The Journal of Classics Teaching (2026), **27**, 46–53
doi:10.1017/S2058631025100706

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Research Article

Simplex sigillum veri: a minimal language approach to Latin teaching

Ignacio Aragües y Oroz
Independent Scholar, Hong Kong

Abstract

This article explores a novel approach to Latin instruction grounded in the principles of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) and the Minimal Languages framework. Whilst recent developments in Latin pedagogy have increasingly embraced communicative methods, the selection of appropriate target vocabulary remains a critical challenge, especially when traditional frequency lists prioritise terms ill-suited for active use. This, in turn, complicates the implementation of communicative approaches, which depend on accessible and contextually relevant language. We propose Minimal Latin (ML), a minimal language based on a universal lexicon derived from NSM principles and governed by a simplified grammar. ML offers a principled solution for vocabulary selection and lexical sequencing. It also facilitates in-language definitions and the explanation of cultural concepts without recourse to translation. The article outlines the theoretical foundations of NSM and Minimal Languages, presents a Latin version of NSM, and proposes ML as a pedagogical tool for Latin teaching across multiple instructional contexts.

Keywords: Latin; pedagogy; vocabulary selection; communicative method; natural semantic metalanguage; minimal languages

Communicative methods and target vocabulary selection

In recent decades, the teaching of Latin has experienced a notable shift towards new communicative pedagogical approaches. As Rambsy (2020) notes, this change in focus is associated with various terms, such as Active Latin or Comprehensible Input, but they all emphasise the importance of using and speaking the target language as part of the learning process. In their introduction to the recent volume *Communicative Approaches to Ancient Languages*, Lloyd and Hunt (2021) identify the goal guiding this shift as 'escaping the image of ancient languages as mere codes to be deciphered and moving towards students experiencing them as normal means of communication, both spoken and written' (p.1).

This trend is not the first attempt to depart from the traditional grammar-translation method, with which it remains associated in many instructional contexts. The natural (or direct) method is now more than a century old, and its origins can be traced back to medieval times, when Latin served as a medium of both oral and written communication in academic settings (Wingate, 2013). Acknowledging this, Manning (2021) characterises the current shift as a 'return to communicative emphasis' (p. 9).

Compared with previous efforts, however, new communicative approaches benefit from extensive research conducted in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), which has primarily focussed on the teaching of modern languages (Carlon, 2013). This represents a profound paradigm shift, inviting a review not only of teaching practices and strategies, but also of the appropriateness of instructional materials and course structures.

Some educators argue that communicative activities should not be seen as an end in themselves, but rather as a means to help students develop greater competence in reading written texts (Lloyd, 2017; Sinclair, 2018). Nevertheless, a communicative approach introduces goals that may diverge from those associated with enhanced reading comprehension. Illustrating this tension, Venditti (2021) recalls that, having been trained through the grammar–translation method, she lacked familiarity with basic structures related to everyday life – structures that would typically be introduced early in a communicative course. The dilemma is clear: the linguistic resources required to read classical texts are not the same as those needed for basic communication, and neither fully supports the acquisition of the other.

One aspect of teaching that clearly exemplifies this problem is the selection of target vocabulary. In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), it is widely acknowledged that, given the vast number of lexical units and the significant time and effort required for their acquisition, it is essential to determine which words should be learned first (Nation, 2013). However, no unified criteria exist for making this selection, an issue that already presents challenges in modern foreign language (MFL) instruction. Contemporary researchers emphasise the need to apply multiple criteria, both objective and subjective, including lexical frequency, lexical availability, and the perceived usefulness or difficulty of specific items (He and Godfroid, 2019; Hidalgo Gallardo & Rufat Sánchez, 2022; Laufer and Nation, 2013).

Lexical frequency is often considered the most suitable metric for vocabulary selection in the teaching of classical languages. Since frequency lists are derived from the corpus of available texts, they

Email: ignacioaragues@gmail.com

Cite this article: Aragües y Oroz I (2026). Simplex sigillum veri: a minimal language approach to Latin teaching. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 27, 46–53. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

align naturally with the needs of students whose long-term goal is to read that corpus. As Gruber-Miller and Mulligan (2022) note, high-frequency words significantly enhance students' ability to recognise and comprehend the language. Ash (2019) further underscores the value of restricting vocabulary to high-frequency terms within a comprehensible input framework, enabling learners to better acquire and retain the language through repeated exposure to relevant and meaningful items.

However, the applicability of frequency lists becomes more problematic when selecting vocabulary for courses with a communicative focus. Since these lists are derived from ancient texts, many high-frequency words have limited relevance for everyday interaction. For example, the Latin Core Vocabulary list compiled by Dickinson College (Francese, 2021) includes terms such as *deus* (ranked 42), *rex* (60), *iubeō* (84), *bellum* (86), *hostis* (93), and *arma* (98), which are unlikely to be useful in basic conversational contexts. Conversely, highly practical words – particularly those referring to contemporary objects or concepts – are notably absent.

