions, between supporters of the overall coherence of the system and its opponents convinced that this question would introduce an irreparable fracture.²

On my part, I have had the opportunity to discuss the problem on several occasions, starting with *Ars imaginandi*, examining the question against the backdrop of the general theory of imagination and in relation to the themes of representation and expression.³ Here I show that, while it is true that the pure concepts of the intellect cannot be formed through words and signs, this does not prevent them from being expressed through the imagination, of which memory is a part, on the basis of the doctrine of the ontological identity of body

1 TTP 4,10; cf. TTP 1,28. Citations are given according to the PUF edition (Spinoza, *Oeuvres*, sous la Direction de Pierre-François Moreau: I, *Premiers Écrits*, 2009; III, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, 1999; IV, *Ethique*, 2020; V, *Tractatus politicus*, 2005) with reference to the volume number, page and lines. For works not published in the ed. PUF, I follow the Gebhardt edition, indicated by the abbreviation G. For textual references that are not citations, I indicate the acronym of the work, the chapter and the paragraph. The English translations of the cited texts are mine.

2 Criticizing the position taken by Hampshire 1951, Savan 1958 argues for the aporetic nature of Spinoza’s philosophy regarding the question of language, a position taken up and refuted by Parkinson 1969; for subsequent discussions see Chiereghin 1976; Dascal 1977; Zac 1977; Dominguez 1978; Moreau 1994; Messeri 1995; Diodato 1995; Vinciguerra 2005; 2006; Hervet 2012; Martinet 2013; Sangiacomo 2013; Laerke 2014.

3 Mignini 1981, 196-217.

and mind formulated in E II, p7: there is nothing in the mind that does not also have expression in the body, and vice versa. Therefore, if words and signs are expressions of the body, appropriately ordered (for example, through the geometric method), they can, indeed must, be able to, also express the pure concepts of the intellect, without demanding a perfect correspondence between the common use of words and the meaning that the philosopher attributes to them, as he declares “once and for all” in the exergue I placed at the beginning. If this were not the case, the fundamental thesis of the ontological identity of mind and body would be undermined.⁴ I have returned to this topic on other occasions, studying the question of language both in relation to the general theme of communication and to that of representation and expression. For a more detailed analysis of these themes, please refer to these works.⁵

Here I will attempt to examine the question of language from the perspective of communicating philosophy in a political perspective,⁶ commenting on the syntagm *ad captum vulgi*, interpreted in relation to spoken and written language. This question should also be examined, complementarily, from the perspective of the institutional strategies for containing the *vulgus* and its transformation into *cives*, as developed in the TP, which also relate to the question of language, but in a broader sense. For reasons of space, this second part will be examined on another occasion.

2 *Ad captum vulgi loqui*

The expression appears in the first of the three rules of life set forth in the TdIE in § 17, immediately after having specified that all our knowledge must be directed towards a single goal, that is, “the achievement of supreme human perfection”.⁷ The first rule concerns the language and practices of external life to be followed in relation to the *vulgus*:

To speak according to the understanding of the common people and to perform all those actions that do not pose any obstacle to the achievement of our goal. Indeed, we can gain no small advantage from them if we adapt ourselves, as far as possible, to their understanding. Add that in this way they will lend friendly ears to the truth. (I,72,18-21)

⁴ E II, p7 and s; E III, p2s.

⁵ Mignini 2000; 2007a; 2007b; 2009.

⁶ A reference to this perspective can be found in Bove 1991.

⁷ TdIE 16: I,72,10-11.

The rule requires that spoken language (*loqui*) and lifestyles should conform to the understanding and behaviour of the common people to the extent that this does not compromise, or jeopardise, the goal of perfection. This rule has two purposes: the benefits that can be derived from its inevitable presence in daily life; and so the possibility of thus directing it, thanks to the honour it can earn, towards listening to the truth. Since the pursuit of human perfection is not achieved singularly and in isolation, but with the greatest possible number of other individuals,⁸ the conditions for the effective communication of philosophy must be created. The moral dimension of this rule, guaranteed by the benefit achieved, and the political significance of its object, the community to which one belongs which is constituted, overwhelmingly, by the common people, are clear here.

