AD 61

Notes on the Latin spoken in Rome in the late 1st century A.D.

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The Latin we study at school – Virgil, Horace, Caesar – is literature that has been passed down to us from antiquity. But this Latin, what we call classical Latin, is not very representative of the 'real' spoken Latin of its time. Even these classical writers, when chatting with friends, would not have adhered to all the strict rules of grammar that we struggle with in the classroom. As with other languages, spontaneous speech habits differ from more considered constructions of the written word.

This film aims to reflect the 'real' spoken Latin – often referred to as 'Vulgar' Latin – of the late first century A.D. The characters are drawn from different backgrounds and so give us an idea of the variation that may have existed in the Vulgar Latin of their time. The senator, for instance, speaks a form of Latin that is perhaps closest to the literary form.

Sources of spoken 'Vulgar' Latin

Our task is no easy one. Classical Latin is easy to study, for it is still with us in Latin literature. Spoken Latin of course is not. So how do we know how to speak it?

Most of the literature that has been passed down to us through the generations is written in classical Latin. It is hard to find in this literature clues as to how the Latin of the time was spoken on a day-to-day basis. However, there are a few authors who make a conscious attempt to reproduce the spoken language of the time. The comedies of Plautus and Terence are a great source of colloquial forms and idioms, but they were written centuries before the year in which our film is set. Examples of spoken language from around the time of the film are limited but there are a few of interest: Cicero for example, uses informal language in his letters as does Horace in some passages of his *Satires*. However, these sources only reflect the daily language of the educated so must be treated with caution. The one work of extreme importance for the study of Vulgar Latin of the late first century A.D. is the *Satyricon* of Petronius. In this novel, the author reproduces the Latin of his slaves and freedmen giving us a tantalizing insight into the spoken language of the masses.

Inscriptions and graffiti are another means of procuring information on the pronunciation of spoken Latin at any given time. Most inscriptions found on gravestones and statues are made up of formulaic language, but those carried out by professionals were often written out and inscribed by workers with a limited education. A great advantage of inscriptions is that it is often possible to date and locate them with precision. The graffiti of Pompeii is another invaluable source of spoken language, since it has been frozen in time for us and dates from a similar period of Latin to our film. The spelling 'mistakes' and grammatical 'errors' found in these sources are a fascinating insight into the Latin spoken there at the time of Vesuvius´ eruption.

There are a few other sources of Vulgar Latin that should be mentioned, though they date back to after our film and, as such, are not primary sources of information for us; Latin glossaries are also considered to be a great source of spoken Latin though most date back to a few centuries after the period we are focusing on. However, it is interesting to bear in mind the information contained in them since, if anything, they can give us an idea of the tendencies that may already be producing themselves in the late first century. Latin Glossaries are generally monolingual and were used alongside literature as a guide to 'translate' difficult words and phrases to speakers. The Reichenau Glosses, for example, which were written in the margins of the Vulgate Bible, show us that some of the words understood in the 4th Century were no longer understood by speakers in the 8th Century. The Latin language was in a constant state of flux, influenced by the many languages of the Roman Empire.

Latin grammar treatises are also invaluable for the study of Vulgar Latin but often date back to a period later than the one we are interested in here. Throughout the Latin language there are texts to be found that focus on correcting the spoken language and highlighting the tendencies of uneducated speech. Particularly fascinating is the *Appendix Probi,* which was probably written in the Christian era, which lists words that are pronounced incorrectly, and prescribes their correct pronunciation.

Other important sources come in the form of technical treatises and Christian literature of the Late Empire. These sources are also dated after the period we are focusing on, but as before, it is important to bear them in mind. Technical treatises on medicine, veterinary science, agriculture and cookery etc. were often written in a lower register of Latin so that they were accessible to the craftsmen and workmen who would be referring to them. As such, they are a crucial source of Vulgar Latin from the fourth century onwards. The first Christian texts are also extremely important since the first they are full of elements of the spoken language of their time. These texts were written by authors from the first Christian communities that were not necessarily highly-educated nor of Roman origin. Their aim was to spread Christianity and make the word of God accessible to the masses, and the language they used reflected this.

If all of the above sources should fail, we can always revert to the Romance languages for clues as to how Vulgar Latin may have been spoken, since it is their common ancestor. By looking at the way in which the same word has evolved and developed within each language, we can reconstruct the form that was used at a given time in Vulgar Latin.

A few features of the Spoken Latin of the late first century A.D.

