

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

English Is Not a Cousin to the Romance Languages, But . . .

This book recounts the fascinating story of how Latin became the modern Romance languages, and it does so for readers who know no language other than English. Such readers, perhaps to their surprise, will be able to follow the story easily, in part because each mention of another language is explained or translated, but chiefly because so much of the story is reflected in English itself.

Latin, the tongue of the ancient Romans, is the direct ancestor and, so to speak, single parent of a host of languages spoken around the world today. Far from being a dead language, it lives on in them (and in English too) as substantially as our forebears, whose genetic material shapes us, live on in us. The two thousand years that separate the one language from the others have witnessed both remarkable persistence and dramatic, even revolutionary, changes, which raises the question: how is it that the current languages are so similar to Latin and yet so different from it? The notable variations among the current languages are another source of interest: how did it happen that, starting out from the same place, they – French, Italian, and Spanish, in particular – have arrived at such separate destinies? This tale is an entrancing saga, played out against the background of western European history and culture: which historical and linguistic forces, we may wonder, have shaped and driven it?

English is, in fact, only distantly related to Latin and her daughter languages. It belongs to an altogether different language family, the Germanic, which also includes German and Dutch, Danish and Icelandic. It is not a sister to Latin, nor even a second cousin. Nevertheless, the story of English is intimately bound up with that of Latin and the other languages.

After French-speaking Normans invaded England, in the eleventh century, French (and therewith Latin) got blended with the local, Germanic language, Anglo-Saxon (also called “Old English”), creating the mixture that led to

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English as we know it. Ever since then, Latin, French, and the others have continually affected our language. To French–Latin influence, for instance, is due the basic rule that in English the plurals of nouns are made with *-s*. Myriads of words, half our vocabulary, come from the same sources, and these pages abound in etymologies. An intriguing special case occurs when a single word has entered English twice, once passed along through French, once taken directly from Latin; this results in pairs of words co-existing in the language that are identical in origin but often unrecognizably different in appearance and meaning. Such pairs are *loyal* and *legal*, and *forge* and *fabric* – who would guess that they are related? And who would suspect that behind *reverend*, *agenda*, and *laundry* lurks a common type of Latin adjective? Words like those, in fact, come from Latin adjectives that have the peculiar function of indicating that something needs to be done: a *reverend* is a person who “needs to be revered,” an *agenda* is a list of “things that need to be done,” and *laundry* comes from a word meaning “what needs to be washed.”

English is present everywhere in the book. When recounting, in summary fashion, some necessary historical background, I associate certain crucial events with terms familiar to us, like *rostrum*, *vandal*, *frank*, and *sherry*. *Rostrum*, for instance, earlier “ship’s beak,” emerged with its current meaning from a decisive naval victory of the Romans over their neighbors in 338 B.C.E. When describing how Latin works, I illustrate key features with examples drawn from the English vocabulary: particular uses of the noun, with *bus* and *subpoena*; various forms of the verb, with *veto*, *habitat*, *debenture*, and *fiat*; participles, with *president*, *script*, and *adventure*; a notorious construction called the “ablative absolute,” with *during* and *vice versa*. These are not merely lexical items derived from Latin; they embody and exemplify some feature of Latin grammar. Similarly, *mesa*, *casino*, *sauté*, *cinder*, and the names of the movie *La Strada* and of the painter Hieronymus Bosch encapsulate later developments in the story. Moreover, Latin is still vigorously supplying words to English and the other languages even today. The steady reliance on English is helpful in both directions: I disclose the etymologies of a certain number of familiar English words that are derived from or influenced by Latin, and, at the same time, I use those words to illustrate and render memorable various elements of the story I’m telling.

