

Learning Latin the ancient way

Eleanor Dickey discusses language learning manuals from the ancient world



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Lately I have been having a great deal of fun discovering how ancient Greek speakers learned Latin. This has resulted in a book, *Learning Latin the Ancient Way*, which provides selections from (and translations of) the different kinds of materials that Greeks used to learn Latin in antiquity. Those materials include dictionaries, grammars, letters, and the charming but unfortunately-named *Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana*.

The *Colloquia* are Latin easy readers consisting of little dialogues about daily life in the Roman empire. Nowadays, if you learn French, you might use a textbook with a little dialogue about going to a café in Paris and ordering a sandwich: it will tell you what the customer says and what the waiter says, and if you are really lucky, when you actually go to a café in Paris you too can get a sandwich using those phrases. (At least in theory – and just once it did actually happen to me that I had exactly the conversation in my Welsh book with a real person who spontaneously said all the same lines.) Well, they had the same idea in antiquity, except that they did not set their dialogues in cafés in Paris, but in places such as Roman public baths, markets, banks, and temples. The dialogues are short, easy, straightforward, interesting, and written by native speakers – and they aim to teach both culture and language simultaneously, as our French textbooks do. One of them, in which someone is given a scolding for bad behaviour at a dinner party, is reproduced on the facing page.

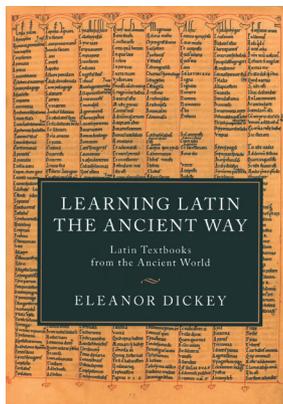
One of my personal favourites is the list of good excuses. Now as a university teacher I am a real expert on excuses, particularly excuses for not doing things; I hear these absolutely all the time. And the *Colloquia* contain a list of excuses to use if you need to tell a Roman why you have not done something – yet these are excuses that, in all my years of teaching, I have never yet heard from a student. For example, 'I couldn't do it, I had to take a bath.'

There is a lot that you can learn about Roman culture from the kind of excuses that they thought would fly.

Why Greek speakers in the Roman Empire wanted to learn Latin

One of the most important reasons for learning Latin was a desire to be a lawyer. As the Roman Empire spread across the Greek-speaking world, Roman law spread with it, and over time Roman law took over more and more of the ordinary legal business that had originally been handled using local legal codes. For example, inheritance from a Roman citizen was governed by Roman law – and after AD 212 most people in the Empire were Roman citizens. Roman law was fundamentally Latin-based; for example, citizens' wills had to be drafted in Latin in order to be valid. And since wills constituted a significant percentage of legal work, a lawyer would find himself at a distinct disadvantage if he could not draft them.

An orientation towards law students is clearly evident in the *Colloquia*, which contain many scenes involving lawyers – but these scenes present an unrealistic picture. Lawyers in the *Colloquia* always win their cases, they are very well paid, their clients are unfailingly grateful, and if a lawyer should end up unemployed, the first person he meets will simply offer him a job on the grounds that he deserves one for having studied so hard. That is



Getting a scolding

The *Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana* contain dialogues to help Greek speakers learn Latin in ancient times. The dialogues are laid out using a line-for-line ('columnar') translation system, with the Latin on the left and the Greek on the right, so that students can easily identify which words mean what. In this sample dialogue – in which someone is rebuked for their drunken behaviour – the original Greek in the right-hand column has been translated into English.



Painting from Pompeii, now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale (Naples), showing a banquet or family ceremony. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

not what the life of an ancient lawyer was really like: evidently these texts show language teachers painting a rosy picture of the legal profession in order to encourage students to persevere with their studies.

Other major reasons for learning Latin relate to the Roman army. The Roman army was not entirely Latin-speaking, but it was nevertheless one of the main ways that Latin speakers ended up in Greek-speaking areas and vice versa. People who joined the army often found it worthwhile to learn Latin, and even those who did not sometimes appreciated the economic advantages of being able to use Latin when dealing with the army. Army bases constituted an important market for local produce, and knowledge of Latin was an asset in the inevitable competition for that market. That is why we have a text with on one side a glossary of kinds of fish, and on the other side a glossary of Roman army terminology: that text was used by someone who wanted to sell fish to the army and believed that knowing Latin would give him a competitive edge.

