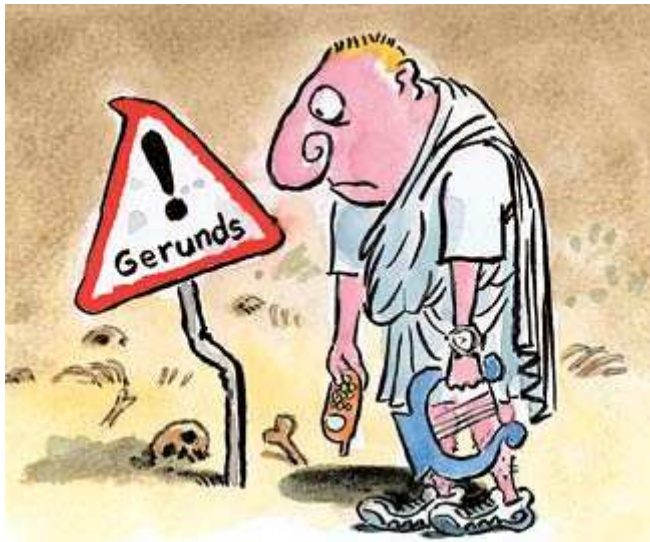


Latin today

Roman rebound

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So you thought that irksome language was dead?



TO SCARY music, a furtive Jewish nationalist of the first century paints on a wall the words *Romanes Eunt Domus*. A centurion enters:

Centurion: What's this, then? ? 'People called Romanes they go the house?'

Nationalist: It—it says, 'Romans, go home'.

Centurion: No, it doesn't. 'Go home'? This is motion towards. Isn't it, boy?

Nationalist (being savagely beaten): Ah. Ah, dative, sir! Ahh! No, not dative! Not the dative, sir! No! Ah! Oh, the...accusative! *Domum*, sir! Ah! Oooh! Ah!

Centurion: Except that takes the...?

Nationalist: The locative, sir!

The scene, from "Monty Python's Life of Brian", marked the apotheosis of Latin in film—until last March. At that point Mel Gibson, star-turned-director, announced that his new film "The Passion", about the last hours of Christ, would be made entirely in Latin and Aramaic. At first, the hero of "Thunderdome" and "Lethal Weapon" did not even want subtitles. When he realised that audiences needed to know, just roughly, what the characters were saying, he reluctantly backed down.

The *milites*¹ in their *caligae*² are now being coached in barrack-room conjugations by Father William Fulco, a professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. They are taking to it quickly, he says; sometimes too quickly, with a steep slide into Italian-waiter accents. Italian is in fact his rough guide for pronunciation of first-century Latin, about which there is much debate. Subtitles will still be waived for soldier-talk, which Father Fulco has derived from graffiti found in Roman camps. You could argue, as he does, that Greek would often be

more appropriate, and that the conscripted troops in Judea spoke little Latin. But, as the language of an oppressive superpower, Latin can't be beat.

As for Mr Gibson, he positively brags about making a film “in two dead languages”. Not dead enough, some may think, remembering tear-stained sessions with Sallust and those cloth-bound small books, blotted with blue ink, in which scouts were forever crossing rivers and winter camps being struck. No wonder the world has galloped so gratefully to English, which has little use for genders or gerunds and never, if it will have been able to help it, employs the future perfect.

Yet hold on a minute (*festina lente*, as Caesar would have said, while gripping some hapless Gaul by the neck). Latin has a surprising number of advocates in the modern world. And these are not merely classicists or arty types entranced by the glories of Virgil, the cockiness of Catullus or the breathtaking fall of the rhythms and words of Horace. They are people who believe Latin has a future, as well as a past.

Totium orbium lingua³

Latin was, after all, the original world language—and not just up to the moment the Vandals carbonised Rome, but long afterwards. In early 16th-century Europe rulers and ambassadors still corresponded in Latin, forming thereby a common cultural web that brought Europe closer together than at any time since. Ordinary people, too, still used Latin as the warp and weft of their prayers, and carried Latin primers round with them. Despite the inexorable advance of the vernacular, Latin was alive and routine among the literate.

