

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51395-1 - Colloquial and Literary Latin
Edited by Eleanor Dickey and Anna Chahoud
Excerpt
[More information](#)

PART I

Theoretical framework

CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Eleanor Dickey*

What is colloquial Latin? What is literary Latin? ‘Literary’ is a famously contested term, and ‘colloquial’ is no less fraught with difficulties. Not only is its precise meaning unclear, but it is laden with value judgements: some consider it a pejorative term and others a positive one. The word has become involved in the social struggle over the relative value of different varieties of language and as such has been given a wide range of different implications and connotations over the centuries, some complementary and others contradictory. In order to use this word in scholarly discourse, one first needs not only to determine what it means, but also to explain how one’s usage resembles and differs from that of others who have used the same term.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Fowler and Fowler 1995) defines ‘colloquial’ as ‘belonging to or proper to ordinary or familiar conversation, not formal or literary’ while defining ‘literary’ as ‘of, constituting, or occupied with books or literature or written composition, esp. of the kind valued for quality of form . . . (of a word or idiom) used chiefly in literary works or other formal writing’. Such definitions tell us a number of different things about the way these terms are normally used:

- ‘colloquial’ and ‘literary’ refer to registers¹, with literary being a higher, more formal, register than colloquial;
- they are defined in part by opposition to each other, as is often the case with registers;
- they are genre-dependent, each being proper to particular genres of communication;²
- the distinction between them is connected to the distinction between spoken and written language.

¹ For the concept of register see p. 10.

² In the linguistic, rather than the literary, sense of ‘genre’: a genre of communication is a type of circumstance in which one might use language, such as a conversation, a formal lecture, a poem, a newspaper article, etc.

The difficulties with such definitions are numerous. First, they give the impression that all linguistic features can be divided between these two categories (i.e., whatever is not literary is colloquial), and yet they cannot.³ Many words and usages are register-neutral, usable in any variety of language: it would be as silly to ask whether English ‘and’ is an element of literary or of colloquial language as it would be to ask to which register the English present tense belongs. Moreover literary and colloquial are not the only registers that exist; some words and usages, such as technical terminology, belong to registers distinct from them both.

The connection between register and genre is likewise not as straightforward as it seems. Ordinary familiar conversation is a genre that can span a wide variety of registers, in part because there is a connection between register and social status: the ordinary conversational language of people of high status tends to have more high-register characteristics than the ordinary conversational language of people of low status (indeed the language is considered high-register by speakers precisely because it is characteristic of high-status speakers). The differences between these two extremes of conversational language can be pronounced, to the extent that they may share little that is not common to other registers of the language, and therefore it can be difficult to say anything meaningful about conversational language as a whole.

Recognition of this problem has led to restricted uses of ‘colloquial’, referring either to the conversational language of low-status people or that of high-status people. When used in the first sense, ‘colloquial’ can be equivalent to ‘ungrammatical’ or otherwise ‘wrong’.⁴ When used in the second sense, however, it can become a kind of Holy Grail of language usage, both for native speakers⁵ and for modern students of languages like Latin or ancient Greek (since considerable social prestige has in some recent periods been attached to a full command of those languages).

Restrictions of this type are useful, but they also cause some problems. Often authors use the term in one or the other restricted sense without indicating which one is meant, and this can cause considerable ambiguity. In addition, from any restriction of the term to a particular sort of conversational usage it follows that a substantial segment of the population either

³ Whether all *language* can be divided up among registers is a different question; probably it can. A passage of reasonable length will normally contain enough differentiable linguistic features to make it possible to classify it as literary, colloquial, or something else, and therefore it is not easy to see how it could be wholly register-neutral.

⁴ See Samuel Johnson, quoted in Simpson and Weiner 1989: s.v. ‘colloquial’ 2: ‘... to refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms’.

⁵ See Chapter 2.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51395-1 - Colloquial and Literary Latin

Edited by Eleanor Dickey and Anna Chahoud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

lacks a colloquial register entirely or commands it only with difficulty as a partially learned register.⁶ This result clashes with the normal meaning of the term ‘colloquial’ enough to cause a sense of internal contradiction for readers.

On the other side of the register/genre question, most literary genres are capable of accommodating a range of registers. Indeed the interplay of registers is often part of what gives literature its richness. One cannot fully appreciate the language of any literary genre unless one is able to consider the possibility that it may involve register variation, and in many cases one must recognise that literary works include some language belonging to low registers.