General qualities of English also emerge from the narrative, highlighted through comparison with the other languages, as points of revealing similarity or difference. A very marked parallel between the history of English and the

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evolution of Latin into the Romance languages, and still a fundamental characteristic of each today, is the loss of the many separate forms an individual noun might take: nowadays there are just two, singular and plural (*window* and *windows*, for instance), whereas formerly there were far more. English contrasts with the other languages, however, in the rich variety of its verb tenses, its hospitableness towards monosyllabic words, and the relative unavailability of diminutives: words like *cigarette* and *darling* are few. At almost every point, therefore, the story illuminates English and is illuminated by it. I invite readers to recognize unfamiliar aspects of their own language and to view familiar things in a new light – in short, to perceive the distinctive contours of their own language.

Visitors to Rome, the Eternal City, the capital of the Roman Empire, who in addition to all else are drawn there by the excitement of history, experience a unique double pleasure. They are aware that the city, as the stage on which many crucial events have been enacted over more than two and a half millennia, is of unmatched historical significance. But at the same time, they see with their own eyes pieces of that past preserved, monuments representing every phase of the city's history, from Romulus's hut atop the Palatine Hill and the basilica built by Julius Caesar in the Forum, through the early Christian church of St. Mary in Trastevere and the medieval fortress of the Orsini family that had once been a theater, on to the Baroque cupola of the church of St. Ivo and the national pride symbolized by the Tomb of Victor Emmanuel II, united Italy's first king. This book is, in a way, like Rome itself: it displays a grand history in perspicuous monuments that are still to be seen and heard around us – the features of our own language.

The study of words can also illuminate the societies they inhabited. That the Romans did not use native Latin words for “wolf” and “wagon” but imported them from neighboring peoples points to the fact that they were a sedentary, agricultural people, not given to herding or roving. One series of words, from antiquity and the Middle Ages (including *pecuniary* and *chattel*), when properly understood, reminds us of the great worth of cattle in earlier societies; another series, of late ancient and medieval words (including *constable*, *marshal*, *henchman*, and *chivalry*), reminds us of the high value formerly attached to those who rode or looked after horses. Such observations are like picturesque postcards of an older world.

In line with my aim of presenting as much of my material as possible through English, I bring the languages and the changes that took place in

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them right before the reader's eyes in a head-on, hands-on encounter. The languages themselves are not relegated to an appendix, as in other studies of the subject, but are the substance, the very stuff of this one. By no means does the book treat all the developments between Latin, on the one hand, and English, French, Italian, and Spanish, on the other, but those representative topics that are selected for treatment are explained fully and clearly. The reader will be able to follow the story every step of the way.

What I hope will also create a sense of immediacy is the inclusion of evidence. The reader will meet here not only assertions about what happened in this long tale of language change, but also at least some of the proof for those assertions. I explain how ancient Latin was pronounced – and also what enables us to know that. Toward that end, I often cite inscriptions, texts such as tombstones carved in durable material and thus preserved unchanged from antiquity, which through their uncorrected misspellings and other mistakes reveal features of the language in their day. I also draw on literary texts for evidence. A passage from the historian Tacitus, a debate he reports between two German brothers in 16 C.E., handily illustrates one important process by which local elites took up the Latin of the conquering Romans. Augustine in a sermon delivered to his north African congregation around the turn of the fifth century C.E. provides clear evidence that, despite the Roman conquest and the widespread acceptance of Latin, some part of the local population continued to speak the native Phoenician language. Glossaries, which explain a difficult term through a familiar one – primitive dictionaries, in effect – teach us which words were unintelligible to readers or speakers at a certain time and place, and which were current and comprehensible. All these documents arose from recognizable situations of actual people, our fellow-men, which lends human interest to each one.

The book begins, as it must, with Latin. It sets forth its prehistoric origins as an Indo-European language and how, as Roman power expanded, it spread from the area around Rome to the entire Mediterranean basin and beyond; it also explains how the language works. (It does not teach Latin, nor any of the other languages either.) Next, it gives a substantial account of the Romance vocabulary. Then it describes the deeply altered variety of ancient Latin that is the genuine ancestor of the modern languages. The book concludes with a few samples of the earliest texts in each one, ranging in date from the ninth to the thirteenth century.

