

The Use of Latin as a Spoken Language in the Humanist Age

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THE EXISTENCE OF a spoken (and not merely written) sphere of discourse for Latin as a non-vernacular language for Europe's intelligentsia was a heritage of the Middle Ages. Although the spheres of European society in which Latin might be spoken were much the same in the Renaissance as in the middle ages, nevertheless the advent of humanism and its emphasis on the restoration of the standards of ancient Latinity brought about a much closer attention to this 'spoken' use. This article is divided into the following topics: (1) Latin as a spoken language in schools and universities; (2) spoken Latin outside the academic sphere; (3) the impact of humanism on the spoken use of Latin.

Spoken Latin in Schools and Universities

The rather well-known situation of Montaigne, who is said to have learned Latin as an infant from caregivers who spoke it to him before he learned French, was totally exceptional - as exceptional then as now. For virtually everyone in the class of people who learned Latin, the process of learning was an arduous one that began at six or seven years of age. It was definitely a case of learning a second language, and not a native one, and indeed not even another vernacular tongue, but one whose norms were codified and fixed in canonical texts, not the fluid environment of popular usage. Latin for centuries had been what linguists might define as a 'dead language'. Nevertheless, it was a 'working' language: namely people learned it to use it in writing, and, not rarely, in spoken communication. The fact that nearly everyone in the Middle Ages and Renaissance who learned Latin did so not merely to be able to read and understand the written sources of the academic disciplines (virtually all of which were in Latin), but also to acquire the practical ability to use Latin themselves as a means of communication, constitutes a major difference between the way Latin was learned then and the way it is typically learned now.

In pre-university education pupils in Latin schools in most regions of Europe began at a very young age to speak the language. In the initial stages of Latin learning teachers certainly used the vernacular to explain principles and Latin words. In England, to mention just one example, before the 12th century elementary pre-university Latin teaching was done in Latin and old English; from the twelfth

century to the early humanist age French was used for the earlier stages of Latin learning. But more advanced students in many English grammar schools were expected to communicate exclusively in Latin with their teachers and with each other (though even with such students the teacher might use a vernacular word from time to time to gloss an unfamiliar Latin one, and might ask these students to translate from their vernacular into Latin). In many regions of Europe, with remarkable uniformity, the exclusive use of Latin as the spoken language on the school premises for students beyond a certain level (sometimes with recess times excepted) was enforced with harsh penalties for violations.

This practice was typical also of the academies of the Jesuit order up to its suppression in 1773 - as is clear from many passages in the famous *Ratio studiorum*.

Such an acclimatisation to the spoken use of Latin was, of course, also a preparation for university life. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries - as in the preceding medieval period - all over Europe the language of university activities was Latin. Lectures, disputations, examinations, publications, and ceremonies were conducted in Latin. Latin was the language not merely of grammar, rhetoric and *bonae litterae*, as they were called, but also medicine, philosophy, and what we would call the natural sciences. Hence anyone who entered a university would be very ill-prepared indeed if they did not already have at least some experience in the spoken use and auditory comprehension of Latin.

Of course we must keep in mind that statutes requiring spoken Latin might sometimes be neglected or violated in any institution from a Latin secondary school to a university. The Belgian Jesuit Antonius Van Torre (1615-1677), for example, reproaches those teachers and students who neglect the Jesuit rules which require Latin as the spoken language in school, and he stresses the utility of these laws, which help ensure that the successful student will have access to advancement in educated society. We have evidence that when university students were away from the academic setting they tended to seek out their own countrymen and used their vernacular (after all most of them were not using Latin in university because of any zeal for Latin, but because it was then the obligatory language of the academic world). However, it took a very long time for the vernacular languages to gain a greater role in academic life. For example, Christian Thomasiaus at Halle and Christian Wolff at Leipzig created a considerable stir when they began to conduct lectures in German instead of Latin at the very end of the 17th century - and their practice was not instantly imitated on a large scale. Ludvig Holberg in his Latin autobiography testifies to his surprise when he discovered how little professors at Oxford maintained the spoken use of Latin - but Holberg's Oxford experience dates from the early 18th century. Academic statutes, therefore, supported by other indications, reflect a real condition which existed near the time they were written - namely a real need to maintain a Latinate environment.

Spoken Latin Outside the Academic Sphere

As had been typical in the Middle Ages, Latin continued to be used for public administration and diplomacy in some areas. Nevertheless in the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries the vernacular languages, especially in Spain, France, Italy, and Britain, were employed with rapidly increasing consistency in governments, chanceries, and legations, especially as national monarchies grew more assertive and conscious of their identities. However, Latin certainly remained the international language of the Roman church

'..for if you will consider it, Latin is no more unknown to a child, when he comes into the world, than English: and yet he learns English without master, rule, or grammar; and so might he Latin too, as Tully did, if he had some body always to talk to him in this language.'

- John Locke

not only in the Renaissance, but long afterwards. It was always the medium for church councils, although Erasmus implies that if two clerics with the same native tongue found themselves at such a meeting, they would more often than not quickly revert to their common vernacular. Nevertheless, during the 16th and 17th centuries the spoken and conversational use of Latin existed not rarely even outside strictly academic, ecclesiastic and diplomatic spheres, especially between people of different linguistic background who did not know each other's languages. The utility of Latin for international communication is quite often stressed in texts of the 16th and early 17th centuries. The fact that people resorted to Latin is not surprising when we consider that an active command of Latin, and especially humanistic Neo-Classical Latin, was a mark of the educated person. None of the vernacular tongues in the humanist era had quite the same prestige.

