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Grammatical Constructions We Live By: The Case of (*dis*)*similis sui*

In Republican Latin, when the adjective *similis* ("similar") denotes a general similarity it governs a dative; so dogs resemble wolves (Cic. *nat.* 1.97: *canis ... similis lupo*). When closer resemblance or identification is marked, the genitive is used; so *veri simile* is an invariable expression. With Livy, both constructions interchange freely (3.46.4: *similibus ... Icili*; 3.65.9: *similes Icilio*), until in the empire the genitive construction becomes uncommon. I wish to analyze these changes by focusing on the peculiar construction of *similis sui/sibi*, the case of self-resemblance. What seems an unremarkable instance of shifting case usage in fact parallels changing perceptions of moral character in the early Empire.

The phrase *similis sui* describes an object in nature that possesses an inherent resemblance to itself. I begin explicating this apparent tautology--how can something *not* resemble itself?—with a passage in which Cicero narrates human degeneration from natural law. He remarks that, were it not for moral depravity, "no one would be so like himself (*sui ... similis*) as all people would be like one another" (*leg.* 1.29). Universal self-similarity, in other words, coincides with an all-moral state of nature. The conception seems uniquely Roman. In texts otherwise indebted to Greek predecessors, formulations of the type *similis sui* do not translate a specific phrase. In these contexts, the Latin describes an unchanging state that inheres in nature (Cic. *Tim.*, Apul. *mund.*) or, by analogy, geographical features, the properly running state, and the well-ordered soul (Mela; Apul. *mund.*; Cic. *sen.*, *Tusc.*).

When applied to a human being, extant examples of the phrase (*dis*)*similis sui* reflect this notion of immutable nature. The identification noted is between current behavior and an assumed pre-existing pattern. Late Republican texts present the clearest examples, a circumstance that does not simply reflect the paucity of evidence. These passages demonstrate that retaining one's true self became a matter of pride, provided that that self is worth attaining (e.g., Caes. apud Cic. *Att.* 9.16.2). Not surprisingly, this topos of unvaried character finds a comfortable home in Roman oratory (Cic. *Clu.* 41; cf. *Ver.* 2.4.15, *Phil.* 9.6).

In the Empire, the equation of external appearance and internal character becomes problematized, as actors grow increasingly capable of impersonating *similis sui*, of dissimulating. Only two post-Republican examples of the phrase *similis sui* in describing a person's character are extant. In both instances (Apul. *met.* 10.27; Suet. *Tib.* 67.3), the only individuals attaining the Republican ideal of self-resemblance are—ironically—innate masters of dissemblance.

I close with Seneca's laments over how human beings have failed to live in accordance with natural disposition. In one case *similis* governs the dative *sibi* rather than the genitive *sui* (*ep.* 120.21). Kühner-Stegmann claim that "the genitive is used by Cicero and older authors when it is a matter of an all-around, comprehensive resemblance ..., while the dative is used only for partial or approximate similarity" (1.449; L.-H.-S. 78).

Seneca, I claim, preserves in his remarks the connotations of the dative recognized in earlier authors. The evolution of the construction of *similis sui/sibi* represents, then, not simply a shifting of grammatical construction, but an instance where a new understanding of the world determines grammar.