'Quis sic facit domine,	'Who acts like this, sir,
quomodo tu,	as you do,
ut tantum bibis?	that you drink so much?
quid dicent	What will they say,
qui te viderunt talem?	the people who saw you in such a condition?
quod numquam foris cenasti	That you never dined out
tam aviditer?	so greedily?
ita hoc decet sapientem	Is this a fitting way for a prudent
patrem familias	master of a household
qui aliis consilia dat	who gives advice to others
semet ipsum regere?	to conduct himself?
non potest turpius	It is not possible (for things) more shamefully
nec ignominiosius evenire	nor more ignominiously to happen
quam heri gessisti.'	than you acted yesterday.'
'Me certe valde pudet.'	'I certainly am very much ashamed.'
'Quid dicunt alii in absentia tua?	'What do others say in your absence?
infamiam maximam tibi cumulasti.	Great infamy have you accumulated for yourself.
accidit ad haec grandis denotatio de tali intemperantia.	In addition to this, great censure (of you) has occurred as a result of such intemperance.
rogo te	Please,
ne postea tale facias.	in the future don't do such a thing.
sed modo numquid vomere vis?	But now you don't want to vomit, do you?
et mirror	And I'm amazed at
quae passus es.'	what has become of you.'
'Nescio quid dicam, ita enim	'I don't know what to say, for so
perturbatus sum	upset have I been
ut rationem nulli possim reddere.'	that no explanation to anyone can I give.'

What these *Colloquia* tell us about the Roman world

They tell us a lot about ordinary, everyday life. The ruins of Roman buildings and the objects one sees in museums simply come to life in the *Colloquia*. For example, when you went to a Roman bank to borrow money, exactly what did you say and what did the banker say? Only the *Colloquia* tell us that.

When you went to the Roman baths, what was the procedure, and what did you say at each stage? What happened when you got out of the water? We used to think that Romans were clean after a bath, but it turns out that they were not, because the water itself was fairly disgusting owing to having many sweaty, dusty, oil-covered people washing in a small pool all at once. So when you got out, the *Colloquia* tell us, you had to take a shower and scrape yourself with a *strigil* in order to get clean enough to use a towel.

We have the remains of Roman *insulae* – huge blocks of flats. We know that these had shops on the ground floor, flats for rich people on the first floor, and then rooms for progressively poorer people on each higher floor. The *Colloquia* bring the *insulae* to life by describing what to do when you arrive at one of them looking for someone who lives there. You start by asking directions from the doorman at the bottom, who says, for example, ‘Oh, yes. Go up two flights of stairs and knock on the door on your right.’ Then when you arrive at your friend’s flat you have to negotiate with a different doorman, and all these doormen are slaves. It turns out that nearly everything a Roman did involved interacting with the institution of slavery, and that just isn’t something you see either from the ruins or from the mainstream literary culture.

What we can learn from these texts about the Latin and Greek languages

The language-learning texts tell us a lot about pronunciation, because sometimes the Latin is transliterated into Greek script, or vice versa. Of course, interpreting that evidence is complicated, because not only was the Latin language changing over time, but the Greek language was changing too.

For example, in the 1st century Romans pronounced the letter *v* like our ‘w’. (Thus *veni, vidi, vici* was pronounced ‘waynee, weedee, weekee’.) So in the 1st century Latin *v* was transliterated using the Greek letters *omicron upsilon* (ου), because this was the closest thing Greek had to the ‘w’ sound. But by the 5th century Romans were using the ‘v’ sound that we would recognise now (*veni, vidi, vici*), and in the texts of that period, Latin *v* was transliterated with the Greek letter *beta* (β). This is because by the 5th century the pronunciation of the Greek *beta* had shifted from a ‘b’ to a ‘v’, like the Modern Greek pronunciation of *beta*.

The language-learning texts also reveal the extent to which the formal rules of Classical Latin, the ones we learn today, were not always followed in everyday practice. On the whole ancient learners were interested in collo-

quial spoken Latin, not literary Latin, and the two could be very different, especially in later centuries.

What lessons we can learn from the ancient world about attitudes toward languages

It is really striking that, although the Romans had conquered pretty much the whole world (at least, ‘whole’ from their perspective), they did not assume that everybody would or should speak their language. They never seem to have thought ‘Latin’s enough, I don’t need to learn Greek.’ Indeed it is clear that most Romans who travelled to the East learned Greek, having made a significant investment of time to master the language that had been the hallmark of civilisation long before the Romans arrived.

The Romans had a way of handling their expansion that more recent empires could only dream of. Part of that was a humility in terms of languages, and it would not do us any harm to have a bit of that humility too. ■

This article originates from remarks made by Professor Eleanor Dickey in conversation with Joseph Buckley, Policy Adviser on Languages at the British Academy. A longer version of this interview can be heard via <https://soundcloud.com/britishacademy/>

BORN GLOBAL



Born Global

On 31 March 2016, the British Academy published *Born Global*, a collection of evidence on the complex relationships between language learning and employability.

The project was launched against a backdrop of steady decline in the take-up of languages at all levels despite recurrent reports of unmet employer demand for language skills, in an increasingly mobile and international labour market.

The Academy therefore set out to gather a range of new evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, to develop a deeper understanding of the language needs for employment, employer attitudes to languages and how languages are used in the workplace for different purposes, by employees of different levels of skill and accountability.

In addition, to reflect the Academy’s longstanding concerns in the area of languages, its particular interest in Higher Education and research and its role in assessing and maintaining the health of its disciplines, it has produced a report on the implications of the Born Global evidence for higher education, *Born Global: Implications for Higher Education*.

All the evidence from *Born Global*, alongside the higher education report, is available via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/bornglobal