The Impact of Humanism on the Spoken Use of Latin

The goal of the humanists, as we all know, was to purge Latin, Europe's international language, of the jargon of scholastic theology and speculative grammar, and to obliterate peculiar usages characteristic of sub-types of medieval Latin (especially in law and documents), and restore modern Latin to the standards and stylistic canons of the pagan Roman authors. The humanist movement was pan-European and immensely successful. By the mid-16th century, with the exception of the works of a few die-hard theologians, and some legal documents written according to time-honoured customs, the great mass of Latin produced by the academic, administrative, and ecclesiastical elite was humanist Latin, and it very obviously, by comparison with medieval texts, reflects the stylistic and grammatical canons of pagan Roman Latin, even if medieval vocabulary for post-antique institutions might be retained, and new words sometimes coined for new things. At the time when the humanist movement was beginning to be felt in northern Europe, i.e. in the late 15th century, the spoken Latin of students and masters was typically redolent of scholastic jargon, and not infrequently quite ungrammatical. This usage above all had to be reformed, or at least a new standard proposed. Many humanists believed that mastery of a *sermo cottidianus* ('daily conversation') modelled on classical authors rather than permitting children to imitate the corrupt *sermo cottidianus* that was then current, or to simply translate mentally from their vernacular languages, provided the best way to train students directly in good Latin. No humanist expressed this idea more succinctly and clearly than Erasmus of Rotterdam.

But the world of the 16th century was not the world of pagan Rome, and it was the contemporary 16th century world the student would be using his pure classical Latin to describe. The humanist teachers understood this very well, and this factor is one of the main reasons for the sudden explosion (from the late 15th century on) in the composition and the publication of entertaining little Latin dialogues designed as models for the spoken Latin discourse of students. These works are known as *colloquia scholastica* or *colloquia familiaria*. Jacobus Pontanus, a German Jesuit master (1542-1626), in the preface to his *Progymnasmata*, a massive collection of *colloquia*, explains their utility. Such *colloquia*, he says, deal with subjects familiar in the lives of students, subjects never found in Cicero's letters – yet the *colloquia* also provide the classicising Latinity appropriate for treating such subjects. The genre of *colloquia* did have a few earlier antecedents. There appears to be one surviving ancient example, perhaps written by one Iulius Pollux in the early-third century to acclimatise Greek speakers in the eastern half of the Roman Empire to Latin. There are a few early medieval dialogues that may be classified with this genre, of which the best

'Postgate's enthusiasm for learning Latin by the direct method (by speaking the language) was evidenced at mealtimes; at one Sunday dinner Margaret asked *da mihi bovem* ('give me the ox') instead of *da mihi bovis* ('give me some beef'), and found the whole vast sirloin thrust at her.'

known is the collection of *colloquia* by Aelfric, produced in Anglo-Saxon England for a monastic setting, perhaps in the early 11th century. But, Aelfric's works excepted, very few medieval *colloquia* are known.

As we have seen, spoken Latin was also one of the fundamental features of the Jesuit academic system until the order's suppression in 1773. So, in Jesuit pedagogy and culture, ex-tempore Latin eloquence and the cult of Ciceronian style (in moderation) were joined. Similarly the great architects of humanist Latin pedagogy in the German-speaking areas, Philippus Melanchthon and Ioannes Sturm, were Ciceronians of the moderate sort.

Both Melanchthon and Sturm were strong upholders of the importance of spoken Latin in schools. Indeed Sturm himself wrote a collection of *colloquia* for students entitled *Neanisci*.

The role of Latin as Europe's international *lingua franca* of the learned declined steadily during the course of the 17th century in the face of ever more prestigious and powerful national monarchs and ever more pervasive and literate vernacular culture. In the same period the respectability of using one's native language for learned discourse was greatly enhanced in many regions of Europe. The decline of Latin became precipitous in the 18th century, as Latin's prestige was severely undermined first by nationalism and the enlightenment, and later by romanticism and the Age of Revolution. By the second half of the 18th century and the 19th century the primary purpose of learning Latin was not to use it as a language of expression, but to understand the texts of the classical authors. Yet neither spoken use of Latin, nor the use of Latin in writing and publication, was ever entirely extinguished. This was particularly true in the Roman church. Until the second Vatican Council of 1962, Latin remained as the teaching language in Catholic seminaries – though it was often an arid, non-classical, and semi-scholastic Latin, which had survived in the field of Canon Law since the late Middle Ages, despite the success of humanism elsewhere.

Finally, if we consider that the late Carl Egger (leading light of the Vatican's *Opus fundatum latinitatis* after Vatican II) was a student of the entire Latin tradition including not merely Roman writers, but also authors of the humanist era such as Erasmus and Pontano, and that the *colloquia* of Vives and other later Renaissance authors were among the sources for modern Latin word-lists and narratives composed by Egger and his late colleague Iosephus Mir, we realise that the spoken Latin culture of the humanist age and the very recent living Latin movement are not unconnected.

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