



Rivista di Studi Indo-Mediterranei XI (2021)

Plurilingual e-journal of literary, religious, historical studies. website: <http://kharabat.altervista.org/index.html>

Rivista collegata al Centro di Ricerca in "Filologia e Medievistica Indo-Mediterranea" (FIMIM) Università di Bologna

cod. ANCE (Cineca-Miur) E213139

ISSN 2279-7025

Vernacular Reconsidered: Dante and the Islamic Linguistic Tradition

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Abstract. In the *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante illustrates his reasons for writing in vernacular instead of Latin, a language that in his day was recognized as the uncontested vehicle for learning and culture. About the same time, late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, within the Islamic civilization, where Arabic enjoyed a unique prestige as the sacred language of the Koranic revelation, a process of vernacularization of Islamic teachings progressively unfolds entailing the usage of vulgar languages for the composition of religious texts. Exploring the conception of vernacular as *locutio naturalis*, and as such directly descending from the primordial language of man, will enable us not only to establish a parallel between Dante's vision of vulgar language and the Islamic one, but also to shed light on the explicit and implicit premises that justified the ennoblement of vernaculars vis-à-vis Latin and Arabic (or Persian) in the respective medieval cultural contexts.

Keywords Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia*, Arabic linguistic tradition, Islamic linguistic thought, Sufism.

1. Introduction

At a quite early stage of his life Dante (d. 1321) decides to turn to the Italian vernacular, alongside Latin, for the composition of his works thus challenging (or contributing to challenge) a well-established tradition that saw in the Latin language the uncontested vehicle for learning and culture (cf. Danesi 1991). The consequences of that choice for the destiny of the Italian language and the history of Italian literature and culture can hardly be overestimated. Suffice to say that, had he not made that decision, he simply would not have become the Dante that we are honouring and celebrating worldwide this year, 2021, on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of his death.

About the same time, late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, within the Islamic

civilization, where Arabic enjoyed a unique prestige as the sacred language of the Koranic revelation, a process of vernacularization of Islamic teachings progressively unfolds entailing the usage of vulgar languages for the composition of religious texts (Schimmel 1982: 137).

In what follows, in order to shed light on the explicit and implicit premises that justified the ennoblement of vernaculars vis-à-vis prestigious and even ‘sacred’ languages such as Latin and Arabic, we will explore the role played, in the respective medieval cultural contexts, by the conception of vernacular as a language descending from the primordial language of man. In so doing, we will direct our attention to the multiple convergences between Dante’s vision of vernacular and the Islamic coeval one.

2. Vernacular as *locutio naturalis*

Dante, it goes without saying, is not the first one, in the history of Italian literature, to write in vulgar language. What is particularly noteworthy in his case, though, is that not only does he make the choice to use vernacular for his literary compositions, but he also extensively dwells on the rationale behind that particular choice. He notably does so in the *De vulgari eloquentia*¹ where, in Latin, he advances his arguments in favour of vernacular and explicitly states that he is the first one to engage with a similar topic: “Cum neminem ante nos de vulgari eloquentie doctrina quicquam invenimus tractasse, [...] locutioni vulgariarum gentium prodesse temptabimus” (“Since I find that no one, before myself, has dealt in any way with the theory of eloquence in the vernacular, [...] I shall try to say something useful about the language of people who speak the vulgar tongue”, *DVE*²: I, I, 1).

In the treatise, after defining vernacular, *vulgari locutio*, as the linguistic form which “infantes assuefiunt ab assistentibus cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt” (“infants acquire from those around them when they first begin to distinguish sounds”) and that “sine omni regula nutricem imitantes accipimus” (“we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses”) (*DVE*: I, I, 2), Dante contrasts vernacular with a different linguistic form which he refers to by the term *gramatica* and that “in the lexicon of the *De vulgari eloquentia* [...] is consistently used to mean ‘a literary language governed by rules’” (Botterill 1996: 90). Such a variety, unlike vernacular, cannot be used to address the general public since he argues: “ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatem regulamur et doctrinamur in illa” (“Few, however, achieve complete fluency in it, since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study”, *DVE*: I, I, 3). Dante’s argumentations in favour of vernacular are not confined to such practical concerns though. In fact, in the *De vulgari eloquentia* he introduces us to a way more complex conception of vulgar language, and of its intrinsic nature, and to the fundamental features of what might be called his ‘philosophy of language’. The vernacular, unlike *gramatica*, he says, is the primordial language of man

¹ Dante’s view on language in general and on vernacular in particular may be encountered in “many of his writings, including the *Commedia*, but his most thorough and sustained writings on the topic [...] are *Il Convivio*, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, and *La Vita Nuova*” (Wiles 2015: 759; cf. also Cremona 1965).

