

The Prologue to *Grammar of the Castilian Language* (1492)

TO THE MOST HIGH AND EQUALLY
ILLUSTRIOUS [*esclarecida*] PRINCESS DOÑA
ISABEL,¹ THE THIRD OF THAT NAME, QUEEN
AND SOVEREIGN OF SPAIN AND THE ISLANDS
OF OUR SEA. THUS BEGINS THIS GRAMMAR
OF THE CASTILIAN LANGUAGE, NEWLY
[*nueva mente*] MADE BY THE SCHOLAR
ANTONIO DE NEBRIJA.² IT BEGINS WITH THE
PROLOGUE. READ AT YOUR PLEASURE.

WHEN I PLACE BEFORE ME AND PONDER, MY most illustrious Queen, the antiquity of all the things that have been recorded for our memory and recollection, I find one thing and can conclude with certainty: that language was always the companion [*compañera*] of empire, and followed it such that together [*junta mente*] they began, grew, and flourished—and, later, together [*junta mente*] they fell.³ And now having put aside the more ancient things about which we have the faintest image or shadow of truth—these being those of the Assyrians, the Indians, the Sicyonians, and the Egyptians, in which one could very easily prove my claim—I come to more recent events and especially those about which we have greater certainty, beginning with those concerning the Jews.

It can be very quickly ascertained that the Hebrew language had an infancy in which it could barely speak. And I call “infancy” the entirety of the time in which the Jews were in the land of Egypt. Because it is true, or very close to true, that the patriarchs would have spoken in the language that Abraham brought from the land of the Chaldeans, until they descended into Egypt, and that there they would have lost something of that language and intermingled something of the Egyptian. But once they departed from Egypt and began to form their own collectiv-

ity [*cuervo de gente*], little by little they would have separated their language, collected—or so I think—from that of the Chaldeans and the Egyptians as well as from that with which they communicated amongst themselves, having been separated in religion from the barbarians in whose land they dwelled.

So the Hebrew language began to flourish in the time of Moses, who—once trained in the philosophy and letters of the wise men of Egypt, worthy of speaking with God, and of communicating the matters of his people—was the first to venture to write the history of the Jews and give beginning to the Hebrew language. Which, from this point forward, free of restrictions, was never so elevated as in the age of Solomon, who is understood to be peaceful because in his time peace, nurturer of all the good and honest arts, flourished with the monarchy. But after the kingdom of the Jews began to disintegrate, together [*junta mente*] the language began to be lost, until it came to the state in which we see it today: so lost that amongst the Jews now living, none can give account of the language of their Law, or of how they lost their kingdom, or of the Anointed One for whom they wait in vain.

The Greek language likewise had its infancy, and began to show its strengths shortly before the Trojan War, when the music and poetry of Orpheus, Linus, Musaeus of Athens, and Amphion flourished, and shortly after Troy’s destruction, [in the time of] Homer and Hesiod. And so that language grew until the monarchy of Alexander the Great, in whose time lived that multitude of poets, orators, and philosophers who brought to their greatest heights not only the language but also all the other arts and sciences. But after the kingdoms and republics of Greece began to unravel and the Romans made themselves masters of it, so together [*junta mente*] the

Greek language began to dissipate and the Latin language to gain force.

Of this we can say more: it [Latin] had its infancy with the birth and peopling of Rome, and began to flourish almost five hundred years after Rome was built, at the time that Livius Andronicus first made public [*publicó*] his works in Latin verse.⁴ And so it grew until the monarchy of Caesar Augustus, under whom, as the Apostle says, “came the fulfillment of the time in which God sent his Only Son;”⁵ and the Savior of the world was born in the time of peace that the prophets had spoken of and that was prefigured in Solomon, and of which the angels sang at His birth, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to the men of good will.”⁶ This was the time of the multitude of poets and orators who conveyed to our times the abundance and delights of the Latin language: Cicero [*Tulio*], Caesar, Lucretius, Vergil, Horace, Ovid, Livy, and all the others that followed until the time of Antoninus Pius. From there, as the empire of the Romans began to decline, then together [*junta mente*] the Latin language began to deteriorate, until it came to the state in which we receive it from our fathers, which surely when compared with that of those [former] times, has little more to do with it [classical Latin] than with Arabic [*la araviga*].