Another limitation of frequency lists is that they do not, in themselves, offer a criterion for sequencing vocabulary. For example, the Dickinson College list includes 1,000 terms – roughly the number of words a learner is expected to acquire for basic communicative competence – yet it does not indicate the order in which these terms should be introduced. This is a significant issue, as not all words in the list are equally useful: a term like *vestīgium* (ranked 716) is arguably less essential than *rēs* (ranked 38). One possible solution is to establish cut-off levels that create hierarchical groupings – for instance, assuming that words ranked 1–99 represent a more basic vocabulary than those ranked 100–199. However, as Hashimoto (2021) observes, this method is arbitrary and lacks empirical justification. There may be little difference in usefulness between words ranked 99 and 100, whilst terms within the same range (e.g. ranks 1 and 99) can vary significantly in frequency.

When evaluating the usefulness of a word for learners, subjective criteria often play a significant role. Dang and Webb's (2020) study of 17 English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Vietnam found that most based their vocabulary selection primarily on the textbooks they used, followed by their own experience and intuition. However, such criteria are not always reliable. McCrostie (2007) observed that teachers were accurate in estimating word frequency for very common or very rare terms, but less so for mid-frequency vocabulary. In light of this, Sánchez Gutiérrez *et al.* (2025) conclude that neither corpus-based lists nor teacher intuition alone provide sufficient guidance for selecting relevant vocabulary. In the case of Latin, as noted earlier, the challenge stems less from the subjective side of the selection process than from the objective one: resources are far more limited than in modern language teaching, and frequency lists prove inadequate for courses with a communicative focus.

The purpose of this article is to offer an objective alternative for Latin vocabulary selection on the basis of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM). As we will argue, this approach not only provides us with a concise core vocabulary list, but also offers a viable model for lexical sequencing. Another advantage of this approach is that, by being based on a finite inventory of universal concepts, it provides a model applicable to all languages, making it easier to transpose developments in MFL to the teaching of Latin and ensuring maximum translatability and comprehensibility of the input.

Table 1. Semantic Primes

Substantives	I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY, KINDS, PARTS
Determiners	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE
Quantifiers	ONE, TWO, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW, SOME, ALL
Descriptors	GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates	THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech	SAY, WORDS, TRUTH
Actions, events, movement	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Location, existence, specification	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
Possession	(IS) MINE
Life and death	LIVE, DIE
Time	WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space	WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH
Logical concepts	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, VERY, MORE, LIKE~AS

In the following sections, we will present the theoretical principles underlying our proposal, with a summary of the NSM theory. Next, we will introduce Minimal Latin (ML), including its vocabulary and syntax. Finally, we will demonstrate several ways in which the use of ML can be applied in Latin teaching under a communicative method, both as instrumental vocabulary and in explaining complex concepts.

The natural semantic metalanguage

The natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach originated in Wierzbicka's seminal work *Semantic Primes* (1972). Its central hypothesis is the existence of a finite set of universal, indefinable concepts, known as *semantic primes*, which can be combined to express all complex meanings in natural languages (Wierzbicka, 2021). Wierzbicka initially identified 14 such primes; subsequent research by her and other scholars has expanded the inventory to a current total of 65, as detailed in Table 1.

Semantic primes, typically written in small caps, are abstract entities. However, the theory predicts that these primes, being universal, are linguistically represented in all natural languages. Such *exponents* may take the form of words, morphemes, or phrases (Fernández, 2020). This universality ensures that both the list of exponents and the definitions constructed with them are cross-translatable between any two languages, with minimal loss or addition of meaning (Gladkova and Larina, 2018).

The metalanguage possesses not only a lexicon but also a syntax, which is not arbitrary but determined by the meaning of each semantic prime (Goddard, 2018b, p. 60). Each prime has a specific valency – that is, a set number and type of arguments it requires to form a well-structured clause. For instance, a predicate such as DO needs, in its basic form, two arguments, as illustrated in (a).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a. someone DOES something

This clause can be further extended to reveal additional aspects of the situation denoted by the predicate:

b. someone DOES something to someone
c. someone DOES something with something
d. someone DOES something with someone

These additional arguments can be categorised using traditional semantic terminology: in sentence (b), the underlined argument is a patient; in (c), an instrumental; and in (c), a comitative. Additionally, the predicate may include evaluators or adjuncts of time and place, as exemplified in the following sentences:

e. someone DOES something (good/bad)
f. someone DOES something (there)

With its vocabulary and syntax, NSM purportedly allows for the semantic explanation of any complex concept expressed in natural languages. For example, Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014b) define the English term *happiness* as follows:

[1] *Happiness* (as in 'money doesn't bring happiness')
a. it can be like this:
b. someone thinks like this for some time:
c. 'some good things are happening to me now as I want
d. I can do many things now as I want
e. this is good' (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014b, p. 105)

From a theoretical perspective, NSM addresses the classical semantic problem of circular definitions (Fernández, 2020). Contrary to the assumption that all concepts can be defined, Wierzbicka (1996) contends that semantic primitives are inherently indefinable. This view not only avoids the risk of infinite regress, but also sidesteps a subtler and more frequent form of circularity, in which simple concepts are defined using more complex ones.

