

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# LATIN LANGUAGE

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**Overview** The Latin language, like any long-lived and influential language system, has roots which vanish into the past, and future horizons which are still incomplete, if only because we are still talking about them. The roots of Latin lie in a dialect originally employed by the tribe called Latins, living in the region of Latium in Italy; a dialect we feel able to trace back at least to the tenth century B.C.E. (The oldest written inscription in this dialect appears to be the Praenestine fibula, a piece of bone saying 'Manius made me for Numerius.') From which point we are off, onto a still vigorous adventure in a language which refuses to die, and which proves how hardy is the Italic branch of the Indo European language family.

**The development of the language** In broad terms, the language of the Latin people assumed formal condition with the formation of the Roman Monarchy and Republic, a period during which writers like Plautus and Terence, and later Cicero, contributed greatly to exploiting the expressive potentials of the language. That takes the language into the period of the Augustan Empire and later, takes it, that is, from Golden to Silver, through a gradual transformation, all within high style, of the expressive possibilities of a highly wrought literary language, the language say of the historian Tacitus (56 B.C.E.-120 C.E.) (Latin, here, at perhaps its highest elevation of power and imagination, and not for a minute to be confused with the Latin of the streets, the Vulgar Latin made possible by Silver Latin. Vulgar Latin is amply attested by inscriptions, graffiti, and book marginalia throughout the developmental progress of the language.)

**Silver Latin and after** The literary potentials of Silver Latin are the playground of great writers from the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121 B.C.E.-180 C.E.) to Saint Augustine (354 C.E.-430 C.E.), after whom--to speak crudely--the broad educational decline of the Roman system meanders out into centuries during which what we once called the Dark Ages decline in their attention to high thinking and careful expression. And yet this decline is far from a demise, for in successive iterations Latin goes to a new and fine tuned life in Renaissance Humanism (think of Sir Francis Bacon), in the Latin use and practices of scholarship in the 18th century (think Linnaeus, for example, 1707 C.E.-1778 C.E.), in the perennial attention of the Roman Catholic Church to a liturgy originally established into Latin and still faithful to it, and finally in a surprisingly rejuvenant Latin of our own moment, when academic study in and through Latin pays undying testimony to the endurance of a language family.

**The nature of this language** While we have much to understand about the developmental intertwining of human usefulness, with stages of language growth, we know that during its most highly elaborated moment--in its condition under the Roman Empire--Latin was a very highly tuned linguistic signification vehicle. In terms every contemporary student of Latin knows, the classical form of the language--the era we study--was highly inflected. What does this mean? From within their language world, organizing an imaginative world that constituted their works, Livy, Tacitus, Ovid had access to: three genders, seven noun cases, four verb conjugations, four principal parts, six tenses, three persons, three moods, two voices, two aspects and two numbers. The upshot of a richly signifying repertoire of this sort, in a thinking-imaginative mind, is a wide opportunity to 'say just what you want to,' in a shaded tone, an emotional pitch, in a thought-perspective which hews precisely to the contours of what you want to express. The development of the language, around and beyond you, will be as adept as you ask it to be in the creation of a word world.

**The legacy of this language** We have mentioned change within a language like Latin. A language that lives as doughtily as Latin goes through many significant changes, and bequeaths ever new forms of itself. The passage of Latin into the Middle Ages occurs within a gradual simplification of the language--of that elaborate signifying system--while the move into Renaissance Humanism frequently represents the opposite revision, into a more florid and recherché form of the language. The Latin of Catholicism is purposively changeless and muscular, while the embedded Latinity of even our most daily language use guarantees to Latin--think of medicine, science, the intricate prose of an author like Robert Musil--a closeness to us we cannot imagine ourselves without.

The larger picture legacy takes us into the historical energy of classical Latin, which viewed from within proves to have been the mother of a wide family of 'Romance' languages. To speak historically, and crudely, there was a cut off point, In the development of classical Latin, when it passed not only into the post-476 C.E. decline, but, after the Moorish intervention in Spain (ca. 711 C.E.), into an era when the centrality of Roman/Latin culture was cut off from what were becoming the increasingly defined pre-states of modern Europe; France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Romania, states in which the so called Romance languages were coming to birth. From a certain perspective, then, we can speak of those Romance languages as evolving forms of Latin itself.

**Where we English speakers engage Latin** While Latin fans out into Romance Languages, English, of course, is in its formative stages, growing from Anglo-Saxon and amalgamating a variety of Germanic dialects. It was at the Battle of Hastings (1066 C.E.) that the Norman French victory over the English injected into the British Isles social and eventually linguistic changes (introduction of French, and with it a vast Latin component) which rendered us English inheritors at the same time deep consumers of the Latin embedded in our language.

### Reading

Baldi, Philip, *The Foundations of Latin*, Berlin, 2002.

Palmer, Frank Robert, *Grammar*, Harmondsworth, 1984.

### Discussion questions

Darwin argues that evolution seeks ever better developmental conditions for mankind. That's the reason for our evolution. -Can the same be said for the evolution of a language like Latin? Does it develop in accordance with the continual betterment of the human setting through which it passes?

Does Latin itself, which shows the influence of Greek, carry extensive traces of Greek inside it?

Does individual language change move toward an omega point? Or does one language simply flow into another language through time?