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## THE PITFALLS OF ETYMOLOGY

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The paper focuses on the drawbacks and advantages of applying etymological analysis to the study of lexical contacts.

*Key words:* language history, etymology, language contacts.

It is generally thought that due to the genetic relation between the Latin and French languages the fair command of one helps the acquisition of the other. Accordingly, if we can speak French fluently, we may rightly expect rapid progress in Latin.

While studying Latin, however, we encounter a certain number of obstacles. These can partially be explained by the fact that traditional typology based on the similarities of morphological features classifies these languages into different language types. We realize that languages do not fall neatly into one type, but it is well-known that Latin is essentially inflecting (or fusional) while French is fairly isolating (or analytic).

The language learner would find consolation in the fact that at least the French vocabulary is ultimately of Latin origin. The phonological changes that occurred during the evolution from Latin to French spanning over two thousand years obscured disappointingly the relationship between French and Latin forms in some cases. Painstaking efforts must be made to commit new words to our memory. Part of the Latin vocabulary was replaced, another part underwent subtle semantic differentiation. We find exact or close correspondence first of all in the field of the so-called **learned words** (Latinisms, *cultismos*) as opposed to **popular words**. To quote Rebecca Posner, [1, p. 150] popular words were “inherited through smooth transmission from Latin” while learned words were “borrowed from Latin during the course of the languages’ history”. The expression itself is a calque on the French *mots savants*. These have been streaming from Latin into French ever since the Middle Ages.

I would like to draw attention to the sometimes harsh dissonance between Latin and French vocabularies. Assuming the role of a naïve language learner I am going to present situations in which, according to all probability, the vain efforts of both native speakers of French or those of language learners mastering French are doomed to fail. It is the expression **naïve language learner** that I am going to use throughout the paper. This covers native speakers of French as well as learners of Latin who are fluent in French both desirous of knowing Latin. I am not going to make an in-depth scientific analysis. I would only like to highlight practical difficulties we are likely to face when we try to interpret Latin sentences. As the language of our conference is English, I am not citing Latin-French dictionaries exclusively, but a variety of dictionaries. All modern languages share words of Latin origin, thus my contribution aspires to be ample in scope.

Quoting proverbs, sayings and maxims is part and parcel of teaching Latin. Some of these, especially at the initial stage, may serve as model sentences illustrating a given point of grammar. At later stages they are quoted mainly as examples of the classical heritage. They give us an immediate feeling of success as many of them are easy to understand:

*Historia est magistra vitae.* ‘History is life’s teacher.’

*Navigare necesse est.* ‘Sailing is necessary.’

*Sic transit gloria mundi.* ‘So passes away the glory of the world.’

In the above examples the grammatical pattern of the translation closely follows that of the original. The sentences do not contain complicated grammatical structures. We are hopelessly confused when we try to translate the historian Tacitus’ famous principle:

*Sine ira et studio* ‘With neither anger nor partiality.’

Any naïve language learner would be willing to translate *studio* as being related to the English word ‘study’ or *étude* in French etc. If we check the meaning in a dictionary, the following wealth of meaning strikes our eyes: The Latin-French Dictionary by Gaffiot [2, p. 1486] enumerates 9 meanings in 3 semantic groups. The otherwise quite handy Latin-Hungarian Dictionary by Györkösy [3, p. 528] lists 18 different meanings in 4 main groups. The Oxford Latin Dictionary [4] gives 7 main meanings without further precision which I present here somewhat simplified:

**studium-ii, n.**

- 1/a. Earnest application..., zeal, ardour.
- 1/b. Inclination... desire, fancy.
2. Enthusiasm, eagerness.
3. Object of interest, aim, concern.
4. Activity, pursue, pastime.
5. Devotion to a person, party, cause, etc., goodwill, support.
6. Partisan spirit or expression of it. Quotation: *sine ira et studio*;
- 7/a. Intellectual activity, esp. of a literary kind, or an instance of it, study.
- 7/b. the study of a particular subject.