² *De vulgari eloquentia*. Unless otherwise stated, the translation used for passages from the *De vulgari eloquentia* is that of Botterill (1996).

“prima fuit humano generi usitata” (“it was the language originally used by the human race”), is used by the totality of humanity “totus orbis ipsa perfruitur” (“the whole world employs it”), and is our natural language whereas *gramatica* is an artificial language “naturalis est nobis, cum illa potius artificialis existat” (“it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial”) (*DVE*: I, I, 4). For these three reasons, Dante argues, vernacular is nobler than *gramatica* (and therefore even than Latin): “Harum quoque duarum nobilior est vulgaris” (“Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular”, *DVE*: I, I, 4; cf. Grayson 1965).

Dante’s theory of vulgar language is not devoid of difficult and seemingly contradictory passages to which scholars have repeatedly drawn attention (Mazzocco 1993: 108). A first problem with Dante’s statements above is that of reconciling “the idea that languages are many with the idea that the vernacular was *the* natural language for the whole human race” (Eco 1995: 37, italics in the text) and that, despite being divided into several varieties, “licet in diversas prolationes et vocabula sit divisa” (*DVE*: I, I, 4), is considered by Dante the one and common language shared by the entire humanity up to his day. One would be tempted to assume that here, by the expression *vulgaris locutio*, Dante does not mean a specific language but rather vernacular in general which he considers the common trait of mankind, whereas, as he points out, *gramatica* is known to the Greeks and others but not to all peoples, “Greci habent et alii, sed non omnes” (*DVE*: I, I, 3). A similar interpretation, though, would appear in contradiction to Dante’s succeeding remarks. Dante, later on in the text, specifies that although all present vernaculars derive from the primordial language of man, Adam’s language, that original *forma locutionis*, ‘form of language’, was completely lost after Babel with the sole exception of the Hebrew language:

Hac forma locutionis locutus est Adam; hac forma locutionis locuti sunt omnes posteri eius usque ad edificationem turris Babel, que 'turris confusionis' interpretatur; hanc formam locutionis hereditati sunt filii Heber, qui ab eo dicti sunt Hebrei. Hiis solis post confusionem remansit [...]. Fuit ergo hebraicum ydioma illud quod primi loquentis labia fabricarunt.

In this form of language Adam spoke; in this form of language spoke all his descendants until the building of the Tower of Babel (which is interpreted as 'tower of confusion'); this is the form of language inherited by the sons of Heber, who are called Hebrews because of it. To these alone it remained after the confusion [...]. So the Hebrew language was that which the lips of the first speaker moulded (*DVE*: I, VI, 5-7).

To further complicate the matter, while in the *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante states that Hebrew was the language spoken by Adam and the language used by humanity until Babel, in the *Paradiso*, Dante has Adam say that, long before the construction of the tower by Nimrod’s people, the language that he used to speak in paradise was all extinct:

La lingua ch'io parlai fu tutta spenta
innanzi che a l'ovra inconsummabile
fosse la gente di Nembrot attenta

The language that I spoke was long extinct
before that unaccomplishable task

entered the minds of Nimrod's followers (Paradiso: XXVI, 126)³.

To sum up, vernacular is the primordial language of man, and as such identified with Adam's language, but its original form was lost after Babel and only preserved by Hebrew. Post-Babelic Hebrew, though, is not the same language spoken by Adam (which was initially said to be Hebrew) since that primeval language was all extinct long before the construction of the tower. This notwithstanding, and despite being divided into multiple varieties, vernacular, being man's *locution naturalis*, is the one and common language share by the totality of mankind. All these distinct facets of Dante's vision of vernacular can hardly fit into a coherent and consistent *stricto sensu* linguistic theory. Yet, as discussed below, a comparative look at the coeval Islamic conception of vernacular might perhaps help shed some light on this intricate matter.

