

## A POEM IN OTHER WORDS IS A LANGUAGE LESSON

*Abstract: This article advocates a more active approach to language pedagogy at the intermediate and advanced level. Reworking the text in Latin helps students better understand both the author and the language. The exercises advocated here can be divided into three categories: oral/aural, syntax manipulation and composition.*

Latin pedagogy is changing. Instead of stressing unrelieved rote memorization, instructors and students alike are reaping the benefits of adding inductive learning and active Latin—listening, speaking and writing. Much has been written about active Latin in the beginning classroom.<sup>1</sup> In intermediate and advanced levels as well, a more active approach facilitates growth in the language and increases student involvement in the class and the text, raising faces from their bookward stare, to say nothing of increasing the energy in the room. Reworking and rewording the text in Latin helps students better understand both the author and the Latin in several ways.<sup>2</sup> The exercises advocated here can be divided into three categories: oral/aural, syntax manipulation and composition; they stem from a recognition that Latin and Greek are difficult languages. Having students work actively with a text by talking about it, writing about it and playing with its grammatical structures demystifies the language. For simplicity's sake, I will confine my discussion to poetry, although the methods work equally well with prose. These strategies might be particularly helpful in Advanced Placement high school classes, where the instructor must set the pace to someone else's metronome. Although it may seem that these exercises take up class time, the time is well spent. Students learn a great deal of Latin from them, and as the term progresses everyone reaps the benefit of a class populated by more fluent and skillful Latinists.

Before we turn to examples of each exercise, something ought to be said about the obstacle posed by active Latin in the classroom. Using Latin actively takes commitment, energy and a sense of humor. Teachers who have never spoken Latin tend to be both anxious and embarrassed. "What if I get it wrong in front of my students?" You probably will. Catching yourself in an error offers a teaching

<sup>1</sup> Such contributions are the focus of Sienkewicz, et al. (2005).

<sup>2</sup> The penultimate chapter of Minkova (2001) offers more examples of reworking Latin texts. Minkova and Tunberg (2004) have many excellent readings and exercises.

moment: “Ah, I just made a grammar mistake. Here’s what I said (again). Who can tell me what the error is?” Sometimes you will make a mistake and not catch it—as people do every day, when speaking their native tongues. Glancing at a few inscriptions is good therapy against fear of error—the world does not stop spinning if you make a mistake. The look of wonder and delight on students’ faces as they realize that they understand your Latin makes up for the humility of demonstrating that you really do not know everything. As an exercise to build confidence and warm up the Latin brain, look at the vocabulary for the material you want to use in class. Pick out a manageable (small!) selection and practice making sentences and speaking them out loud. Talking to yourself in Latin, slowly and thoughtfully, builds confidence in the sound of your own voice—a confidence that will help your students understand the Latin. It also builds facility with manipulating the language actively.

Some general preliminary advice:

- In the beginning it will be helpful to script any Latin exchanges ahead of time, and advisable to use the simplest possible structure and vocabulary.
- Keeping the Latin portion short helps both instructor and students: scripting a shorter exercise will take less time and mental energy, and students who are just learning to listen to Latin tire easily. Keeping sentences short and using familiar vocabulary facilitates not only the scripting, but student comprehension.
- Avoid *oratio obliqua* (indirect speech); this is both prudent and easily accomplished. Instead of walking into the syntactical labyrinth of *Vergilius dixit/dicit* or *Scimus/intellegimus/legimus*, use declarative sentences with the parenthetical *ut Vergilius nobis dicit* or *ut scimus*. Even if the instructor is fluent, the students will not be, and when their brains begin to hurt, they will leave you to face the inevitable Minotaur alone.
- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly. When people feel insecure, they often speak more rapidly. Speaking slowly will calm the speaker, as well as help the students understand.
- Have at your disposal an arsenal of phrases to talk about texts, and students will quickly become accustomed to understanding what you are getting at. Thus, for example, the phrases *spectat ad*, *pertinet ad*, *attinet ad* can be used for “looks to” or “refers to.” These phrases can sometimes be a simpler substitute for *agitur de* (“it involves or has to do with”).<sup>3</sup>

Questions about the grammar of a passage are a good place to start oral/aural work in class. Although complex discussions of grammar are better held in the vernacular, the simple back and forth that occurs in discussing a text can easily be had *Latine*, e.g.: *Quo casu? Ablativo. Cur ablativo? Ablativus instrumenti est. Qui est verbi mo-*

<sup>3</sup> The final chapter in Traupman (1997) gives many examples of how to talk about grammar in Latin.