Furthermore, NSM has been proposed as a remedy for ethnocentrism – particularly Anglocentrism – which, according to Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014a), has historically permeated linguistic research. The dominance of English as an academic lingua franca has fostered the mistaken belief that it can function as a culturally neutral tool of analysis. This misconception becomes especially evident when terms such as *politeness* or *kinship* are employed to describe categories in other languages. The problem is twofold: first, it neglects the fact that such English terms are themselves socially and culturally conditioned, and therefore not universal; second, it introduces concepts that may be foreign or irrelevant to the languages being studied.

Given its cross-translatable nature, NSM helps mitigate ethnocentric bias, making it a valuable tool for intercultural communication. In recent decades, the growing focus on pragmatics within NSM research has given rise to ethnopragmatics, a closely related framework (Goddard, 2018b, p. 286). This approach emphasises the use of semantic primes to develop *cultural scripts* – semantic explanations of norms, values, and culturally specific practices.

This field has expanded with the development of *minimal languages*, first proposed in a volume edited by Goddard (2018a). The authors argue that, despite its role as a global lingua franca, English is saturated with concepts deeply rooted in Anglo cultural frameworks, which can hinder effective cross-cultural communication. Minimal English, a radically simplified version of English, aims to overcome these limitations by enhancing translatability into other languages.

Whilst grounded in NSM, Minimal English is not identical to it. Its lexicon comprises a core set of approximately 200 terms, including the 65 semantic primes, along with a selection of *semantic molecules* – definable, low-complexity words that are generally universal or near-universal (e.g. *mother*, *we*, *eye*, *animal*, *day*, *wood*). Once a semantic molecule has been defined using NSM, it can be employed to construct more complex meanings. This makes Minimal English a flexible tool for bridging linguistic and cultural divides. For instance, the molecule *we* is defined by Goddard (1995) as follows:

[2] We =
Im thinking of people
Im thinking of me
I say the same about all these people:
this person .... (Goddard, 1995, p. 107)

Subsequently, *we* can be used in more complex definitions in combination with semantic primes. For instance, Goddard (2020) defines *country* as:

[3]
these people can think like this:
we [m] are people of one kind
we [m] do many things not like people in many other places (Goddard, 2020, p. 11)

The inventory of Minimal English includes not only universal semantic molecules, but also certain more complex terms that are nearly universal or unavoidable in contemporary global discourse – such as *money*, *government*, *mosquitoes*, *plastic*, or *computer*. This lexicon is flexible and expandable, allowing for the incorporation of new terms as they gain relevance across cultures. Moreover, Minimal English admits local adaptations that include context-specific vocabulary. For example, for someone living in the Arctic, it might be important to include terms such as *seal* or *whale* (Goddard, 2018b, p. 277).

It is important to emphasise that the focus on English in this theoretical framework does not reflect any intrinsic superiority of the language, nor does it suggest any advantage beyond its current global usage. As Goddard (2018b, p. 269) notes, Minimal English aspires to be "minimally English." (Wierzbicka, 2013, p. 195) prefers the term *Basic Human* to highlight that this is not simply a reduced version of English, but rather the English instantiation of a universal minimal language. The emphasis on English and other global languages in this strand of NSM research is pragmatic: these languages already function as vehicles of intercultural communication, and Minimal English is intended as a tool for enhancing clarity and mutual understanding within those same contexts (Goddard, 2021, p. 2).

NSM and second language teaching

Although pedagogy remains an emerging field within the NSM framework (Sadow and Fernández, 2022), its potential for didactic

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

application was recognised early on. Harkins (1986) was amongst the first to use NSM to clarify the meanings of functional words, particularly those whose technical descriptions often proved ineffective for both learners and teachers. Through this method, Harkins distilled the meanings of Warlpiri particles into clear and simple formulas that could be readily used in the classroom. Subsequent studies extended this approach to other languages (Dao, 2012; Wong, 2018).

However, the most productive use of NSM in pedagogy has been in the field of intercultural communication. Goddard (2004, 2010) thoroughly explored the advantages of using cultural scripts in educational settings, showing through practical examples how this approach avoids technical jargon and prioritises simplicity in explanatory vocabulary. He also introduced an important distinction between cultural scripts – intended primarily for linguistic analysis – and *pedagogical scripts*, which are adapted specifically for teaching purposes.

Building on this line of research, scholars such as Peeters (2013), Fernández (2016), and Sadow (2014, 2019) have advanced the pedagogical applications of NSM. Fernández (2020) identified specific challenges that students face when working exclusively with NSM, noting that it seems more suited to professional linguists than to general learners. To address these challenges, she proposed the use of minimal languages in didactic contexts. This same approach is supported by Peeters (2021), who explores the use of minimal languages to write cultural scripts. Similarly, Sadow (2021) developed a minimal language known as Standard Translatable English (STE), specifically designed for second language teaching. What sets STE apart is its design as a tool for teachers, with a focus on their perspectives and needs. Sadow (2021) also applied STE in creating the Australian Dictionary of Invisible Culture for Teachers (AusDICT), a specialised dictionary for educational use.

With regard to vocabulary selection, Goddard and Wierzbicka (2007) were the first to propose that the inventory of exponents of semantic primitives could serve as the core vocabulary of a language. Whilst these words are often high frequency, they are not necessarily the most frequent. Their value lies in their instrumental role: NSM shows that they can be used to define new terms. In contrast, many high-frequency words are constrained by their semantic specificity, limiting their utility in explanatory contexts.