The reason why the project of human perfection cannot be implemented without involving the common people, even though they are entirely alien to it, is also clear, both in Spinoza's political works and in the thinking of his fellow authors with whom he collaborated in pursuit of the same goals:⁹ the society to which one belongs is formed by the totality of citizens gathered under a common law, the ultimate holder of the power of that society and of the State.¹⁰ Here, then, is the political reason for the first rule of life, not provisional, as it might appear with Descartes in mind, but permanent and stable, which prescribes the use of a language calibrated to the capacity of the common people to understand.

If this rule therefore appears necessary and permanent, always valid, so long as there are imperfect human societies, one must ask whether it is actually productive,¹¹ given the characteristics that Spinoza also attributes to the *vulgus*, also on the basis of an ancient tradition.

3 Nature and Power of the *vulgus*

To approach Spinoza's notion of the *vulgus*, let us examine how this Latin term is rendered in the parallel passage of the Dutch translation of the *Nagelate Schriften*:¹² “Naar de bevatting van ‘t gemeen te spreken...”. The closest translation of *het gemeen* is “the common

⁸ TdIE 13-15.

⁹ Bordoli 2001.

¹⁰ TP, chap. 8, § 3 ad finem: “If there is absolute sovereignty, it is that held by the entire multitude”. Cf. the analogous position of A. Koerbagh, below, p. 8.

¹¹ Sangiacomo 2013 p. 207 et seq. notes the issue, considering it aporetic and interpreting it differently from the one proposed here.

¹² Spinoza 1677.

people”, who constitute the majority of a country’s population that Spinoza, elsewhere, also refers to with the terms of *plebs*, *multitudo*, and *populus*.¹³

The first difficulty in realizing the program envisioned by the first rule arises from the natural inclinations of the vulgar, who seek things contrary to their own preservation:

But all those things which the common people follow not only do not offer any benefit to the preservation of our being, but may even hinder it: they are often the cause of the ruin of those who possess them (if one can say ‘possess’) and are always the cause of the ruin of those who are possessed by them. (TdIE § 7; G II,7,5-9)

The main weakness of the *vulgus* is therefore a radical compromise, due to ignorance, of the *conatus* which, instead of achieving preservation and empowerment, achieves, despite illusions, the destruction of its own being. Note that here it is not only individual preservation that is at stake but, due to the large number of individuals bent on destroying their own being, also that of society as a whole. The *vulgus*, elevated to political decision-making status, is necessarily destructive, as both history and our own present, demonstrate with dramatic clarity.

Why are the common people unable to provide for the preservation of their own being, both individual and collective? First of all, because of the weakness and fragility (*imbecillitas*) of their *ingenium*,¹⁴ that is totally dominated by the power of the imagination. The notions with which common people usually explain nature are imaginative,¹⁵ as is their idea of the power of God.¹⁶ From this it follows that their *animus* is *tenuis* and *impotens*,¹⁷ *rudis*,¹⁸ *varius et inconstans*,¹⁹ therefore extremely changeable and unreliable. His opinions are *praeconceptiones*,²⁰ that is, the legacy of ancient traditions that have not been examined and discussed, hence *praejudicia*.²¹ From all this it follows that the *vulgus* is *superstitioni addictus*, because it loves

13 On this topic and on the fluctuations in meaning of these terms, see Saccaro Battistii 1984; Cristofolini 2008.

14 TTP 5,18: III,232,10.

15 E I, App 9: IV,158,9-13.

16 E II, p3s: IV,164,21-4; cf. in this regard Ep 54: G IV,251,9-11.

17 E V, p41s: IV,494,20.

18 TTP 13,9: III,460,20-1.

19 TTP Praef. 5: III,60,16-24; cf. 14,1: III,464,1-11.

20 TTP 15,1: III,482,10; 180,25-6)

21 TTP 15,1; III,482,15.

time more than eternity and adores the books of Scripture more than the word of God itself.²²