*dus? Coniunctivo. Cur? Interrogatio obliqua.* Even in a class conducted almost exclusively in English, small, frequent visits to the land of the target language improve student facility.

Simple questions can initiate discussion of the text and get students involved in what they have prepared. It is the rare class where everyone has an equal understanding of the text under consideration. Starting the discussion with these questions in Latin stokes the students' linguistic fires and may undo confusion about simple points before the group dives into the poem. Students will grow familiar—and thus at ease—with these and similar questions. Even the weakest students can supply one- or two-word answers.

Students speaking in Latin, however, are going to make mistakes—many, many mistakes. How much to correct? Picking one's battles gives students a chance to work slowly toward greater facility without stifling their motivation to try. I tend to correct syntax and pronunciation that I think the students should get right even under the pressure of public performance (e.g. *mater meus, ducebo, nátura, habéo, ducére*).

In addition to the reading itself (which will suggest its own questions), the basic *quis? quid? ubi? quando? quomodo?* are a useful foundation. The following questions about Catullus 96 offer a range of content, grammar and inference; they become progressively harder, and not all will work with all levels, but are offered as suggestions:

Si quicquam mutis gratum acceptumve sepulchris  
accidere a nostro, Calvo, dolore potest,  
quo desiderio veteres renovamus amores  
atque olim missas flemus amicitias,  
certe non tanto mors immatura dolori est  
Quintiliae, quantum gaudet amore tuo.

- *Quis loquitur? Catullus poeta loquitur.*
- *Cui loquitur? Calvo, amico suo, loquitur.*
- *Quid de Calvo dici potest? Quomodo hoc scimus? Calvus est vir: hoc scimus ex fine nominis; Calvus Quintiliam amat: hoc scimus ex verbis "amore tuo"; Calvus dolet, maeret, luget: hoc scimus ex "a nostro dolore," "desiderio," "flemus."*
- *Quis est Quintilia? Est mulier cuius mortem Calvus luget / de cuius morte Calvus dolet / flet.*
- *Quid de Quintilia dici potest? Quomodo hoc scimus? Quintilia iuvenis / adolescens / puella mortua est. Quintilia maturior iusto mortua est; hoc scimus ex "mors immatura." Quintilia amavit Calvum; gaudet enim quod a Calvo amata est.*
- *Dic mihi de verbo quod est "missas." Missas est participium perfectum plurale, feminini generis, casus accusativi, quod cum nomine "amicitias" coniungitur.*
- *Dic mihi de nomine quod est "sepulchris." Sepulchris est nomen neutrum, plurale, dativum quod coniungitur cum "acceptum" quod verbum iungitur cum casu dativo.*

- *Dic mihi de verbo quod est "renovamus." Renovamus est verbum persona prima plurali, modo indicativo, voce activa, tempore praesenti.*
- *De quo (de qua re) agitur hoc carmen (poema)? Quintilia mortua est. Erat, ut videtur, aut amica aut uxor Calvi; et Calvus et poeta dolent. Catullus suadet Calvo ne doleat.*

What can we expect from such questions? Introducing, for example, Horace, *Odes* 1.10 (*Mercuri, facunde*) with the question *De qua re agitur hoc carmen?* might on the most basic level elicit the response *Laudat Mercurium*. One might object that this answer does an injustice to the poem, or in the case of the likely response *Laudat Mercurius* or even just *Laudare*, injustice to the very language. I would argue that even a completely incorrect answer teaches and helps: the instructor can reply *Quem Mercurius laudat?* or *Mercurius Horatium laudat aut Horatius Mercurium?* Even a bad answer represents a student searching his or her brain for Latin.

A simple, even halting, answer also encourages other students to build on what has been said. Sometimes students whose command of the language is less strong are eager to show (albeit in broken Latin) their understanding of the themes of a poem. The student who has a facility for decoding Latin often has less interest in what the Latin, once decoded, means. Asking questions gets students with differing abilities and learning styles involved.

