

The Modern Connotation of "Latin Teacher"

This is a composite of three papers, with much overlapping of content in them, all written in the late 1950's, and one printed in the December 1956 *Classical Journal*.

The connotation of a phrase is as fickle as the popularity of a person. Even words that seem firmly established in the language are not exempt from this fluctuation. From the days of "*pius Aeneas*" to the early 1900's, the word "pious" was one of the highest compliments that could be applied to a person. But since then, for many people the word has acquired the connotation of self-righteousness and has become somewhat of an insult. Thus it might be profitable for us to examine the current connotation of another time-honored phrase: "Latin teacher."

To those of us who teach Latin the term connotes a person who performs a worthwhile service, and sometimes we are surprised to discover that other people do not always share our conception. Some of my friends like me in spite of my profession. Once when I was commuting between two colleges, a Grayhound driver on whose bus I rode every day became quite friendly until one day he asked me what I did. When I told him that I taught Latin, he looked at me as if I had said that I sold dope. When he finally recovered himself somewhat, he said pityingly, "Well, don't ever tell anybody, and they'll never know the difference."

The sad thing about this remark is that it reflects accurately the connotation of the term in many people's minds. We may say that this is just the attitude of the uneducated; but let us consider for a minute how we are regarded by our colleagues.

When a college education meant a study of the humanities, and when Latin was a standard graduation requirement, teaching Latin was an honorable profession. It still remains so in Catholic schools, where modern attitudes have not undermined basic ideals so much as in Protestant and non-religious schools. But in the majority of colleges and universities today, at least in the Midwest American colleges, Latin has become a subject for the eccentric student, and the teacher is looked upon as a very minor member of the teaching staff. If he establishes himself as a man of eminence on the faculty, it is for some other accomplishment besides his teaching of his very small load of "Latin scholars." Even in state universities, where most classes are overwhelmingly large, I know of no overcrowded Latin and Greek Departments.

In my own college we have been involved in a struggle this year to retain the two-year foreign language requirement for graduation. We have managed to hold our line so far, but not by an overwhelming vote of the faculty. The very fact that we have had to fight for our subject is an indication that the value of language study is not fully recognized even by the so-called academic community.

The ancient Romans were a practical people, and modern American education has out-Romaned the Romans in this respect. In an educational system where a student is given a degree in business administration, or agriculture, or home economics, or "education," the study of a foreign language seems to many people a luxury course -- nice, but not important -- and the study of what they call the "dead" languages seems to be a harmless pastime (if a person has nothing better to do), but as much a waste of energy as crossword puzzles. I am getting tired of having professional people tell me that, after all, Latin does not "prepare" a person for anything -- except teaching Latin, of course.

How can we impress other people with the need for studying a highly inflected language when a technical knowledge of our own language is treated casually or ignored? Rules of

grammar and spelling and fine discriminations in meaning are disregarded even by the "educated." Bergen Evans of Northwestern University, who makes out questions for the "\$64,000 Question" and who is moderator on the TV show, "The Last Word," defends such statements as "It's me," and "I've got ten dollars." Thus, among our so-called intellectuals, our college professors, what a person can learn from studying Latin seems superfluous.

Since the general public and our colleagues do not see our value to modern society, perhaps we can find some solace in the attitude of students. But no. The average student today has a natural antipathy to Latin. There is a terrible attrition rate when the student moves from high school to college. This year sixty-two incoming freshmen at the college where I teach were eligible to go into second-year college Latin, having done satisfactory work in two years of high school Latin. Only three of these students continued Latin, even though one more year would have fulfilled the college foreign language requirement. The other fifty-nine started another foreign language. Why? They did not dislike me, for they had never met me and most of them had never even heard of me. It was the subject itself that they either feared or felt no use for.

I have painted a rather dismal picture of how we look in other people's eyes today. We might as well concede that the high regard that used to surround our profession has worn off. Although I would not admit this to anyone except other Latin teachers, to the man on the street we are oddities; to our colleagues we are ineffectual eccentrics; and to students in general our courses are hard and useless.

But luckily our prestige can rise as well as fall. But whether our area of learning regains complete health or remains a semi-recovered invalid depends somewhat on whether we who teach college Latin use the proper preventives to avoid the recurrence of the original disease. Recuperation is much more difficult than maintaining an already healthy state. If we accept with a philosophical shrug the general estimate that our ideas of education are obsolete, we will remain fringe faculty members. But if we face our problem honestly, admit that our profession does not have its former glory, and set about with American practicality to do something about it, we can raise our position to its deserved level.

