

Dead Tongue Shows Signs of Life

Stephen Goode

Once widely presumed dead, the study of Latin is staging a lively comeback in U.S. public schools. Young students typically have a good time. Better still, they stand to benefit from exposure to the wellspring of 60 percent of English words. There is a Greek revival, too.

Donna Speer could not decide what she would have her elementary school Latin class do for the school's patriotic assembly, a special occasion at which students performed carefully prepared skits. Recite a few lines of Cicero, she thought. No, that was a little much for youngsters, not to say a bit boring.

Then while driving her car one day, she started reciting a Latin version of the "Pledge of Allegiance" that someone had translated, and she had her answer. "That particular translation had said nothing to me at first," she says. "But suddenly, I began to hear that it had great rhythm."

It began *Fi-dem me-am o-bli-go*, I pledge allegiance, and ended *cum li-ber-ta-te, jus-ti-ti-a-que, om-ni-bus*, with liberty and justice for all.

Speer turned the Latin pledge over to her students at Grace and St. Peter's, an Episcopal elementary school in Baltimore, giving them three weeks to learn the words.

"It bothered me that it's an ersatz pledge," she recalls. "There's really no such thing in the Latin of the ancients." The children, mostly nine- and ten-year-olds, learned it in two sessions.

Speer should not have been too surprised. Already, she had composed rules of grammar in rap for her classes, which they recited daily to snapping

fingers and elbows tapping on desk tops. And her students, about 80 percent of whom are black and many of whom are from impoverished backgrounds, readily memorized lines from Latin and Greek poets, chanting them in unison, like rap.

Nonetheless, says Speer, "it always amazes me how much they like what we do in class. It is startling to see them internalize the language. No one's told them that Latin is dead. And certainly no one has told them it is boring."

The students at Grace and St. Peter's do not stand alone. After years of decline—a low point of 155,000 public school students reached in 1976—Latin is making a comeback. In 1985, the latest year for which figures are available, 176,000 public school students enrolled in the subject, says Edward Phinney, who heads the American Classical League and chairs the classics department at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

There are no figures for private schools, but Phinney thinks the steady increase that Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek have achieved in recent years also applies to them. And he believes that the number of classical language students in private schools probably "equals or maybe slightly surpasses" the number studying those languages in public schools.

These days, the vast majority of Latin students are likely to be in middle or high school, just as they were in the 1930s, when as many as 900,000 U.S. students took the subject, says Robert Labouve, director of languages with the Texas Education Agency.

But a growing number of elementary schools are teaching Latin. Many of those are in large cities, such as Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Indianapolis, where Latin is taught to children much like those in Baltimore—the kind of youngsters from low-income, poorly educated families who were most unlikely to study it in years past.

"From being the language of the elite, the language taken by the best students at the best schools, it has become the language people now believe everyone should have access to," says Labouve, who also chairs the National Committee for Latin and Greek. "This is a basic change."

The young seem to have little problem approaching the language. Speer, for example, says her elementary school pupils do not know that languages are supposed to be difficult. "Fourth and fifth grades are an ideal time," adds Janice Moody, who teaches Latin at T.C. Williams High School

in Alexandria, VA, but also has taught the language to elementary pupils. "At that age, students are more willing to speak ... They don't have the self-consciousness of a high school student."

Why Latin? Classicists such as Phinney point out that at least 60 percent of English words derive from Latin, which makes it an ideal way to strengthen vocabulary and verbal skills. They also note that most professional and scientific words in English have a Latin base, giving Latin students bound for college a leg up on those who have not studied the language.

But mostly, the appeal is practical. "When we looked at schools that work, we found they were often private and parochial, that they had rigorous discipline, that they required students to wear uniforms—and that they taught Latin," says Charleen Hunter, a curriculum coordinator with the Kansas City, MO, public schools. "It was part of an appealing profile." Hunter, among others, is working on a new program that will introduce Latin and Greek to Kansas City public schools.

And there is the example of Philadelphia, which introduced Latin to fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders in 1968, in a program that now gives more than 10,000 children 15 to 20 minutes of instruction in the language each day. The results were impressive: When educators tested Philadelphia Latin students in the 1970s, they found that they had grown a whole year in verbal skills by their second year of the language beyond whose who did not take it.

The results could not be accounted for by arguing that students likely to take Latin would be brighter, since the designers of the tests were careful to choose two groups—Latin takers and those without Latin—that had similar backgrounds and abilities, says foreign language education supervisor Rudolph Masciantonio, who introduced the current Latin program into Philadelphia's public schools.