3. Vernacularization of knowledge in Islam

While Dante was elaborating his conception of the vulgar language in relation to *gramatica* and to Latin, on the other side of the Mediterranean and beyond it, the contemporary Islamic world was confronted by an analogous problem. Within Islam, the Arabic language enjoyed a form of linguistic prestige even more compelling than the one enjoyed by Latin in the Western world of the time. As the language of the revelation, the Koran, Arabic was considered a sacred language. Moreover, in Sufi milieu this notion of a sacredness of the Arabic language was even further refined in complex and highly metaphysical terms. According to the Sufi vision, the language of the Koran was not only the language of the revelation but was conceived of as actual revelation in language, the embodiment in meaning and form of God's speech. Thus, if in Christianity $\acute{\omicron} \lambda\acute{\omicron}\gamma\omicron\varsigma \sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi \acute{\epsilon}\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\tau\omicron$, the Word became flesh, and took a human form, that of Jesus (*Gospel of John*: 1, 14)⁴, in Sufi teachings the Word takes the form of a human language, the Arabic of the Koran. For the Andalusian Sufi master Ibn 'Arabī (d. 1240):

the Koran is the concrete, linguistic embodiment of the Real Being, God Himself. [...] The revealed Book is the actual, true, authentic embodiment of God's Speech. Its every letter is full of significance, since the book manifests the divine realities in both its form and meaning (Chittick 1989: XV).

Despite the prestigious and sacred status attributed to the Arabic language within the Islamic civilization, in late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries (Dante's years), progressively unfolds a process generally referred to as vernacularization of Islamic teachings that entailed the composition, in various vulgar languages, of poetry and songs related to mystical themes. In those centuries, the Islamic civilisation in its expansion and consolidation (eastward and elsewhere), had reached remote and rural areas where the masses were not quite conversant with Arabic or Persian⁵. Islamic preachers, and Sufis in particular, to convey their teachings

³ The translation used for passages from the *Paradiso* is that of Musa (1986).

⁴ Cf. Robinson and Pierpont (2005: 225).

⁵ Persian language by that time had become a well-respected literary language within the Islamic world, cf. Green (2019: 17-29).

had to turn to local vulgar languages; vulgar languages in some cases deprived of any former written tradition, let alone literary prestige. Such a process gradually involved languages like Turkish, so-called Hindavī, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Bengali and many others (cf. Schimmel 1982: 135-69 and Anjum 2017). It may seem paradoxical that such a process was particularly promoted within the Sufi milieu that, as seen, were the ones that developed the finest and most complete metaphysical conception of the divine Word and held the language of the Koran in the highest possible esteem.

As in the case of Dante, practical concerns must have played their role. In the Bengal area, where Arabic and Persian “were the recognised vehicles of religious and literary composition” (Abdul Mannan 1964: 228), the attempts of Muslim poets to use the local language to reach the population in rural areas, who only had a limited knowledge of Arabic and Persian (Eaton 1993: 60)⁶, “were viewed with disfavour” (Abdul Mannan 1964: 228). Consequently, those “writers who did work through the medium of Bengali found it necessary to justify their doing so” and to provide explanations, also on the pragmatic level, for their choice (Abdul Mannan 1964: 228). Still a few centuries later, authors like Ābdun Nabī (17th century) felt that, by writing in vernacular, they might have committed a sin but also believed that was a necessary price to pay for the benefit of their public:

I am afraid in my heart that God will be angry with me because I have written the Muslim scriptures in Bengali. But I reject that fear in order to do good to the common people (quoted and translated by Abdul Mannan 1964: 231).