Introducing the day's reading in Latin at the beginning of class has several virtues. Chances are good that, unless the student has just finished the assignment, Latin is not uppermost in her/his mind. Beginning the class with Latin gets students thinking in Latin. It also reviews the material they have just read. A simple overview of the reading may also make the passage "click" in the minds of those who understood it less well on their first reading. The instructor can vary this presentation between questions and answers involving the students and a solo introduction. For some readings it might be useful to devote the day's introduction to background material, for example, identifying the recipient of and circumstances around one of Cicero's letters, or the background behind a political poem by Horace. What follow, by way of example, are two different possible introductions for Horace *Odes* 1.11, the first very simple, the second more complicated:

Tu ne quaesieris (scire nefas) quem mihi, quem tibi  
finem di dederint, Leuconoe, nec Babylonios  
temptaris numeros. Ut melius quicquid erit pati!  
Seu pluris hiemes seu tribuit Iuppiter ultimam,  
quae nunc oppositis debilitat pumicibus mare  
Tyrrhenum, sapias, uina liques et spatio breui  
spem longam reseces. Dum loquimur, fugerit inuida  
aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.

I. *Leuconoe est puella. Horatius scribit ad hanc puellam. Illa multa rogat de tempore futuro. "Quid mihi accidet?" inquit Horatius. "Quem finem dei mihi dabunt?" Tempus anni est hiems. Mare pulsat saxa iuxta mare. Fortasse haec est vitae ultima hiems. Fortasse erunt plures hiemes. Bonum est, ut Horatius putat, vinum bibere et de hodierno die cogitare. Vivere hodie melius est quam de futuro tempore cogitare.*

II. *Horatius cum puella cui nomen est Leuconoe loquitur. Leuconoe de rebus futuris—de fine vitae suae et de numeris Babylonis—cogitat. Horatius monet eam ut vita sua cottidie fruatur. Id est suadet ei ut de hoc die ipso cogitet. Leuconoe scire vult quid sibi Horatioque olim accidat. Horatius putat eam non oportere hoc scire. Leuconoe debet tantum de hodierno tempore cogitare. "Noli" inquit poeta, "de crastino tempore meditari! Melius est hodie vivere. Si scires quid cras tibi accideret, anxia fieres." Hiems est, et Leuconoe vivit. Fieri potest ut mox Leuconoe moritura sit nec videat hiemem alteram. Poeta ei persuadet ne vinum bonum servet sed bibat. Non dicit, autem, "carpe diem" sed "carpe diem" quod verbum "carpere" spectat ad flores et fructus; idem significat ac "decerpere."*

The second paragraph is a mix of very simple and more complicated sentences. Objections could be made to its style, etc., but the object here is pedagogical. It is good to remember that for students listening, all sentences are complicated. When a sentence is in fact more complicated, it is often helpful to say the same thing in several different ways, keeping most of the vocabulary the same. This reiteration gives students time to grasp the general idea by hearing the same thought expressed in similar ways over and over; reviews phrases that can be used to express the same syntactical idea; and helps students figure out by analogy phrases they otherwise would not have understood without looking them up. Thus the instructor can follow *Poeta ei persuadet ne vinum bonum servet sed bibat* with *Horatius eam monet ut vinum bibat*, or *Poeta ab ea postulat ne vinum servet*, or *Poeta iubet Leuconoen vinum bibere nec servare*. The more frequently the instructor uses constructions students are likely to meet in their reading, the faster and better they will read without constant recourse to a dictionary and grammar.

Especially in the beginning the instructor might want to generate the synopsis *suo Marte*. The synopsis can also provide a dictation exercise: as the instructor slowly gives a brief synopsis, students copy down what they hear, reinforcing the connection between the language they hear and the language they read. As students grow accustomed to what the instructor has in mind, the synopsis can become a group project. If students are encouraged to keep in mind while they read how the poem's content might be expressed in prose, they are likely to come away from their reading with a greater understanding of the text. Precious class time may be saved by letting students know in advance that they will be doing a group synopsis and/or by having a definite time limit.

