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Research Article

Teaching Vulgar Latin: still a challenge for the secondary school?

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Abstract

In a world where the teaching of Classical Latin itself is increasingly at risk, introducing Vulgar Latin at secondary school level could be an opportunity to revive pupils' interest in studying this language and increase awareness of their linguistic heritage. The ideal way to stimulate this effect is through classwork on epigraphic documents, which undoubtedly provide students with a unique opportunity to get to know the Latin-speaking civilisation from within. In recent years, this teaching strategy has gained international attention, stimulated by the need to renew Latin teaching methods to make them more effective and meaningful for both teachers and students. In this contribution, I will offer a review of a personal experience including the reusable sample of a Vulgar Latin workshop for high school students, and I will reflect on the role schools and universities should play in specifically promoting the teaching of Latin through epigraphy.

Keywords: Latin teaching; secondary school; Vulgar Latin; epigraphic workshops; school and university

Vulgar Latin workshop report

In May 2019, I visited the Wolfram-von-Eschenbach-Gymnasium in Schwabach (Nuremberg, Germany) to conduct a series of epigraphic workshops, one of which was specifically devoted to Vulgar Latin – the everyday spoken form of Latin that is largely unattested in literary sources and eventually evolved into the various Romance languages.[1] The title of the workshop was *Vulgär . . . Latein?!? Die Alltagssprache der alten Römer* (Vulgar . . . Latin?!? The everyday language of the ancient Romans). Students were aged 16–17 years (11th grade of the German education system) and had advanced proficiency in Latin.

The workshop was designed to achieve the following aims:

1. To introduce students to epigraphic sources, which are usually overlooked at the secondary school level.
2. To introduce students to the concept of Vulgar Latin, which is also typically absent from secondary school curricula.
3. To offer an example of research in the humanities, which tends to be underrepresented in mainstream perceptions of 'scientific research'.

A more general aim was to promote interest in Classical Studies, especially philological studies, by showing that they extend beyond the translation of literary texts to include other types of documents that intersect with philology, history, and archaeology.

The programme of the workshop included (1) a short lecture, followed by (2) group work and (3) an individual activity. In the following paragraphs, I present my experience in the form of a sample lesson plan, so as to enable readers to reproduce the workshop independently, ideally enriching their knowledge of the topics with the aid of reliable handbooks and further readings (Appendix I). Photos of the workshop are available on the webpage I created during the Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral project that funded such outreach activities at the time.[2]

Lecture

In the lecture, students were given a brief introduction to the discipline of Latin epigraphy. Emphasis was placed on defining 'epigraphy' and on highlighting the pervasive presence of inscribed texts in the classical world in public as well as private contexts. To illustrate the different epigraphic categories (legal, votive, funerary, and so on), a simulated 'walk' through a typical Roman city was undertaken with the help of a PowerPoint presentation, beginning with outdoor areas (squares, shrines, and cemeteries) and continuing indoors (the *domus*).

The distinction between contexts provided an opportunity to introduce the concept of linguistic registers (formal and informal) and language variation, which lies at the basis of any discourse on Vulgar Latin. Through analogous examples in German, students learned how researchers study epigraphic 'errors' to gain insights into spoken Latin.[3] For example, a comparison was drawn between the standard German *Nein, Chemie [ke'mi:], Ich bin älter als du* and the colloquial variants *Nö, Chemie [ʃe'mi:], Ich bin älter wie du*. Similar examples can easily be found in other languages to adapt the lesson to different contexts. In addition, images of contemporary 'inscriptions' (such as pieces of graffiti or printed texts) containing misspellings were shown. Once again, German examples were used, but equivalents can readily be found in many languages by searching online. In this way, students were

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able to understand precisely the types of mistakes under discussion when considering misspelt Latin inscriptions and Vulgar Latin.