What we have said of the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin languages we can even more clearly show in the Castilian; it had its infancy in the time of the judges and kings of Castile and of León, and began to show its strengths in the time of the very illustrious and eternally worthy King Alfonso the Wise, under whose mandate were written the *Siete partidas*, the *General Istoria*,⁷ and many works in Latin and Arabic were transferred [*trasladados*] into our Castilian language; which then extended itself to Aragon and Navarra,⁸ and from there to Italy, following the company [*compañía*] of the princes we sent to rule in those kingdoms.⁹ And so it grew until the monarchy and peace we enjoy: first, because

of divine goodness and providence; then, because of the skill, work, and attentiveness [*industria, trabajo y diligencia*] of your royal Majesty,¹⁰ under whose good fortune and auspices [*fortuna y buena dicha*],¹¹ the members [*miembros*] and pieces of Spain,¹² which were scattered in many parts, were gathered and united [*reduxeron y aiuntaron*] into a single body and Kingdom,¹³ the form and joint of which, so ordered [*ordenado*],¹⁴ the many centuries, injuries, and passage of time will not be able to break nor unravel.

So that, with [*después*] the Christian religion—through which we are friends of God or reconciled [*reconciliados*] with Him¹⁵—newly purified; with [*después*] the enemies of our faith defeated by war and the force of arms, from which ours received so many injuries and feared much worse; [and] with [*después*] justice and the execution of the laws that unite us and make us live equally in this great company, which we call the Kingdom and Republic of Castile, nothing is left but for the arts of peace to flourish.

Amongst the first of these is that which teaches us language, which sets us apart from the animals and is proper to man and is first in order after contemplation, [and] which is the basis of understanding. Up until our time, it [the Castilian language] wandered unfettered and beyond rule, and because of this it has received many alterations [*mudanças*] in a few centuries;¹⁶ such that, if we compare with that of today that of five hundred years [ago] we will find as great a difference and diversity as can exist between two languages.

And because my thoughts and desires were always to exalt [*engrandecer*] the things of our nation [*nación*],¹⁷ and to give to the men of my language works on which to better employ their idle hours [*ocio*], which they now spend reading romances [*novelas*] or stories wrapped in a thousand lies and errors,¹⁸ I decided before all else to order into an art our Castilian language,¹⁹ so that now and from now on what is written in it will follow the

same principles,²⁰ and [so that] it will extend itself throughout the duration of the times to come. [This] as we see has been done in Greek and Latin, which because they were submitted to art,²¹ have remained uniform, even as several centuries have passed over them.²²

For if we do not do something similar in our language as in theirs, in vain will your chroniclers and historians write and consign to immortality the memory of your praiseworthy deeds, and others of us attempt to bring into Castilian strange and alien things [*cosas peregrinas*],²³ and this cannot be but a matter of a few years.²⁴ And so one of two things will necessarily follow: either the memory of your great deeds will perish with the language, or it will wander [*ande peregrinando*] through strange nations, for lack of a proper house in which to dwell. I wanted to lay the first stone in its foundations [*çanja*],²⁵ and to do in our language what Zenodotus did for Greek and Crates [of Mallus] did for Latin; although they were surpassed by those who wrote after them, at least it was their glory—as it will be ours—to be the first inventors of such a necessary work. This we did in a moment that was never more opportune, because our language is so near the summit that we must fear its descent rather than await its rise.

And following from this [there is] another no less useful benefit to the men of our language who will want to study Latin grammar; because once they properly understand [*sintieren*] the art of Castilian—which will not be difficult because it concerns the language they already comprehend [*sienten*]²⁶—when they move to Latin there will be nothing so obscure that it cannot become simple, especially with the use of the grammar that your Highness commissioned from me to compare lines from the Castilian with the Latin;²⁶ through this method of instruction it would not be a miracle to learn Latin grammar, I say not in a few months, but in a few days, and much better than what previously was learned over many years.

