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March 1977

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Thomas Nelson Winter

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, c150gpilot@yahoo.com

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“Did the Romans Really Talk Like That?”

Thomas N. Winter

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Each of the two high school Latin teachers working with me this past summer asked me how to handle such a question as I have used for the title. It gets around to the case-endings: did they really have to listen for them to understand conversational Latin, or weren't they really talking much more simply than got written in the books? The answer is perhaps a bit disappointing for the student who wants to be reassured that the ancient Romans were really speaking English.

The evidence is architectural as well as literary. Surprisingly enough, the best and firmest answer lies in Greek and Roman theatrical architecture, and leads to one of the most interesting of all impacts of culture on the level of technology. How come we have miserable acoustics in even our brand-new theatres while all of the surviving ancient theatres have outstanding acoustics? There are many answers, but the basic one, it can be shown, is that we don't have to hear case-endings and they did. With our one-two-three, subject-verb-complement language, all we have to hear is the words in their sequence. We do not have to hear the entirety of each word. So we don't need good acoustics, and we don't get good acoustics.

Any tourist to Greece or Turkey who has been in an ancient Greek theatre can testify that the ancient Greeks had outstanding acoustics. Generally, normal conversational tones can be heard all the way up in the top rows. Vitruvius, the Roman writer on architecture, makes it clear why. In the passages on the building of theatres, we can see that the one fear of the ancient architect was loss of the case-endings. They knew that sound travels in waves, just like the ones you can make and see on the surface of still water, and which you can see interfering with each other once the waves rebound from the water's edge. The trick was in avoiding destructive interference. Here, for instance, is Vitruvius on the question of seat alignment:

The curved cross-aisles should be constructed in proportionate relation, it is thought, to the height of the theatre, but not higher than the footway is broad. If they are loftier, they will throw back the voice and drive it away from the upper portion, *thus preventing the case-endings of words, from reaching with distinct meaning the ears of those who are in the uppermost seats above the cross-aisles.* In short, it should be so contrived that a line drawn from the lowest to the highest seat will touch the top edges and angles of all the seats. Thus the voice will meet with no obstruction (5.3.4).

Of course, the basic way of avoiding wave interference is to stick with the basic outdoor theatre, and, as Vitruvius recommends a little later in the same essay, to choose an anechoic site in the first place: “Particular pains must be also taken that the site not be a deaf one, but one through which the voice can range with the greatest clearness. This can be brought about if a site is selected where there is no interference due to echo.” Then, as we have already seen, the architect's challenge is to be sure he aligns his structures so that no destructive interference is created. Avoiding this interference of course required a correct, modern understanding of the nature of sound, which the ancients had. Vitruvius again:

“Voice ... moves in an endless number of circular rounds, like the innumerably increasing circular waves which appear when a stone is thrown into smooth water, and which keep on spreading indefinitely from the centre unless interrupted by narrow limits, or by some obstruction which prevents such waves from reaching their end in due formation. *When they are interrupted by obstructions, the first waves flowing back, break up the formation of those that follow ...* as it is in the case of waves formed on the water, so it is in the case of the voice: the first wave, when there is no obstruction to interrupt it, does not break up the second or the following waves, but they all reach the ears of the lowest and highest spectators without an echo (5.36–5.37).”

The acoustical quality of the ancient theaters and the level of understanding which made it possible make one of the great ancient technological and theoretical achievements, and we must remember that the single goal of the architect was, as we have seen in the first of the passages from Vitruvius, to make it possible for the audience to hear the case-endings.

There is of course, other evidence about the Romans realizing the importance of case-endings. It was so fundamental that they didn't talk about it much. It would, of course, be parallel with an English speaker saying "You must carefully learn the meaning of prepositions"—fundamentally true, and so unnecessary to say. Nonetheless, all Latin teachers will be delighted to know that the foremost Roman educator actually said it:

Children should begin by learning to conjugate verbs and to decline nouns, because there is no other way to get to the next levels of understanding. It would have been unnecessary to say this, except that several [teachers] begin, in ambitious haste, with the later stuff and, because they want to show off their students in the more difficult material, slow their students down with their short-cut.

It was Quintilian who said it, and because of its high intrinsic interest, it should be worthwhile to pass it on in Quintilian's original form:

Nomina declinare et verba in primis pueri sciant, neque enim aliter pervenire ad intellectum sequentium possunt; quod etiam monere supervacuum erat, nisi ambitiosa festinatione plerique a posterioribus inciperent et, dum ostentare discipulos circa speciosiora malunt, compendio morarentur (i.4.22).

The zeugma with which he starts is also of some interest to the Latin teacher, "nomina declinare et verba," for it shows that a learned native speaker could use the one verb, "declinare," for both nouns and verbs, without always having to keep straight one verb for the one class of words and another verb for the other as with our proper "decline," "conjugate."

Another passage with much the same effect is in Arnobius' "Against the Gentiles" (*Adversus Nationes*, 2.6). It puts learning the cases and tenses at the very beginning of the steps in sequence of education. It is a long, anti-intellectual, and unpleasant passage, a sort of "just because you can button your shirt and tie your shoes and have been to college doesn't mean you can tell truth from falsehood," but it does give the steps in a Roman's education. The beginning, of interest to us, is "Quia per casus et tempora declinare verba scitis et nomina, ..." Though Arnobius does not exhort the learning of the case-endings as did Quintilian, he nonetheless makes it quite clear that learning the cases and tenses was the standard first step.

We can summarize by observing that Roman children had to learn the case and tense forms consciously, just like our first-year students; secondly, that this part of Roman education was a necessity so obvious it was taken for granted; and finally, the endings were so necessary for comprehension that native speakers needed to hear them even to understand a play being acted out before their eyes—a necessity which produced acoustics unmatched in modern times.

Published in *The Classical Outlook*, 25 (1977), pp. 25–26. Copyright © 1977 American Classical League. Used by permission.