Another poet, Ābdul Hākīm (d. 1690) explicitly states that his decision to realize a Bengali version of the Persian text *Nur-nāma*⁷ came as a response to a request directly addressed to him by those who could not read the original text:

All those accounts about religions are remarkable and everything is related in [Perso-Arabic] books [*kitaba*]. Those friends who are not trained to read [Perso-Arabic] books came to me and affectionately submitted their complaint. Therefore, I strove to satisfy everyone by rendering the poem about the creation of light into the language of Banga⁸, and by composing it I fulfilled everyone’s wish. When listening to Persian from someone else’s mouth, one cannot understand properly and be content. This is why I address you in a Bengali composition and satisfy everyone with my work (quoted and translated by d’Hubert 2019: 104).

In what follows, Ābdul Hākīm’s considerations in defence of vernacular go way beyond such practical initial remarks:

It makes no difference if God writes about the Prophet’s qualities in Arabic, Persian, or in the language of Hind. Whether in Arabic, Persian, or Hinduyani, God wrote the Prophet’s story in treatises. In the Arab country, the Lord provided Muhammad with a Quran [*musapha phorkana*] in Arabic language. In the country of the Uryan, he sent the Torah to the prophet Musa in Uryani. In Greece, he sent the Psalms [*jabbura*] to David in Greek. In the country of Syria, it is in the Syriac

⁶ For a reappraisal of the generally accepted dichotomy between Persianate urban centres versus vernacular rural areas cf. d’Hubert 2019.

⁷ “This text is a cosmogony dealing with the creation of the universe by the Light of Muhammad” and was “a ritual Persian text that was part of the daily environment of the Bengali Muslims from at least the seventeenth century on” (d’Hubert 2019: 102-3).

⁸ Bengal.

language that he sent the Gospel to Jesus. In all countries, whatever the language people speak, the Lord understands all of them, be it Hinduyani, the language of the country of Banga, or any other idiom. Whoever worships the Lord in his own tongue, he will address him accordingly. The lord does not ignore any language; whatever the kingdom, he knows its language (quoted and translated by d'Hubert 2019: 104).

To fully appreciate the implications entailed by the passage above we need to approach it in the light of the symbolic conception of language diversity developed within the Islamic linguistic tradition. Firstly, it should be noticed that the idea of Arabic being the only sacred language is alien to the Islamic thought. The Koran explicitly denies that, when it states that all the prophets that were sent to humanity, before the prophet Muhammad, spoke to their respective peoples in their own language:

wa-mā 'arsalnā min rasūlin 'illā bi-lisāni qawmi-hī li-yubayyina la-hum

And We have sent no Messenger save with the tongue of his people, that he might make all clear to them (Koran XIV, 4)⁹.

In the Koran only twenty-five prophets are directly mentioned, but this is not to be interpreted as the total number of messengers¹⁰ sent by God since the holy book of Islam also affirms:

wa-la-qad ba 'atnā fī kulli 'ummatin rasūlan

We sent forth among every nation a Messenger (Koran XVI, 36).

wa-la-qad 'arsalnā rusulan min qabli-ka min-hum man qaṣaṣnā 'alay-ka wa-min-hum man lam naqṣuṣ 'alay-ka

We sent Messengers before thee; of some We have related to thee, and some We have not related to thee (Koran XL, 78).

Thus, every *'ummaḥ*, nation, had its messenger but not all of them are mentioned in the Koran. Moreover, according to a *ḥadīth* reported by Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 965), the number of prophets, *'anbiyā'* (plural of *nabī*), in the whole history of mankind amounts to the astonishing number of 120,000 (al-Fārsī 2014: 453, *ḥadīth* 361)¹¹. If each and everyone of them spoke the language of his people, we must draw the conclusion that virtually every human language “might have been a vehicle of God’s message sometime in the history of the speakers of that language” (Syed 1986: 79). Consequently, from an Islamic perspective, there is nothing intrinsically ‘unsacred’ or profane in vernaculars as such¹².

4. Vernacular and *fiṭrah*

As illustrated above, the Islamic civilization did not considered Arabic as the only sacred

⁹ The translation used for Koranic passages, unless otherwise stated, is that of Arberry (2008).

¹⁰ According to the tenets of Islamic prophetology every messenger, *rasūl*, is a prophet, *nabī*, but only a *nabī* who brings a new sacred law is called *rasūl*.