The students were then shown a short YouTube video on Pompeii and Herculaneum, 2 sites that have yielded numerous wall inscriptions offering insights into daily life and traces of spoken language. To make the topic more accessible in a light-hearted yet illustrative way, they were also shown a scene from *Life of Brian* in which the protagonist writes the slogan 'Romans go home' on a wall, committing grammatical errors that are then corrected by a Roman soldier. All this served to exemplify that it is precisely from the Vulgar Latin reflected in similar errors that the Romance languages eventually developed.

Group work

During the group work, the students were asked to read and 'correct' texts from Latin inscriptions containing various grammatical errors. The inscriptions selected were *CIL* VI 2569, *CIL* VI 34026, *AE* 1968, 67, *AE* 1974, 20, and *OpRom*-1961-181.[4] In this case, the inscriptions were provided as photocopied images, though such activities can be even more effective if carried out in a museum setting. Since the inscriptions used were on stone, attention was drawn to the aesthetic difference between the 2 main types of lettering employed in Roman lapidary texts: square capitals (more regular and orderly) and rustic capitals (more stylised, influenced by texts written on papyrus with a reed pen and ink). To ensure that students were able to 'decipher' the inscriptions, they were also introduced to common features of epigraphic texts, such as abbreviations, punctuation marks (which separate words rather than sentences), and ligatures. For further assistance, a list of abbreviations occurring in the selected texts was provided, arranged alphabetically, and accompanied by translations.

After the allotted time, a representative of each group presented their analysis of the inscription to the class, reading the Latin text without abbreviations, correcting errors, and providing a translation. During the correction phase, the image of the inscription under discussion was projected onto the screen for the entire class: first accompanied only by the text in Vulgar Latin, then by the corresponding Classical Latin version, and finally also by the translation. These elements appeared gradually, following the reasoning of the group's spokesperson.

Individual activity

For the final task, each student produced a *defixio* (curse tablet). These inscriptions were chosen because they often contain vulgar language, reflecting their origin in low literacy and socio-linguistic contexts. Another reason is that they enable students to explore magic and occult practices in the ancient world, a subject that holds significant anthropological interest and generally fascinates the public but is rarely covered in schools.

First, the concept of the *defixio* was introduced through a short, adapted text from Wikipedia. Then, with the aid of a template (easily found via a Google Images search), the students were shown the Old Roman cursive script commonly used for everyday writing, including *defixiones*. They were encouraged to compose their curse tablet using this script on grey paper simulating lead, the typical material of *defixiones*. The text was written in pencil, which was also used to pierce the paper, thereby imitating the insertion of a nail in antiquity; this approach proved highly cost-effective, as grey paper is inexpensive, and students already possessed pencils. For the content, students were provided with original texts in both Vulgar and Classical Latin, along with translations. The selected texts were Urbanová (2018, 181, 277, 278, and 286). Each student was asked to copy one of the original Vulgar Latin texts onto their *defixio*, although some chose to compose their own texts in Latin. An optional extension consisted of introducing vulgarisms and deliberate misspellings.

Assessment

The workshop on Vulgar Latin proved valuable not only for its innovative focus compared with traditional Latin lessons, but also because:

1. It enabled students to compare contemporary life with Roman life in diverse ways, and to relate ancient and modern languages through the concept of linguistic change, contributing to a less static image of Latin.
2. It fostered an unconventional approach to Latin learning, encouraging cooperation among students and strengthening their command of the language beyond the literary context.
3. It introduced the appealing theme of magic in the ancient world in a manner that stimulated creativity and encouraged the active use of Latin.
4. It provided students with basic epigraphic knowledge, fostering independent exploration of related topics and enriching their future museum visits.

Students noted that they appreciated the workshop's dynamism, which provided a welcome break from their usual school routine. They also welcomed the opportunity to engage with original topics and to approach Latin from a fresh perspective. They were particularly intrigued by Roman cursive script, which they perceived as resembling a form of secret code. Overall, the experience was highly positive for both students and teachers. The success of the initiative was also reflected in the local press, which published an article under the headline *Latein lebt am WEG* ('Latin lives at the Wolfram-von-Eschenbach-Gymnasium'), emphasising the exceptional nature of the event.[5]

The workshop described above lasted 90 minutes (approximately half an hour per activity), although a 2-hour slot would have been preferable to permit a calmer and more detailed treatment of the different topics. Indeed, the topics addressed may also be explored in greater detail over several class hours.

