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IS LATIN A DEAD LANGUAGE?

SOME YEARS AGO this journal presented a lively debate between Dr. Beach of Hartford and Professor Pulgram of Michigan on the merits of an international congress which was held at Avignon in September, 1956. See *CJ* 52 (1957) 301-8; 53 (1957) 119-23. This Congress for Living Latin, as it was called, was intended to promote the use of Latin as an international language. Its sponsors, who included Dr. Beach, claimed that the study of Latin is a useful activity because the language can still serve as a medium for communication among peoples of diverse national tongues. Indeed, they sought to demonstrate their point by making Latin the vehicle for their own deliberations; at least, Latin was actually spoken by a number of the participants.

Professor Pulgram objected in the first place that Latin is not a living language and that, in any case, the idea of an international language other than perhaps English or Russian or Chinese makes no sense in the present world. Many Latinists, I suspect, will sympathize with Dr. Beach, who certainly practices what he preaches, though I think myself that in most respects, but not in all, Professor Pulgram had very much the better of the argument.

The following discussion will attempt to show, first, that Latin is not a dead language even in the sense that Professor Pulgram gave to the phrase. Latin never died. In the second place, the terms living or dead as applied to any language are seriously misleading. The speakers of a language may live and die, but the language itself does not die, nor was it ever born. Language is simply not an organism and to personify it as such is to misrepresent its nature. Nevertheless, I will grant that there is some excuse for applying the term "living" to the modern languages, but I will argue, in the third place, that the greatest values to be gained from the study of the Latin language do not come from the attempt to make it a living language in that sense. In short, my answer to the question, is Latin a dead language, is a ringing No—the term makes no sense—but we ought to teach it as if it were.

Linguists, including Professor Pulgram, commonly say that a language is living when it is spoken by numerous people who learned it in childhood from their elders. Conversely, when there are no longer any native, everyday speakers of a particular language, it is said to be dead. This has happened to some languages in the past and will happen to others in the future. In various corners of the world, the last surviving speakers grow old and die, without having passed on their language to the next generation. But this is not what happened to the Latin language.

As we all know, Latin survived in the form of the various Romance languages. To take a particularly interesting example, there is Romansh, a language spoken by considerable numbers of people in Switzerland and recognized as one of the four official languages of the country. If today you were to ask the people of the Engadine what language they are speaking, they will answer "Ladin" (lah-deen). It is true that this Ladin is not the same as the Latin we know from the written records. It is also true that it is quite different from the French and Italian spoken elsewhere in Switzerland and in wide areas of Europe, as well as from Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, and a few others of the Romance dialects. By the criterion of mutual unintelligibility, we must classify them all as separate and distinct languages; yet all are based on Latin.

We all know this as historical fact, but I fear that few of us take the trouble to understand just how it came about. One difficulty is that all our training makes us concentrate on the written forms of what we take to be the Latin language, whereas the language itself is a means of oral communication. That is, Latin or any other language consists of a set of oral forms, combinations of speech-sounds to which meanings are assigned by agreement or convention among the speakers of the language. The language may then be recorded by means of a sec-

ondary system of written symbols (an alphabet or syllabary); yet there are still some languages which have never been recorded in writing, and some illiterate speakers of any language—and they communicate perfectly well.

If the primary use of language involves oral communication, it follows that any language is subject to change. For communication is a matter of agreement between no more than two speakers, and common politeness will permit some innovations. Changes may come fairly rapidly in matters of vocabulary. Anyone can introduce a new word or use an old word in a new sense, without much danger that he will be misunderstood. If the word is taken up by other speakers, it will eventually be entered in a dictionary and become part of the standard language. With respect to sounds, there are many local variations, but changes in any one locality come slowly, and they come very slowly indeed in matters of structure—the conventions which determine that in current English the expression "dog bites man" means one thing while "man bites dog" means quite another. A deviation in lexical meaning may involve no more than two people on a single occasion—Humpty Dumpty and Alice, for instance—but deviations in structural meaning will conflict with conventions that are applied countless times by numerous people. They are thus very slow to win general acceptance, especially so when certain forms of the language gain ascendancy as a standard dialect through literature, the church, the schools, the public press, and now movies and radio. Nevertheless changes do occur, and some of them become standard in their turn.

