

SIL Electronic Book Reviews 2009-011

A natural history of Latin

By Tore Janson

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. x, 305. hardback £16.99, paper £8.99. ISBN 9780199263097 (hardback), 9780199214051 (paper).

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The title of the Swedish original of this work, *Latin: Kulturen, historien, språket* (Stockholm: Wahlström and Widstrand, 2002)—“Latin: the culture, the history, the language”—gives a clearer idea of its contents than does its English adaptation, intended to invoke the spirit of Pliny the Elder “in the hope that it will provide a suitable blend of useful information and entertaining anecdote, just as his volumes do” (65). There is indeed a lot of useful information in this book, and there are many anecdotes as well. The latter do not always deal directly with important matters germane to the book’s topic, but most have some pedagogical value in being an aid to remembering important ideas which they illustrate. The book is easy reading and provides an overview of Roman history and culture along with a history of the rise, spread, and decline of Latin, its change from mother tongue of an empire to a language of wider communication, and its place in Western cultures and languages today.

More distracting than the least relevant anecdotes are the sometimes extensive expressions of the author’s (or translator-adaptors’?) evaluation of the people and situations being described. The object may be the Romans, as in the section “How bad were the Romans?” (14–17), where we read, “People react in different ways to this picture of the Romans. Personally, it makes me sick, and I imagine many other people feel the same way” (16). More often, a superficial, negative approach to religious matters seems evident, as in these comments about Tertullian (77–78):

Several of his other books were about tricky theological questions like absolution and the Trinity. Their most striking characteristic is their spiteful and uncompromising attitude to everyone who thought differently from Tertullian himself, which unfortunately set the tone for theological disputes down the ages.

On the other hand, a positive bent toward Lucretius, described as “an apostle of science, materialism, and rationalism” (59), is clear in the space (57–59) devoted to his thought and its enduring influence through, among others, Marx.

The first of five parts, “Latin and the Romans” (3–82) summarizes Roman history and several aspects of culture, with special attention given to areas of language use— theater, poetry, “writing, reading, listening, and speaking”, “speeches, politics, trials”, “Cicero and rhetoric”, “the

language of history”, “name and family”, “everyday language”, and other sections. But mixed in with these are other sections, giving an overview of Roman history from the eighth century bce to the age of Constantine (“Christianity: from dangerous sect to state religion”, 76–82).

Part II, “Latin and Europe” (83–176), is summarized well in the final paragraph of the first section:

In what follows I will first discuss how it was that Latin disappeared as a native language while at the same time acquiring its unique role as the common language of communication for individuals from many language groups. I will then look in some detail at that language, how it varied from region to region, and how it differed from ancient Latin. I will introduce quite a few examples of how Latin was used, and is still being used, in many fields and of how thoroughly it has infiltrated the modern European languages, including English. I won’t say anything about the death of Latin, as the language is very much alive.

This historical sketch includes a lot about the interaction between the Church, education and literacy, and Latin, somewhat less about Latin in philosophy, medicine, and science, and three brief subsections on Latin and German, French, and English. The final section, “Latin and us” (174–176), includes “three good reasons for knowing something about Latin”: its roles as the Romans’ native language, as “Europe’s international language until two or three hundred years ago”, and as “the language from which the modern European languages have drawn the majority of their loanwords” (176). It then suggests that some who read the book “may even be inspired to go further and really learn the language. It takes time and a lot of effort, but it can be very rewarding” (176).

The remaining three parts present key aspects of the language itself, with an eye to enabling the serious reader to make grammatical and semantic sense of Latin expressions s/he may encounter in various fields. Part III, “About the Grammar” (177–215), purports to offer “a very brief survey...of those parts of the grammar which are different from English and present the English-speaking learner with difficulties” (179). After three pages, not always as clear as they ought to be, on pronunciation and stress, and a shorter section on syntax, the rest of Part III is devoted to morphology, certainly an important part of Latin grammar that fits the above English-oriented description. Other areas in which Latin and English differ, such as how Latin, lacking definite and indefinite articles, handles the functions for which English uses such forms, are not treated.

The remaining two parts are similar in content and function to the Latin parts of the “foreign words and phrases” section found in many English dictionaries. Part IV, “Basic Vocabulary” (217–269), contains about 1,800 words, including all those mentioned in the book; in choosing what words to include, priority has been “given...to those which have left frequent traces in modern languages” (218). Part V, “Common Phrases and Expressions” (271–296), by and large achieves its purpose of compiling “some 500 more or less well-known Latin phrases, expression and quotations with translations” (218), though like any such list, some of the choices of what to include and what to omit are surprising. It may indeed be useful to know the expression *ad acta* ‘to the files’, but I would have thought *ad fontes* ‘to the sources’, the Renaissance motto epitomizing a renewal of study of the classics important for, among other things, the Textus Receptus (another phrase not in the list, by the way), at least as important. There are many

phrases helpful for academic reading, such as *mutatis mutandis* ‘with the necessary changes’, but not *ceteris paribus* ‘other things being equal’. We find *id est* ‘that is’, but not *exempli gratia* ‘for example’ (but then, the same is true of my 1993 American English dictionary). Many biblical expressions are included, but it is not obvious why *Domine, quo vadis?* ‘Lord, where are you going?’ is included rather than a phrase more important in the history of theology (and, I would venture, better known), *hoc est corpus meum* ‘this is my body’. Some surprises are educational: the inclusion of *gloria in altissimis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis* ‘glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will to mankind’ (which could be better translated as ‘...to people of good will’) led me to discover that the Vulgate indeed has *altissimis* in Luke 2:14, not the *excelsis* so familiar from our Christmas carols, not to mention centuries of sacred choral music.¹ But whatever quibbles about inclusions and omissions may or may not be worth making, the compilation remains an extremely useful part of the book; and its worth is enhanced by inclusion of the source of many of the expressions.

The sociolinguistic/historical parts and the more strictly descriptive linguistic parts combine to result in a very worthwhile book. The descriptive linguistic parts give a clear feel for the morphology of the language. The preceding parts give a clear picture of its contribution to many languages and many specialized fields of study today, and forcefully exemplify the interaction of language, society, politics, and religion through what the dust jacket calls “The story of the world’s most successful language”.

There may be some languages under study by field linguists today for which a similar sociohistorical description can and should be written. But most linguists studying minority languages will find the descriptive parts of the book a more useful example of how to choose and present the structural and lexical “highlights” of a language to the educated reading public with no background in linguistics. Your definition of what constitutes the grammatical “highlights” of a particular language, of course, will be determined more by the linguistic research fashions of the twenty-first century than by those of the long tradition of classical studies.

Typos are surprisingly many for what we usually expect from OUP, but seldom hinder comprehension.

Notes

- 1 For the biblical occurrence of *gloria in excelsis*, see Luke 19:38; translators may find it of interest that the same Greek phrase corresponds to *gloria in excelsis* there as to *gloria in altissimis* in Luke 2:14.