We know what the books of Scripture are; what Spinoza means here by the word of God, as opposed to the books of Scripture, which latter he considers be not the true word of God, must be explained. For Spinoza, “word of God” means “a simple concept of divine thought revealed to the prophets: obeying God with a pure heart, cultivating justice and charity”.²³ But since this concept coincides with the dictates of reason, by the “true word of God” we can consider both human reason, granted identically to all men, and nature with its laws, which reason is able to understand and explain. The common people, however, detest natural knowledge²⁴ and have no sound concept of either nature or of God.²⁵

One essential consideration that helps understand the nature of the *vulgus* is its relationship with Sacred Scripture. In fact, the latter was constituted *ad captum vulgi*,²⁶ and equally the main instrument of accrediting Scripture, the miracle,²⁷ was instituted *ad captum vulgi*, because the *vulgus* judges the power of God by the occurrence of unusual things.²⁸ However, although Scripture was constituted in order to conform with both the ability of the *vulgus* to understand, and with its opinions,²⁹ the *vulgus* does not seek to live according to the precepts of the former.³⁰ This means that, although a bond of mutual nourishment has been established between the *vulgus* and Scripture, what there is in Scripture that conforms with reason is not enough to modify the mind of the *vulgus*. How is it possible then to think that, where Scripture, with its language drawn from the vulgar and composed for the vulgar, has failed, philosophy can succeed, striving to also speak *ad captum vulgi*? Spinoza’s answer distinguishes between oral and written language. The philosopher’s oral language must adapt to the understanding of the masses; written philosophy excludes such adaptation, as we will see, since it addresses itself only to philosophers.

A further reflection concerns the origin and nature of words, born within the *vulgus* and constituted *ad libitum et captum vulgi*, can

²² TTP Praef. 10: III,70,10-13.

²³ TTP Praef. 10: III,70,13-17.

²⁴ TTP 1,2: III,78,17; 79,12.

²⁵ TTP 6,1: III,240,21-5. See also E I, App: IV,158,9-11.

²⁶ TTP 6,13: III,260,2-8; TTP 14,11: III,478,9-11.

²⁷ TTP 6,5: III,246,2-9.

²⁸ TTP 6,1: III,238,1-12; 240,1-6.

²⁹ Ep 78: G IV,328,2-3.

³⁰ TTP 7,1: III,276,3-15. Here the reference is also to theologians, who in this respect are also part of the common people.

be read in the TdIE.³¹ Also in the CM Spinoza states that words were initially discovered by the *vulgus* and that to understand their meaning today we must understand, or rediscover, their original, past, meanings.³² However, this being the case, the difficulty seems to increase: if all words, including those of philosophy, derive from the *vulgus* and must be used knowing the meaning that the *vulgus* originally gave them, how will it be possible to use vulgar words in the work of emendation? In fact, words must be used with the meaning assigned to them by the *vulgus*, because otherwise they would not understand and the first rule would be contravened; on the other hand, if all these words express the power of the imagination, how can use them to expound concepts and rules of reason?

In the *exergue* I placed at the beginning, Spinoza declares that he is not interested in explaining the meaning of words. This statement has no critical value for those who dedicate themselves to this task, as, for example, his friends Louis Meyer and Adriaan Koerbagh do in their dictionaries. He intends to clarify his task: to explain the nature of things. And since he must use words, he uses common words with the meaning closest to the nature of the thing he wishes to express, provided that it falls within the general meaning of the common word used. Thus, the connection with the *vulgus* is not completely severed in the use of language, even in his writings, given the vernacular origin of the words. However, it is the particular meaning that Spinoza attributes to common words and, above all, the often new revelation of the nature of things that renders the *vulgus* unsuitable for philosophy.