The equation of register/genre distinctions with those between speech and writing causes additional difficulties. Literary language (whether this means high-register language or the language of literary genres) is not simply the same as written language, nor is colloquial language (whether this means low-register language or the language of some conversational genre(s)) the same as spoken language. The language of the Homeric poems is generally agreed to be a literary one – that is, elevated, remote from ordinary conversation, and used only for poetry – but also generally agreed to have evolved in a society that had no knowledge of writing. Even in societies where the production of high-register works in literary genres is likely to be aided by writing, their delivery is often oral. In our culture, plays, lectures and speeches are delivered orally, often after being composed in writing – but not always, as many successful speakers do not use a written text and some plays are improvised or incorporate changes to the original script made during rehearsal and not written down. The fact that a member of the audience often cannot tell from the language used whether the giver of a speech or lecture is following a written text, or whether a comedy sketch was written or improvised, shows that there is no clear and simple connection between linguistic register and spoken versus written language production.

In fact, any register can be produced orally: doctors, lawyers and other specialists use technical language as readily as politicians produce their own special genre, and some academics have a habit of delivering in conversation

⁶ Not all conversation is conducted in the idiom that its speakers find easiest and most natural, because there are often advantages to using a type of language with which one is less familiar. In this context one normally thinks of people of low-status origin who as adults attempt to acquire a higher-status conversational register, e.g. the situation in Shaw's *Pygmalion* or Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme*. But the reverse also occurs: people who find themselves surrounded by speakers of a lower conversational register may also try to acquire elements of that register, particularly if use of higher-register features generates hostility in their conversational partners.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51395-1 - Colloquial and Literary Latin

Edited by Eleanor Dickey and Anna Chahoud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

sentences so grammatically complex that listeners wish they had been written down. At first glance, however, it seems that the same cannot be said for writing: the language of published books and periodicals, while reasonably diverse, does not have the same range as that of orally delivered speech. But published language is only a subset of written language, and if one turns to non-print media such as the Internet, much greater diversity in written genres becomes apparent. The development of e-mail and text messaging has led to the blossoming of very informal written genres and to the evolution of new linguistic features attached to those genres. Are these genres and their distinctive linguistic features literary because they are found exclusively in written contexts, or are they colloquial because they belong to an informal register? Is the distinction between spoken and written language that seemed so striking in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western society merely a temporary phenomenon that was born with the rise of publishers and editors and is now becoming obsolete as they lose control over the distribution of written language? These are only a few of the problems with the spoken/written divide; in fact even before the rise of electronic communication linguists were discarding a classification of language based on spoken versus written format and replacing it with classifications based on genre.⁷ It is therefore highly problematic to use the written/spoken distinction to help understand the literary/colloquial distinction.

The common usage of the term ‘colloquial’ is thus of little use to a scholar, but at the same time it is not possible to investigate colloquial Latin without understanding what it is or may be; a clear understanding of the question is essential for answering it. Let us therefore turn to three sources that might be more help: the science of linguistics, the terminology used by the Romans themselves to talk about variation in their language, and the ways scholars have traditionally used the term ‘colloquial’ in discussing Latin and Greek.

⁷ See Biber (1988: esp. 52–3) and Chafe and Tannen (1987).

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-51395-1 - Colloquial and Literary Latin
Edited by Eleanor Dickey and Anna Chahoud
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CHAPTER 2

*Colloquial language in linguistic studies**James Clackson*

The term *colloquial* has had a varied fortune in the history of linguistics. In works written in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries it is possible to find references to the colloquial form of language, sometimes contrasted on the one hand with ‘formal’ or ‘literary’ language, and on the other hand with ‘vulgar’ or ‘illiterate’. Thus in 1920 the English scholar Henry Wyld could write a book entitled *A History of Modern Colloquial English*, and argue for a separation between the spoken and literary forms. It was clear that Wyld also separated out the colloquial from the vulgar in his later tract on ‘the best English’ (Wyld 1934: 605), which notoriously maintained that the language spoken by the ‘members of the great Public Schools and by those classes in society which normally frequent them’ was intrinsically superior to every other type of English speech. Other works on English written in the same period, often aimed at teachers of English or a wider non-specialist public, are more explicit in their classification of the language into three levels (see Kenyon 1948 for citation and discussion of these). Yet it is clear that the simple segregation of language into bands of formal, colloquial and vulgar was never a widely or deeply held view; Wyld himself acknowledges the fact that different varieties may interlock in speech and change takes place through mixture of different codes. Indeed, most scholars writing about the English language were influenced by Murray’s diagram of different varieties of English included in the preface to the Oxford English Dictionary (earlier the New English Dictionary, Murray 1888: xvii). Murray’s diagram, repeated below, showed ‘colloquial’ and ‘literary’ ranged around ‘common’, with offshoots of scientific, foreign, technical, slang and dialectal. Murray emphasised the fuzzy boundaries between the different varieties, and the movement of lexical items from one category to another over time. The idea of a separate colloquial level of language was firmly put to rest in Kenyon’s 1948 paper, which argued that it was important to separate out different functional varieties, such as formal or familiar, from cultural levels such as standard and sub-standard.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51395-1 - Colloquial and Literary Latin