Sometimes translating Latin into English is the best way to make a difficult thought clear. But often before—or instead of—translating

a difficult passage for students, the instructor can repeat the idea using different words, or break down a complicated thought into several simpler sentences. Catullus 96 (above), for example, with its six-line sentence, can be broken down into smaller, simpler components:

*Homines mortui muti sunt et iacent in sepulchris. Nos qui vivimus dolemus et illos mortuos quos amamus desideramus et lacrimamus propterea quod amici nostri mortui sunt. Sentiuntne hunc dolorem mortui? Si sentiunt, placetne illis dolor noster? Si sentiunt, hoc putant: magis gaudent quia amati sunt quam dolent quia mortui sunt.*

Just as oral/aural exercise strengthens language acquisition, manipulating syntax helps students become better readers by deepening their understanding of the language. In place of prepared translation tests, which encourage memorization of selected passages, and in addition to passages at sight and other assessments, I give students a variety of exercises to reinforce and stretch their facility with the language. In these assignments they can use, and indeed are encouraged to spend much time reading, lexica and grammars. Such exercises test comprehension of the original text as well. Starting from the text they are reading, students change relative clauses into participial phrases and find different ways of expressing the same thought. They learn to report statements, imperatives and questions by moving them into indirect speech, and move indirect statements, commands and questions back to their direct form.

Playing with clauses teaches students a great deal about subordination, *oratio obliqua* and *oratio recta*—in other words, about how Latin works. Creating, for example, a non-copulative sentence out of the objective genitive in Ovid *Met.* 1.452 *Primus amor Phoebi Daphne* gets students thinking in terms of manipulating even the simplest parts of a sentence. From the Horace (*Odes* 1.11) above, for example, we might ask the following:

- What is another way of expressing *tu ne quaesieris*?
- Rewrite *carpe diem* to a form appropriate for the following lead verbs: *Horatius Leuconoem orat*; *Horatius Leuconoem hortatus est*; *Horatius Leuconoem suadebat*.
- Rewrite as a present contrafactual condition: *sapias, uina liques et spatio breui / spem longam reseces*.

As students become comfortable with basic exercises, they can move on to more complex puzzles, such as manipulating parataxis into hypotaxis or transforming statements into various kinds of conditions. Turning Latin hypotaxis into parataxis, for example, is not only hard, but often does violence to the sense, to say nothing of the literary value, of the passage. That very violation of sense and truncation of nuance gives students a new respect for the intricacies of the language in both its poetic and prosaic guises.

Students can also rewrite the text in various ways, a yet more complicated step that truly challenges them to appreciate the difference between prose and poetry. Students rewrite a poem in simple prose, or if the poem is long, a section of it. Such revisions can be done in stages. One useful exercise is to ask students to step back from the complex language of the poem and recount what is going on in very simple terms. Offering an example, either by handout or by doing the exercise together in class, clarifies the assignment. When students become accustomed to and proficient at the simple exercise, they can redo the passage, using only prosaic vocabulary and syntax. While the idea of the assignment remains the same, this variation gives students a greater understanding of the distinction between poetic and prosaic vocabulary. A third variation asks students to provide a *copia verborum*, supplying alternatives with similar meaning to a given number of words in the passage. Lewis and Short (available online through Perseus) often provides synonyms at the start of the entry, an advantage over the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Coming up with alternative words and phrases reinforces vocabulary in a relatively painless manner. Even the briefest exercise at building a *copia verborum* will enrich students' reading.

In a yet more advanced version of this exercise, students might try using only the sentence structure, syntax and vocabulary found in a particular Latin prose author, footnoting the comparanda. This exercise can also be done in teams or groups. The first time students have such an exercise on either a basic or an advanced level, it is a great learning experience to put together a prose version as a class, with students (or groups) giving a sentence they have prepared ahead of time, and the class and the instructor looking at its virtues and vices.

In addition to rewriting a poem in prose, students learn a great deal from reverse translation. This exercise gives them an appreciation of the difference between prose and poetry and the mastery of the poet at hand. From a literal prose translation supplied by the instructor (I took the following example from the venerable *Horace Literally Translated*),<sup>4</sup> students write a Latin prose version. The rules are: they may not look for the Latin poem; they are to write in clear prose, making relative clauses out of participles, etc., if that seems to make their Latin clearer; and they should not assume that they know how a word works, but rather constantly consult the dictionary. I have a link both on my homepage and on the course syllabus page to the English-Latin lookup tool on Perseus.<sup>5</sup> I also give some vocabu-

<sup>4</sup> Buckley (1920).