That lesson is not lost on students. Says Moody, "Each year I ask my first-year students why they're taking Latin, and 90 percent of them say they've heard how much it has improved test scores and language skills of those who study it." She uses Jenny's Latin series, probably the most famous of Latin textbooks, for her high school students, and a textbook approach is standard at the high school and middle school levels, says LaBouve. But the sky seems to be the limit when it comes to the language in elementary school. Philadelphia, for example, gives its students a heavy immersion in Roman history, mythology and literature as well as Latin grammar and vocabulary.

Speer decided to use rap when it occurred to her that she was requiring students to learn Latin prepositions and adjectives when they probably did not know what a preposition or an adjective in English was. So she made up definitions the children chanted: "An adjective belongs to a noun or a pronoun. It can modify, specify, limit or describe." When they recite them, "they're boppin' down the aisles," she says.

Speer's students also memorize lines from Virgil and from Greek writers such as Homer, Hesiod, and Sophocles. "This is poetry in dactylic hexameter," she says. "Of course, I don't tell them that. But they like the beat, the long-short-short that is dactylic. It fits a rhythm they can identify with, and memorization comes easily."

Speer also teaches Greek to fourth-graders, and Kansas City's Hunter is working on plans for Greek elementary schools that will introduce fourth-graders and others to the Socratic method, Greek myths and history, and language, she says.

But in large part, says Phinney, Latin teachers teach Greek to their best students as a kind of reward. Moody, for example, plans to give her six fifth-year Latin students a month's worth of the language toward the end of the school year. "It's a natural outcome for students who've had a lot of Latin," she says.

Speer recalls the defense she and other classics majors used when challenged about their study of ancient languages. "I'd say, 'We're doing them for what we want to be, not for what we want to do.'"

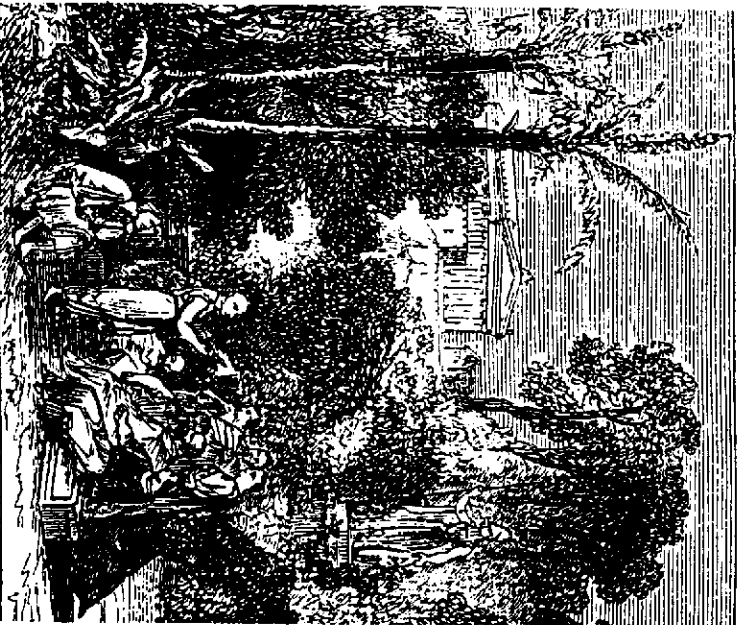
These days, that defense no longer may be necessary. Phinney says that big corporations such as Aetna Life Insurance Co. and Morgan Stanley Group Inc. now regularly recruit from his campus's classics majors. "They tell me they find classics majors more flexible, more open to experiences such as foreign appointments than students who specialize, say, in computer science." The companies, he says, can provide any extra training students might need, probably better than a university can. But he notes, "The recruiters say that when they can get a Latin and Greek student to join the firm, they have someone they can count on to write a long report when it's needed and do it accurately."

LaBouve thinks that interest in Latin has stabilized and that a return to the days of decline is not likely. The real problem he says, is the shortage of language teachers of any kind, including Latin teachers. "It's a terrible situation," he says, "the fruit of years of ignoring the importance of languages in our schools."

Meanwhile, groups such as The American Classical League and the National Committee for Latin and Greek offer a variety of materials for classics teachers at all levels, including newsletters, standardized tests in the languages, and annual meetings. And the federal government has gotten into the act with the National Endowment for the Humanities in recent years sponsoring well-attended seminars in Latin and Greek studies for elementary teachers.

Hunter says she has heard educators debate whether students score better after studying Latin because they get more interaction with the teachers or whether it is the language itself that makes the difference.

Ultimately, she says, it makes no difference. "If the kids do better—and they are doing better—and if teachers feel better about what they're doing—and they are feeling better—then it must be worth it."



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