Since the notion of *vulgus* is central to the attempt to reconstruct a Spinozian theory of language, it is useful to examine another text to understand the Spinozian conception of the *vulgus* and consequently of language. This is a passage from chapter 16 of the TTP in which the author illustrates his own conception of natural law:

The natural right of each man is determined not by sound reason, but by desire (*cupiditate*) and power. For not all are naturally determined to act according to the rules and laws of reason; on the contrary, all are born ignorant of everything, and before they can know the true rule of life and acquire the habit of virtue, a great part of their life passes, even if they have received a good education. And yet, in the meantime, they are bound to live and preserve, as far as they can, themselves: that is, by the sole impulse of appetite, since nature has granted them nothing else and has denied them the actual power to live according to sound reason.

31 TdIE, 88: I,120,6-1; cf. Ep 6: G IV,28,10; 29,6-8.

32 CM, 1,6.

Therefore, they are no more bound to live according to the laws of a sound mind than a cat by the laws of leonine nature. Therefore, considered under the sole dominion of nature, whatever anyone deems useful to himself, whether guided by sound reason or moved by the emotions, he is permitted by the supreme right of nature to desire and to take, in any way, by force, deceit, entreaties, or as he can most easily, consequently considering as his enemy anyone who would prevent him from satisfying his desire (*animus*). (III,506,27-508,11)

This is the human condition in the state of nature. But since nature is not suspended with the constitution of the social body,³³ the impulse of *cupiditas* and power continue to be active causes of action, within the limits of a law suffered or tolerated, certainly not loved. Still today, what most moves the common people, yesterday as today, especially when they reach positions of power, is the idea of, and greed for money, as we read in E IV, App 28-9: a particular vice “in those who seek money not out of poverty or to satisfy needs, but because they have learned the arts of profit, which they proudly boast about”.

In conclusion, far more than the tyrant, or the external enemy, it is the common people who are the true danger for human society, because tyranny is more easily established where it is dominant, and also creates conditions of internal weakness within the State which make it easy prey for external enemies. And if, unfortunately, the vulgus were to gain direct control of the State, it would become the greatest danger to itself and to the rest of humanity, in proportion to the power it wields. There have been tragic examples of this. Therefore, Spinoza is not afraid to repeat Tacitus’s ancient warning: “*Terret vulgus, nisi metuat*”³⁴ (unless subjugated by fear, the vulgar inspire terror). This is why reflection on the nature of the vulgar, and on the political regimes able to contain its destructive impulse constitutes the core of Spinozian politics.

33 Ep. 50 to J. Jelles: “As regards politics, the difference between Hobbes and me, about whom you ask, consists in this: I always leave natural law in its integrity and maintain that in the condition of society the sovereign power has more right over the subject only in proportion as it has more power than the subject. And this always takes place in the state of nature” (G IV: 238,25-239,4).

34 E IV, p54s; TP 7,27.

4 Philosophical Language and the *vulgus*

If the words (*verba*), including those considered sacred, were composed *ad libitum et captum vulgi*³⁵ or, to put it another way, if faith was revealed and written according to the capacities and opinions of the prophets and the common people of the time in which they were spoken and written,³⁶ those words and the languages constructed from them have nothing to do with truth or philosophy, but can be understood and embraced by everyone, at any time, according to their own opinion or point of view, because they seek piety through obedience: “It is not necessarily the case that he who presents excellent arguments demonstrates the best faith, but rather the case that he who displays excellent works of justice and charity”.³⁷ Spinoza therefore adopts praxis, that is, the conduct of life in accordance with justice and charity, as the criterion for evaluating not only individual merit but also the doctrines, messages, and languages forged by the imagination to which one refers. These do not have value in themselves, but only to the extent that they are able to produce those practical results.

Now, if the life orientation of the common people runs contrary to the preservation of being, and therefore cannot be followed by those who live by reason, how will it be possible to speak to them and to be understood (for example, using their own national language or even their dialect) if the content of the discourse must necessarily conform to reason, which is completely alien, if not in conflict, with the interlocutor’s view? What type of language must be adopted so as not to be rejected, but rather to inspire respect and consideration from the common people, so that they gradually become capable of understanding words of truth? The question of language concerns not only the form – that is, the language used, the style, the rhetorical resources – but also and essentially the contents, themes, and concepts expressed, that may not be understood. The question of language concerns not only the ‘how’ to say, but also, and primarily, the ‘what,’ ‘how much,’ and ‘when’ to say.