Furthermore, Goddard and Wierzbicka suggest that the universal nature of semantic primitives may make them easier for learners to acquire. They propose that introducing all – or nearly all – of these primitives within the first 500 vocabulary items could significantly support vocabulary acquisition, although they also emphasise the need for further empirical research to validate this approach.

In this context, adapting NSM for didactic purposes appears essential. As Sukaton (2019) notes, the semantic primes themselves may not be particularly practical for beginner-level students. He also observes that NSM tends to be more effective in defining abstract concepts than concrete ones; for example, it is easier to convey the meaning of a word such as *camēlopardalis* through an image than through a semantic paraphrase.

An approach based on minimal languages offers a promising solution to these challenges. One such initiative is the Learn These Words First (LTWF) project by Bullock (2014), an online dictionary for English learners structured as a progressive language course. The first two lessons introduce semantic primitives through visual aids, whilst the following 10 lessons incorporate around 300 semantic molecules. These foundational components are then used to define 2,000 core vocabulary terms from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE). Bullock (2021) shows that definitions crafted using the LTWF's minimal vocabulary are more accessible to learners than those relying exclusively on NSM or traditional dictionary definitions.

Table 2. List of Latin Exponents of Semantic Primes

Substantives	EGO, TŪ, ALIQUIS, ALIQUID~RĒS, HOMINES, CORPUS, GENUS, PARS
Determiners	HIC, ĪDEM, ALIUS
Quantifiers	ŪNUS, DUO, MULTĪ, PAUCĪ, ALIQUIS, OMNIA
Descriptors	BONUS, MALUS, MAGNUS, PARVUS
Mental predicates	CŌGITŌ, SCIŌ, VOLŌ, NŌLŌ, SENTIŌ, VIDEŌ, AUDIŌ
Speech	DĪCŌ, VERBA, VĒRITĀS
Actions, events, movement	FACIŌ, ACCIDŌ, MOVEŌ
Location, existence, specification	SUM (ALICUBI), SUM (=EXSISTŌ), SUM (ALIQUIS)
Possession	MEUS (EST)
Life and death	VĪVŌ, MORIOR
Time	QUANDŌ~TEMPUS, NUNC, ANTE, POST, DIŪ, PAULĪSPER, ALIQUAMDIŪ, MŌMENTUM
Space	UBI~LOCUS, HĪC, SUPRĀ, ĪNFRĀ, LONGĒ, PROPE, LATUS, INTUS, TANGŌ
Logical concepts	NŌN, FORTASSE, POSSUM, QUIA, SĪ, VALDĒ, PLŪS, UT

Latin NSM and Minimal Latin

The first step in constructing the Latin version of NSM is to define the inventory of exponents of semantic primes in Latin. The principal method for identifying these exponents is the use of *canonical sentences* – sentences or fragments composed predominantly, or entirely, of semantic primes. These are formulated for each prime according to its expected syntactic pattern and can be tested cross-linguistically (Goddard and Peeters, 2006). A representative example is the list compiled by Goddard and Wierzbicka (2017), which features 150 simple sentences in English. Translating these into the target language allows researchers to determine the language's semantic prime exponents and to map its core lexicogrammatical features.

In the case of Latin, a key limitation of this approach is that, unlike with living languages, we cannot rely on native speaker intuition to assess the validity of canonical sentences or to confirm the proposed exponents. As a result, our primary source has been original Latin texts, complemented by the pedagogical intuition of experienced Latin instructors. Additionally, prior NSM research conducted in other languages – especially Romance languages (e.g. Peeters, 2006) – has offered valuable insights that informed the development of our list.

Table 2 presents the resulting inventory of semantic prime exponents for Latin, which serves as the foundation for the approach proposed in this article.

For our list, we have adhered to conventions commonly used in Latin to facilitate its integration with other teaching methods.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Verbal forms are presented in the present tense, first-person singular, whilst nouns are listed in the masculine singular, except in cases where the primitives carry an intrinsically plural meaning, as is the case with *homines*, *multī*, and *paucī*.

As can be observed in the list, there is a notable case of polysemy with the exponent *sum*, a Latin verb that lexicalises three different semantic primes. This case is analogous to *to be* in English. To resolve the ambiguity, we list the three exponents accompanied by synonyms or by the arguments they can take.

The list also accounts for cases in which a single semantic prime is represented by multiple exponents, which Wierzbicka called *allolexy* (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2021). In our list, following standard NSM practice, we include allolexes only when they correspond to two or more distinct lemmas. Variants of a single lemma, such as *me* and *mihi*, which are allolexes of *ego*, are not listed individually, but are considered part of the usable metalanguage and used according to its grammatical rules.

Notably, amongst the 65 exponents we identified, 6 are not included in the Dickinson College Latin Core Vocabulary list: *vēritās*, *paulīsper*, *aliquamdiū*, *mōmentum*, *īnfrā*, and *intus*. As anticipated, although there is a correlation between an item's universality and its frequency, the overlap is only partial. This serves as further evidence that the two criteria cannot be used interchangeably in the selection of pedagogical vocabulary.

