

Continuing classical Latin



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Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 A History of Latin	6
1.1 Language change	6
1.2 Notions of language change in Ancient Rome	6
1.3 The fate of the Latin language	7
1.4 Early Latin: Plautus	8
1.5 Early Latin: Latin before Plautus	8
1.6 The Indo-European language family	9
Conclusion	9
Keep on learning	10
Further reading	11
Acknowledgements	11

Introduction

This course features a discussion that shows how languages develop – a spoken language is constantly undergoing change while written language is more conservative. In its second part it also looks at the evolution of Latin into the Romance languages: Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian and others.

The discussions throughout this course are between Professor Geoffrey Horrocks and Dr James Clackson, both of the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge University.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 3 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an awareness of the general differences between spoken and written languages
- demonstrate an awareness of how spoken Latin developed into the later Romance languages
- demonstrate an awareness of some early Latin forms of words, as found in Plautus and archaic Latin
- demonstrate an awareness of Latin's place within the wider Indo-European tradition of languages.

1 A History of Latin

The spoken language is the 'living' form of a language and all spoken languages are constantly undergoing change. Written languages tend to be more conservative, and associated by speakers with the correct or standard language.

1.1 Language change

Some linguistic changes, particularly in the use of individual slang words, are short-lived in the spoken language, but others take hold and become general among the whole population. For example, in English the letter r is still written after vowels, but no longer pronounced by most speakers in central and southern England in words such as for, farm, car, cart, potter, and so on. This change is gradually spreading through the dialects of English, as younger speakers in the north adopt pronunciations without r.

Audio activity 1

Now listen to the following audio conversations between James Clackson and Geoffrey Horrocks.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[History of language](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Changes in language](#)

1.2 Notions of language change in Ancient Rome

The Roman elite had ideas very similar to ours about the written form of their language. They also thought that it was the correct form of language, and they would poke fun at people who spoke in a way that they considered incorrect.

Example: Catullus (c. 84-c. 54 BCE), Roman Poet, Poem 84

Chommoda dicebat, si quando commode uellet

Dicere, et insidias Arrius hinsidias,

Et tum mirifice sperabat se esse locutum

Cum quantum poterat dixerat hinsidias.

'Arrius used to say hadvantages, when he meant to say advantages, and hambushes when he wanted to say ambushes. He would think that he had spoken splendidly, when he had said hambushes as loud as he could.'

Arrius spoke a variety of Latin which had lost *h-* at the beginning of words, and he overcompensates by adding *h-* to words which never had it. Overcompensation of this type in linguistics is called hypercorrection.

Audio activity 2

Now listen to the following audio conversation between James Clackson and Geoffrey Horrocks.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Changes in form of speech](#)

1.3 The fate of the Latin language

Spoken Latin, not the written Latin of literary works, was the variety which evolved into the Romance languages: Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian and other languages. Whether two different linguistic varieties are deemed to be the same language or not is not wholly a linguistic issue, but relies upon political and cultural factors as well.

Latin vocabulary survives in these languages, although sometimes the sounds have changed quite radically. Latin *calidus* 'hot' becomes Italian *caldo* but French *chaud*. Latin *frigidus* 'cold' becomes Italian *freddo* and French *froid*. Latin *habere* 'to have' becomes Italian *avere* and French *avoir*. Latin *pater* 'father' becomes Italian *padre* and French *père*. In spoken Latin the words used were often slightly different from the written forms given. For example, the word for 'father' in Italian and French actually derives from the Latin accusative *patrem*, which became the form used in late spoken Latin. The Romance languages generally show a preference for analytic structures where Latin has synthetic structures. This means that where Latin will lump together a number of different elements into a single word, such as *amabo* 'I will love' which combines the notion of first person, future and 'love', there is a tendency in Romance languages to separate these out, as in French *je vais aimer* 'I will love', which uses three words.

The grammar also changed: the Romance languages have lost most of the Latin case endings.

The beginnings of the changes in spoken Latin can be seen in some ancient texts:

Petronius Arbiter (d. 66 CE), Roman Novelist. His *Satyricon* features representations of the speech of freed slaves.

Example: Chapter 46 *dixi quia mustela comedit* 'I said that the weasel ate it'.

Note use of *quia* for indirect statement (cf. French *j'ai dit que*), and word for 'eat' *comedere* not *edere* (cf. Spanish *comer* 'to eat').

Suetonius (c. 70-130 CE), Roman Historian and biographer. His *Life of Augustus* 76.2 cites Augustus' use of *manducare* 'to eat' (cf. French *manger* 'to eat').

Audio activity 3

Now listen to the following audio conversations between James Clackson and Geoffrey Horrocks.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Disappearance of Latin](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Changes to Latin](#)

1.4 Early Latin: Plautus

Plautus (fl. c. 205-184 BCE), Roman Playwright. Latin text of his plays has been modernised in spelling.

Example: nominative plural *viri*, in Plautus's day written *virei*.

Some features of Syntax are different:

Example: Prohibitions. In Plautus it is possible to say 'Do not do!' in the following ways: *ne* + perfect subjunctive: *ne feceris* (Epidicus 148); *ne* + present subjunctive: *ne facias* (Curculio 539); *ne* + a special verb form which dies out in later Latin: *ne faxis* (Mostellaria 1115).

In the works of Cicero (106-43 BCE), the most frequent common way to say 'do not do' is *noli facere*.

Audio activity 4

Now listen to the following audio conversation between James Clackson and Geoffrey Horrocks.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Plautus' Latin](#)

1.5 Early Latin: Latin before Plautus

Fragments of archaic Latin law are preserved as the Law of the XII Tables. Early inscriptions survive from the 6th Century BCE. Writing was introduced into Southern Italy by Greek colonists in the early 8th Century BCE, Polybius (c. 200-c. 118 BCE), Greek Historian of Rome. *Histories* 3.22.3 'the Ancient Roman language differs so much from the modern that it can only be partially made out, and that after much application, by the most intelligent men.' (Translation by W.R. Paton)

Some Early Latin forms:

aurum 'gold' from earlier *ausom*

iurat 'he swears' from earlier *iouesat* (CIL I² 4).¹⁰

Genitive singular of second declension was – *osio*; CIL I² 2832a (= *Lapis Satricanus*)
popliosio ualesiosio = *Publii Valerii*.

Audio activity 5

Now listen to the following audio conversation between James Clackson and Geoffrey Horrocks.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Before Plautus' Latin](#)

1.6 The Indo-European language family

Latin belongs to a big family of languages, called the Indo-European family. Other members of the family include Greek, Sanskrit, Russian and English. Some words can be reconstructed from the parent language 'Proto-Indo-european', for example: **seks* 'six', **septm* 'seven'. These words are written with an asterisk before them, to show that they are reconstructed words, and not actually attested in any written form.

Audio activity 6

Now listen to the final audio conversation between James Clackson and Geoffrey Horrocks.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Ancient Latin](#)

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying the arts and humanities. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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Further reading

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Acknowledgements

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