As famously expressed by Robert Kaster, (late) ancient grammarians feel and act like ‘guardians of language’. Their teaching aims to preserve Latinitas and, in accordance with a long-established twofold task embracing ratio elogendi and enarratio auctorurn, draws on a tradition which is both technical, i.e. earlier artes grammaticae, and literary, i.e. the correct consuetudo of the auctores.

Pompeius is an African grammarian dating from the second half of the 5th century. His commentary on Donatus’ Ars apparently stems from notes taken down by his students while he was lecturing and hence mirrors his teachings as they were orally delivered: as a result, in this work we come across some features – prolixity, repetitions, hints of ‘oral performance’ – we would expect in an unrevised firsthand witness.

I will dwell on two aspects of Pompeius’ work, which I argue might be intertwined.

Firstly, elements pertaining to the spoken register of Latin copiously feature in the commentary. Such elements are commented upon and sometimes approved, or they even seep into the texture of Pompeius’ prose itself.

Secondly and somewhat most importantly, Pompeius’ commentary “affords an especially vivid glimpse of the grammarian’s … sense of … rivalry with his predecessors” (Kaster 1997: 138, 161-8). As a matter of fact, an investigation of Pompeius’ attitude towards the two main sources he relies on – Donatus and Servius’ commentary on Donatus – would enable us to give a more detailed image of the complex relationship Pompeius establishes with his auctores, who are sometimes approved, but at most times criticised and corrected.

I will argue that both the seepage of spoken Latin into Pompeius’ commentary and the open rivalry with his predecessors might reflect the fact that in fifth century Africa the monolithic and compact construction of traditional grammar is starting to somewhat collapse even in its guardian’s eyes.

Reference:
- R.A. Kaster, Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity, Berkeley 1997