One example of Spinoza’s *ad captum vulgi* oral language, reported by Colerus,³⁸ can be found in his conversation with his landlady in The Hague. When Mrs. Van der Spyck asked him whether his religion was good and capable of leading her to salvation, Spinoza is said to have replied: “Your religion is fine: you don’t need to seek another to be saved, as long as you apply yourself to a peaceful and pious

35 TdIE 88: I,120,10.

36 TTP 14,11: III,478,10-11.

37 TTP 14,11: III,478,17-19.

38 Colerus, Lucas 2015,77.

life”. Given that Colerus gathered this information directly from his landlady, the philosopher’s words appear to be reliable. The response appears to be consistent with the lady’s capacity for understanding, as she was reassured of the goodness of her religion, of the lack of need to seek another, and of the attainment of salvation through it, to the extent that she was able to lead a peaceful and pious life. A reasonable response and, as such, also true, although it did not express all the philosophical truth Spinoza had in mind. It is true that, in inviting the lady to lead a quiet and pious life, in which true salvation consists,³⁹ he was adhering to the doctrine supported in chapter XIV of the TTP mentioned above, that is, the indifference of the ways or opinions (in this case religions) with which the precept to live according to justice and charity is interpreted. However, Mrs. Van der Spyck was thinking of eternal salvation after death, which only her religion, she was convinced, could guarantee her: something on which Spinoza stays silent. Here the philosopher limits himself to asserting, in addition to the theorized argument of the indifference of the historical religions practiced, the same consideration as that in letter 21 to De Blyenbergh, of 1665, he addresses to himself:

And if I should ever perceive that the fruit I have already gathered from the natural understanding is false, it would make me fortunate, since I enjoy it and try to pass through life not with fear and tears, but in serenity, joy, and mirth, and from time to time I ascend a step. (G IV,127,1-5)

Therefore, an answer, and a language, *ad captum dominae*, but still far from philosophical truth.

What guides Spinoza’s response? Is it a philosophically established rule and doctrine, or is it the prudence of someone who must, from time to time, assess the interlocutor’s degree of ‘vulgarity’, their knowledge, their willingness to listen, and their capacity for learning, and then tailor the appropriate language to suit them? This seems to be the case. Therefore, the word and language to be used with the *vulgus* are determined by the philosopher’s prudence and inspired by his benevolence toward the mankind.

However, in the TdIE, Spinoza envisions the parallel development of other instruments that sought to liberate the *vulgus*: first and foremost, a politics, for the construction of a society that is able to transform the *vulgus* into *cives*, the term preferred in the TP. To this end, a new moral philosophy and a pedagogy are necessary to better

39 The concept of ‘salvation’ is expressed by the Latin term *salus* and the Dutch *heyl*, which mean ‘health’, not eternal, but temporal, coinciding with the concept of physical and mental well-being (*welstand*).

educate children and young people: in the Amsterdam where Spinoza wrote this passage, J.A. Comenius already lived. The development of “a complete medical science” and a “mechanics” or technology capable of “gaining much time and leisure” to devote to the free arts of educating the soul are also important. Thus the project of perfecting human nature, to be achieved socially, therefore envisages the combined use of various sciences and arts, to which the oral intervention of the philosopher and his *exemplum vitae* is added.

5 Written Language and Its Audience

Spinoza completely changes his perspective when considering the use of written language. In the preface to the TTP, after twice explicitly addressing the “philosopher reader”, not only does he not address the common people, but he explicitly states that he does not want them to read his work, which would certainly be misunderstood:

For I know how persistently those prejudices which the mind has embraced under the name of religion are fixed in the mind; I know also that it is equally impossible to free the common people from superstition or fear; I know, finally, that the constancy of the common people is equivalent to obstinacy, and that they cannot be guided by reason, but are carried away by blind impulse to praise or to blame. Therefore, I do not invite the common people or all those who, like the common people, are prey to the same passions, to read these things; I would rather they were ignorant of this book than cause trouble by distorting it, as is their custom. And while they do not benefit themselves in any way, they are a hindrance to others, who would devote themselves more freely to philosophy if they were not hindered by one obstacle, namely, the belief that reason should be the handmaid of theology, for I trust that to such people this work will prove most useful. (G IV,127,1-5)