According to the Oxford Latin Dictionary, *studium* can be replaced by 22 different “dictionary definitions”. We might venture to say that it is overcharged semantically. Fortunately, the dictionary gives the meaning ‘partisan spirit or expression of it’ and quotes the expression in question but does not give the common translation. The Oxford Latin Dictionary remarks that the etymology of the Latin word is “obscure”. What can be inferred from etymological dictionaries is that the original meaning ‘zeal, ardour, desire’ seems to have undergone a specialization of meaning towards ‘zeal for study’ > ‘study itself’ > ‘the product of study’. The modern English word itself is polysemous with 10 main meanings in the Concise Oxford Dictionary. The most current and important sense on the synchronic level is ‘the process of gaining knowledge’. For the naïve language learner this modern meaning or meanings of a word of Latin origin represent luring pitfalls he is very unlikely to avoid while rendering Latin texts into French. Tacitus, who writes in an exceedingly concise style, further aggravates the already hopeless situation of the naïve language learner.

Tradition narrates that the last words pronounced by the Emperor Augustus on his deathbed were:

*Acta est fabula.* ‘The play is over.’

Nothing could be easier than interpreting this expression. *Fabula* is the source of corresponding words in most European languages. We also know the saying

*Lupus in fabula.* ‘The wolf in the story (who appeared when spoken of).’

The latter saying is used when the subject of the conversation unexpectedly turns up in a company. Here the word *fabula* is used in its general sense: ‘story’. The Concise Oxford Dictionary [5, p. 418] lists the meanings in modern English:

- 1/a. A story, esp. a supernatural one, not based on fact.
- 1/b. A tale, esp. with animals as characters, conveying a moral.
- 2. Myths and legendary tales (*in fable*).
- 3/a. A false statement; a lie.
- 3/b. A thing only supposed to exist.

Writing fables has remained a form of literary expression down to the present day. It must be mentioned that *Acta est fabula* was used to mark the end of the play in the antique theatre. Just like the Italian expression *Finita la commedia* where *commedia* is to be interpreted more like ‘play’ than ‘comedy’. Augustus must have compared his impending death to the end of a theatrical performance. The usual English version is ‘The play is over.’

Another difficulty to iron out is how we are supposed to interpret *acta est*. If we look at the very common phrasal verb in the English rendering, there seems to be no problem. *Ago, agere, egi, actum* is a very common word in Latin where it can mean ‘drive, pursue, occupy oneself with, carry on, perform, act (a play), do’ to mention but a few. Correspondingly, it is used lavishly in 44 senses. Sense 25 is the one that matches: ‘to act (a part) in a play. The modern English word “act” ultimately derives from the past participle form of the same Latin verb.

It is not necessary to choose famous quotations or proverbs to illustrate shifts of meaning of this kind. Any ordinary classical text will serve our purpose.

*Romae consules creabantur.* ‘Consuls were elected in Rome.’

The modern meaning of the word create is ‘bring into existence’. The example illustrates a specialized use in the legal language of the time: ‘to invest a person with a specified office, appoint’.

So far we only examined isolated examples. In some cases the massive change of meaning affected whole semantic fields. The idea of “killing” was expressed among others by the verbs *interficere, occidere, necare*. *Interficere* survived nowhere in Romance. *Occidere* lived somewhat longer. It was current in Old French, but did not survive. *Necare* used to mean ‘to kill’ in Classical Latin but it took on the meaning ‘to drown’ which is its meaning in modern French. Mention must be made here of *tutari*, which meant ‘to take care of’ in Classical Latin. There are only suggestions to explain through what obscure semantic shifts it became *tuer* in modern French. In this language it is the general word meaning ‘to kill’ which is the opposite of the meaning of its etymon. Out of the four Latin verbs just examined two were lost altogether, one underwent marked specialization and one suffered drastic change by the time it survived into French. All these changes and differences altered even the etymologically related words beyond recognition.

It goes without saying that an impressive number of examples could be cited to emphasize similarities in vocabulary between the Latin and the French languages. French words like *nature, imagination, misérable, professeur, facile, intelligent, optimisme*, etc. resemble strikingly their Latin counterparts both in form and in meaning. However, this was not brought about by accident but by conscious borrowing. Throughout the Middle Ages and afterwards, the French language kept on borrowing words from Latin. These learned words did not take part in the phonological and morphological changes that altered the words of popular origin i.e. the vocabulary that represents the direct continuation of the spoken Latin language in French. *Nature* was first attested in the 12th century, while *optimisme* was recorded in the 18th century for the first time. It must always be examined when the borrowing of the given Latin word took place.