In some cases, universal items appear to be replaced in the frequency list by semantically related but more complex terms. For instance, the Dickinson College list includes *vērus* and *vērē*, whose semantic relationship to the absent *vēritās* is evident. Whilst more frequent terms may prove more useful in certain contexts, when constructing our NSM we must prioritise the more universal exponent, as it ensures the highest degree of cross-linguistic translatability.

We can test the effectiveness of our Latin version of NSM by generating semantic explications or translating existing ones, such as the definition proposed by Goddard in [3], which can be rendered as follows:

[4] Nos =
de hominibus cogito
de me cogito
idem de his omnibus hominibus dico:
hic homo . . .

Constructing a minimal language requires expanding its lexicon beyond semantic primes by incorporating semantic molecules. To ensure consistency, it is useful to rely on pre-established inventories in which the molecular status of these items has already been demonstrated. Following this approach, we propose, as an initial stage in the development of Minimal Latin, the incorporation of 270 semantic molecules on the basis of the list provided by Bullock (2014) in his LTWF project. This yields a Minimal Latin with a total of 335 vocabulary items (see Appendix: Semantic Molecules in Minimal Latin). The total number of lexical items in the minimal language should be considered provisional and flexible, subject to modification depending on specific contexts of use.

Regarding the grammar of our metalanguage, the guiding principle is to preserve, as far as possible, the rules of Classical Latin, provided that doing so does not compromise the cross-linguistic translatability of the resulting utterances. Following the criteria established by Travis (2002, 2003) in her adaptation of NSM to Spanish, the sentences generated by the metalanguage must be both grammatically correct and pragmatically neutral. In other words, they should avoid morphosyntactic constructions which, though acceptable in the language, introduce implicit meanings, modal nuances, or culturally specific presuppositions that cannot be reliably rendered in other languages.

Thus, for instance, in Latin resultative clauses introduced by *ut*, the use of the subjunctive, is grammatically mandatory and poses no problem for translatability; it should therefore be incorporated into the metalanguage. By contrast, we avoid the subjunctive in contexts where it alternates with the indicative – such as in causal clauses introduced by *quod*, *quia*, or *quoniam* – since this alternation often introduces a subjective or inferential nuance that is not universally interpretable.

As can be seen, simplification in many cases consists in reducing the range of grammatical options available to a native speaker. We therefore propose using only the SOV word order, as it is the unmarked order in Latin. Similarly, and following the same principles, our metalanguage preserves the case system, gender and number agreement between nouns and modifiers, the use of high-frequency prepositions, and the verbal system, with particular emphasis on the contrast between the perfect and imperfect tenses.

This proposal should be understood as a work in progress, open to adjustment, expansion, or revision as practical experience with its implementation accumulates. Rather than offering a prescriptive or final set of rules, our aim is to establish a flexible and functional framework upon which local variants, contextual adaptations, or broader developments may be constructed in accordance with specific pedagogical goals.

Pedagogical applications

To conclude, we will summarise the potential applications of ML in the teaching of Latin. We begin with the practical problem that originally inspired this article – the selection of target vocabulary – and then move on to more exploratory uses of ML.

Target vocabulary selection

As noted at the beginning of this article, ML provides an immediate and practical list of target vocabulary for use in curriculum planning and the development of Latin teaching materials. This core list offers educators a foundational tool to help prioritise the most essential and universally applicable terms for learners. By focussing on a compact set of easily translatable and semantically transparent words, ML allows instructors to streamline their courses, ensuring that students are introduced to vocabulary that is both communicatively functional and conceptually meaningful.

ML enables the construction of a provisional lexical hierarchy to support pedagogical decision-making. For illustrative purposes, vocabulary items can be organised into levels: level 1 includes the Latin exponents of semantic primes; level 2, semantic molecules, that is, items definable entirely in terms of level 1 vocabulary; and level 3 and beyond, lexemes not included in ML. This hierarchy reflects not only the logical dependencies amongst terms (e.g. one must understand level 1 words to comprehend level 2 definitions), but also their cultural specificity and universality.

Furthermore, as we have argued, this approach offers a helpful complement to traditional frequency-based lists, which often include terms that are less useful in communicative contexts. By focussing on words essential for expressing basic human experiences and meanings, ML provides a more practical foundation for teaching Latin, especially in beginner courses or

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

materials designed to bridge the gap between reading and active language use.

Defining new terms

By relying on the foundational set of semantic primes and molecules provided by ML, instructors can introduce and explain unfamiliar vocabulary in ways that are both accessible and conceptually transparent to students. Rather than resorting to translation into the students' native language or complex paraphrases, teachers can offer simplified explanations in ML, grounded in the universal meanings encoded in the metalanguage. This method ensures that learners remain immersed in Latin whilst also developing a deeper understanding of the internal logic and structure of the language. The semantic explications we have provided throughout this article offer concrete examples of how such definitions might function in practice.