This passage is extremely clear about who Spinoza is addressing in the treatise and in his other writings. First and foremost, and without any restriction, it is intended for all those who are devoted to philosophy; secondly, for all those who could understand it and for whom it would be very useful, if they were not hindered by a single obstacle, the conviction that reason must be the handmaid of theology. Spinoza therefore seems to be addressing theologians and the clergy in general, followers of the Scholastic doctrine of reason as

ancilla theologiae.⁴⁰ The common people, on the other hand, are totally excluded from reading the text, because it is impossible to free them from superstition or guide them with reason. In this tripartite division it is not difficult to recognize the ancient Averroist division of the interpretation of Scripture for the use of philosophers, of theologians, and of the common people.⁴¹ This does not mean, however, that the *vulgus*, even though it was not the addressee of the written text, continues to be the nodal centre of Spinoza's political reflection.

In February 1671, when Spinoza heard that someone had translated the TTP into Dutch and intended to publish it, he wrote to Jarig Jelles, seriously worried, asking him to find out and to try to stop it being printed because if it were, the work would certainly be prohibited,⁴² indeed it eventually was.⁴³ We can assume that Spinoza had been profoundly affected by the story and fate of his friend Adriaan Koerbagh, tried in 1668 for the publication of *Een Ligt* and who had died in prison just two years earlier.⁴⁴ Koerbagh, as he admitted during the interrogations at the trial, knew Spinoza well and had been to his house several times; in the work that was tried and prohibited he had adopted the ontology of the KV and perhaps of the first two (not definitive) parts of the *Ethics*; lastly, he, Spinoza and other friends, such as Meyer, shared the project for the cultural liberation of the Dutch people.⁴⁵ However, unlike Spinoza, who wanted to limit his direct engagement with the common people to communication and oral language, Koerbagh wanted to address the common people through his writings as well. He wrote not in Latin but in Dutch, using rhetorical forms and stylistic devices more suited to the comprehension of a common reader. Let us briefly outline Koerbagh's linguistic experience so as to better understand Spinoza's.

At the § 2 of chapter 1, dedicated to Being or God, the author declares the purpose of the work, clarifying it for its intended audience from the outset:

Since we have proposed, with God's blessing, to deal in writing with the principal matters of theology and religion, in order

40 The ancillary nature of philosophy to theology had been established in a letter from Gregory IX to the theology masters of the University of Paris dated 7 July 1228 (“*Si doctrina celestis eloquii*”); Bonaventure took up the doctrine of subordination again in *De reductione artium ad Theologiam* (c. 1256); Thomas, *Summa theologica*, 1, q.1, a. 5, *ad secundum*.

41 Averroes 2019.

42 Ep 44: G IV,227,6-17.

43 Spinoza's TTP, together with Hobbes's *Leviathan* and L. Meyer's *Philosophia S. Scripturae interpres*, was publicly condemned in 1674.

44 Koerbagh 2011; 2027.

45 Bordoli 2001.

to thereby make known to the people of our country our inner reasoning on these matters, we have resolved, so as not to incur wasted effort or vain labour from which no one could derive fruit or benefit, to use the language that is already known, or should be, to all the people. For the matters we will treat in all seriousness for the benefit of the people and the State (although at times, with good reason, we will speak jokingly), concern the entire people.

The term used here by Koerbagh for people is *volk*, corresponding to the Latin *populus*. The aim of the work is therefore to free the Dutch people from prejudices and errors regarding theology and religion; and since he addresses “all the people”, he decides to use the language they are or should be familiar with: Dutch. The reference to the potential waste of effort in using a language unknown to the people might recall the similar recommendation Spinoza makes at the end of the KV, when he asks the friends he composed it for, in order not to waste their labour in communicating those doctrines to others, to consider, carefully, whether those to whom they are communicated are capable of understanding such doctrines. Clearly, here, Spinoza is not talking about language, but about “things”.