Remarks

When preparing epigraphic workshops for secondary school students, it is necessary to take care to avoid students' frustration, especially considering that in most cases the workshop will be their very first contact with ancient inscriptions:

1. The workshop must align with the students' proficiency in Latin (for instance, Vulgar Latin workshops are only suitable for advanced students).
2. It is necessary to select well-preserved inscriptions (possibly not fragmentary at all), written with clear lettering, and of which good pictures are available (this might take some time to research in epigraphic databases; Appendix II).
3. Students must be provided with some preliminary instructions and a list of abbreviations to be able to read and translate the inscriptions properly (as mentioned above).

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To promote collaboration during the group activity, it is advisable to assign specific tasks to each member of a group: For example, one student deciphers abbreviations, and another identifies errors and restores the text to Classical Latin, while a third provides a translation into the language of instruction. The group then reaches a consensus on a solution, which is subsequently presented to the class by a designated spokesperson.

The errors found in inscriptions can be discussed collectively in greater detail, with particularly fruitful results when the students are native speakers of a Romance language or are studying one at school. For instance, forms such as *MESSES* for *menses* (AE 1968, 67) and *MESIBUS* for *mensibus* (*CIL* VI 34026) clearly anticipate Italian *mese* and Spanish *mes* ('month'). From this perspective, it is worth identifying inscriptions of special relevance to the students' linguistic backgrounds (a task that, once again, requires targeted searches in the epigraphic databases; Appendix II).

Background and prospects

As early as 1985, the renowned Italian epigrapher Silvio Panciera called for a reconsideration of traditional Latin teaching. He urged to move beyond the exclusive use of literary sources by also incorporating non-literary texts, thereby drawing students' attention to linguistic variation and offering a more realistic view of Roman culture. The scholar argued that an exclusive focus on high literary production risks providing a partial and even misleading image of Latin and Roman civilisation. He insisted on the necessity of expanding the chronological range of authors studied and of acknowledging 'a different Latin',[6] one that was not restricted to elite literary usage but reflected the language of the majority of speakers. Within this framework, inscriptions naturally assumed a prominent role.

Much water has flowed under the bridge since Panciera wrote those lines. Yet, it seems that only in recent years have Latin teachers begun experimenting with inscriptions to provide more varied and realistic materials than literary texts alone. This shift reflects a broader belief in the need for pedagogical innovation, integrating theory with practice and fostering critical engagement rather than rote transmission of content.[7] The approach seeks to improve learning outcomes and raise students' motivation.[8] In fact, even when not explicitly framed within this perspective, experimental strategies using inscriptions have nonetheless demonstrated similar benefits.

While some studies remain theoretical proposals not yet implemented in practice,[9] others have been published in pedagogical reports as models for teachers.[10] In these works, scholars highlight the effectiveness of inscriptions for teaching Latin, particularly at the intermediate level, where they support grammar revision[11] and student-centred, activity-based learning.[12] Other advantages of using inscriptions in the Latin classroom include increased student engagement, enhanced cultural understanding, improved reading speed, and confidence in sight-reading, as well as opportunities to introduce new perspectives, for example, from history, gender history, or art history (as many inscriptions are accompanied by reliefs, sculptures, and portraits).[13]

Compared with these examples, scientific literature on the teaching of Vulgar Latin by means of inscriptions appears to be non-existent or probably scarce. Yet, it seems almost unnecessary to mention the benefits that students could derive by the inclusion of this topic in their curricula, beside those already described above. For instance, there is often a sharp gap between the study of Classical Latin and the analysis of the first testimonies of the Italian language among Italian students. Similarly, the origins of Italian dialects and their relationship to Latin are poorly understood, as dialects are commonly perceived by non-specialists as corrupt forms of Italian rather than as independent languages derived from spoken Latin.[14] Overall, the inclusion of Vulgar Latin in secondary school curricula can help clarify the linguistic and cultural changes that took place in Europe from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages since later inscriptions also attest the transition from pagan to Christian culture.