¹¹ Some scholars “place the number of prophets at 224,000” (Wheeler 2006: 27).

¹² As suggested by Canteins, within Islam, “la langue « vulgaire » ne s’oppose pas à la Langue sacrée mais au contraire à la langue profane” (Canteins 1981 : 87).

language in the history of humanity. Neither was Arabic unanimously considered as the first language of mankind. Alongside the belief that identified the Adamic language with Arabic, within the Islamic tradition we also encounter the widespread opinion that the primordial language was not Arabic but a language called *suryāniyyah*. While several scholars in using the term *suryāniyyah* had actually in mind historical Syriac (or Aramaic in general)¹³, others, especially within Sufi circles, employed the same word to refer to a primeval language that had nothing to do with Syriac, Aramaic or any other historical language (cf. Patrizi 2014: 89-94). In fact, such a language is described as having a very a peculiar linguistic nature that makes it utterly different from any known human language. An account of the distinctive features of that original tongue of mankind can be found in the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'* (*Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*, 10th century). According to the mysterious authors of this famous and influential medieval Islamic encyclopaedia, in 52 treatises¹⁴, after creating Adam and subjugating to him all things, God:

ğama 'a la-hu hādīhi al-'ašyā'a kulla-hā ṣağīra-hā wa-kabīra-hā wa-ğalīla-hā wa-ḥaqīra-hā fī tis 'i 'alāmātīn bi-'aškālīn muḥtalifātīn musammātīn qad ġama 'at 'asmā'a ġamī 'i al-mawğūdātī wa-'aqṣarat al-ma 'anī kulla-hā [...] fī al-tis 'atī al-'āhādī allatī hiya min wāḥidīn 'ilā tis 'atīn [...] wa-hādīhi al-ḥurūfu al-tis 'atu allatī 'allama-hā Allāhu subḥāna-hu li-Ādama 'alay-hi al-salāmu wa-hiya allatī yasta 'milu-hā ahlu al-Hindī 'alā hādī al-šakli: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9. wa-kāna bi-hādīhi al-ḥurūfī ya 'rifu al-'ašyā'a kulla-hā wa-ṣifātī-hā 'alā mā hiya bi-hi mawğūdatun fī 'aškālī-hā wa-hay 'atī-hā.

united in him all those things, small and large, sublime and mean, in nine signs through different, designated shapes that combined the names of all existing things. The significations of them all were contracted [...] into nine units which go from one to nine. [...] These nine letters which God – He is Exalted! – taught Adam – upon him be peace! – are those which the people of Hind employ, according to this form: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9. Through these letters all things, and their specific characteristics by which they exist in their shapes and forms, are known (Ormsby 2021: 172-3; 98)¹⁵.

Such a situation, affirm the *Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'* in what follows, went on until Adam's sons, who spoke in *suryāniyyah*, increased in number (Ormsby 2021: 173). Then “they scattered far and wide; they dispersed on the earth, going to the farthest regions” (*tafarraqū fī al-'aqālīmi wa-taqatṭa 'ū fī al-'arḍi wa-tafarraqu fī al-'aṭrāfi*) and, gradually, the original nine letters that made up the Adamic language, “kept on increasing [...] until the number of twenty-eight letters was complete” (*lam tazīl al-ḥurūfu tazīdu [...] 'ilā 'an kammalat 'iddatu al-ḥurūfī tamāniyatan wa-'iṣrīna ḥarfan*) and “stopped at this number” (*waqafat 'alā hādīhi al-'iddati*) because twenty-eight is one “of the perfect numbers” (*min al-'adādi al-tāmmati*) (Ormsby 2021: 173-4; 98-99) and corresponds to the number of the letters of the Arabic script which is:

ḥātīmata al-kitābātī wa-tamāma 'adadi al-ḥurūfī kamā 'anna šarī'ata al-'islāmi 'aḥīru al-šarā'ī kulli-hā wa-Muḥammadun ṣallā Allāhu 'alay-hi wa-'alā āli-hi ḥātīmu al-nabiyyīna wa-'aṣḥābi al-

¹³ On the Islamic traditions that maintained that Syriac was the language spoken by Adam cf. Rubin (1998: 330-2).

