

Note on Latin Grammar

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Chapter 1

Overview

1.1 Historical notes

This note is about Classical Latin and Ecclesiastical Latin. That's to say languages like Old Latin, vulgar Latin (with prototypes of Romance articles) are not discussed.

1.2 Phonology and the writing system

1.3 Parts of speech

Latin word classes can be defined easily via morphology, and these classes prove to have morphosyntactic significance. Traditionally speaking, word classes with none or poor morphology are called **particles**, and non-particle words can be divided into two large classes: those with similar morphology of prototypical nouns (i.e. **declension**) are **nominals**, while words with similar morphology of prototypical verbs (i.e. **conjugation**) form a uniform class rightfully called **verbs**. Nominals include **nouns** and **adjectives**, the distinction between the two can also be defined morphologically.

Latin particles include **prepositions**, **adverbs**, **interjections**, and **conjunctions**. The adverb class and the preposition class have a large overlap: often a preposition has an intransitive counterpart, which is similar to a prototypical adverb. Conjunctions may be seen as “prepositions for clauses”. The functions and etymologies of particles are highly diverse.

Latin nouns, verbs, and adjectives are all open categories. They are able to head constituents, and so are correlatives (though correlatives can be listed in the grammar). The preposition class is closed and is a part of the grammar, just like conjunctions. However, conjunctions are purely functional, while certain prepositions may be argued to head attributive expressions: though prepositions are often said to be markers of a periphrastic case system, the semantics carried by certain Latin prepositions are too complicated for a case system. This is also the case of adverbs: some adverbs seem to be periphrastic markers of TAME categories and therefore may be considered as a part of the grammar, while others seem to carry “real” meanings.

Theoretical aspect 1.1: Lexical and function classes

In § 5.1.2 in [this note](#), I say words with “real” meanings and that head constituents words with “real category labels”. Thus, certain adverbs and prepositions have “real category labels”, because they actually head peripheral arguments or attributives, so they are type-3 words, while other adverbs and prepositions are purely functional and are type-4 words.

Fig. 1.1 is a visualization of the classification of Latin word classes. Unattested word classes in Latin include articles (*a* or *the*),