The third benefit of this work may be [*puede ser*] this: when in Salamanca I showed your royal Majesty a sample of this work, you asked of what purpose it could be; the Reverend Father Archbishop of Ávila snatched my response, and answering for me he said that after your Highness has put [*metiesse*] under her yoke many barbarous peoples and nations of alien languages [*peregrinas lenguas*], with defeat they would have [*ternian*] to receive the laws that the conqueror imposes on the conquered, and with them our language; then, through this my art they would be able to [*podrian*] come into the knowledge of it, as now we depend on the art of Latin grammar to learn Latin.²⁷

And it is therefore certain that not only the enemies of our faith, who now have the need to know the Castilian language,²⁸ but also the Biscayans, Navarrese, French, Italians, and all the others who have some trade or abode [*trato y conversación*] in Spain and a need of our language,²⁹ if they have not learned it by use from childhood, they will quickly come to know it through this my work.

This [work] which with such diffidence, reverence, and apprehension I wanted to dedicate to your royal Majesty, as Marcus Varro dedicated to Cicero his *De lingua Latinae*, as Grillius dedicated to the poet Vergil his book on accents,³⁰ as Saint Jerome to Pope Damasus I, as Paulus Orosius to Saint Augustine his *Histories*, as many other writers who directed their works and attentions to persons much more learned in that of which they wrote, not to teach them some thing that they did not know, but rather to demonstrate the spirit and will they had inspired, and so that through their authority some favor might be gotten for their works.

And so, after I deliberated, with great hazard to the opinion many have of me, whether to bring the novelty of this work out of the scholarly shadows and darkness into the light of your court, to no one could I more justly consecrate this work of mine than

to her in whose hand and power this moment of our language belongs no less than does the rule over all our affairs.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

Paragraph and sentence breaks in Nebrija's grammar (as well as its title) were not codified in the first printing and vary in subsequent editions. For consistency with references to the prologue in English-language criticism, I follow the text of the Oxford UP edition (1926). In addition to modern Spanish and English dictionaries (*Diccionario de la lengua española* and *Oxford English Dictionary*), I consulted Nebrija's Latin-Castilian lexicon (*Vocabulario español-latino* [1494]) in conjunction with the Latin dictionary known as Lewis and Short (*Latin Dictionary*) and *The Oxford Latin Dictionary*; Richard Percivale's 1591 Spanish-English-Latin dictionary; Sebastián de Covarrubias's 1611 monolingual Castilian dictionary; and *Tentative Dictionary of Medieval Spanish* (1945). When I cite the Latin cognates Nebrija gives for Castilian terms, I am referring to entries in his *Vocabulario español-latino*. The Nebrija, Percivale, and Covarrubias dictionaries are collected in the Real Academia Española's online resource *Nuevo tesoro lexicográfico de la lengua española* ("New Lexicographic Treasury of the Spanish Language"); *Tentative Dictionary of Medieval Spanish* is available online through the HathiTrust Digital Library. As far as possible, I have maintained the extended sentence structure and reliance on relative pronouns of the original. This translation benefited from the input of many readers, including Guadalupe González Dieguez, Katharina Piechocki, Sarah Thomas, and Malinia Ahuja; errors, however, remain my own.

1. In defining *esclarecida*, Nebrija gives the Latin cognates *clarus* (clear, bright; illustrious, celebrated) and *illustis* (clear, distinct; illustrious; distinguished, honorable). Percivale defines *esclarecida* as "famous," "clear," and "renowned." Covarrubias, writing after more than a century of the Inquisition and with the question of the converso in mind, adds "de claro lineage" ("of clear lineage") to his definition. Although Nebrija will later highlight the queen's intellectual achievements, which could support the translation of *esclarecida* as "enlightened," I have chosen the English "illustrious" for its proximity to Nebrija's Latin cognates for the original term.

