

## Why study Latin?

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I had my fair share of charming reactions when I told some people I pursue Latin. The reactions ranged from sheer amusement, to people quietly criticizing me for studying a dead language, to people asking me whether Latin is some form of Spanish. I cannot help but feel that such a spectrum of emotions is justifiable, since I still describe calculus as “that thing with swirling lines.”

Languages always interested me. I got my kick out of Latin when I would listen to Classical music and try to follow the libretto in Latin. Finally, in grade ten, I switched high schools to one where they offered Latin (and there were not many, that is all I can say). I loved it instantly. The spelling, the pronunciation, the form. I even loved all those things that will one-day cause me to have a stroke (mainly third declension verbs and a myriad of little adverbs that all sound the same but mean different things). Through grades ten and eleven, I took three language courses: German, French, and Latin. By grade twelve, I was so sick of trying to do three languages at once that I dropped French. I thought of taking ancient Greek for fun, but I swore to myself that I shall never put myself through such form of torture ever again. By the time I got here, I dropped German, since it became tiring.

By now you might be asking why? Why might one put oneself through such a pointless ordeal of losing their mind (at times), trying to memorize something that is dead? Isn't the fact that it is a dead language a good enough indicator that it is not worth wasting one's time on?

I can give you a plain answer and a long answer. The plain answer is a short, simple no. The long answer is

that it is not dead. It has evolved. What is called “vulgar Latin”, spoken by the people who lived in different areas of the Roman Empire, is very much alive today through the Romance languages: Italian, Spanish, French, Romanian and even obscure languages such as Catalan, Dalmatian, and Sardinian. Thus, Latin can provide an enormous help when one chooses to study one of these languages. It helps with vocabulary, and sometimes it can explain why a language works in a certain way. I can hardly speak any French, despite all those years spent on learning it. However, sometimes when I am forced to use it, my Latin helps me out enormously.

Latin has a very complex grammar. Unlike English, which has some relics of cases that it inherited from Old English (meaning Saxon Genitive and four-case sentence structure), Latin has six cases. When one tries to learn about them, one gains an unchallenged knowledge of how a sentence works. Also, in order to attempt to try to master tenses in Latin, one must learn about them. That knowledge can easily be applied to tenses in English. I certainly had no idea when to you use pluperfect before I learned about it in Latin. Latin not only teaches one about grammar, but also gives one an insight into all those wonderful grammatical thingamajigs English dropped or never had.

Have you ever read a text and came across a big word? Well I certainly do every day, meaning that I

have to do my textbook readings. Have you ever tried to seem smart and use a big word? I attempt to do it every day. Have you ever wanted to insult someone in their face, but were too afraid that they will understand what you are saying and give you a beating to prove that they have understood your nasty words? We all do now and then. Well, because of Latin, I have a much easier time with all three of them. Sometimes when I am too lazy to get up, find my dictionary, and then search for that bloody word, I just use my knowledge of Latin to try to figure out what that word means. Thanks to words derived from Latin, which I occasionally

choose to use (ignoring their common Anglo-Saxon synonyms), I can say quite pretentiously that I ascended the stairs, not that I climbed up the stairs. For the third one, I have a choice between calling someone a liar or simply calling them mendacious and letting them try to look it up in the dictionary. . . Good luck figuring out the spelling!

Latin derivatives are everywhere in English! There are not many that originally descended to us from Romans themselves as people in Britain mostly adopted church terms such as ‘vicar’ with the advent of Christianity. Many words of Italic origin came to English after the Norman Conquest. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, Classic scholars worked hard with incorporating Latin and Ancient Greek words into English. Many words did not make it. But I am sure as callous

hell that some other ones did and most people utilized them on a diurnal basis! This practice was so wide that even Shakespeare wrote a character on it. Holofrenes (in *Love's Labor's Lost*) was one of the “overenthusiastic coiners of Latin.”

Also, many legal terms are derived from Latin. Sine die, you might kill someone, end up divorcing your wife (that bitch), or your neighbor might be suing you because that dog of yours has been placing its waste on your neighbor's lawn (quite intentionally on your part), and that day you might have to deal with a plethora of legal mumbo jumbo. Do you really want to gape in wonder when the judge or somebody else uses something like *ex facie, nemo dat quod non habet, or talis qualis?* Or do you want to impress the greatest legal minds by knowing what they are saying (although, alas, there is a chance that even they do not know what the words they are using mean)?

The same with another field: biology. Do you want to be laughed at for the rest of your life by some uppity classicists because your *corvus* sounds more like *korv-ass?* There certainly is ass in *ekwass ass-ee-nass (Equus asinus)*, but do not shove it where it does not belong (eg. raven).

So, next time when somebody tells you they are studying Latin, do not laugh at their face and call them stupid, because they can insult you back in ways you can never possibly understand. But be nice to them, befriend them, and get them to help you out with big words next time you are desperately trying to appear anything more than a blithering idiot. So if you can, study Latin because *nil satis nisi optimum*.