Deep into the next two centuries, too, it remained the preferred language of philosophy and science. This was not just because it crossed borders, but because it kept an antique purity. While mongrel English found its words encumbered with changing meanings, Latin preserved a precision that scientists increasingly needed. The deeper Isaac Newton went into formulations of physical laws, the more he wrote his notes in Latin, the closest approach in words to the utter directness of mathematical symbols.

Modern-day champions of Latin make a special point of both these qualities: universality and purity. No matter that Latin, in the last decades of its heyday, was as dog-eared and scatty as any other well-used language, and that the Latin of the street (or, for that matter, the walls) often ignored the rules. This is still a language of striking conciseness and clarity, with the added bonus of a sort of timeless abstraction. To read a news story in Latin is to set it *sub specie aeternitatis*⁴ indeed, its importance or triteness brightly exposed by the translucence of the words.

Small wonder then, that some people still prefer their news in Latin, and that the centre of Latin news broadcasting nowadays should be Finland, a country of translucent birches, lakes and blondes, and with a language the opposite of universal. The Finnish Broadcasting Company (aka Radiophonia Finnica Generalis, or YLE) puts out a five-minute bulletin, “Nuntii Latini”, every week, and has done so for 14 years. The bulletins are broadcast worldwide, and are also collected and published as books. The conjunction of Latin with Finno-Ungaric makes for some bizarre listening and reading, as in

Anneli Jäätteenmäki, quae munere ministri primarii a mense Aprili functa est, a praesidente Tarja Halonen dimissionem petivit et accepit.⁵

But people in more than 50 countries, from East Timor to Uruguay, are tuning in, sending Latin letters of appreciation and begging for ancient Greek.

For these listeners, “Nuntii Latini” is not only a lifeline but a repository of proper usage. *Pace* the French Academy, no language is more closely guarded or monitored than a supposedly dead one. Each expert believes himself privy to the real sound and oratorical shape of the Latin Cicero spoke, perhaps forgetting that the pronunciation of even 15th-century English still divides the scholars. Latin websites—dozens of them, at the last count, including Latinteach.com (“Where Latin teachers meet in cyberspace”)—feature loving translations of Dr Seuss’s “Quomodo Invidiosulus Nomine Grinchus Christi Natalem Abrogaverit”⁶ and show the most tender care for third-declension loan-words. One-upmanship, too, goes with the territory. Ever since last July, when a bit of scatological Latin strayed into the pages of *Private Eye*, a British satirical magazine, delighted letters have poured in about the applicability of the genders of *nauta* (sailor, masculine, feminine form) and *bollocae* (guess).

If Latin, spoken or written, is ever to catch on again, perhaps it needs justifying. Among the XVIII slightly desperate reasons for learning Latin to be found on Latinteach.com, the most attractive is “Explain the passive periphrastic to your significant other,” and the most topical, “Learn to conquer the world and claim it was self-defence.” Or perhaps, discarding justification, the language just needs modernising. Henry Beard’s handy little tome, “Latin for All Occasions”, is designed to recycle old Latin tags for the present time. (Eg, *rara avis*: There is no car hire available⁷.) Many have pointed out that “Been there, done that”, was originally coined by Caesar when he proclaimed *Veni, vidi, vici*⁸, though he did not wear the T-shirt.

Others are trying a serious and comprehensive updating. David Theodore Stark has devised what he calls Latino Moderne, a version that strays close both to modern Italian and to Esperanto. It has the letters k and w in it, as well as a definite article, *le*, which is “correct for all cases, genders and numbers”. It dispenses with gender anyway: “All nouns are considered neuter unless they refer to things that are actually masculine or feminine (such as men or women). In poetry, this rule may be relaxed.” The sentence structure, too, follows modern English or French, hence *le homine ambulava inar le domo*, “The man walked into the house”. Verb endings become rather Spanish. The whole website primer is pleasingly free of consuls and verbs of killing; it is recommended for international businessmen. But the conditional and the gerundive have by no means been banished outright.