This is what happened to the Latin language. The Latin spoken by the common people of Rome in Cicero's day no doubt differed considerably from the formal language which he composed for delivery in his speeches. Nor is it likely that the Latin of the common people was itself uniform. It must have permitted many variations in sounds and form and meaning, according to the local background of the speaker or his social status. Then when the soldiers, colonists, and merchants of Rome spread over western Europe—and this happened at various times, not merely in the wake of Caesar's armies—further changes developed in each area, as the local inhabitants tried to adjust their speech to that of the newcomers, and the Romans in turn picked up new words, new meanings for old words, and new habits of speech. The changes did not take place evenly over the various areas, nor did they all move in the same direction. Various dialects developed in various regions, but they were all developed from spoken Latin.

Let us look again at this point. If we could follow the changes in the spoken language of any particular area over these critical centuries, we should not be able to discover any sudden break between what we would call Latin and the new Romance dialects. There was no day when one generation of speakers in the Inn valley said to themselves, "Now we will stop talking Latin like our fathers; instead we'll speak Ladin." Neither did their sons, nor their sons' sons, to the *n*th generation. Yet if a speaker of the *n*th generation could confront some Rip Van Winkle of the first generation, the two would not be able to understand each other, and we should have to say they were speaking different languages.

In other words, spoken Latin did not die. It was slowly transformed in different areas and at different times into what we now recognize as different languages. This was my first point, and I must add that I am not here arguing against Professor Pulgram. On the contrary, no one in this country has done more to clarify our ideas on the process of transformation which I have just sketched.[1]

What I do object to is the use of the terms living and dead of any language, as if it were an organism which has life. To be sure, the capacity for growth and change is one test for life in an organism, and it is very tempting to a linguist to say that a spoken language has life, whereas a language which is preserved only by a learned class and is deliberately guarded from change is dead. But this is only a figure of speech, and I submit that it is dangerously misleading. Spoken Latin did not die. Neither did spoken Greek, though modern Greek is very different from the Greek spoken by Pericles or Aristophanes. Neither did ancient Chinese, nor Persian, nor any of the dozens of other ancient languages which one can trace back through their modern representatives.

It is even misleading to say that a language now spoken by only a few people whose children have adopted another language is in danger of dying. The speakers may die, but if any records have been kept of the language it can still be studied and perhaps adopted by a future generation, like ancient Hebrew in modern Israel. And if no records have been kept, the language simply disappears and there is no point in talk-

ing about it. Systems of oral communication doubtless existed from the very beginning of human history, whenever man discovered that he had organs with which a set of varied and distinct sounds could be articulated, and wherever at least two people formed a community. Were there many such linguistic communities, or only one in the beginning? We cannot tell, since we have no records, and for the same reason it is idle to talk about the languages which may have existed at this period. The origin of language is the one subject professional linguists have agreed not to talk about.

The habit of thinking about language in terms of an organism is responsible for two other prevalent misconceptions. One, indeed, was begun by professional scholars. This is the family-tree concept, by which neat schemes are drawn up with various lines labelled to show the collateral branches of what is called a family of languages all descended from a common parent, like our own Indo-European family. Though we can indeed trace the changes in various linguistic items through successive languages back to an assumed original form, we cannot reconstruct enough of the forms of the original to reveal it as a genuine system for oral communication. What our etymological dictionaries of Indo-European give us does not constitute a language. And on the other hand, though we may be able to contrast the gross features of different but related languages, we cannot fix the successive bifurcations by any points in space or time. Such family trees give us only a distorted and highly arbitrary picture, and it is questionable whether they are not more misleading than useful.[2]

The other error is to talk about changes and inconsistencies in a given language as if they were diseases of an organism and could be healed by rational treatment. This argument, which is as old as grammar itself, has recently been renewed in a popular book which I suspect is in most school libraries. I mean Bodmer's *The loom of language*. The fact is that language is more conventional than rational, and that deviations and anomalies are no more "diseases of language" (in Bodmer's phrase) than changes in the weather are diseases of nature.

Finally, if we cannot say that any spoken language really dies, neither can we say that it was ever born. For if it was spoken by a linguistic community, it would be formed and controlled by the conventions which that community had adopted from its predecessors or its neighbors. Even an artificial language proposed for international communication today, like Esperanto or Ido or Basic English, has to be formed from elements which are already understood by a considerable number of native speakers. In language as in Lucretian physics, the principle holds that nothing is created out of nothing: *nullam rem e nilo gigni divinitus umquam*.