Explaining cultural keywords

In NSM theory, cultural keywords are words or expressions in a language that are deeply embedded in the culture of its speakers and reflect culturally significant ideas, values, or practices (Wierzbicka, 1997). They are 'culturally-specific words around which whole discourses are organised' (Leivsen and Waters, 2017, p. 7). These terms often lack direct equivalents in other languages, as they are closely tied to the particular worldview and social norms of the culture in which they emerge. The identification and explication of cultural key words using the metalanguage has long been a central concern of NSM research. As Goddard notes, this emphasis represents a return to words, rather than syntactic structures, as the primary focus of linguistic inquiry.

This theoretical framework can be applied to several culturally salient Latin terms, such as *virtūs*, *pietas*, or *dignitas*, whose meanings are rooted in Roman social life and cannot be fully captured by a single English equivalent. As Schrader (2016) argues in the case of *virtus*, and as is normally the case with cultural keywords, translating such terms with a single word – such as *virtue* or *excellence* – fails to reflect their full semantic and cultural scope.

What follows is a semantic explication of *virtūs* in Minimal Latin, intended to illustrate how the NSM framework can be used to clarify such culturally complex concepts using a small set of universal elements:

[6] X virtūtem habet =
X rēs facit
X has rēs facit quia X Y est
homines cogitāre possunt:
'bonum est si Y has rēs facit
X has rēs bene facit
hoc bonum est'

This explication of *virtus* in ML seeks to capture the core features discussed by Schrader (2016). The expression *X habet virtūtem* is unpacked through a series of minimal propositions that reflect not only what *X* does (*X facit rēs*), but also why *X* does them: namely, because *X* is a certain kind of person or thing (*X est Y*). This captures the normative dimension of *virtus* in Roman thought, where excellence was linked to fulfilling one's expected role. The following embedded thought – *'Est bonum si Y facit has rēs'* – introduces the social evaluation of this behaviour: the idea that it is desirable for a person or thing of type *Y* to do such things – and that doing them well is what constitutes *virtus*.

For pedagogical purposes, a more concise version of the explication can be formulated as follows, using semantic molecules such as *debeo* and *valdē*:

[7] X virtūtem habet =
quia X Y est, X rēs facere debet
X has rēs valdē bene facit
hominēs dē hōc cogitant: 'hoc bonum est'

This tool lends itself particularly well to classroom exploration, as it allows students to engage with the cultural logic of a term without relying on the inevitably reductive process of translation.

Creating simpler texts

ML can also be a powerful tool for producing graded readings. A lexical hierarchy such as the one introduced in 4.1 – semantic primes (level 1), semantic molecules (level 2), and all other lexemes (level 3 and beyond) – provides a useful model for estimating the complexity of a text. Such a classification allows educators to gauge how accessible a given text might be on the basis of the relative proportion of ML versus non-ML vocabulary.

This framework can support both the simplification of classical texts and the creation of original materials. In either case, it helps identify terms that may require explicit instruction and highlights opportunities for introducing new vocabulary in a principled way. To illustrate this method, we offer an adapted version of the opening passage of Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*. This version retains the conceptual content of the original whilst reducing its lexical and grammatical complexity:

> Gallia tres partes habet. In una sunt Belgae, in alia sunt Aquitani, et in alia sunt Celtae (aut Galli). Quisque suam linguam, suas leges et suas institutiones habet. Garumna flumen est inter Gallos et Aquitanos; Sequana et Matrona inter Gallos et Belgas sunt. Fortissimi sunt belgae, quia (i) longe sunt a centro provincia; (ii) mercatores non ad eos eunt et non res quae homines debiles faciunt portant; (iii) et sunt prope Germanos (flumen Rhenus inter Germanos et Gallos est), et Germani semper cum Gallis pugnant.

In this version, only four lexical items fall outside the ML core (excluding proper names): *institutiones, flumen, mercatores*, and *debiles*. This illustrates how the vocabulary hierarchy can support the design of beginner-friendly materials whilst maintaining the essential content of the source. This same method can be used not only to simplify texts, but also to predict their difficulty and to identify potentially useful candidates for future expansion of ML, particularly when certain non-core items prove to be frequent and pedagogically valuable.

Conclusions

This article has proposed a Minimal Language approach to Latin teaching, grounded in the principles of the natural semantic metalanguage. By adopting a reduced and semantically transparent core vocabulary, ML offers a coherent framework for communicative pedagogy that avoids the limitations of traditional frequency lists and enables greater lexical control. ML represents a potential

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

step towards a more principled and universal approach to the selection of target vocabulary and its communicative use in Latin instruction.

Further development of ML will require empirical validation in classroom contexts. Future research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of ML-based curricula compared with traditional or frequency-based approaches, particularly in terms of vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and learner motivation. In addition, a more comprehensive set of semantic molecules, adapted to different learning goals and cultural contexts, could expand the expressive power of the language whilst maintaining its core simplicity.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706

Competing interests. The author declares none.

References

Ash, R. (2019) Untextbooking for the CI Latin class: why and how to begin. *Journal of Classics Teaching* 20, 65–70. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631019000114

Bullock, D. (2014) *Learn These Words First*. https://learnthesewordsfirst.com/

Bullock, D. (2021) Using minimal English (minimal Spanish, etc.) for non-circular learners' dictionaries. In Goddard C (ed), *Minimal Languages in Action*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 111–137. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4_5

Carlon, J.M. (2013) The implications of SLA research for Latin pedagogy: modernizing Latin instruction and securing its place in curricula. *Teaching Classical Language* 4, 106–122.