And since you are not unaware of the condition of the times in which we live, I still want to insist, urging you to be very careful about communicating these things to others. I do not mean that you should keep them to yourself, but only that, if you ever begin to communicate them to anyone, let no motive or purpose drive you other than the health of your neighbour, since you have clearly assured yourself, with regard to him, that you will not lose this reward for your labour. (KV 2,26,10)

The reference to the “condition of the times in which we live” constitutes the context and reason for the author’s recommendation to friends. We must highlight at least three characteristics of this condition: the widespread ignorance of the people; the dominance of theological doctrines, whatever they may be, and of the prejudices and superstitions they foster among the masses; and the lack of freedom of expression, especially for dissonant or alternative doctrines. This condition requires the utmost prudence, the virtue that Spinoza adopted as his own motto in the emblem inspired by the dog rose: “Caute”.⁴⁶

Thus Spinoza, unlike Koerbagh, did not believe that his text could be used for the liberation of the entire Dutch people: which is why it was not published, but only circulated, in manuscript form, among his

⁴⁶ Mignini 1981.

friends. Indeed, he believed that language and communication must be carefully tailored to the understanding of those to whom they are addressed, in a progressive, extremely prudent, and therefore slow, process of liberation. This does not alter the fact that this work was also necessary for Spinoza, because, like Koerbagh, he believed that the power of the State resides in the multitude of its citizens. Indeed, Koerbagh was explicit on this point on several occasions. See, for example, note g of the first chapter:

It is a good use of power when the government uses the power granted to it by the people, in all cases, in the interest of the nation, to protect the freedom, well-being, and advantage of the people. And these are indeed powerful, but not above the power of the people.

The thesis supported here, and, as we have seen, also shared by Spinoza in the TP, is that the people (Spinoza in the TP prefers the term *multitudo*)⁴⁷ are the source of State power. Rulers receive the power they exercise from the people, and this is just, not abused, only if it is exercised in the nation's interest, to safeguard the freedom, material well-being, and every kind of benefit for the people whose power can never be exceeded by the power of the rulers. But if this is the case, since the nation is largely made up of common people, the nation's primary interest is the transformation of the *vulgus* into *cives*,⁴⁸ that is, into subjects (citizens) aware of and responsible for their own power.

In note c of the second chapter, Koerbagh clarifies what he means by common people (*het gemeene*): those devoid of knowledge and dominated by passions, regardless of their wealth or social status. This definition corresponds exactly to the Spinozian *vulgus*. Lack of knowledge and an abundance of prejudices prevent common people from recognizing the disinformation they are fed, in order to maintain and support the power of those who systematically deceive them, namely, the clergy of any historical religion.

If common people, who are the majority – and I don't mean common people in term of social status or poor in money or wealth – but common people in terms of knowledge, judgment, and practice of knowledge, whether noble or not, rich or poor – if those people were a little more gifted in knowledge, judgement, and in the practice of knowledge and were a little less prejudiced, that is, if they didn't distrust others too much, they would realize that they are being led by the nose, as they say.

⁴⁷ *Populus* is absent there.

⁴⁸ *Civis* is Spinoza's preferred term in the TP, starting with the subtitle.

Could the common people be saved from ignorance? The text Koerbagh is writing, and other similar texts, could offer a tool. But already in chapter 2, devoted to the discussion of the false doctrine of the Trinity, the author begins to express doubts about the treatise's intended audience. At the end of paragraph 3, we read:

This [text] is written only for the intelligent who can understand it, because the clergy do not want to understand it or comprehend it; and there is not yet the possibility of communicating it to the common people.