<sup>5</sup> Students working on a Macintosh running Tiger can now look up English-to-Latin with Widgets, thanks to Notre Dame (<http://archives.nd.edu/latgramm.htm>); Whittaker's Words (<http://users.erols.com/whitaker/words.htm>) can be down-

lary, especially for passages where I sense that the students may go far enough astray to do harm to the sense. A lively session always ensues when the actual poem is discussed in class and students (translations in hand) take on the question of the art of translation and of poetic composition. The following example comes from Horace, *Odes* 3.22 (*Montium custos*):

O virgin, protectress of the mountains and the groves, you three-formed goddess, who, having been invoked three times hear young women in labor and save them from death. This pine tree that overshadows my villa is sacred to you and at the end of every year I shall happily present it with the blood of a boar-pig, just practicing his sidelong attack.

Here are two responses, one from a very skilled student, and other from a student who struggled (my corrections in parentheses):

I. *virgo, custos montium silvarumque, tu triformis dea, quae invocata ter puellas parturientes audis et eas ab morte tueris. Haec pinus meae villae imminens sacra ~~+++~~ (tibi) est et exeuntibus annis singulis eam sanguine verris tantum meditantis obliquum ictum laete donabo.*

II. *O virgo, custos ~~montum~~ (montium) et nemorum, tu es dea triformis, quae, ter invocata, ~~audiat juvenecas puerperas seruetque~~ has de morte (audis servasque). Haec pinus, quae ~~immineat~~ meae villae (imminet), est (tibi) sancta et fine ~~omnis anni~~ (cuiusque anni) ego (hanc) ~~cum sanguinem~~ (sanguine) verris, ~~quae~~ (qui) modo ~~meditatur~~ suum ictum (meditatur laetus donabo).*

Evaluating these exercises can obviously challenge the mind and patience. Having and communicating a clear sense of goals and expectations yields great benefits. Students cannot be expected to mirror the instructor's illustrations; most will not have any experience with an active Latin; and even good readers may at first find constructing a genuine Latin sentence taxing.

I use two different schemes for grading such work: the specific and the general. I find the specific more helpful with more proficient students; otherwise I go with a scheme of "minor errors, major errors, and capital offenses," for which I deduct points on an increasing scale. The number of points needs to be adjusted for the level of the students and their experience with writing prose.

I often give students the following list of errors as a guide for checking their work:<sup>6</sup>

- adjective-noun disagreement
- error of case (nominative/accusative; oblique)
- error of mood

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loaded for an ever-ready dictionary; finally, of course, Perseus provides an indispensable resource (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/engreek?lang=Latin>).

<sup>6</sup> For a different list of error codes, see Handley (2001), whose highly readable and useful reference, aimed at modern foreign language acquisition, is a great resource for teachers of Latin and Greek as well.

- error of part of speech (e.g. adjective for pronoun)
- error of tense of indicative
- error of tense of subjunctive
- error of voice
- ignoring supplied notations / not following directions
- inappropriate *oratio recta*
- misspelling
- number disagreement (verb)
- unattested Latin (i.e. made-up words)
- (simple) word used incorrectly

Errors can be added or subtracted and point values adjusted for emphasis in a class where a particular error just will not go away.

How do students react? The best welcome the marked improvement in their mastery of the language. The few who love Latin only as a kind of linguistic parlor game and whose goal is to find subjects to match verbs, etc., bristle at active use. But the unanimous consensus—even among those who struggle with the exercises and grumble about how much harder it is than simply translating—is that they learn more than ever before.

Cicero, discussing the influence of frequent practice on the principles of right conduct, offers an apt analogy for taking the study of ancient authors beyond reading and translating (*Off.* 1.60):

Sed ut nec medici nec imperatores nec oratores quamvis artis praecepta perciperint, quicquam magna laude dignum sine usu et exercitatione consequi possunt, sic officii conservandi praecepta traduntur illa quidem, ut facimus ipsi, sed rei magnitudo usum quoque exercitationemque desiderat.

Students who have duly studied the principles of morphology and syntax still need to exercise their language skills at the intermediate and advanced level. The greater their skill and subsequent success, the more likely they are to continue in the language—and that, after all, is the goal.

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