I firmly believe that missionary work, like charity, should begin at home. I suggest that our fellow teachers should be among the first allies we win to our cause. At least in my college, modern language majors have not been encouraged to study Latin. I am beginning a campaign, suggesting to the head of the Modern Foreign Language Department the desirability of Latin as a minor for students majoring in the Romance languages. I have made even more progress in my campaign on the English Department, where Latin is now suggested as a minor, and where Classical mythology has been made a required course for a major. I have explained the great scarcity of high school Latin teachers to our education professors and have gained some attention from them -- not because they see any value in Latin, but because they see opportunity in areas where demand for teachers is greater than supply.

A current trend in our school is the interdepartmental seminar course. We have one in American civilization, which is handled by a professor of history, one of sociology, and one of literature. There is another seminar which utilizes professors of French, Medieval history, and Renaissance art. I may soon suggest one for students in Latin, ancient history, and philosophy.

The heart of our problem, of course, is attracting students into Latin. We are partially to blame for this situation, since we have always maintained extremely high standards, and we have eliminated those students who are not of the highest caliber. This is an admirable practice in advanced courses, but not necessarily desirable in elementary courses. Other departments

have designed courses for the average student. In order to compete on equal terms with these other departments, we must also adapt to something besides only the best. It is true that not all students should major in Latin; but it is also true that any student who is capable of college work can gain much from two years of college Latin or its equivalent.

Also, if we are to have Latin as a valuable part of education in the future, we must get into our classes now the people who will be our future educators. If we don't, they are not apt to feel the lack of something they never had. Last year, I am told, only seven people qualified to teach Latin were graduated from all the colleges and universities in the state of Indiana; and only twenty-five Ph.D.'s were conferred in Latin in the entire United States. I also read in the January issue of the *Classical Outlook* that only twelve teachers of Latin in the public schools of Illinois are under thirty-five years of age. Such a situation seriously threatens our survival unless we do something about it. High school teachers can be of great help here by encouraging their better students to continue Latin in college.

One adjustment that most Classics departments have been forced to make in order to survive is the inclusion of courses in English on such subjects as mythology and Greek and Roman literature. These serve a definite purpose, but they are superficial in comparison with a study of the language itself. A person who knows classical literature only in English understands it no better than he would know a person by watching an actor portray him.

I feel that we can offer Latin courses which will not terrify the average student without lowering our standards drastically. My experience indicates that the student's antipathy toward Latin is based on two very tangible difficulties: his lack of knowledge of grammar, and his inadequate Latin vocabulary. Each of these can be eased.

Although there is a great deal more to grammar than case endings, these seem to me to be the basic element for the average student. If he learns his case endings and has been taught how these forms are used, he can usually translate a sentence adequately. The verbs almost automatically fit into the noun arrangement. The most difficult problem he has with verbs is recognition of those that appear in the perfect tenses. Therefore, in teaching elementary Latin, I emphasize most of all recognition of case endings and the principal parts of verbs. Armed with these two weapons, the average student can conquer a sentence -- not gloriously, perhaps, but he still manages to have a fair idea of what the sentence says, which is the first step in translating.

Vocabulary deficiency is what makes Latin dull to the average student. When he reads something in English, he just skips over the words he does not know and tries to get the idea without those words. It is shocking to find how many words a student does not understand in his English reading. However, this practice is not practical in reading Latin. Therefore, each preparation means a long session of checking words in the vocabulary. Some students spend more time in looking up words than in actually translating. Their first-year text may have included such uncommon words as *rana* and *ursa* in the vocabulary lists along with the words that the student will meet hundreds of times in his reading, with no indication of their relative importance to him.

It seems to be traditional to teach Cicero and Vergil in second-year college Latin courses. Obviously, these are the two authors most worth the intermediate student's effort; but they are not easy reading. In teaching Vergil I use Pharr's text. It is old, but it eliminates the vocabulary problem. In teaching Cicero, I have found college students more responsive to the two essays, *De Senectute* and *De Amicitia*, than to the orations. But the vocabulary in these essays is admittedly difficult for any but the exceptional student at the intermediate level. For

that reason I made an analysis of the vocabulary in these essays; and at the beginning of the term I give the students a word list of 189 words that appear in either essay as many as ten times or in the two of them as many as twenty times. These words are arranged in the order of the number of times they appear, and the student's first few assignments are to become familiar with these words. He has an incentive to do so since he can see that he will be meeting these words frequently. Then he is not overwhelmed by facing all at once the more than 1,600 words that are used in either essay.

This list is printed at the end of this article. In the December 1956 *Classical Journal* I offered to send it to any one desiring it. I had requests from forty schools, but only four of them were not Catholic, and one of these four was in Belgium.