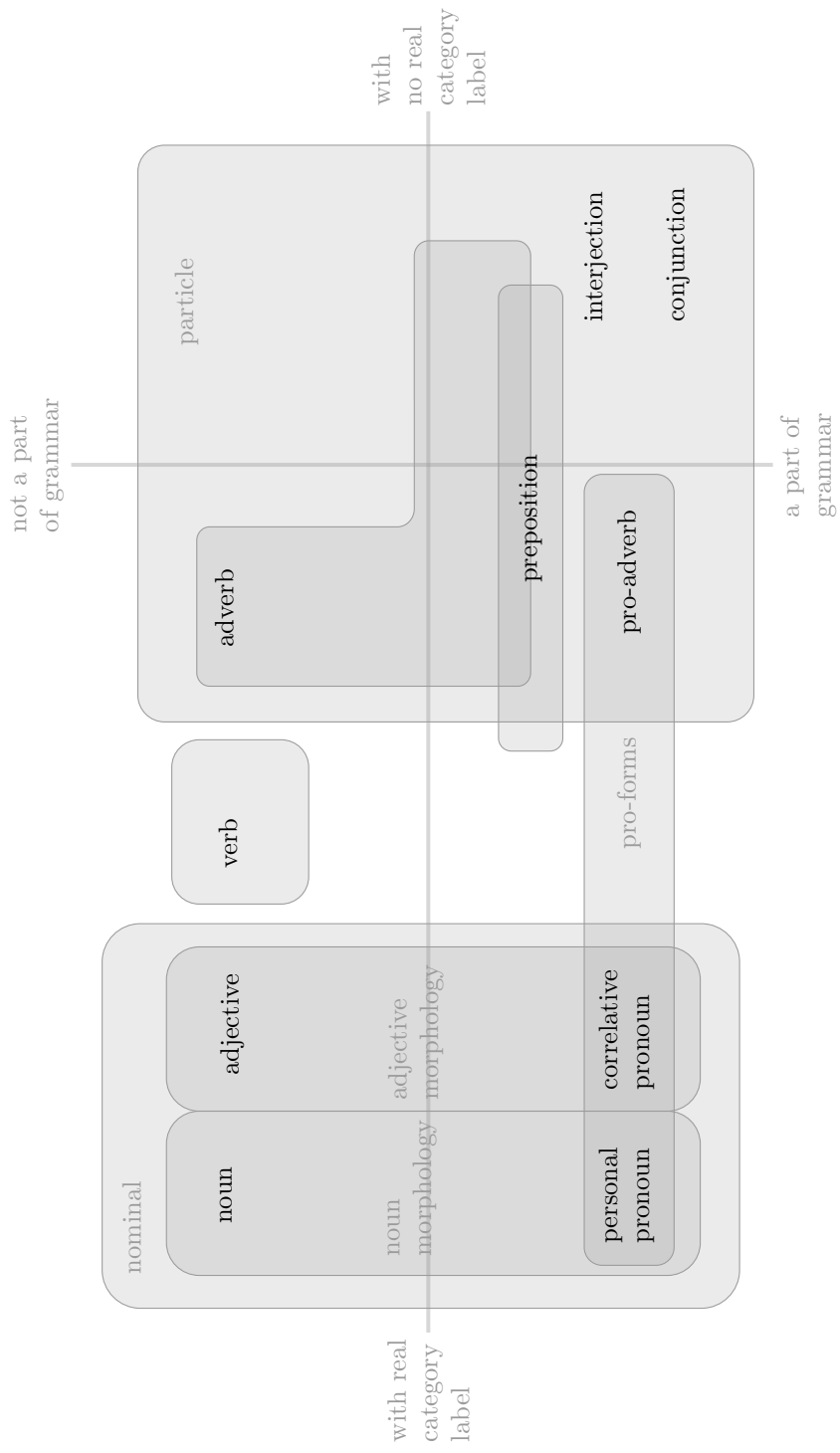


Figure 1.1: Latin word classes

1.4 Morphology

Latin has rich morphology, which enables a rather free – but still not completely arbitrary – constituent order. Latin has a clear inflection-derivation distinction. Despite its richness, Latin derivation is largely historical, with meanings of derived forms having shifted and no longer regularly inferable. Latin inflection is always suffixal, while derivation is predominantly prefixal. Concatenative morphology (affixation and compounding) is prominent but isn't the only morphological device: the following non-concatenative mechanisms are all attested:

- *Subtraction*: dropping of first-conjugation stem-final vowel (§ ??).
- *Infixation*:

These mechanisms, however, are largely historical, just like their concatenative counterparts.

Theoretical aspect 1.2: Constituency deemphasized in Latin grammar

The largely free constituent order means description of Latin grammar is mostly dependency-relation based or BLT-based, because surface-based constituents other than NPs and clauses are hard to define. Still, generative (constituency-based, though the introduction of movements and the structure of Cinque hierarchy gives it certain flavor of dependency grammars) approaches exist for Latin constituent order.

1.5 Noun phrases and nominal morphology

1.6 Verbal morphology and clause structure

Most clausal grammatical categories are marked on the verbal morphology. Sometimes a grammatical category is there but is not reflected in the morphology. For example, in English we have infinitive clauses, but strictly speaking, there is no such thing as “infinitive verb”: the head verb of an infinitive clause has exactly the same form of a non-third person singular present tense verb. This is not the case in Latin. For example, the head verb of an infinitive clause in Latin indeed has a separate position in the paradigm. Thus, grammatical categories of the clause are listed in this section.

1.6.1 The finite paradigm

1.6.1.1 Voice

Latin doesn't have rich valency changing devices: there is only one clause-wide valency decreasing device – passivization – and there is no valency increasing device. Causative constructions are realized by complement clauses, not any change in the argument structure. Whether passivization happens is recorded by the category of **voice**. A verb (and hence the clause headed by it) is therefore either in **active voice**, or in **passive voice**.

Theoretical aspect 1.3: Valency changing

See § 7.1 in [this note](#). From a generative perspective, some languages realize valency changing by a series of *vP* structures, and then the case assignment of the arguments is trivial. Some languages use non-trivial cases of the structural case assignment mechanism to achieve valency changing (“suppressing the agent argument, and then the nominative probe has to choose the patient argument”). Of course, *vP* changes in the second type are still there, which may be a likely source of relevant verb morphology. Naturally, the second group of languages have more restricted valency changing devices; this is the case of Latin.

1.6.1.2 TAME categories

Latin has fused tense and aspect: the composition of three tense values and three aspect values gives nine options, but in Latin, there are only six morphologically distinguished options, as is shown in Table 1.1. When people talk about **tense** in Latin (and in many other Indo-European languages), they are often taking about things like the six options, instead of the past/present/future system.