Edited by Eleanor Dickey and Anna Chahoud

Excerpt

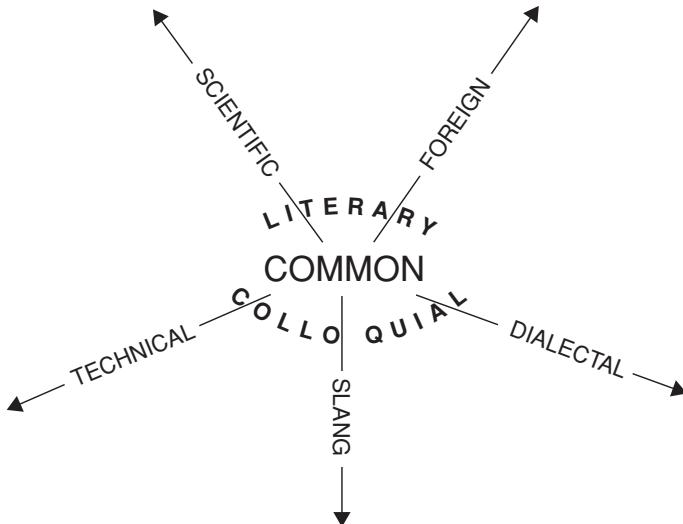
[More information](#)

Fig. 2.1 Murray's diagram of the varieties of English

Since Kenyon's paper, the last thoroughgoing attempt by a mainstream linguist to set out a scientific definition of 'colloquial' that has proved to have any influence is that made by Martin Joos in his book *The Five Clocks* (1962, 1967). It is perhaps significant that this work has had more influence on teachers of English, both as a foreign language and in secondary education, and has had less impact on the community of sociolinguists. Joos builds up a categorisation of English into five styles: frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate. The colloquial in Joos's definition comprises both the consultative and the casual style (Joos 1967: 29). The consultative style is 'our norm for coming to terms with strangers – people who speak our language but whose personal stock of information may be different' (Joos 1967: 23), and its defining features are that the speaker supplies background information, and the addressee participates continuously. The casual style is used for friends and acquaintances, and is marked by frequent ellipsis and slang. Joos maintains that he is using the term slang in its 'strict' sense, referring to the Webster's definition: 'Language comprising certain widely current but usually ephemeral terms (especially coined or clipped words, or words used in special senses, or phrases, usually metaphors or similes) having a forced, fantastic or grotesque meaning, or exhibiting eccentric or extravagant humor or fancy' (Joos 1967: 24, citing Neilson and Knott 1934). The style which borders the bottom end of the two colloquial styles

Colloquial language in linguistic studies

9

in Joos's categorisation is the intimate, the language which is used between very tight-knit groups of people, and which relies on shared specialised jargon and a common understanding of familiar sentence patterns to enable speakers to extract a single word or expression from a longer utterance to convey the whole meaning. The style above the colloquial styles is the formal, a style 'strictly determined by the absence of participation' (Joos 1967: 36). Formal text is planned, cohesive and structured, and the speaker does not interact with the addressee. Joos stresses that it is possible within a single conversation, text or even sentence to alternate between different stylistic levels, and his own book is itself an artfully constructed exemplification of this principle: 'your reporter is writing good standard mature formal style, with many borrowings from the consultative and casual styles, plus shreds and patches of frozen style placed with honest care' (1967: 20).

Although Joos's work is still cited in some works on stylistics, linguists writing since him have barely used the term colloquial, except in specific senses related to certain languages: thus, for example, it is possible to talk of 'Colloquial Arabic' to refer to spoken varieties as opposed to the written standard form, Modern Standard Arabic. According to a recent book on bilingualism 'linguists generally don't use the term "colloquial" in any scientific sense. However, "colloquial" is in general use... as a term for whatever variety is used in informal situations. This is usually a variety which is not written down' (Myers-Scotton 2006: 84); the non-technical use of the term colloquial is endorsed in the most recent authoritative dictionary of linguistics, Matthews 2007, which has no entry for the word.