¹⁴ On the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'* cf. El-Bizri 2008.

¹⁵ Excerpted from the Epistle 31, *On the reasons of the difference in languages, graphic figures and expressions*, included in Section 2, *The corporeal and natural sciences*. The translation used (and the edition consulted) for passages from the *Rasā'il Iḥwān al-Ṣafā'* is that of Ormsby (2021).

šarā`i`i.

the ultimate seal of all writing systems and is perfect in the number of its letters, just as the Islamic *sharī`a* is the ultimate of all legal system, and Muhammad – may God bless him and his household! – is the Seal of Prophets and the proponents of laws (Ormsby 2021: 174; 99).

Therefore, according to the members of the Brethren of Purity, Arabic was not the primordial language, nor can the Adamic language, being composed of only nine letters (which correspond to the Indian numerals), be identified with any particular historical language. Later Sufi scholars, like al-Ḥawwās (d. 1532) and al-Ša`rānī (d. 1565), further developed the ideas expressed in the passages above and integrated them into their own conception of the *suryāniyyah*¹⁶. Among them al-Dabbāg (d. 1719) is arguably the one that provides the most accurate details about the inner structure of the Adamic language and the way in which other languages were derived from it. An extensive section of the lengthy book devoted to him by his disciple al-Lamaṭī (d. 1743) deals with al-Dabbāg’s conception of the *suryāniyyah*¹⁷. Firstly, the *suryāniyyah* was the language that Adam spoke in paradise and brought with him when he descended to earth (*kāna yatakallamu bi-hā fī al-ḡannati fa-nazala bi-hā `ilā al-`arḍi*, al-Lamaṭī 2002: 184; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 427). After his descent he continued to use it “with his wife and children because it was still familiar to them and their knowledge of the meanings was pure” (*ma`a zawḡati-hi wa-`awlādi-hi li-qurbi-hi bi-l-`ahdi, fa-kānat ma`rifatu-hum bi-l-ma`ānī šāfiyyatan*, al-Lamaṭī 2002: 184; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 426). The *suryāniyyah* remained “in its original form among his descendants without change and alteration” (*fī `awlādi-hi `alā `ašli-hā min ḡayri tabdīlin wa-lā taḡyīrin*) until the death of the prophet Idrīs (al-Lamaṭī 2002: 184; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 426-7). Then “change and alteration affected it and people began [...] to derive their own languages from it” (*daḡala-hā al-tabdīlu wa-taḡyīru wa-ḡa`ala al-nāsa [...] yastanbiṭūna min-hā luḡati-him*, al-Lamaṭī 2002: 184; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 427). The fundamental difference between the Adamic language and the multiple languages derived from it is that “in every language [...] speech is made up of words, not of letters of the alphabet” (*al-kalāma fī kulli luḡatin [...] yatarakkabu min al-kalimāti lā min al-hurūfi al-hiḡa`iyyati*) whereas the *suryāniyyah* “it’s made up of letters of the alphabet” (*yatarakkabu min al-hurūfi al-hiḡa`iyyati*) and each of its letters “indicates a self-contained meaning” (*yadullu `alā ma`nan mufīdin*) (al-Lamaṭī 2002: 183; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 424). When “ignorance became general among the offspring of Adam” (*amma banī Ādama al-ḡahlu*) and men became incapable of expressing concepts, in a concise and allusive way, using single letters to convey meanings, it became necessary to join letters together and the words, produced by that combination, took the place of single letters to indicate “a particular meaning current among the adherents of this convention” (*ma`nan min al-ma`ānī al-dā`irati `inda `ahli dālika al-waḍ`i*) (al-Lamaṭī 2002: 183; O’Kane and

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that in so doing they extensively quoted from the Iḥwān al-Šafā` without mentioning them explicitly. A similar behaviour, as noted by Patrizi (2014: 92), on the one hand shows the extent of the influence of the *Rasā`il Iḥwān al-Šafā`* on Sufism, but on the other, also proves the reluctance of Sufi scholars to openly refer to them as a source.

