

## THE STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF LATIN

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*With a pudding on Sunday, and stout humming Liquor,  
And Remnants of Latine to puzzle the Vicar; . . .*

— W. Pope

Remnants of Latine! For centuries in Western Europe a knowledge of Latin (and, where possible, of Classical Greek), provided the principal access to a study of man's cultural achievements. It could be assumed that a training in Latin was part of the baggage of an educated man. Today, with the explosion of knowledge and the consequent demands on a student's period of formal training, the outlay of time and effort in any particular field must be carefully balanced against the rewards of such concentration. The ready availability of information in any one of a number of modern languages and the staggering development of communications media have deprived Latin of its unique position. As a result, the study of Latin now occupies a somewhat different niche in the hierarchy of educational values.

Learning Latin has traditionally been a time-consuming task; and today many students feel reluctant to devote a major part of their effort to the study of an "ancient" language in the face of more immediate pressures.<sup>1</sup> This reluctance is sometimes expressed in spite of considerable interest in classical studies for themselves and an awareness of their contributory value in the pursuit of humane studies generally. The result, nonetheless, is that the place of Latin has come in for searching re-appraisal in today's crammed curriculum. This is reflected not merely in secondary school programmes, but in the modification or abandonment in recent years of the "Latin requirement" for admission to, or for the Bachelor's degree at, most major universities in the Western world.

When all the foregoing has been said, it is still generally conceded that a student of any modern European literature, comparative literature, history, linguistics, philosophy, theology and a variety of other related fields has a marked advantage if he can read Latin — this quite apart from the intrinsically valuable educational experience of studying classical antiquity. Yet, if Latin studies are not to parallel those of Classical Greek in disappearing, except from the study of the specialist, something other than a holding action must be undertaken. Foremost among the desiderata to be reached are the reduction of unacceptable time requirements and the boosting of teaching and learning effectiveness.

Confronted with the situation outlined, the Department of Classics at McGill University took steps three years ago towards meeting these objectives. The result was the introduction of the "structural approach" to the teaching of Latin, based on the techniques of modern applied linguistics. This has been used, with gratifying results, for a first-year group of approximately 270 students. Some account of the programme at McGill may be of interest to other educators faced with the same problems.

The structural approach<sup>2</sup> is based on the view that language is a set of learned behaviour habits — a code involving signal units in certain permitted patterns. To use language easily and effectively these patterns must be grooved in until they become habitual responses. Native command of a language is the ability to make these responses *automatically* and correctly, to given stimuli: i.e., not to have to "work out" every construction like a piece of algebra.

In the development of pedagogical material, the first step is to make a careful analysis of the language and to determine the units at the various levels of structure (i.e., phonemic, morphemic, syntactic) and their patterns of organization. The next step is to build carefully programmed drills by which the student is conditioned to respond appropriately to given stimuli. (What gives a language its unique identity, after all, is not just a different set of words, but a structural mechanism all its own, not quite like that of any other language. In the structural approach, the student wastes less time than under the direct method, and learns to handle the mechanism deftly and correctly. In short, he "learns the grammar" in the truest sense of the word, as contrasted with "learning *about* the grammar," a goal often receiving greater emphasis under a more conventional approach.)

As the student proceeds in his carefully programmed approach, drills are supplemented with shorter, then longer, segments of reading material plus questions controlled to elicit specific responses (in Latin). The student is meanwhile developing progressively greater sensitivity to structural stimuli and, while lexical understanding is still limited, structural understanding should be much increased. The experience has been compared to that of, let us say, a native speaker of English who reads unfamiliar technical material in his own language for the first time. He ordinarily recognizes verbs, nouns, adjectives, and so forth (i.e., the construction of the passage) even though he is unsure of the precise dictionary meaning of some of the terms. After a period of carefully designed drills, such as we have described, reading in Latin now becomes an exercise much more like reading in the student's own language. Of course he consults a dictionary for new words; but since he ordinarily recognizes the part of speech, i.e., has a structural understanding, this now becomes an operation much more like using a dictionary in his own language. He understands

the basic thrust of the passage. It is only the referential content of the new lexical item which he has to look up. A situation rather different — even the reverse — of common experience in Latin! Where the initial stages of such a programme are carefully planned and conscientiously followed through, the student develops a facility in handling the structural signals and learns to read *in Latin* — to think *in Latin*.

The text adopted for the introductory course at McGill is *Latin: A Structural Approach* by Professor Waldo Sweet of the University of Michigan. A brief examination of the text will reveal that problems confronting the English-speaking student of Classical Latin are treated in a way differing from the conventional method.<sup>3</sup> One major problem is illustrated by the following.