Nevertheless, to pass to my third point, we do need some terms to distinguish between a language learned in childhood from one's parents or elders and one that is studied at second hand, largely from books or from teachers who are seldom native speakers—a language which we ourselves will seldom use in everyday conversation and which we are not going to pass on to our children. The contrast between living and dead will not do. The old terms native and foreign are more defensible, but I suggest as still better simply first and second. A person's first language is the one he learns in childhood. Any other language, if he learns it at all, is a second language (or third, or fourth), while the term foreign might well be reserved for the languages which he never learns. The point about these numeral terms is that they are relative to the speakers, as they should be. French is the first language for a Frenchman, but for English speakers it is at best a second language. German is a first language for many native speakers, but for others it is only a second language, and so on with Russian, Japanese, or Chinese; whereas the Latin which we learn in school must be only a second language for everyone. One great attraction of the modern languages is that even as second languages they may be used in conversation with the strangers who in this narrowing world are not unlikely to confront us. There is even a chance that if we go and settle in a foreign country the language which we learned as a second language may become a first language for our children. But there is no chance for Latin. It will remain a second language even for those who, like Dr. Beach, speak it fluently. It has been a second language even in the Church for over a thousand years.

But this conclusion, I submit, is not a reason for despair. The great glory of the Latin language is that it was the vehicle for some of the world's great literature. Its written forms preserve precious records of the civilization and wisdom from which our own culture is derived. And on a humbler level, the written forms which were continued as

a second language through the Middle Ages provided an indispensable medium for the communication of new knowledge which made the renascence of western culture possible. Most of the great works which brought about the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were written in Latin, and those that were not, like Galileo's brilliant essays or the fascinating records of new world exploration, were usually soon translated into Latin for the benefit of people in other countries. Finally, it was in this written Latin of the Renaissance that the technical terms of modern science, embodying both Latin and Greek roots, were created. In short, Latin was the universal means of written communication, and it still is, at least in its technical vocabulary.

But not for oral communication, despite the Congress for Living Latin. It follows, I think, that the primary reason why we study Latin today is not to speak it, nor to write it, but to read it. We study Latin in the hope that we may have some acquaintance with the recorded knowledge which built our modern world, and in the hope that we can teach our children to share that knowledge. The student of a modern language can enjoy oral communication as a pleasurable activity, like swimming or choral music; and it may even be a useful activity, if he happens to visit a foreign country. Of course he can also learn to read the language and derive continued intellectual pleasure from doing so. But the ability to read in a universal second language is the primary goal in the study of Latin. If oral communication is lively, and books may be called dead, it is still through books that we must justify the study of Latin. The mass audiences of radio and television should warn us that however lively oral communication may be, it is all too often trivial and altogether unrewarding. The educated citizen is still the man who can control his learning by choosing the right books, and education through dead books or a dead language, if you will, is still the main reason for studying Latin.

It also follows, to pass to a fourth and final point, that if we fail to teach our students to read some sort of Latin, we are failing in our mission. I do not mean the polished rhetorical sentences of Cicero's speeches and essays, or of his humanist imitators, or of much of classical prose, self-consciously literary as it was—for here I think we have set our goals unnecessarily high—but the more modest, everyday language represented by Roman comedy or the colloquies of Erasmus, by the occasional verse of Catullus or the dignified hymns of the Church or the sometimes rowdy songs of students, by the workmanlike prose of Pliny or Suetonius, written primarily to impart information, or of mediaeval and modern scholars like Einhard, Vincent of Beauvais, Agricola and Aldrovandi and John Ray. What would be the effect on the interest of our students if we should read the Latin version of Columbus' voyages side by side with, or instead of, Caesar's accounts of the Gauls and Britains, which may have some immediacy for people in England and France, but very little for Americans? I am sure we could find better materials for reading.

I do not mean, either, that we should not use oral Latin, perhaps a good deal of oral Latin, at least at the beginning of our four-year course. Nothing will catch the interest of our students more quickly than oral Latin, or teach more efficiently the varieties and the uses of the inflectional forms of Latin than oral drill controlled by pattern practice. On the other hand, since our primary goal must be to read Latin, I believe that we should pass over as soon as possible to a reading method, and certainly before the end of the first year.

Nor do I mean that we should discard altogether the literary Latin of Cicero and Vergil. The close study of a literary masterpiece like the *Aeneid* is an invaluable experience for any person who desires to understand the creativity of the human spirit. This, however, should come at the end of the course, when our students will be more ready to acquire a taste for literature. It is in the middle years that our problem lies. We need a complete course for the second and third year of Latin, not just a collection of supplementary readers,[3] a course which will at the same time develop systematically the ability to read ordinary Latin and also show our students that there are documents in Latin—dead books, if you will—which are both instructive, in the best sense of the word, and attractive to the modern reader. Then we might all have some inkling of the significance of Latin as a second language, indeed, but a universal second language.

