

THE ACCADEMIA DELLA CRUSCA TODAY: ITS TASKS AND PROBLEMS *

Unlike other academies — the Accademia dei Lincei, for example — the Crusca has never embraced all branches of scientific and humanistic knowledge. In contrast to its predecessor the Accademia Fiorentina, a sort of informal university where various disciplines were studied, the Crusca was designed as a center for lexicography and philology dedicated to the study and cultivation of the vernacular language. In this capacity it was to serve as a vehicle of linguistic unification for three centuries.

In 1923, the Academy's work on the *Vocabolario* was interrupted and its philological studies oriented toward preparing critical editions of literary texts and Italian documents. The Crusca became a fief of the University of Florence, adopting its modern philological methodologies. The Centro di Studi di filologia italiana, established at the Academy by a special law in 1937, remains one of the foremost schools of Italian textual criticism. In 1964, Giacomo Devoto succeeded Bruno Migliorini as president of the Crusca and expanded the Academy's activities, establishing two more centers, one for lexicography and one for grammar. Each center publishes a journal, as well as critical editions; organizes seminars, symposia, and courses; and, in collaboration with the University of Florence, trains young scholars.

Unlike the academies of eastern Europe, the Crusca does not have a permanent staff of researchers paid by the state: members and university researchers work on a voluntary basis. The system has advantages and disadvantages. Young scholars who are trained there move on to secondary schools and universities and, since the research staff is constantly renewed, it does not age. On the other hand, the Academy lacks the permanent staff that is vital for collective research projects.

The famous *Vocabolario* was a collective endeavor from the beginning. The old Academy, in fact, lived solely for the dictionary, of which it published five editions from 1612 onward; the last began in 1863 and by 1923 had reached the letter *O*. Then, judged to be too slow and expensive, the work was halted by the Minister of Public Education.

After the Second World War, ambitious lexicographic projects were revived or started all across Europe. In Italy, the Crusca took the initiative, and in 1955 began planning for a new dictionary; in 1964 the National Research Council decided to finance the project. The form finally elaborated, after much discussion, was that of a comprehensive and historical dictionary of the Italian language from its origins to the modern period. In cooperation with the National Computer Center at Pisa, an advanced technique of computerized data collection was designed. All extant texts from the origin of the lan-

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guage to 1375 were to be included, and selections from the most important texts of the later centuries.

Shortly after its inception, the inadequacy of funds and personnel caused the project to be redefined and limited to a « Tesoro delle origini » (which had in fact been foreseen as a first stage). The decision, though necessary, proved opportune: the texts of those early centuries — characterized by a strong regional variation of dialects — presented challenging philological and lexicographic problems that led to casting the work in a new and original form. Now, after twenty years of work selecting and verifying data from more than 2,000 texts containing more than nineteen million words, the actual preparation of the dictionary is beginning. Meanwhile, the National Research Council has renewed and extended its support, by establishing another research center, affiliated with the Academy, and providing funds for its staff. We have not abandoned the second part of the new dictionary, dealing with the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, but it must await the completion of this first part. The lexical archive, or word bank, will be available to scholars for consultation in the interim.

The Crusca Academy contributed to the maturing of linguistic national consciousness and to the linguistic unification of Italy even during political divisions and foreign occupation. If the Academy's linguistic purism provoked polemics, its dictionary was accepted as an indispensable tool by writers and poets, even as they quarreled with it. In today's changed political and social conditions, however, the Crusca cannot remain the province of a small circle of linguists guiding an even smaller circle of writers. Linguistic education on a broad scale and to a national standard is properly the responsibility of the national school system; the Crusca supplements and influences that instruction through its scientific research. But the Crusca is not an ivory tower. Appreciating the importance of language as an instrument of education and cultural communication in a politicized society, the Academy has initiated contacts with universities, schools, and the public at large to exchange ideas and concerns about the teaching and use of language.

Some, however, still insist that the Academy should be the official monitor and arbiter of the Italian language. In the twentieth century linguistic purism has been encouraged, first by the fascist regime and after the Second World War by those who feared the growing influx of foreign words and the influence of the mass media. But the age-old accusation of purism has weighed heavily on the Academy, and it is in any case unlikely that its now diverse membership could unite to formulate a single « official » vision of the language. In truth, the Academy has never in all its 400 years assumed the functions of a linguistic supreme court of appeal. It is more likely, and reasonable, that the Accademia della Crusca will continue to promote the knowledge of the Italian language, from which comes its enlightened and respectful use.

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