A common impression made on English-speaking readers of Mediaeval Latin is that much of it is “easier to understand” than material of classical authorship. The English language relies largely on *word-order* to signal which word goes with which in a construction. Latin does this through *word-form*, i.e., grammatical inflexion. Many mediaeval authors reflect in their Latinity the influence of their own background vernaculars in which grammatical inflexion was disappearing and in which *word-order* was becoming correspondingly more important. When writing in Latin they naturally retain the standard inflexional features, but *word-order* becomes much more regularized. As a result, the English reader can in some cases almost disregard features of inflexion or *word-form* and depend on a set of *word-order* signals, not unlike those in his own language, to signal constructional relationships.<sup>4</sup> Hence the impression of “easiness.”

Classical Latin does not work this way. Here *word-order* has a function and a value sharply different from anything the student is used to in English. Syntactic linkage is signalled largely through *word-form* — inflexion. The student must be sensitized to the signals peculiar to the Latin code through a series of pattern drills designed to condition him until he reacts on cue not merely correctly but automatically, both in recognition and production. The consequent proliferation of pattern-drills is one of the most conspicuous features of a structurally oriented text. Once the constructions to be learned have been introduced through a block of basic sentences or other basic material to be over-learned by sheer mimicry and memory-work, the student is ready to begin drill sessions where he gains practice in expansion, substitution and transformation of set frames. Translation exercises are curiously absent. Constant insistence on translation, so common in the introductory stages of language learning, can actually militate against the student's feeling at ease with a new set of language habits: i.e., constructions.

Vocabulary (and it has to be learned) is taught in context, further promoted through the recognition and production of synonyms and observation of resemblances to English derivatives. Gone are the lists with right and left hand columns to be covered (and peeped at). The vocabulary section is for reference and discussion. All new words have been learned before the student gets that far!

A further note on drills: these often take the form of question and answer in Latin — a device equally useful for eliciting comprehension of the substantive content of a passage read. In this connection, reading passages, verse selections in particular, are commonly supplied in Sweet's text with a Latin (prose) paraphrase. In the paraphrase the student often finds the clarification which helps him discover the meaning of the original without recourse to English.

At McGill it has been necessary to accommodate the basic programme to the restrictions of a shorter term, the conventional timetable of three class-hours a week, and a differing set of second year reading requirements. While this has involved certain adjustments in detail, care has been taken to safeguard the essential features of the structural approach.

Commercially produced tapes are available for the Sweet text, but it was found more convenient by the McGill department to produce and time its own tapes. Recording facilities and technical services at the Peterson Hall laboratory are excellent, and a complete set was produced to accompany the text. An effort has been made throughout to observe the reconstructed pronunciation, with due attention to such features as vowel quantity, single versus double consonants, features of morphophonemic change and the positions of stress, following the rule of Ennius. Drill sessions in the language laboratory are mandatory for every student, and the periodic use of tape-recordings to introduce new materials in class allows the instructor to forestall at least some inaccuracies of production before they become established patterns.

A beginning has also been made towards supplementing reading material in the text with additional prose readings. These are accompanied by *annotationes* — new words or phrases explained or paralleled by already known terms in Latin — and are often followed by questions in Latin. An added feature of the McGill programme is designed to lessen the impact of later written requirements on the student without return to the bald translation exercise as a learning device. Following the learning of new material there is a time-lag of about two weeks; then the student is given a written exercise covering the same ground. This arrangement has the advantage of providing review and of disciplining the student to handle, in writing, material which has been the subject of considerable oral drill and reading.

At this point, perhaps a cautionary note should be added. Latin is Latin, however presented. This fact plus the presence of familiar words and phrases on the page lead many an instructor into temptation, the temptation to pretend that an essentially different theoretical approach is really "just the same thing" with minor adjustments to allow for the use of a few new teaching aids, such as language laboratories. One begins to "explain" constructions. Back to the rules! "Mr. Smithers, what does this mean?" (The last question isn't actually aimed at eliciting meaning. All the instructor wants is the nearest English equivalent.) One forgets to be inductive! The acuteness of the problem, the re-alignment of teaching technique, is also related to rate of turn-over in personnel in any department; but no one accustomed to language teaching along traditional lines is entirely immune to the temptation.