The evidence taken from the above sources has allowed us to reconstruct certain general features of the spoken Latin of the period we are wishing to emulate:

I.   Syncope – the loss of sounds within the word (especially unstressed vowels). Vulgar Latin has a tendency of dropping unaccented vowels in words of more than two syllables. In words of more than four syllables this happened very early on in the language. This is a linguistic phenomenon that is also true of Oscan and Umbran, the neighbouring

languages of Latin which would have been spoken by many Romans, and undoubtedly influenced the way in which they spoke Latin. Syncope was particularly common when the unaccented vowel was in contact with the consonant *l*, for example, in the shortening of *oculus* 'eye' to *oclus* and *tabula* 'table' to *tabla*. Although it was not that common in the late first century we know it was happening from the graffiti we find in Pompeii (*fridam* is found instead of *frigidam* 'cold'). We also know that the Emperor Augustus preferred the word *caldus* to *calidus* 'warm, hot'. If you listen carefully to the speakers in our film you will hear the shortening of forms such as *populus* 'people' to *poplus* (cf. French: *peuple*).

II.   Apocope – the loss of one of more sounds from the end of a word.
The loss of sounds from the end of a word is a common phenomenon in the Vulgar Latin of our film. In Pompeii we find, for example, *quomodo* 'how' reduced to *quomo,* which then went on to be *como* in Spanish and Portuguese and *cum* in Romanian. The loss of the final *t* in verbs of the third person is also documented in Pompeii where we find *vivi* for *vivit* 'he lived'.

III.   Loss of nasals (m/n).
The loss of final *m* of a word is a process which started early on in Latin language. Students of poetry will already be familiar with the tendency to lose the sound of an 'm' at the end of a word from the elision of the final 'm' before a word starting with a vowel. It is highly probable that the *n* of *mensa* 'table' and similar words was not pronounced at all at the time of our film. In the first century B.C. we find the words *cosol* for *consul* and *cesor* for *censor*. We are even told that Cicero didn´t pronounce the *n* in such words (Vel. gramm. VII 79.1).

IV.   Simplification of groups of consonants
The simplification of groups of consonants can also be seen with the groups *pt, ps* and *gn.* We can be sure that our gladiator`s Italian pronunciation of the word *pugna* is not far off. *scritus* for *scriptus* 'written' is found in the early first century, and *isse* and *issa* are found instead of *ipse* and *ipsa* in Pompeii.

V.   Loss of 'h' sound
The *h* is almost certain to be silent in ordinary speech in the 1st century AD. An *h* found in the middle of the word would have not been pronounced since the earliest times and at the beginning of a word would have been lost during the Republic. We can be sure, then, that it would not have been pronounced in informal speech of the first century in words such as *mihi* and *nihil.* Inscriptions show us that the *h* was omitted in words in which is should be found (*ic* for *hic* 'here'), and added in others mistakenly (*holim* for *olim* 'once'). Educated people, however, made a conscious effort to maintain the aspirations in words, and the initial *h* was still pronounced in the fourth century (Aug. *Conf.* 1.18.29). In poetry, which consciously reworked Greek models, the *h* may have been reinforced. We have adopted that principle here: you will hear the initial *h* in lines of verse but not elsewhere (listen to how the Gladiator pronounces *hodie* 'today'. The initial *h* may well have been sounded by people thinking they were creating an impression of social standing, not entirely unlike Londoners who did something similar with their 'cockney' aspirations.

VI.   Vowel length

There is no doubt that at some point in its history and development into the Romance languages, Latin vowels lost their ability to be distinguished as 'long' or 'short'. The question is, when did this happen? Was it already in play in the late first century? The evidence that suggests the loss of vowel quantity becomes more and more frequent from the third century onwards, but we cannot rule out the possibility that it was already happening, or beginning to happen much earlier.

The fact that Latin vowels could be distinguished by their length was a distinctive phonological feature of the language in its early stages. The fact that a long ā could be differentiated from a short ă also meant all the difference in some words; see for example, *ānus* 'ring' and *ănus* 'old woman.' Since early times the Romans tried to mark the difference between long and short vowels by writing two consequent letters AA for a long vowel, and by putting an "apex" (`) or an acute accent (') to mark short vowels.

In Classical Latin the length system was an essential feature of verse, even popular verse, and mistakes in vowel length were regarded as barbarous. In spoken language, however, the distinction between long and short vowels became gradually less marked. Indo-European languages (the group of languages to which Latin belongs) have a general tendency to eliminate vowel quantity. By the end of the Republic, it is more than likely that the ability to distinguish the length of a vowel depended on where the accent fell in a word. It is a universal law of language that the syllable of a word which carries the accent tends to be be longer than an unaccented one – or to become so in time. Accent eventually swallowed up vowel length in Latin´s derived languages: qualitative differences are more easily articulated and understood by speakers than quantitive ones.