In Vaticano claritas⁹

Purists, of course, abhor the very thought of simplifying, and nowhere more fiercely than in that last redoubt of living Latin, the Vatican. All official papal documents are redacted in Latin. The language, naturally, cannot easily express modern concepts and things: for popes, that is part of its charm. But in Rome the challenge is not to chop and squeeze the language into new shapes, but to translate modern words into the full, but precise, complexity that Latin requires. Every Thursday, a five-man team meets to argue it out. And it is somehow heartening to discover, as supposedly serious people wage the war on terror or struggle to mend the world economy, that some others spend their working hours deciding that the Latin for “hot dog” should be *pastillum botello fartum*¹⁰. (Which encyclical was that again?)

The result of their labours is the new “Lexicon Recentis Latinitatis”. At £70 (\$116) for 700 pages, and with Italian, rather than English, as its second language, this is not a volume for the

ordinary bedside table. Nor do the Latinised phrases always trip off the tongue. *Universalis destructionis armamenta* is thunderingly good for “weapons of mass destruction”, and even harder to lose in the sand-drifts of Iraq; *conformitatis osor*, a hater of conformity, is a nice turn for “hippie”, while *benzini aerisque migma*, for carburettor, gives the magic impression that air mixed with benzene might make you fly. But *tempus maximae frequentiae* is far too elegant for “rush hour”, while *iazensis musica* (jazz) bears in that “z” the whiff of falsehood.

Latin's greatest virtue, its conciseness, is too often betrayed by stretching it instead. Thus *vesticula balnearis Bikiniana* (a little bathing garment from Bikini) becomes sadly unskimpy, and *sonorarum visualiumque taeniarum cistellula* (a little box of ribbons of sounds and sights) does over-fussy duty for a videocassette. Other words are instantly fossilised when Latinised. Crisps are *globuli solaniani*, “circular forms of a plant of the deadly nightshade family”, or salty oblivion in a bag. A boy scout is *puer explorator*, surely a useful little slave with a sling and pebbles, rather than a lad in shorts with a penknife.

The front-man of the translating team also cuts a surprising figure. He is an American Carmelite priest, Reginald Foster, Latin's loudest advocate in the modern world. Bumptious, bespectacled, in overalls and from Milwaukee, he is so devoted to Latin that he greets visitors with “*Ave!*” and is renowned for speaking not just the classical version, but the Carolingian and the medieval, if asked. For more than 30 years—chalk in one hand, wineglass in the other—he has conducted a Latin summer school in Rome, holding many classes *sub arboribus*¹¹ in the conversational style of the ancient world. His students have been seen in Pompeii, reading Pliny's letters aloud as they stroll the streets, and at the Fons Bandusia near Rome, pouring wine into the water while reciting Horace. Year by year his classes grow more popular, though you need to be well past *amo*¹² and *fundus*¹³ to apply.

As Father Foster himself admits, shaping Latin to the modern world is not the way to save it. His massive dictionary is something of a game, when all is said, as are the tourist phrasebooks and the Finnish broadcasts. Latin's salvation—or, at least, the key to its preservation—lies in the glory of its literature, and in the eagerness of devotees to bring others to it. Father Foster plays his part magnificently in that. But alas, for all the colour and comic-strip fun of modern Latin textbooks, there is no way to the literature that does not go *via*¹⁴ the horrible wild places where ablatives and gerunds live.

1 soldiers; 2 boots; 3 a world language; 4 in the context of eternity; 5 AJ, who has held the post of prime minister since April, submitted her resignation to President TH, which he accepted; 6 “How the Grinch Stole Christmas”; 7 rightly, “a rare bird”; 8 I came, I saw, I conquered; 9 light from the Vatican; 10 a little roll stuffed with sausage; 11 under the trees; 12 I love; 13 farm; 14 by way of