“Word of Latin origin” is a very vague term. Within this category, Henriette Walter [6, p. 29] proposes to distinguish four sub-groups which I closely follow:

1. Words borrowed from Classical Latin i.e. the literary texts written at the age of Virgil and Cicero.

2. The vocabulary inherited from Vulgar Latin. As we know, this was the variety of Latin the Romans used in their daily lives. A considerable proportion of French vocabulary can be traced back to this language. Classical and Vulgar Latin coexisted.

3. Throughout the Middle Ages we can witness a great number of so-called *semi-cultismos*. This means that words of Latin origin were taken over at a special phase of the phonological development. These words show some regular sound changes but not all the expected ones. In some cases a Latin loanword may have been influenced by the existing popular equivalent of the same word which resulted in unexpected forms. Thus Latin *ecclesia* (itself borrowed from Greek) leads to French *église* ‘church’, *\*ab oculis* ends up in *aveugle* ‘blind’ while *aequalis* gives *égal* ‘equal’ in French.

4. Learned words have always represented an inexhaustible source for the renewal of French vocabulary. The period in which most Latin words entered into French seems to have been the 16th century. The rapid development of sciences in the 18th century also favoured the influx of Latin words into French. In this language the learned element assumes immense proportions.

Latinisms are part of the international scientific and cultural vocabulary. This shared vocabulary constitutes a connecting link even between languages that are not closely related genetically. From this perspective, the speakers of French enjoy an obvious advantage. However, in the course of their Latin studies, they are presented the first of the four categories exclusively. As we have seen, the Classical Latin language differs most strikingly from present-day French as part of the vocabulary of Classical Latin was replaced by other elements. Only linguists and historians seem to be interested in vulgar texts, each for their respective purposes. In this way the benefit of the fairly close resemblance between Vulgar Latin and a Romance language such as French cannot be put to the language learner’s advantage.

A more simplified approach distinguishes within Romance vocabulary popular words and learned words. Popular words are the outcome of normal transmission from Vulgar Latin during which regular phonological changes took place. This is how Latin *aqua* ‘water’ became *eau* and *oculus* ‘eye’ became *oeil* in French. The regular sound changes were so radical that the original Latin etymon can be traced back from present-day French only with some knowledge of historical phonology. Can we expect this from a language learner? Another special feature of French vocabulary is that a word of popular origin like *eau* cannot participate in any morphological derivation. *Aquatique* and *aquarium* are direct borrowings from Latin. They were formed in Latin from Latin elements and French borrowed the ready-made “foreign” forms at different periods. The morphologically complex French expression *eau-de-vie* translates *aqua vitae* by its component parts and puts them together again in French, so this is not a virtuoso performance of French nominal morphology at all.

Does the knowledge of French help the acquisition of Latin? We have seen that Latin vocabulary made its way into French through four clearly distinguishable routes. Of these four routes only one is passable today: those of learned words. The words of ultimate Latin origin that came to French by the three other channels show tremendous phonetic, morphological and semantic differences. These disagreements cannot be handled and overcome by naïve French-speaking language learners. If a French-speaking learner of Classical Latin sets out to make rapid progress – to use Julius Ceasar’s words – “to come, to see, to conquer”, he will be disorientated not only by the completely different phonological and morphological structures of these two languages but even within the scope of individual word developments he is doomed to be deceived by legions of **false**

**friends** and similar treacherous linguistic phenomena. A naïve language learner can hardly be expected to ferry smoothly between Scylla and Charybdis.

*Acta est fabula.*

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## ПІВДОДНІ РИФИ ЕТИМОЛОГІЧНОГО АНАЛІЗУ

**Тібор Орші**

У статті зосереджено увагу та труднощах та перевагах застосування етимологічного аналізу під час вивчення лексичного контактування мов.

*Ключові слова:* історія мови, етимологія, міжмовна взаємодія