VII.   The pronunciation of the vowels

The loss of vowel quantity in Vulgar Latin brought about reorganization in the tone of the vowels. Short *ă* and long *ā* merged as a simple *a* and were pronounced in the same way; the vowels *ĭ* and *ŭ* became more open and are often found confused with the vowels *ē* and *ō*. In Pompeii we find *filix* for *felix* 'happy, lucky', *veces* for *vices* 'change', *flus* for *flōs* 'flower' and *consol* for *consul.*.

VIII.   Diphthongs

The reduction of Latin diphthongs (*ae, au, oe, ei, ou*) is a process that began before the Christian era. By the first century A.D., the dipthong *ae* is already found as a simple *e*. The graffiti of Pompeii gives us *querite* for *quaerite* (Väänäänen 1966: 23). This phenomenon had already happened in Umbrian by the second century B.C., and this would have no doubt influenced the Latin language. Latin words with this diphthong therefore tend to develop in the same way as those with a simple short *e* (*caelum* 'sky' > Sp. *cielo*) or a long *e* (*saeta* 'silk' > Sp. *seda*).

The diphthong *au* appears as a simple *o* early on in borrowed words from Oscan and Umbrian. As a result, the reduction of *au* to *o* was considered rustic and old-fashioned. At the beginning of a word, this diphthong is found as a simple *a;* in Pompeii we find *Agusto* for *Augusto.*

IX.   Confusion between *b* and *v.*

The consonantal *u* is an age-old chestnut. Transliteration suggests a *w* sound, for the Latin *v* was represented by *ou* in Greek (e.g. Oualerios for Valerius). However, in the century of our film, the *v* is confused with *b* in inscriptions. From the first century A.D. we find confusion between *b* and *v* in literary documents too (for example, *iuvente* for *iubente*) (though this only seems to happen when the consonant is between two vowels: at the beginning of a word the difference between the two is maintained.) And certainly in later centuries the *v* sound is everywhere. For our purposes we have stuck to *w* in the poetry (conservative, and Greek-inspired) and tended towards a *v* sound in ordinary speech.

X.   The loss of the neuter

The division of nouns and adjectives into three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter) begin to simplify itself from beginnings of the language. Indo-European (the ancestor of Latin) distinguished between animate (masculine and feminine) and inanimate (neuter), and the functions of the three genders were clear. As Latin developed, the role of the neuter became less apparent and it began to be absorbed by the masculine. The changes in the vowel system also meant that the gender of certain words became more difficult to decipher (as the *u* opened into *o* and the final *s* and *m* of words softened and was perhaps dropped, many words simply seemed to end in an *o,* whatever their gender!) It is true that the neuter is still seen in some of the Romance languages today, but it is restricted to certain uses (cf. Italian *braccio* 'arm' and *braccia* 'arms'). Although the reduction in use of the neuter was gradual, the confusion between the gender of nouns and adjectives is already apparent in the graffiti of Pompeii where we find *hoc locum* for *hunc locum.*

XI.   The loss of the case system

The cases and declinations of Latin nouns are one of the banes of any Latin student´s life at school. It seems that the Romans felt the same. None of the Romance Languages preserve the Latin case system as it is found in Classical Latin. The Latin declension had been in a continuous process of simplification from the earliest times, when there were other cases such as the Instrumental and Locative to contend with (these cases were absorbed into the genitive and ablative.) There are many factors that contributed to the decline of the Latin case system. It has been suggested that the main reason is because speakers of a language tend to lean towards simplicity, though if we look at languages that have fully functioning cases, this is not a definite (look at German, for example). The main reason behind the loss of the cases system is the fact that the cases were no longer easy to distinguish from each other. The changes in the pronunciation and tone of vowels meant that in the first declension for example, the nominative and the ablative were no longer easily distinguished. Vulgar Latin began to rely more and more on the use of prepositions.

XII.   The vocabulary used

The vocabulary we have chosen for the speech of our characters is largely taken from Plautus, Terence and Petronius, as well as other authors of the era in question (including Classical Authors). Where there has been a choice between one word and another we have tended to opt for the form found in more 'Vulgar' authors rather than the forms chosen in Classical authors. The characters that are most probably from a more lowly background (especially the Gladiator and the Slave) also have Greek vocabulary in their speech, since bilingualism was rife amongst the masses. There were many Greek slaves and merchants in

Rome throughout the Empire and before, and Greek had an important impact on the Latin language as a whole.

XIII.   Differences in the speech of each character

The characteristics of any individual´s speech are affected, of course, by a number of factors; the background of the speaker, their level of education, whether or not they speak any other languages, the person to whom they are speaking, the situation they find themselves in. Although all of our characters at some point speak a more Vulgar Latin, they all use language that is different in its own way:

Further reading:

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