Most of the approximately 1,500 words that appear in either essay fewer than ten times occur only one to three times. Many of these the student will have to check in his dictionary, but many he will already know since they include such elementary words as *puer*.

Around this basic list much vocabulary work can be grouped, if needed. For instance, the personal pronouns and their possessive adjectives appear 895 times; the irregular adjectives and adverbs in their three degrees appear 347 times; the phrase "not only...but also" appears 62 times in various forms; verbs with the suffix *-esco* appear 33 times; and abstract nouns whose ending is *-tio*, *-tia*, *-tas*, or *-tudo* appear 817 times.

If a student learns these basic 189 words, his work in translating is immeasurably simplified. Any part of it he learns makes the drudgery just that much easier. And as his sense of frustration decreases, his sense of accomplishment and pleasure increases, for the average student is discouraged with Latin not because it is difficult but because he feels frustrated when so often he cannot get it in spite of conscientious work. Tackling something difficult enough to offer a challenge gives a sense of satisfaction if the task is successfully completed. Thus I feel that if students are given enough help to make their accomplishment possible, the reputation of Latin will spread from our students to others that Latin is stimulating rather than deadening. At least I have succeeded in five years in tripling the Latin enrollment in Monmouth College, and I hope that I have just started.

Last year my first major was graduated. She accepted a position teaching English but organized on her own responsibility a Latin class from among her students in a high school where no foreign language had been offered. And this year two nearby communities have asked me for Latin teachers for schools previously without a foreign language offering. Two of my senior students are teaching one hour a day in these schools. This is the kind of thing that I hope will become contagious. If this desire for a knowledge of Latin ever reaches epidemic proportions, we will not have to be concerned any longer about the connotation of the term, "Latin teacher." It is possible.

Words Found in *De Senectute* and *De Amicitia* Twenty Times or More

674 - qui	38 - mors, studium, vivo, voluptas
572 - sum	37 - vis
447 - et	36 - iam, noster, saepe, tum, vir
356 - is	35 - magnus, numquam
350 - in	34 - corpus, ne + subjunctive
225 - non	33 - fero, primus, sapiens
181 - ego	32 - ago, alter, annus, nisi
179 - -que	31 - quisque, modus
173 - enim	30 - delecto, deligo, iste
163 - hic	29 - adulescens, audio, meus, puto
162 - amicitia	28 - soleo
147 - ut + subjunctive	27 - causa, quasi, tamquam
144 - possum	26 - ante, ne...quidem, tantus
140 - ad	25 - do, tempus
134 - sui	24 - consul, inter, mos, res publica, unus
129 - ab	23 - accipio, certus, magis, nam, quantus, sermo
127 - cum (when)	22 - debeo, deus, itaque, nascor, nemo, sine
125 - nec	21 - colo, facilis, memoria, omnino, semper, sentio
123 - ille, sed	20 - auctoritas, benevolentia, gravis, num, optimus, plus, quam (how)
119 - video	
115 - omnis	
113 - dico, ut + indicative	
110 - si	
106 - senectus, facio, fio	
103 - ipse	
99 - aut, de, res	

Words in *De Senectute* Ten Times or More, but not in Above List

96 - amicus	70 - animus, multus (o, um)
93 - atque, ex	18 - adulescentia
90 - quidem	15 - ager, gero
85 - cum (with)	14 - at
84 - versus	13 - diu, patria
83 - habeo	12 - careo, intellego, iucundus, melior, venio
82 - etiam	11 - minor, munus, terra, vitium
81 - quis, quid	10 - bellum, ceteri. desidero, pater, praeclarus, quamquam, tuus
77 - autem	
76 - tu	
73 - senex	

Words in *De Amicitia* Ten Times or More, but not in Above List

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| 67 - quam (than, as) | 39 - alius, tam, vel |
| 63 - nihil | 15 - iudico, quam ob rem |
| 61 - aetas | 14 - tollo, utilitas |
| 59 - suus | 13 - amo, caritas, genus, loquor, quisquam, rectus, ullus |
| 55 - natura | 12 - amor, honor, propter |
| 54 - ita, quod | 11 - existimo, fortuna, locus, minime, quis (indef.), capio,
cum...tum |
| 52 - aliquis | 10 - adsum, arbitror, difficilis, qualis, quod si, summus,
talis, valeo |
| 50 - idem | |
| 49 - tamen, vita | |
| 48 - bonus, quidam | |
| 45 - homo, nullus, sic, volo | |
| 44 - maximus, virtus | |
| 43 - igitur | |