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Although many languages and dialects that exist today are descended from Latin, I deal only with French, Italian, and Spanish. They are the ones most studied and most familiar in the English-speaking world; in the United States, Spanish is an all but official second language. (Although the book assumes no knowledge of any of them, readers who happen to know something about one or another should enjoy it all the more.) Moreover, those languages have made the most substantial contributions to English. French, as already indicated, became an essential component of English nearly a thousand years ago, and its cultural attainments and prestige have assured its continuing influence: think of the *avant garde*, *lingerie*, and *faux pas*. Italian has given us many items having to do with the arts in particular: *spaghetti*, *piano*, *chiaroscuro*, *balcony*. The Spanish language too is the source of quite a few words (*algebra*, *stevedore*, and *peccadillo*), a certain number having entered American English from the western part of the country, where Spanish has long been the native speech of many: examples are *mesa* and *Colorado*.

This is not a history of English. The basic structures of the language and its core vocabulary remain true to the Germanic family. This book, though it aims to impart engaging, unfamiliar information about the language, leaves whole areas untouched. It is a very partial account of English, dealing only with those features affected by Latin – which, to be sure, are very numerous. It may even be said that some of Modern English's most pronounced and most characteristic features are untouched by, or liberated from, the influence of Latin. The drastic reduction in the number of a noun's forms has already been mentioned. A remarkable and potent characteristic is the ease with which English words move around from one function to another: adjectives are readily converted into nouns, like *sharps* (implements for drawing blood, or musical notes), or nouns into verbs, like *eyeball* ("you don't need to measure – just eyeball it") and *doctor* ("Hamlet doctored the cocktails"); it appears that just about any noun in the language can be verbed. Those possibilities were limited in Latin, and even today such conversions would be difficult for the Romance languages.

Familiarity with English, however, is all that is needed to follow the journey of Latin into the modern languages. I assume no acquaintance either with the other languages or with the terms of linguistics. Everything foreign I translate and explain, and the few technical terms used I define as the need arises and, ordinarily, through clear English examples. I employ no abbreviations. My

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hope is that, by these means, I will remove all obstacles to your enjoyment of a story about language change that is of unsurpassed fascination.

Though this book carries no footnotes, it should be understood that virtually everything here, except the presentation, depends on the work of other scholars; some suggestions for further reading will be found at the end. All translations are my own.

PART ONE



LATIN

CHAPTER TWO

THE CAREER OF LATIN, I

From Earliest Times to the Height of Empire

THE PREHISTORY OF LATIN: INDO-EUROPEAN

The subtitle of a recent book identifies Latin as “the world’s most successful language,” a claim it substantiates admirably (the book is Tore Janson’s *A Natural History of Latin*, from 2004). The explanation for Latin’s success lies partly in the nature of the language itself, to be sure, but far more in the achievements of those who spoke it – their conscious shaping of the language, the uses they made of it, and especially their success in imposing it upon vast numbers of people. The story of Latin is inextricably bound up with the history of the Romans, who spread their language from a small coastal region in central Italy to the greater part of the world that was known to them. It is the story of how a world empire was created and how, in the end, that empire broke apart, its fragmentation foreshadowing and furthering the process by which Latin dissolved into the variety of modern Romance languages we find today.

Roman history begins with the city’s founding, in the eighth century B.C.E. For later periods of that history much of our information comes from written sources. For the earliest periods, before writing, we have to rely heavily on archaeology, the science that uses material remains to reconstruct the lives of societies. Our interest here being language, we may wonder whether something similar is possible for the earliest phases of an immaterial matter like language. The answer, surprising perhaps, is yes. The prehistoric period of Latin’s life *can* be reconstructed – and in remarkable detail.

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Curious Coincidences?