2. The editor of a 2011 edition of *Gramática*, Carmen Lozano, offers two possible interpretations of the phrase *nueva mente*: "de modo nuevo" ("in a new way") and "ahora por primera vez" ("now for the first time" [3n2]). "Newly made" is used to convey the novelty both of the undertaking and of Nebrija's methodology.

3. I explain my translation of *compañera* in the introduction.

4. The modern sense of the Spanish verb *publicar* is "to publish." However, Nebrija gives the Latin *publicus* (belonging to the people; public), while Covarrubias defines *publicar* as "Manifestar en público alguna cosa" ("To manifest in/as public some thing").

5. This phrase is marked as a quotation in the Oxford edition of the prologue (1926; *Gramática de la lengua castellana*), but not in all editions; see, e.g., Galaxia Gutenberg's (2011; *Gramática sobre la lengua castellana*). The language here combines text from Galatians 4.4 ("But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent his [only Begotten] Son, born of a woman, born under law") and John 3.16 ("For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" [*New Oxford Annotated Bible*]).

6. This is Nebrija's rendering of Luke 2.14.

7. Alfonso the Wise is Alfonso X of Castile-León (1221–84); he established Castilian as a language of learning at court. The *Siete partidas* (*Seven-Part Code*) is a compilation of statutory codes aimed at establishing a uniform system of regulation; the *General estoria* (*General History*) is a universal history, beginning with the Old Testament creation of the world.

8. My translation emphasizes Nebrija's conception of language as active rather than passive. The verb here is reflexive: *se estendió*; the subject of the verb, the relative pronoun that refers back to the previous clause, is the Castilian language itself, which is also the implied subject of the next phrase, "following the company of the princes."

9. The original is "siguiendo la compañía delos infantes." See the introduction for an extended discussion of *compañía*. I have avoided the temptation to clarify ("following in the company of the princes") or condense ("following the company of princes"). Each represents a forceful interpretation of the relation between elements in this phrase, neither of which gives room to the purposely ambiguous function of the words *compañera* and *compañía* in the prologue.

10. While the sense of *trabajo* (work) is straightforward, *industria* and *diligencia* have multiple overlapping shades of meaning. In his definition of *industria*, Nebrija gives the Latin *industria* (industry, diligence, assiduousness) and *sollertia* (skill, resourcefulness, ingenuity); Covarrubias emphasizes the centrality of *maña* (aptitude) in his definition. For *diligencia*, Nebrija gives *diligentia* (carefulness, attentiveness) and *gnaritas* (knowledge, experience); Covarrubias describes *diligencia* as "la sollicitud, el cuidado y prontitud en ejecutar alguna cosa" ("the attentiveness [or, application], care, and promptness in executing some thing").

11. Like *industria* and *diligencia*, *fortuna* and *buena dicha* present a challenge. Nebrija does not provide a Latin equivalent for *fortuna*, but Covarrubias's definition—"lo que sucede a caso, sin poder ser prevenido" ("that which occurs by chance, without anticipation")—

accords with the modern English sense of “fortune.” For *dicha*, Nebrija gives the Latin terms *felicitas* (fruitfulness, happiness, good fortune, luck) and *faustus* (auspiciousness, favorable circumstances, happiness). I use “auspices” in the senses of propitious influence, favoring influence, and indication of a happy future (“Auspice”).

12. Nebrija’s use of *miembros* privileges the sense of parts of the body, or limbs, while Covarrubias highlights its double sense as limb (specifically, of an animal) and of the affiliate of a group.

13. The shifting meanings of the verb *reducir*, which Nebrija renders as *reduxeron*, make it difficult to translate. He gives the Latin *redigo* (to send back, return, gather in, restore, reduce) and *reduco* (to lead or bring back, to bring home, to draw back, to reduce [to a state]). Percivale gives the English cognates “to reduce” and “to bring back.” Covarrubias writes, “[R]educir es convencerse. Reducido, convencido, y vuelto a mejor orden” (“To reduce is to convince [oneself]. Reduced, convinced, and returned to a better order”). The etymology and extended definition of *reduce* in *The Oxford English Dictionary* reflect these connotations—“to bring back, to bring” and “to convert, transform, render”—although the OED classifies most of these senses as obsolete. The Real Academia Española’s contemporary dictionary (*Diccionario de la lengua española*) includes the phrases “sujetar a la obediencia a quienes se habían separado de ella” (“to bring back to obedience those who had strayed”) and “persuadir o atraer a alguien con razones y argumentos” (“persuade or attract someone with reason and argument”). In my translation (“gathered”), I privilege the spatial implications of the phrase, which extend the imagery of the previous clause.