¹⁷ The section is entitled *Fī ba`ḍi al-āyāti al-qur`āniyyati allatī sa`alnā-hu `an-hā wa-mā yata`allaqu bi-dālika min tafsīri al-luḡati al-suryāniyyati* (*On some Koranic verses that we questioned him about and the explanation of the suryāniyyah language in connection with that*) and is part of the book *al-Daḡab al-Ibrīz min Kalām Sayyidī `Abd al-`Azīz al-Dabbāg* (*Pure gold from the words of Sayyidī `Abd al-`Azīz al-Dabbāg*). The translation used for passages from the book is that of O’Kane and Radtke (2007).

Ratke 2007: 426). That was the origin of language diversity. Although “an awesome science was lost because of ignorance of the meanings of the letters and knowledge of their secrets” (*dā‘a bi-sababi ġahli ma‘ānī al-ḥurūfi wa-ma‘rifati ‘asrāri-hā ‘ilmun ‘azīmun*), adds al-Dabbāġ, it is always possible, for those who are still familiar with the *suryāniyyah*, to explain a given word in given language (*tilka al-kalimata allatī fī tilka al-luġati*) by the meanings embedded in each of its letters (al-Lamaṭī 2002: 183-4; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 426). This is because through “the letters of the alphabet in every word in every language” (*ḥurūfa al-ḥiġā‘i fī kulli kalimatin min kulli luġatin*), the *suryāniyyah*, and its letters/concepts, are diffused “within all languages the way water is diffused within wood” (*fī ġamī‘i al-luġāti saryāna al-mā‘i fī al-‘ūdī‘*) (al-Lamaṭī 2002: 183; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 425). Moreover, traces of the Adamic language remain in infantile speech (*baqiya ‘inda al-ṣiġāri min-hā mā baqiya*) as long as a child “continues breast-feeding” (*mā dāma fī ḥāli al-riḍā‘i*) (al-Lamaṭī 2002: 184; O’Kane and Ratke 2007: 428). The *suryāniyyah*, being both the original language and the first language uttered by infants, is thus intrinsically related to the *fiṭrah*, the ‘primordial nature’ in which, according to the Koran, man was created and the ‘natural disposition’ on which, as reported by a well-known *ḥadīṭ*, all children are born:

fiṭrata Llāhi llatī faṭara l-nāsa ‘alay-hā

the primordial nature from God upon which He originated mankind (Koran XXX, 30)¹⁸.

mā min mawlūdīn illā yūladu ‘alā l-fiṭrati

No child is born except on his natural disposition (al-Buḥārī 1998: 263, *ḥadīṭ* 1358).

5. Convergences

Both Dante’s *vulgaris* and the *suryāniyyah* of the Sufis are conceived of as the *locutio naturalis* of man in his state of *fiṭrah* and the *forma locutionis* shared (though divided in *diversas prolationes et vocabula*) by the totality of mankind. In both contexts the establishment of a link between vernaculars and the Adamic language represents a key argument for the ennoblement of vulgar language in the face of the prestige enjoyed by Latin, Arabic or Persian¹⁹. The problem of how, despite the actual existence of different vernaculars, humanity might share one common natural language is approached by the Sufis by positing that while chronologically speaking the Adamic language represents the original source of all languages (and is, in that, distinct from them), on the ontological level, since its letters infuse all languages, it represents, *hic et nunc*, the inner and the hidden reality of every language (and is not, as such, something truly separated from them). If this is the case with every language it *a fortiori* applies to sacred languages. The rationale behind that is explained by Arnaldez in the following terms:

¹⁸ Translation from *The Study Quran. A New Translation and Commentary* edited by Nasr, Dagli, Dakake, Lumbard, and Rustom (2015: 1821).

¹⁹ In this regard, it is noteworthy that the proponents (including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself) of the reform of the Turkish language and of its emancipation from the linguistic and cultural influence of Arabic (an influence mainly exerted on the graphic and lexical level) endorsed, and even further developed, the *Güneş-Dil Teorisi* (the Sun-Language Theory) a theory, elaborated in the 1930s, that postulated the origin of all human languages from a proto-Turkic primal tongue (cf. Lewis 1999: 57-74).

pour toute langue qui détient un dépôt révélé, la langue adamique représente une norme idéale, selon laquelle il faut comprendre les textes pour saisir la vérité pure qu'ils contiennent (Arnaldez 1956: 47).