In Latin the word for “mother” is *mater*. Across the Adriatic and Ionian Seas from Italy, the Greek word for “mother,” recorded as early as about 720 B.C.E., is *mater*. Moving still farther east and much farther back in time, to around 1500 B.C.E., we find that in Sanskrit, an ancient language of India, the word is *matar-* (the hyphen indicates that this is the stem of the word, not the word in full). In Old Church Slavonic, a language used by Slavic peoples and attested in the ninth century C.E., the word is *mati*. In Old Irish it is *mathir*. Thus, over a vast area, extending from India to Ireland, and over a period of three and a half millennia, the words for “mother” in a number of languages appear quite similar to one another. Coincidence?

Let us consider now a pair of nouns referring to agricultural life, the yoke that makes it possible for the oxen to draw the plow – and thus for the farmer to till his field – and the mouse that is the farmer’s enemy, forever nibbling away at his store of grain. (Though I don’t describe how the words were pronounced, the ways they are written are an indication of their similarity sufficient for our purposes. The table should be read across.)

English	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Old Church Slavonic
yoke	yuga-	zugon	iugum	igo
mouse	mus-	mus	mus	mysi

Very much alike, aren’t they?

Here next are two common numbers, another fixture of human life. The Welsh language, still spoken on the western edge of Britain, is added to the table; Gothic is also added, the language of a Germanic tribe that entered the Roman Empire during the third and fourth centuries C.E.

English	Gothic	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Old Church Slavonic	Welsh
two	two	dva(u)	duo	duo	dva	dau
three	threeis	trayas	treis	tres	tri	tri

The resemblances are strong and striking. As we accumulate examples, the similarities look more convincing, and it becomes more likely that the words do not resemble one another by chance.

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Continuing the search for similar-looking words in widely scattered languages, we may turn to a pair of verbs.

English	Gothic	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Old Church Slavonic
<i>lick</i>	<i>-laigon</i>	<i>lih</i>	<i>leikho</i>	<i>lingo</i>	<i>lizati</i>
<i>mix</i>	<i>(blandan)</i>	<i>miks</i>	<i>meignumi</i>	<i>misceo</i>	<i>-mesiti</i>

(The hyphen before *-laigon* and *-mesiti* signals that they are found only in compounds, just as one might write *-whelm* to indicate that in Modern English the verb in question is found only in a compound like *overwhelm*, not by itself.) With the addition of these examples, which could readily be multiplied, the evidence becomes . . . overwhelming, and our notion that the similarities among the languages are not accidental seems confirmed.

To the proof given by the vocabulary, another, still more potent proof can be added. This has to do with the morphology of the languages, that is to say, the different forms that a single word can take, for instance, the differing forms of the English verb *to play* seen in *I play*, *she plays*, and *they played*. Here now are two forms of the verb “to bear,” which in all these languages means both “to carry” and (from the specialized sense “to carry a child”) “to give birth to.” Not only is the stem of the word similar from one language to another, but so too are the endings of the verb, the final sounds, which serve to indicate who performs the action of the verb. In this point the other languages differ from ours. Whereas Modern English needs to state the subject of the verb with a pronoun (*you* and *we* in the following example), the other languages do not. That information is included in the verb itself, at the end. To take the Latin forms as examples, the ending *-s* indicates that “you (singular) bear,” whereas *-mus* indicates that “we bear.” It’s as if the words were “bear-you” and “bear-we.”

English	Sanskrit	Doric Greek	Latin	Old Church Slavonic	Gothic
<i>you bear</i>	<i>bhara-si</i>	<i>pherei-s</i>	<i>fer-s</i>	<i>bere-si</i>	<i>bairi-s</i>
<i>we bear</i>	<i>bhara-mas</i>	<i>phero-mes</i>	<i>feri-mus</i>	<i>bere-mu</i>	<i>baira-m</i>

In this feature too, the similarity is striking, even though English happens not to share it.

And finally, here is the complete present tense of the verb *to be*, which is astonishingly similar from one language family to another. Observe again how the endings identify the subject of the verb.