At McGill the group of instructors met weekly for the first term. At each meeting three members of the group each assumed responsibility for presenting in outline one of the lessons for the forthcoming week. The presentation was then discussed by the group as a whole. Not only did this prove useful in pre-locating certain shaky pedagogical procedures, but valuable insights and suggestions were contributed by individual members or even generated in discussion. The group meeting was of particular importance in the final shaping of examination material. A student's language competence, especially in Latin, has often been equated with his ability to translate. Curiously (or naturally), the assessing of a student's competence in his own language has never been gauged on such a basis. One wonders why it should be in any other. Furthermore, if teaching procedures have been designed to inculcate specific skills, it would appear only reasonable that testing procedures should be correspondingly directed at assessing control of the same skills.

Five tests were written by those in the McGill course during the first term. All were designed to test control of specific constructions. Questions were modelled on the pattern drills: to a given stimulus the student was expected to make a given response. Questions varied in type: multiple choice, simple substitution, expansion, transformation. In the second term opportunity was provided for more discursive answers, sometimes in the form of paraphrase or translation. Final examinations were set in the Spring of 1964 and '65. Over the academic year, 1965-'66, assessment of performance was made on the basis of cumulative tests throughout both terms. No final examination was required.<sup>3</sup>

The structural approach has now been used for three years at McGill, and overall results have been gratifying, perhaps even something more. (After two years' use as an experimental project, the structural approach was adopted for all entering the B.A.

curriculum without matriculation in a classical language and having, at that time, to make up that requirement.) The degree of active participation in class-work by the individual student is inevitably higher. The traditional classroom situation allows an average of perhaps between one and two minutes of individual attention per student per hour. Where attention is engaged exclusively, as in laboratory drill, the time of active individual involvement can be increased by as much as 3,000%. One result at McGill has been the reduction of failure rate in Introductory Latin by a significant percentage, coupled with a more marked sense of achievement on the part of a greater number of students. This is not to say that perfection has been reached. The usefulness of the course, particularly for graduate students and others who need to acquire a reading knowledge of Latin as rapidly as possible, would probably be increased if the rate of progress were accelerated to match that of other intensive, introductory language courses at the University. In this way an amount of Latin could be learned in one year roughly comparable to that taught in a three-to-four year high-school curriculum.

As noted above, reading requirements for the second year sequel at McGill are somewhat different from those toward which Sweet was working in the preparation of his material. A preoccupation with readying the student to read Vergil has somewhat coloured the content of *Latin: A Structural Approach*.<sup>8</sup> At the moment there exists a hiatus between the tightly programmed first-year course and the conventional, second year reading programme at McGill. This could be remedied by producing continued drill materials, questions, annotations, to accompany the second year texts. While more demanding on the instructor, such materials could carry a student to a much firmer, basic control of the language, — to say nothing of a broader coverage of the literary sources themselves.

Some day perhaps someone may take a series of typical cultural situations from Roman society of the first century B.C., and present them through blocks of carefully selected literary material. Around each of these nuclei could then be developed a language-learning unit based on the best insights of modern applied linguistics. Other levels of classical culture would be taught simultaneously with the language. If such a programme were thoughtfully worked out there is no reason why, at the end of his first year's study, the student should not achieve as good a control of Latin as of any modern language similarly taught. Certainly he should experience much more reward in handling a language with a certain sureness of give and take, rather than carrying out an exercise more reminiscent of fitting together the pieces of an exacting jig-saw puzzle.

## NOTES

1. The trend toward professionalism in university training is sometimes deprecated; but to ignore or simply resist the consequent educational demands on the student is in a large measure to refuse to accept the proper response of the university to the needs of society. Even the term "scholarship" now connotes the professional research specialist.
2. The first part of this description was included in a Letter to the Editor of *Classical News and Views*, March 28, 1966.
3. The problems confronting the English as compared with the German or French-speaking student of Latin (and of any other language) are different both in kind and degree. The English-speaking student tends to have more of a problem with the inflexional features of Latin and only moderate difficulty with vocabulary. The speaker of German can often cope more readily with inflexional features to which he is accustomed in principle in his own language, but finds Latin vocabulary more foreign. The French speaker has problems of both structure and semantic shift not quite like those of either the German or English speaker. Strictly speaking, different pedagogical material should be prepared for any language to meet the particular needs related to the structural contrasts with the source language of different learners.
4. Due attention must also be given to the fact that this increases the redundancy of signal tremendously, thereby further facilitating comprehension.
5. In keeping with regulations, those who failed to obtain a pass mark on the basis of the year's performance were given the option of a supplemental.
6. In spite of circumstantially induced limitations, Sweet's material represents an important break-through in the teaching of Latin, and should be in the hands of every Latin teacher, at least for examination and study. Any who plan on obtaining a copy would be well advised to examine the most recent version. It represents a significant advance on the first edition, and features a skilful level of programming. It has now been thoroughly tested, and is published by Encyclopaedia Britannica Films Inc.