Despite the many advantages, significant limitations hinder the integration of inscriptions into Latin teaching at secondary level. The most evident difficulty is that many teachers lack familiarity with Latin epigraphy, which can make the subject appear intimidating, as clearly emerges in parts of the scientific literature mentioned above.[15] This results in students rarely engaging with epigraphic sources, unless their teachers develop a personal interest or external specialists offer workshops.

The situation is further complicated by the declining presence of epigraphy in universities (already in 2001, Panciera referred to this problem in Italian academia) and by the widespread, though unfounded, relegation of this subject to ancient history curricula.

It may also seem paradoxical to advocate for more epigraphy, and more Vulgar Latin, at a time when Classical Studies themselves face threats from changing educational policies and societal priorities.[16] In this respect, it seems useful to go back to Panciera, who argued that renewing the teaching of Latin was the best means of ensuring its survival. For him, the key lay in improving the 'quality' of Latin learning, which entailed 'reading more, much more, to understand more'.[17] Forty years later, his statements appear more than ever tenable.

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Notes

1 The term 'Vulgar Latin' is suitable for encompassing both sociolinguistic and chronological variation, cf. Adamik (2015, 646).

2 https://linguisticdifferences.wordpress.com/2019/05/19/workshops-lateinische-inschriften-vulgar-latein-wolfram-von-eschenbach-gymnasium-schwabach/.

3 The reference book in this field is Väänänen (1966). An updated methodological work is Adamik (2012).

4 Abbreviations according to Epigraphische Datenbank Clauss-Slaby (EDCS), cf. *infra*, Appendix II.

5 Lisa von Stern, *Schwabacher Tagblatt* (26 May 2019).

6 Panciera (1985, 41).

7 This view is particularly common in the Spanish education system, where emphasis is placed on so-called *innovación docente*. A substantial literature exists on teaching innovation in Spain; regarding classical subjects, cf., for example, Mariño Sánchez-Elvira and Hernández Muñoz (2021).

8 Cf., for example, Beasom and Kvapil (2007, 3): 'Both of us were confronted with the danger of losing the interest of students who once had a burning desire to learn about the ancient world'.

9 For example, González Galera (2018); Lorenzo Fernández (2019); Lena (2022); and Pérez Zurita et al. (2023).

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10 For example, Carpenter (2006); Beasom and Kvapil (2007); Leen (2012); Lillo Redonet (2017); and Gómez Jiménez (2020). Also of interest is Ragolič (2014).
11 For example, Carpenter (2006, 1); Hartnett (2012); and Lorenzo Fernández (2019, 391).
12 For example, Carpenter (2006, 2); Lorenzo Fernández (2019, 392–393); and Pérez Zurita et al. (2023, 870).
13 For example, Carpenter (2006, 4); Leen (2012, 7); and Lorenzo Fernández (2019, 388).
14 Cf. D'Achille (2017, 1).
15 For instance, Carpenter (2006, 2) notes that many of his students' questions 'were beyond [his] ability to answer', which required 'several days of preparing a few overheads for each class'. Similarly, Leen (2012, 7) admits that she was 'reluctant at first to undertake the project' due to her lack of experience with inscriptions, which led her to take a 'crash course in Roman epigraphy'.
16 Ragolič (2014, 205–206) refers to the situation in Slovenia. Broadly on this topic, see Canfora and Cardinale (2012), especially sections 2 and 3.
17 Panciera (1985, 42).

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Appendix I: Preparatory readings for teachers

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Appendix II: Epigraphic databases for texts and photos

Epigraphische Datenbank Clauss-Slaby (EDCS): https://db.edcs.eu
Epigraphic Database Roma (EDR): http://www.edr-edr.it
Lupa (Ubi erat Lupa. Bilddatenbank zu antiken Steindenkmälern): lupa.at

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