

IT SEEMS, THAT RUMORS OF THE DEATH OF LATIN WERE GREATLY EXAGGERATED

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by Steve Coates

It was the repository of all Western culture. The fall of the Roman Empire couldn't destroy it. It flourished in the Middle Ages, boomed in the Renaissance, endured the birth of European nationalism and has weathered this century of indifference and neglect. Is the computer age likely to put an end to it?

Not a chance: Latin lives, and it lives on the Internet.

It's at its most lively on the *grex Latine loquentium* (the Latin speakers' group), or more fondly *grex noster* (our group), a bulletin board with only two rules: 1) Any topic may be discussed as long as the discussion is in Latin, 2) When in doubt, refer to Rule 1.

The *grex* was founded last year as a spinoff from a Latin-studies bulletin board which uses English. Subscribers, largely graduate students and younger academics, number about 90, with 15 to 20 regular contributors (*scribentes*); the rest are lurkers (*legentes*). (To subscribe, send "Subscribe Latine" and your name to listserv@plearn.edu.pl).

Those numbers are minuscule if one thinks of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when Latin thrived in Europe as a *lingua franca* for international scholarship, diplomacy and commerce. And they pale in comparison with the hundreds of thousands who log on for Spiderman or Metallica. But the response has encouraged Latinists who want the language -- which, after all, most people think of as dead already -- to stay alive.

"There are so few people scattered around the world who have any interest in actually speaking or writing Latin," said Jeffrey Wills, an associate professor of classics at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. "But you could establish a critical mass by getting them together on the Internet."

In fact, though classicists have a reputation for stodginess, they have been quick to exploit the Internet as a research tool. A rich classical store can be tapped at World Wide Web sites like [Perseus](#), a collection of resources for Greek art, archaeology and literature, or the [classics home pages of the University of Michigan](#) and [Oxford University](#). But today's classics instruction tends to focus on minute, almost word-by-word analysis of ancient texts, and Wills says that as a result, even advanced students sometimes have trouble reading a prose passage fluently, let alone writing

or speaking in Latin.

Enter the grex to buck the trend with wide-ranging talk and high linguistic standards. The correspondence is startlingly genteel, as if letters from the ancient world had invaded a culture that prides itself on being in your face (*adversa fronte instans*), a culture in which the art of rhetoric is often reduced to a few expletive-ridden imperatives (*iussa maledictis mixta*).

But what is most striking is that cyber-Latin is a youth movement, with most correspondence carried on by graduate students. Wills, who is 37, suggested that most established professors don't have time for an activity with relatively little academic prestige. And "There's a demographic cutoff on the Net," he said. "Older professors just aren't very interested."

The grex is trying, in a small way, to emulate the revival of Hebrew, which for 1,700 years had been used almost exclusively for prayers and Talmudic studies before being resurrected as the official language of modern Israel. Israelis and neo-Latinists face the same problem -- how to update an ancient language for the modern world.

"The ancient Romans lived in simpler times," said Akihiko Watanabe, 22, a first-year Yale graduate student from Japan and a frequent grex contributor. "One has to improvise to express some things in Latin."

Take a car. Watanabe recently posted a message noting that there was dissatisfaction with the word "automobile" because it mixes Latin (*mobile*) and Greek (*auto*). Alternatives discussed included *auto-raeda* (an auto-chariot) or even a *vehiculum sese movens* (a wagon that moves itself).

Computing terminology is most pertinent -- and problematic. Konrad Kokoszkiewicz, a 26-year-old graduate student at Warsaw University in Poland who set up the grex, tries to standardize usage, but participants often coin their own terms.

Technical difficulties discussed on the grex conjure up images of Cicero sitting frustrated at his keyboard: "*Conatus sum in elenchum pervenire frustra. Ferte auxilium quaeso!*" (I tried to get onto the list but could not. Please help me!). Or lamenting, "*Nescio, quando hae litterae ad omnes perveniant, quia Listserv noster denuo mortuus videatur*" (I don't know when this message might reach everyone, because our Listserv seems to be dead again) and "*Cyberneticae machinae et ego non boni amici sumus*" (Computers and I aren't good friends).

Titus Bicknell, 25, a graduate student at York University in England, says he spends about two hours a day on his computer for his studies, mostly on the Latin poems of the 19th-century English poet Walter Savage Landor. (Many members of the grex are neo-Latinists, who are interested in Latin written after the 1400s.)

"The neo-Latin scholastic circle is very international," he said. "Most of us deal with very rare books or manuscripts, a lot of them unpublished. The Internet is a way to compile material so people can see it very quickly."

Along with the shop talk, there is just plain chat, as subscribers tell about themselves and discuss common experiences. "Latinists tend to read the same texts over and over," Bicknell said. "But with the grex, you log on and there's something fresh to read every day."

Fresh, yes, but you must take what you can get, like this homage to John Wayne posted from Switzerland: "Etsi Americanus non sum, cor meum semper exultat cum Indianis John Wayne paene opprimentibus tuba VII Alae Equitum Levium alte resonat per planities, quarterhorsii effrenati walopant et nobile vexillum stellatum/striatum fluctuat in vento pugnae." (I am not an American, but my heart always leaps for joy when, just as John Wayne is almost overwhelmed by Indians, the bugle of the 7th Cavalry re-echoes across the plains, the quarter horses gallop wildly and the noble Stars and Stripes waves in the wind of battle.)

At the Vatican, Latin is still the official language of government, and Bicknell and some others in the living-Latin movement fervently argue that it should be adopted as a language of international commerce and diplomacy. They see the grex as a step in that direction.

"When I watch the whole battle of the European Union," Bicknell said, "I'm always struck by the problems caused by language and by the cultural barriers which inevitably follow from that There was a time when Europe shared a common cultural language, Latin, which is especially suited to dealing with precise legal matters. It worked very well. Why not just go back to that?"

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