14. For the verb *ordenar*, Nebrija gives the Latin *ordino* (to arrange, compose, organize; to prescribe, appoint, or institute). Like the corresponding terms in contemporary Spanish and English, *ordenar* carries the senses of organization and of command.

15. For the verb *reconciliar* Nebrija gives the Latin *reconcilio* (restore, reunite, reconcile). In Covarrubias, the derivation *reconciliados* appears in two entries: *reconciliarse* (to reconcile oneself) and *reconciliar* (to reconcile). The first definition, which is secular, comes with an important caveat: one must always treat with caution those with whom one has reconciled. The second definition refers to the reconsecration of apostates under the Inquisition.

16. For *mudanças* Nebrija gives the Latin *mutabilis* (changeable, mutable, uncertain, alterable). In his definition of the root verb *mudar*, Covarrubias highlights this Latin root, emphasizing the quality of change over movement from one place to another.

17. The closest literal translation of *engrandecer* is “to make greater.” Nebrija uses two Latin words to define the term: *grandio* (to make great, increase, enlarge) and *magnifico* (to make or think much of a thing).

18. The modern cognate of the term *novela* is “novel,” although Nebrija gives the Latin *fabula* (tale, story) and

acroama (entertainment, especially musical). As Lozano points out, the term *novela* was already being used to refer to short narratives, following the Italian term *novella* (Nebrija, *Gramática sobre la lengua* 8n35). The reference here, therefore, is most likely to the variety of prose-narrative genres that were gaining popularity, including Spanish sentimental romance, which flourished at the verge of the early modern period (Gwara and Gerli xiii). Cervantes later satirized these narratives, and their popularity, in *Don Quijote* (1605). As a reviewer of this translation usefully pointed out, the Castilian grammar was published the same year as Diego de San Pedro’s *Cárcel de amor* (*Prison of Love*)—an immense success that went through several editions and translations in the subsequent century. With this in mind, I have chosen the English term for the (medieval narrative) genre, “romance.”

19. The original is “reducir en artificio este nuestro lenguaje castellano.” The valences of the verb *reducir* are discussed in note 15. The use of “art” for *artificio* follows Nebrija’s definition of *artificio* as that which is “hecho por arte” (“made by art”) along with the Latin cognate *artificium* (skill, knowledge, theory, art; the rules or theory of an art). This interpretation is supported by the etymology of the term in English and is consistent with the reference in the following sentence to the Greek and Latin languages having been submitted to art (“Artifice”).

20. The original is “quedar en un tenor.” In his *Vocabulario*, Nebrija first defines *tenor* in Castilian as “continuación ordenada” (“ordered series”) and then gives the Latin *tenor* (course, continuity, way of proceeding, uniformity). These valences are present in the English term *tenor*, but they are largely obsolete.

21. The phrase in the original, *debaxo de arte* (literally, “to have been [placed] beneath art”) echoes *reducir en artificio* in the previous sentence.

22. Nebrija’s claim here runs counter to his earlier claims about the deterioration of the Latin language since the fall of the Roman Empire. But rather than frame this as a contradiction, it is necessary to see this slippage from one argument to another as part of the larger shifts in rhetorical strategy that characterize the prologue.

23. The original of “attempt to bring into” is “tentamos de passar.” As Nebrija defines them, *tentar* is equivalent to the Latin *tento* or *tempto* (to prove, try, attempt, test), while *passar* (related to the Latin *meare*) refers to the movement of a thing across space. As Covarrubias puts it, *passar* is “atravesar de un lugar a otro” (“to traverse from one place to another”). I have used “bring” to clarify the relation between inside and outside in this instance.