Why has the term colloquial fallen out of use amongst linguists? Its demise is no doubt partly due to the fact that it covers too wide a range of different linguistic phenomena to remain a classificatory term. Linguists, generally working on spoken forms of language, have shown that the same speaker may show greater variation than can be caught under a simple split between 'literary' and 'colloquial'. Following the pioneering work of the sociolinguist William Labov in the north-eastern United States in the 1960s, and especially his famous survey of phonological variables, such as the presence or absence of post-vocalic *r*, in New York City (Labov 1966), it became clear that a speaker may frequently vary between two different pronunciations of the same word. Speech variation came to be understood not just in terms of the presence or absence of a feature, but of the frequency of the feature in different circumstances. In one experiment, Labov recorded the frequency of variables over four different styles: in the first, the subject read out a list of minimal pairs (such as *god* and *guard*, potential homophones if the speaker did not pronounce the *r* in *guard*);

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51395-1 - Colloquial and Literary Latin

Edited by Eleanor Dickey and Anna Chahoud

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

JAMES CLACKSON

in the second, the subject read a passage from a printed text; in the third, he or she was interviewed and recorded in a formal setting; and finally subjects were recorded without their knowledge, using what Labov termed *casual speech*. The speakers in Labov's study showed a progressively higher deviation from the standard forms in the four different styles. As Labov and other sociolinguists have shown, linguistic variation depends on a host of different factors other than the stylistic: age, sex, ethnicity, class and speakers' self-perceptions can all interact with the variation between careful, formal and casual speech. Speakers across different social groups may share a similar pronunciation of a variable in their most careful formal speech, such as reading a word-list of minimal pairs, but in other styles there may be a much greater discrepancy between those of one social group and another.

Labov's work clearly demonstrated that language may vary not only along a stylistic axis, from formal to informal, but also along other axes, relating to speakers' status and group membership. The term colloquial, which had been used both as description of a particular speech style, and as a label of the language of certain social groups, was avoided as it risked confusing two different things: first, variation in the speech of a single speaker, and second, variation between different social groups in a linguistic community. For the first type of variation, linguists since the 1960s have increasingly spoken of linguistic *registers* rather than styles. The term register is used to describe linguistic varieties that are determined by the context of use rather than the user. For example, a doctor might use a technical medical register when discussing a case with colleagues, a familiar register when chatting up a student nurse, and a more formal register when appearing in front of a court on a misconduct charge. Lexical choice is often the most immediate signal of register, but phonological, morphological and syntactic features may also be present. Different speech patterns among different social groups are now more generally described using the term *social dialect* or *sociolect*, which demarcates a range of linguistic varieties used by speakers of the same social class or connected by some shared group membership. Speakers of the same sociolect will deviate from the standard in a similar way and to a similar degree when they are not using a formal register. To return to the example of our fictional doctor given above, he will most likely share a sociolect with other doctors, with his next-door neighbours and with other members of the same golf club, but not with the hospital cleaners.

It has been seen that it is impossible to discuss colloquial language without reference to formal language; colloquialisms are by definition features

Colloquial language in linguistic studies

ii

normally excluded from the formal written register. It is consequently worth briefly considering how this formality in language is constructed. Formal language to a large extent overlaps with what is referred to as standard language, a concept which is unfortunately itself far from clear-cut. Standard languages are typically the languages employed by sovereign powers as the medium of administration, religion, law, science, education and prestige discourse and display. Standard languages show little or no variation, and their status in a society means that speakers usually associate the standard with the ‘correct’ form of the language. The standard is the variety taught in schools and codified in grammars, and consequently other varieties, including regional and social dialects, are seen as deviations from the standard. Furthermore, lack of proficiency in the standard may be a bar to an individual participating in various official capacities. However, although most states exhibit something which can be called a standard language, the details of its use and its relation to other linguistic varieties may differ from case to case. In some societies, for example, the language of religion may differ from the normal medium of administration – as is the case in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which use Koranic Arabic for religion but Modern Standard Arabic for administration; in other states different varieties may be used for literary works; in bilingual societies there may be more than one standard. Linguists (following Haugen 1966) generally agree that all standard languages have passed through four stages: *selection* of a particular variety, such as the language of one particular area or social group, as the model for the standard; *codification* of that variety in written form; *elaboration* of the functional uses of the standard variety, so that, for example, it acquires a vocabulary suitable for the discussion of legal, administrative, technical etc. subjects; and finally its *acceptance* as the correct form by all members of the society. The nature of what is constituted as formal language is therefore dependent on what has been selected and accepted by members of the speech community, especially those members with personal power or prestige. What is acknowledged by the elite as formal language constitutes formal language. Where there are deviations from this language they may be classed as an intrusion from a different stylistic register, and this is more likely to be the case if the speaker or writer who deviates is also able to control the formal register, but decides not to use it. Alternatively, deviations may indicate social variation or dialect, as is more likely if the originator of them has imperfect or limited control over the formal register.