

The Ethics of Language in Cicero's *De Legibus*
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While Cicero's reputation as a philosophical author has waxed and waned, his position as a philosopher of language has not received adequate exploration. He does not devote any specific philosophical writing to language, but engages the issues in passing, especially in *On the Laws*. Although studies of this work have noted an interest in language and highlighted certain key passages and ideas, they have not seen it as a contribution, distinctively Roman in character though in conversation with Greek precedents, to the understanding of the relations among linguistic usage, habits of thought, and behavior. This paper sets forth Cicero working on the practical side of the philosophy of language in the guise of Roman statesman and lawgiver. Sharing the concern that Plato shows in his *Laws* over the linguistic habits of the *vulgus*, which can foster a view of reality fixed upon material particulars at the expense of the eternal truth necessary for the ordering of society, Cicero nevertheless grants more to the inevitable weaknesses and frailties of humanity, refraining from any reform of the daily speech of the people. Instead, he suggests rather limited measures, carried out in the public language of the law, which will have at least some impact on shaping the thought of the citizens at large. The ruling and intellectual classes, on the other hand, should employ in certain circumstances a more refined, philosophical usage, which will allow them to keep their own thoughts clear and provide guidance to the state. At the same time this kind of speech, so Greek in its origin and features, brings other dangers: the endless multiplication of merely verbal distinctions that destroys the harmony of the intellectual class and, in turn, of the entire civic body through dissension, confusion, and scandal. Philosophical usage must be kept within its proper bounds by traditional Roman prudence and wisdom. The ship of state can be steered, between perils on either side, through the turbulent waters of language.