The modern English cognates of the noun *peregrino/a* include *pilgrim*, *migrant*, and *traveler*. The contemporary English term *peregrine* functions as an adjective (e.g., “peregrine falcon”). Historically, however, *peregrine* in English has meant foreign, strange, traveling, wandering, or residing in a foreign country (all now obsolete). In contemporary Spanish, *peregrino/a* is used to refer both to

those who travel and to things that are foreign or strange. Nebrija himself defines *peregrina* as a “cosa fuera de su tierra” (“thing that is outside its homeland”) and gives the Latin *peregrinor* (to travel away from home; to wander, rove; to be in alien surroundings). In the prologue, Nebrija uses *peregrino/a* (noun and adj.) and *peregrinar* (verb) to convey both foreignness (the strange, the alien) and the act of wandering (traveling, exile), and these two senses (related but not identical) of the term are often in tension. There is here a struggle between the idea of the grammarian as someone protecting the borders of language by keeping strange things out and the idea of the grammarian as someone facilitating the expansion (the travel and wandering) of that language beyond its borders (Lezra).

24. The original is “n[e]gocio de pocos años.” Nebrija defines *negocio* as the “contrario de ocio” (“the opposite of inactivity”) and gives the Latin *negotium* (business, occupation, employment). The word carries not just the emphasis on activity but also the association with trade and the exchange of goods (productivity).

25. The modern Spanish equivalent of Nebrija’s *çanja* is *zanja*: a ditch in which the foundations for a building are laid. Covarrubias equates *çanja* with *cimientos* (foundation), because “es todo una cosa” (“they are all one thing”), meaning that both the ditch and the foundation provide the base for a building structure. Following Covarrubias, I have used “foundation.”

26. Nebrija here is referring to his Latin grammar, *Introductiones latinae* (1481) and its translation into Castilian, *Introducciones latinas* (1488). The English rendering of the final portion of this clause does not fully capture Nebrija’s emphasis on spatial and oppositional language. Where I have given “the use,” Nebrija uses *entreveniando* (to put between two things; insert); in his Latin-Castilian lexicon Nebrija gives the Latin terms *intervenio* (to come between, intervene, interrupt) and *intercedo* (to go between, intercede). Where I have used “to compare,” Nebrija gives *contraponiendo*, whose Latin cognates are *oppono* (to put opposite, oppose, contrast) and *objecto* (to oppose, set against).

27. This sentence hinges on the tense and mood of its key verbs: *metiesse* is the imperfect subjunctive form of *meter* (to put); *ternian* (antiquated form *tendrían*) and *podrían* are the third-person plural conditional forms of the infinitives *tener* (to have) and *poter* (to be able to). While the claim itself is future-oriented, it appears within an anecdote (the Archbishop of Ávila’s response) clearly set in the past, which determines the use of the imperfect subjunctive in the first case. The use of the conditional accords with Nebrija’s use of the phrase “pueder ser” (“may be”) at the start of the sentence. Nebrija’s grammatical and conceptual circumlocution in this sentence is striking when considered in conjunction with the iconic status of this prologue as a text about language and empire—specifically, linguistic or cultural imperialism.

28. The reference here is to the Reconquista, whose completion was marked by the surrender of the Emirate of

Grenada on 2 January 1492. It was earlier alluded to in the phrase “with the Christian religion . . . newly purified.”

29. *Trato* refers to commercial exchange, but *conversación* opens onto other kinds of relations: Nebrija gives the Latin terms *conversatio* (frequent abode in a place; intercourse, conversation) and *convivus* (living together, social intercourse). Similarly, Percivale gives the English “to live with” before “to converse” in his definition of the term.

30. Lozano clarifies that Nebrija here refers to Priscian’s *Institutiones grammaticae*, where Priscian makes a reference to Grillius’s dedication of his book on accents to Vergil (Nebrija, *Gramática sobre la lengua castellana* 11n48).

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