In this way, he adds “la langue de la révélation, qu’il s’agisse de l’hébreu, du grec ou de l’arabe [...] retrouve la valeur du langage adamique” (Arnaldez 1956: 47). Such an intimate association between the Adamic language and the language of revelation bears profound implications for the exegetical practice especially as developed within Sufi milieux. The hermeneutic endeavour becomes an attempt, as in the case of ‘Ayn al-Qudāt (d. 1131), to discover the *suryāniyyah* at the heart of the Koranic language:

When one becomes more ripe, the connected letters will become unconnected. This is what people read, *He loves them* (Q. 5:54)²⁰, and they think that it is connected. When from behind the veil he comes out of his self, beauty itself will be presented to his sight in the disconnected letters, and he will say it all like this: *Yā*’, *Ḥā*’, *Bā*’, *Hā*’, *Mīm* (Rustom 2021: 83, italics in the text)²¹.

Thus, when Sufis like ‘Ayn al-Qudāt approach the language of the Koran, they move beyond the word level and, when interpreting single Koranic terms, they bring those words back to their composition in letters and then base their explanations on the value and the meaning embedded in those letters²². Through this hermeneutic process the primordial inner nature of the Koranic language is somehow restored and, in this light, Arabic might, in a certain way, be identified with the Adamic language, despite not being quite the same thing. From this standpoint the positions of those who, within the Islamic tradition, held that Arabic was the first language of man and those who argued that that language was the *suryāniyyah* may somehow be reconciled and the contradiction implied considered only a matter of perspective. It is noteworthy that this conception of the Adamic language surviving within each sacred language and representing its inner nature, is also reconcilable with Dante’s statement that, although all present vernaculars derive from the primordial language of man, that *forma locutionis* was completely lost after Babel and only preserved by the Hebrew language. Such a theoretical framework appears also compatible with both Dante’s stance, expressed in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, about Post-Babelic Hebrew being the language actually spoken by Adam in paradise, and the position, maintained by Dante in the *Paradiso*, according to which the Adamic language was all extinct long before the construction of the tower²³.

6. Conclusions

In the present contribution we have tried to explore the conception of vernacular in its relation with the Adamic language as envisaged by Dante and by some scholars in the coeval Islamic

²⁰ *yuhibbu-hum* (Koran V, 54).

²¹ Excerpted and translated from ‘Ayn al-Qudāt’s *Nāmāhā* by Rustom (2021: 83, 87).

²² As stated by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidī (d. ca. 900) “It is from letters that names come to be and it is to letters that they return” (excerpted from *Tahṣīl nazā’ir al-Qur’ān*, quoted and translated by Sviri 2002: 211).

²³ Incidentally, as noted by Patrizi, in the *Paradiso* (XXVI, 135) Dante specifies that in the original Adamic language to refer to God, like in case of the *suryāniyyah*, only one single letter was used, the Italian letter ‘I’, while the Hebrew word *El* only appeared later on (cf. Patrizi 2014: 95-96).

world²⁴. Far from seeking to establish direct influences or derivations, considering the commonalities between the two approaches helped us to elucidate some of the theoretical and symbolic premises that justified the ennoblement of vernaculars in the respective medieval contexts. Such a reappraisal of the status of vernacular vis-à-vis languages like Latin, Arabic or Persian, as we attempted to illustrate, provided the epistemological foundations that, from the Mediterranean to the Indo-Iranian area and beyond, favoured a process of vernacularization of knowledge which laid the basis for the emergence of several modern literary languages. Eventually we suggested that looking at Dante's vision of vulgar language by taking into account the speculations on the nature of the Adamic language developed on the other shore of the Mediterranean, might enable us to reflect on some elusive and controversial aspects of the Sommo Poeta's linguistic thought from a less explored comparative perspective based on the many convergences in their symbolic representations of the world and of the Word shared by Dante and the Islamic linguistic tradition.

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²⁴ As well as by some of their later interpreters and continuators.

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