

Most students of Latin learn classical Latin, that is to say surviving works written by writers of the classical era. The classical period used to be defined by Latin scholars as a very narrow one, only a few decades in fact, embracing just Caesar, Cicero, Sallust and at a pinch the historian Livy, all of whom wrote in the first century BC (Livy died in AD 17). That definition worked well for Latin school-teachers who sought very particular models for pupils to imitate in their own efforts to write Latin; but today a somewhat broader definition starts with Cicero and Caesar and continues well into the century of this film with poets like Martial and Juvenal and the works of Seneca, Pliny and Tacitus.

It is still a narrow period in the life of Latin, which survived as the first or second language of Europe for more than 1500 years. And this written language, classical literature, is not a very representative guide to the spoken language, not even of its own time. Spontaneous speech habits will always differ from the more considered constructions of a written language, and Latin was very much an example of this. Only a small part of the population had anything to do with this written language, a wealthy minority who were educated in Latin and especially in classical Greek. Literary Latin was elaborately constructed, and wrought with a grammar and syntax of some precision. The spoken version was looser, inflexions less observed, the 'rules' frequently disobeyed. This colloquial language is the Latin (called 'Vulgar Latin') that later evolved post-empire into Spanish and Portuguese, French and Italian.

One thing that will strike pupils of Latin is how in speech Romans almost certainly voiced their word-endings less than we students do all these years later. Those who know their rules of poetry will already be familiar with the diminishing sound of a final '-m'. This was not the solid lip-closing 'm' we might say to assure our teachers we know the difference between **servus** and **servum**. The final 'm' seems to have had such a diminishing presence that by the time words like **septem** (*seven*) turn up in Spanish, French or Italian the sound has gone altogether (*siete, sept, sette*). Many letters suffer such losses, variably so in all probability in different areas of the empire. To some extent a similar thing was happening with a final '-t' and '-s'. Even the final long *ā* of the ablative singular of **mensa** was more than likely pronounced by a good many people at the time no differently from the nominative ending (short '-a').

As Olivia Cockburn points out in her notes, vowel quantity in speech was by no means as precise or clear as we students of poetry seek to observe. Our interest in Latin verse raises vowel quantity to a level of importance rather less respected by the ancient speakers themselves.

When I started to work with Olivia on the script I couldn't help noticing how sloppy one or two of her expressions appeared to be ... and then I started to get it, as it were: this was a colloquial language at work. If you are interested in this subject, her notes are an excellent read. She lists some further reading too. But for all the many sources of clues Olivia lists, our recreation is still to an extent hypothetical. It is no easy task to establish a set of ground rules for each century, although there are certain letter sounds that quite evidently changed in time. The task of recreating a unique model of Latin speech is in any case beyond us all. Latin was spoken by people of many different nationalities, social backgrounds, cultures, from homelands thousands of miles apart, and over several centuries. Consider the current world language, and all its different speakers. Even with the evidence all around us it would not be easy to prescribe a universally acceptable model of English speech.