Table 1.1: Latin tense and aspect

	past	present	future
imperfect	imperfect	present	future
simple	perfect		
perfect	pluperfect	perfect	future perfect

Similar fusion between categories is shown in the category of **mood**. It's the fusion of morphologically marked clause type (declarative and imperative) and morphologically marked modality. The verb morphology of interrogative clauses is exactly the same as declarative clauses: the interrogative clause type is marked by the existence of interrogative *pro*-forms. Thus, there are three moods in finite clauses in Latin: **indicative**, **subjunctive**, and **imperative**. The indicative mood is the composition of the declarative/interrogative clause type and the realis modality. The subjunctive mood is the composition of the declarative/interrogative clause type and the irrealis modality. The imperative mood is basically the imperative clause type: it doesn't allow modality marking. Sometimes people say the infinitive is the fourth mood, though it's a non-finite clause.

Theoretical aspect 1.4: The term *mood*

BLT only calls the first category *mood*. Different linguists use the term *mood* and *modality* in radically different ways. In this note I just focus on the common practice in Latin grammar study.

1.6.1.3 Agreement

Latin is a typical nominative-accusative language, both morphologically and syntactically. In finite clauses, there is subject-verb agreement: the number and person of the subject is marked on the main verb (in the case of periphrastic conjugation, the features are marked on the copula).

1.6.1.4 Compatibility of categories

Finally I discuss the compatibility of these categories. There is no future tense and future perfect tense in subjunctive clauses, probably for the semantic reason that the future tense already contains certain sense of modality (an event predicted to happen), and thus is not compatible with the subjunctive mood. The imperative mood is not compatible with other TAME markings except the present tense and the future tense. It's still compatible with the voice category, and allowed persons are second person singular/plural with the present tense, and second/third person singular/plural with the future tense. The absence of first person is also probably from semantic origin.

In conclusion, the finite verb paradigm of Latin is shown in Fig. 1.2. The exact realization is divided into four conjugation classes, and the details are too complex to show here.

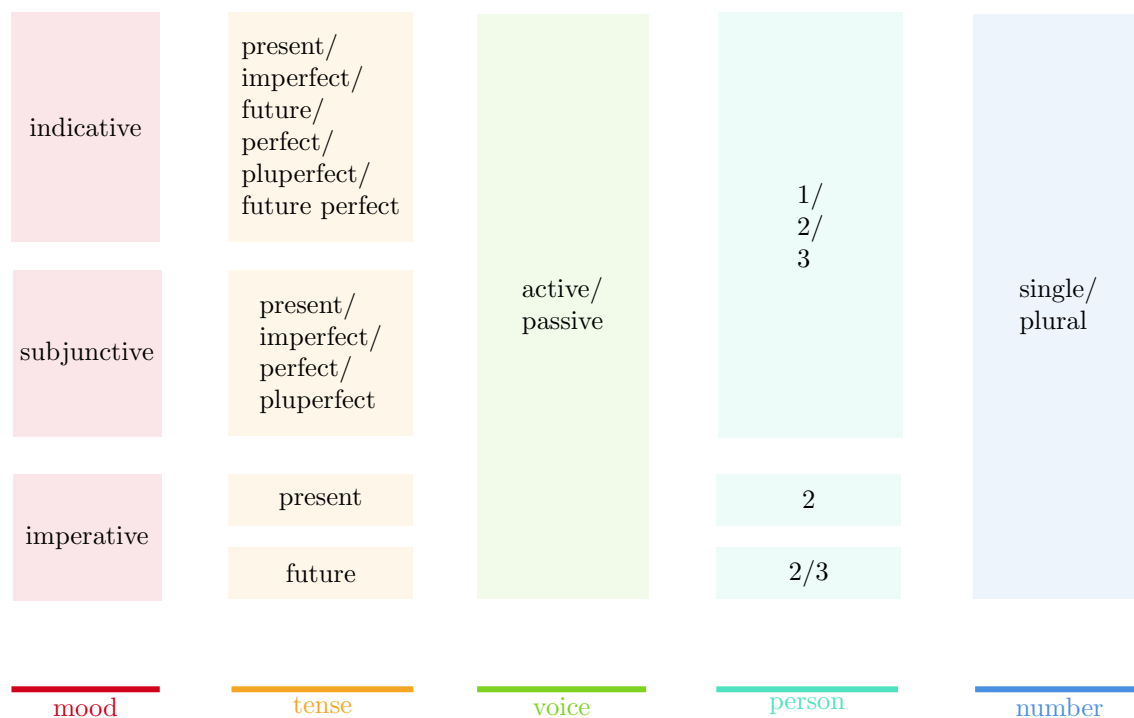


Figure 1.2: The paradigm of finite verb forms

1.6.2 Non-finite forms

1.6.3 Core, oblique, and peripheral arguments

1.7 Clause combining

1.8 Constituent order

Chapter 2

Phonology and the writing system

Chapter 3

Nominal morphology

Chapter 4

Valency classes

Chapter 5

Examples of texts