Dang, T.N.Y. and Webb, S. (2020) Vocabulary and good language teachers. In Griffiths, C. and Tajeddin, Z. (eds), *Lessons From Good Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 203–218. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108774390.019

Dao, L. (2012) The Vietnamese classifiers 'CON', 'CÁI' and the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach: a preliminary study. In Maia Ponsonnet M, Dao L and Bowler M (eds), *Proceedings of the 42nd Australian Linguistic Society Conference – 2011*, pp. 58–74.

Fernández, S.S. (2016) Possible contributions of ethnopragmatics to second language learning and teaching. In Vikner, S., Jørgensen, H. and van Gelderen, E. (eds), *Let us Have Articles Betwixt us: Papers in Historical and Comparative Linguistics in Honour of Johanna L. Wood*. Aarhus: Aarhus University, pp. 185–206. https://doi.org/10.7146/aul.119.107

Fernández, S.S. (2019) Using NSM and "minimal" language for intercultural learning. In Sadow, L., Peeters, B. y Mullan, K. (eds), *Studies in Ethnopragmatics, Cultural Semantics, and Intercultural Communication: Minimal English (and beyond)*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 13–32. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9979-5_2

Fernández, S.S. (2020) Una introducción a la teoría de la Metalengua Semántica Natural (NSM) y su aplicación a la pragmática. *Pragmática Sociocultural/Sociocultural Pragmatics* 7, 397–420. https://doi.org/10.1515/soprag-2019-0023

Francese, C. (2021) "Core Vocabulary." Dickinson College Commentaries. July 21, 2021. https://dcc.dickinson.edu/vocab/core-vocabulary.

Gladkova, A.N. and Larina, T.V. (2018) Anna Wierzbicka, words and the world. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 22, 499–520. https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9182-2018-22-3-499-520

Goddard, C. (1995) Who are we? The natural semantics of pronouns. *Language Sciences* 17, 99–121. https://doi.org/10.1016/0388-0001(95)00011-J

Goddard, C. (2004) "Cultural scripts": a new medium for ethnopragmatic instruction. In Achard, M. y Niemeier, S. (eds), *Cognitive Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, and Foreign Language Teaching*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 143–163. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110199857.143

Goddard, C. (2010) Cultural scripts: applications to language teaching and intercultural communication. *Studies in Pragmatics* 3, 105–119.

Goddard, C. (2018a) Minimal English and how it works: the state of the art. In Goddard, C. (ed), *Minimal English for a Global World: Improved Communication Across Cultures and Languages*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62512-6_1

Goddard, C. (2018b) *Ten Lectures on Natural Semantic Metalanguage*. Leiden: Brill.

Goddard, C. (2020) 'Country','land','nation': Key Anglo English words for talking and thinking about people in places Cliff Goddard. *Journal of Postcolonial Linguistics* 2, 8–27.

Goddard, C. (ed.). (2021) *Minimal Languages in Action*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4

Goddard, C. and Peeters, B. (2006) The natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach. In Peeters, B. (ed), *Semantic Primes and Universal Grammar: Empirical Evidence from the Romance Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 13–40. https://doi.org/10.1075/slcs.81.07god

Goddard, C. and Wierzbicka, A. (2007) Semantic primes and cultural scripts in language learning and intercultural communication. In Sharifan, F. and Palmer, G. (eds), *Applied Cultural Linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 105–124. https://doi.org/10.1075/celcr.7.08god

Goddard, C. and Wierzbicka, A. (2014a) *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199321490.001.0001

Goddard, C. and Wierzbicka, A. (2014b) *Words and Meanings. Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages, & Cultures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199321490.001.0001

Goddard, C. and Wierzbicka, A. (2017) 150 Canonical sentences for identifying semantic primes and the core lexicogrammar of any language. https://intranet.secure.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/346032/150_NSM_CanonicalSentences_v5_05_2017.pdf

Goddard, C. and Wierzbicka, A. (2021) "We": conceptual semantics, linguistic typology and social cognition. *Language Sciences*, 83, 101327. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2020.101327

Gruber-Miller, J. and Mulligan, B. (2022) Latin vocabulary knowledge and the readability of Latin texts: a preliminary study. *New England Classical Journal* 49, 80–101. https://doi.org/10.52284/necj.49.1.article.gruber-millerandmulligan

Harkins, J. (1986) Semantics and the language learner: warlpiri particles. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 10(5), 559–574. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(86)90014-7

Hashimoto, B.J. (2021) Is frequency enough?: the frequency model in vocabulary size testing. *Language Assessment Quarterly* 18, 171–187. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2020.1860058

He, X. and Godfroid, A. (2019) Choosing words to teach: a novel method for vocabulary selection and its practical application. *Tesol Quarterly* 53, 348–371. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.483

Hidalgo Gallardo, M. and Rufat Sánchez, A. (2022) Selección del vocabulario meta en español: propuesta metodológica basada en la triangulación de fuentes léxicas. *Onomázein* 58, 121–147. https://doi.org/10.7764/onomazein.58.07