Here the author seems to contradict the purpose stated at the beginning of the first chapter, in which he declares his intention to address all people. But if the text cannot be addressed to the common people, who are incapable of understanding; if it is not addressed to the clergy, who could understand but are unwilling to; it only remains that it can be addressed to the “intelligent”, that is, to those who are capable of understanding and are at the same time animated by a love of truth and a willingness to listen, namely, the readers the author addresses in the preface to the work: “Benevolent lovers of truth, peaceful and intelligent readers”. A category of people corresponding to Spinoza’s “philosophers”. The author then admits bitterly that it is “not yet” possible to address the common people directly, because they are incapable of understanding. “Yet” constitutes a significant difference from Spinoza, for whom, in the afore mentioned preface to the TTP, the common people will “never” be capable of understanding.

However, Spinoza in the TdIE does not seem to share this thesis, because that text clearly expresses the hope that the common people might come to listen attentively to the truth. The reference to the clergy is surprising. They are the constant target of criticism throughout Koerbagh’s treatise, who acknowledges that they are capable of understanding, “but unwilling”. The author, in fact, addresses them again in § 11, inviting them to distinguish between certain knowledge and faith which, by its very nature, is always doubtful. How, when the clergy act as teachers or masters, can they teach others if they are uncertain of what they teach?

In another text, in note e of chapter 3, the author returns to the topic, declaring that the treatise is addressed “to the learned, or to those who call themselves learned”. Again, the reference seems to be to the clergy, invited to distinguish between certain knowledge and belief and to embrace only certain knowledge:

I speak here primarily to the learned, or to those who call themselves learned. Indeed, to consider all people wise and sensible, to the point of not having to believe, would be impossible. Therefore, I do not want or cannot take away the entire religion

of the common people, who have no opportunity to investigate. I only want teachers to no longer have propositions in which they say they believe, but that they must know and understand with certainty; and if everyone knew with certainty, they would soon agree, and there would soon be a certain unity in doctrine and among the people.

This passage is noteworthy because the author reiterates the treatise's intended audience, namely the clergy, who are invited to accept and teach only certain doctrines, which would necessarily lead to harmony among religious denominations and within the entire population. On the other hand, it is stated, if I am not mistaken, for the first and only time, that the common people cannot be deprived of any form of religion, due to their inability to research and analyse rationally. Here, Koerbagh's initial intention regarding his intended audience seems to be denied once again: not the entire population, incapable of understanding; not the clergy, who could understand but do not want to; so only the few intelligent and well-disposed readers, lovers of truth, namely philosophers, remain. A conclusion very close, despite its intentions, to Spinoza's.

6 Conclusion

Some schematic conclusions can be drawn from the considerations above.

1. It must be reiterated 'once and for all' that Spinoza's aim is not to clarify the nature of words, but of things. Not language, but philosophy; and therefore, not a philosophy of language.
2. Words and language in general will necessarily follow the construction of the intellect, given that mind and body are a single individual, expressed simultaneously in different ways. Spinoza here seems to follow the admonition of the ancient Varro: "*Rem tene, verba sequentur*".
3. Spinoza's political meditation is central to his reflection on the *vulgus* and the dual relationship between philosophy and the *vulgus*.
4. The philosopher, as a single human being, lives among the common people adapting, much as they can, to their language and lifestyles so as to lead as many people as possible to freedom.
5. Philosophy, in its written practice, cannot have the common people as its addressees, yet they remain a core object of inquiry.
6. The centrality of philosophical reflection on the common people is expressed in the construction of a social and

institutional architecture, equipped with its own language, able to guarantee, in itself, freedom and security, leading to a progressive transformation of the *multitudo* into *civitas*. But we will discuss this topic on another occasion.

Abbreviations

For Spinoza's works:

CGLH = *Compendium Grammatices linguae Hebraeae*.

E = *Ethica*.

Ep = *Epistola*.

G = Spinoza, B. (1925). *Spinoza Opera*. 4 vols. Edited by C. Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung.

KV = *Korte Verhandeling*.

TdIE = *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*.

TP = *Tractatus politicus*.

TTP = *Tractatus theologico-politicus*.

For the individual parts:

AfDef = *Affectum Definitio*.

App = Appendix.

c = *Corollary*.

d = *Demonstration*.

expl = *Explicatio*.

p = *Propositio*.

s = *Scholium*.

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