

There are many good reasons for learning foreign languages. One of them is that learning how people in a different culture communicate verbally reveals much about how they think and what view of the world they have. Here is just one example from Latin, using evidence that any student of the language has met repeatedly.

It is obvious that Latin uses a great many more passive verbs than English does: what does that reveal about the way in which Romans viewed the world? The answer is, I believe, that this fondness for passive structures illustrates clearly something confirmed by other evidence: the Romans were an unusually efficient and practical people, more concerned with results than with theories. What mattered to them was whether the task at hand got done; it was of secondary importance who did it or why or how. An intention or a decision is to be translated into action, and the focus is on the result.

Old Cato was typical of this aspect of the Roman character. He was said to have written a Roman history which included no proper names, except that of one of Hannibal's elephants. The omission of names was not accidental. Cato's point was that Roman history was created by the Romans as a group. Common action was what counted and not individual brilliance. Cato, again, was said to have ended all of his speeches on any subject with the refrain "Cartago delenda est", Carthage is going to be destroyed, it must be destroyed. No matter how, the job has got to be done.

This same attitude is implicit in the typical ablative absolute construction. For example: His dictis, after these things were said. Here, there is no direct indication of who said the words, only the statement that in fact they were uttered. We do of course use passives in English, but I believe an English writer would be much more apt to indicate who the speaker was. For example, if you saw the sentence His auditis Caesar ad castra properavit, you might start by translating "these things having been heard". In the context it should be clear that it was Caesar who did the hearing. The Latin usage, however, focuses only on the fact that the words were heard.

There are many passive usages that might be used to illustrate Roman attitudes, but for the moment I'll mention only one more. It is reasonably common, but tends to be rather difficult for English speakers: the impersonal passive where the persons who carry out the action are pointedly ignored. "Venitur": it was come, literally, or there was a coming; somebody came, in fact, but for the moment there was no concern for anything except the arrival. Or, pugnatum est, it was fought, there was fighting, a fight took place.

It can be fun, and I hope some of you will try it, to look at the Latin passives that you meet and consider whether the usage really does show a point of view that is different from that of an English speaker.