There will be some, no doubt, who will say that it cannot be done, that there is no such Latin which can be set before our students in such a course. My answer is that it has hardly yet been tried, and that we ought at least to make the attempt. A more valid objection would point to the carefully selected vocabulary, based on the sequence of

Caesar, Cicero, and Vergil, through which our students now progress, and would ask how it would fit into a new program involving a much wider vocabulary. My answer is that it would not fit; frankly, we can do better without it. In the first place, vocabulary lists based on frequency of occurrence are of no real instructional value, since the words that occur most frequently are the ones that will be learned anyhow in the process of reading. In the second place, a vocabulary restricted to five hundred words a year is far too small. Look at the lists of English words constructed by Thorndike and see how much information you can communicate using only the first two thousand or even the first ten thousand words. It is precisely the rarer words which in any given passage carry the essential meaning. In the third place, such lists are bad because they encourage the habit of treating each word by itself instead of trying to link words together etymologically. That is, when we are reading, we tend to look up every strange word in a dictionary instead of trying to guess its meaning from the context and from other known words which may be related. We ought rather to train our students to build up their own lists in the manner of an inventory or thesaurus, in restricted categories of meaning,[4] and at the same time show them how countless other words can be derived from these basic forms by the regular procedures of Latin word-formation. In fact the patterns of derivation in Latin are almost as important as the paradigms of inflection, and should play a much larger part in our instruction.

The place to begin this kind of instruction is in the second year of the Latin course. Once a small stock of words has been acquired, it can be enlarged systematically by regular drills with special attention to patterns of word-formation, the suffixes by which nouns and adjectives are derived from verbs, or verbs from nouns or adjectives. Much the same patterns will also apply to the technical vocabulary of English, in which our students will be most interested at this stage of their development. This includes both Greek and Latin words, of course, since the vocabulary of modern science goes right back to the Latin writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when new technical meanings were fixed for Lain words and for Greek words borrowed into Latin. Though many new terms have been created in the vernaculars since that time—astronaut, for example—they have followed the patterns of derivation and compounding set by the scholars of the Renaissance, who used Latin as the universal second language. If, then, our students in the tenth grade choose to go on to a third and fourth year of Latin, they will have a much larger Latin vocabulary. If they do not choose to go on, or if there is no choice —for I am afraid that economic reasons will still dictate a two-year terminal course in many schools—they will understand how the Latin habits of word-formation apply to English, and they will have a stock of words, both Latin and Greek, which will give them a much greater control over the technical vocabulary of English. The vocabulary of Caesar, which tradition now compels us to work with, is just not suitable for this purpose.

I appeal, then, for a wider range of reading in the second and third years, and for a more extended and systematic study of derivation, both Latin and English, in the second year. Just as Ladin is a changed form of Latin, that is, Ladin *is* Latin brought up to date by linguistic change, so the technical vocabulary of English *is* Latin brought up to date. Latin did not die. It is still a universal second language.

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[1] See especially his article, "Spoken and written Latin," in *Language* 26 (1950) 458-466, now expanded in chapters 23 and 29 of his book, *The tongues of Italy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1958), 311 ff. For the basic concept of linguistic communities, see L. Bloomfield, *Language* (New York 1933), 42-56.

[2] "Equally naïve and incorrect would be the view of the organic growth and branching out of languages from a common stem, like branches spreading from a tree trunk. A language is no organism, it cannot literally spring from a seed or otherwise be born (save the artificial languages like Esperanto, Ido, or Volapük, though even they have their roots ultimately in natural languages), it cannot grow, decay, and die. If the picture of Schleicher's genealogical tree of Indo-European languages fostered this view, it has indeed done a great deal of harm" (Pulgram, *The tongues of Italy*, 153). And again (312), "I should rather say that the Romanic languages *are* modern Latin of one kind or another."

[3] See the critical bibliography of readers compiled by J. J. Bateman which will appear in the next issue of this journal.

[4] See, for example, P. B. Diederich, *The frequency of Latin words and their endings* (esp. pp. 86-113), Chicago 1939; and J. L. Heller & D. C. Swanson, *Elements of technical terminology, a grammar and thesaurus of Greek and Latin elements used in technical English*, Champaign (Illini Union Bookstore) 1962. See also G. F. Else, "A basic Latin vocabulary along etymological lines," *CW* 45 (1951-52) 241-55.