Laufer, B. and Nation, ISP. (2013) Vocabulary. In Gass, S. and Mackey, A. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Routledge, pp. 163–176. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203808184-13

Levisen, C. and Waters, S. (2017) Chapter 1. How words do things with people. In *Cultural Keywords in Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1075/pbns.277

Lloyd, M.E. (2017) Living Latin: exploring a communicative approach to Latin teaching through a sociocultural perspective on language learning. [Doctoral thesis, The Open University]. Open Research Online. https://oro.open.ac.uk/48886/

Lloyd, M.E. and Hunt, S. (eds.). (2021) *Communicative Approaches for Ancient Languages*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Manning, L.A. (2021) Active Latin in the classroom: past, present and future. In Lloyd, M.E. and Hunt, S. (eds), *Communicative Approaches for Ancient Languages*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp. 27–40.

McCrostie, J. (2007) Investigating the accuracy of teachers' word frequency intuitions. *RELC Journal* 38, 53–66. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688206076158

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nation, I.S.P. (2013) *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139858656

Peeters, B. (ed.). (2006) *Semantic Primes and Universal Grammar: Empirical Evidence from the Romance Languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/slcs.81

Peeters, B. (2013) Language and cultural values: towards an applied ethnolinguistics for the foreign language classroom. In Peeters, B., Mullan, K. and Béal, C. (eds), *Cross-culturally Speaking, Speaking Cross-Culturally*. Cambridge Scholars, pp. 231–259.

Peeters, B. (2021) From cultural to pedagogical scripts: speaking out in English, French, and Russian. In Goddard, C. (ed), *Minimal Languages in Action*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 171–193 https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4_7

Ramsby, T. (2020) Changing methods in Latin teaching. *The Classical Outlook* 95, 20–27. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26907357

Sadow, L. (2014) Cultural scripts in practice: an investigation into applying cultural scripts as a pedagogical tool in ESL classrooms. [Master's thesis, University of New England].

Sadow, L. (2019) Minimal English: taking NSM 'out of the lab'. In Sadow, L., Peeters, B. and Mullan, K. (eds), *Studies in Ethnopragmatics, Cultural Semantics, and Intercultural Communication: Minimal English (and beyond)*. Springer Singapore, pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9979-5_1

Sadow, L. (2021) Standard translatable English: a minimal English for teaching and learning invisible culture in language classrooms. In Goddard, C. (ed), *Minimal Languages in Action*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 139–169. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4_6

Sadow, L., and Fernández, S.S. (2022) Pedagogical pragmatics: natural semantic metalanguage applications to language learning and teaching. *Scandinavian Studies in Language* 13, 53–66. https://tidsskrift.dk/sss/article/view/135071

Sánchez-Gutiérrez, C., Robles-García, P. and Serrano, M.P. (2025) L2 Spanish vocabulary teaching in US universities: instructors' beliefs and reported practices. *Language Teachinga Research* 29, 677–699. https://doi.org/10.1177/136216882210744

Schrader, K.W. (2016) Virtus in the roman world: generality, specificity, and fluidity. *The Gettysburg Historical Journal* 15, 6. https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/ghj/vol15/iss1/6

Sinclair, J. (2018) 'Not so much learning to speak Latin, but speaking to learn it'. Action research on the Use of conversational, spoken Latin in the UK secondary school classroom. *Journal of Classics Teaching* 19, 63–64. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631018000454

Sukaton, O. (2019) Semantics in natural language processing and language teaching. *ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 2, 58–65. https://doi.org/10.34050/els-jish.v2i1.6008

Travis, C. (2002) La metalengua semántica natural: the natural semantic metalanguage of Spanish. In Goddard, C. and Wierzbicka, A. (eds), *Meaning and Universal Grammar: Theory and Empirical Findings*, vol. 1. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 173–242. https://doi.org/10.1075/slcs.60.11tra

Travis, C. (2003) The semantics of the Spanish subjunctive: its use in the natural semantic metalanguage. *Cognitive Linguistics* 14, 47–69. https://doi.org/10.1515/cogl.2003.002

Venditti, E. (2021) Using comprehensible input in the Latin classroom to enhance language proficiency. *Journal of Classics Teaching* 22, 22–28. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631021000039

Wierzbicka, A. (1972) *Semantic Primitives*. Frankfurt: Atheneum Verlag.

Wierzbicka, A. (1996) *Semantics: Primes and Universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wierzbicka, A. (1997) *Understanding Cultures Through their Key Words: English, Russian, Polish, German, Japanese*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wierzbicka, A. (2013) *Imprisoned in English: The hazards of English as a default language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wierzbicka, A. (2021) "Semantic Primitives", fifty years later. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 25, 317–342. https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-2021-25-2-317-342

Wingate, H. (2013) The natural method of teaching Latin: its origins, rationale, and prospects. *Classical World* 106, 493–504. https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2013.0054

Wong, J.O. (2018) The semantics of logical connectors: therefore, moreover and in fact. *Russian Journal of Linguistics* 22, 581–604. https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-9182-2018-22-3-581-604

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631025100706 Published online by Cambridge University Press