

Almost 15 years ago I was riding the New York subway and chanced to read a sign about "rapid transit." And it struck me that this word transit must be pure Latin--that is, unchanged in a single letter in 20 centuries. Nero wrote this word, and spoke it!

I was astonished. Were there other such survivors? Yes, and one by one they came to mind: exit, ego, verbatim, stratum, bonus, alias, minutia, victor. All pure Latin. Or more precisely, pure Latin-English.

But how could all this be such a shock? I had studied Latin for three years in high school and almost entered a Latin course at Princeton, where I majored in English literature. I had certainly heard endlessly about origins, etymologies, derivations, and roots. I had heard a hundred times that English is profoundly "indebted" to Latin.

But here's the rub: etymologies and derivations are abstractions, and dry ones. To say that a word derives from Latin or Chinese or Arabic is interesting but not startling. To say that you're speaking a word unchanged in 2,000 years is startling. And I'm sure this situation is unique in the world's history. There are, I suspect, few if any French words identical to Latin ones, even though the etymological debt may be greater. So it seems that by some marvel of perversity my books and teachers had harped on origins without ever declaring one of the most arresting facts of our culture--that we daily use words that Cicero used.

I was, of course, aware of the legal phrases and the occasional italicized Latin word. (If a word is italicized--or should be--it is ipso facto not English.) But my emphasis here is on common English words, the profoundly ordinary

words that do not announce their heritage. Words like editor, pelvis, opera, humor, labor

Reasoning ad hominem, I suspected that a majority of people have had a similar experience. Informal research confirms this. I have over the years asked dozens of people these three questions: Did you take Latin? If so, do you know whether there are any words that are the same letter for letter in both Latin and English? And if you think so, can you give an example?

The answers can be simply summarized. Roughly half the people who took Latin state flatly that there are no such identicals. These people, by the way, quickly add that there are, of course, thousands of cognates and derivatives and linguistic descendants and so on and on. "You know," they say, "like manufacture and homicide." Then they look proud of themselves, confident in their ignorance.

What's even more intriguing is that the other half--the people who assert confidently that there surely are such words--can virtually never think of even one!

How can all this be?

There is Latin on sundials and Latin on coins and Latin on doorways and Latin on college rings, and all of these occurrences are interesting. But the most interesting Latin of all is most definitely the Latin on our lips.

Would you not think that Latin teachers would be eager to capitalize on these amazing survivors from a long-ago culture? Yes, if you reflect on it for a minute, you would think that. But they generally do not.

Something there is in the pedagogical

mind, it seems to me, that does not like to consort too intimately with the immediate, the known, the obvious, the vulgar slant on things. If salt and pepper will illustrate a point in chemistry, you can be reasonably sure that the chemistry text will speak in dispassionate tones of copper sulfate. And something there is in every textbook that is poisonously concerned with seeming professorial in the worst sense--versus going for the students' hearts or, better still, guts.

In short, the epiphany that started out with the word transit has led me to a whole world of insight, insight into how education should and should not be conducted. I have been thinking obsessively about my own very superior education, and the thing that strikes me over and over is how teachers and courses so often conspired to avoid mentioning the stupendously relevant, the breathtakingly fascinating, or the unforgettably immediate. Let me offer as Exhibit A the accompanying list of 333 common words that are letter-for-letter the same in Latin and English!

I hope that this list will be used widely (and xeroxed ad infinitum) to help excite beginning Latin students and to make Latin seem easier to learn and more vital to all our lives.

It probably goes without saying that the meaning of the words or the pronunciation or the part of speech (or all three) may have changed over the centuries. But the changes and differences are

themselves fascinating and instructive. What the Romans meant when they said bonus and alias, and what we mean, can provide an interesting story and a visceral way to remember a word and its full historic freight.

My list was stopped, somewhat arbitrarily, at 333, mainly because I liked the symmetry of the number. Naturally, every Latin scholar will think of words that might have been included. Indeed, the list could be pushed to 350 or even 400 (or, with lots of medical terminology, to 500 or 600). But you quickly reach more and more obscure words, which defeats my purpose. The power of this list does not come from its comprehensiveness, but from the ordinariness of the words. The power comes from being able to say to a high school class: "You already know all these words" (or most of them). Omissions, therefore, are not of moment. What's important is that Latin (and English) teachers can use this list to increase the efficiency of their classes. Simply declare, as dramatically as possible: "Well, look, isn't this amazing, here are all these words you already know and--guess what?--Caesar wrote these same words! Nero spoke at least a few of them while Rome was burning. The early Christians, awaiting the lions, used these words in their prayers."

This list, simply by being, tells us all--viscerally and unforgettably--that Latin lives on. In our minds. In our thoughts. In our sentences. In our lives.

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This article first appeared in the Princeton Alumni Weekly for September 25, 1985. Mr. Price is director of Word-Wise Educational Services and a novelist whose works include American D*r*e*a*m*s (Permanent Press, Sag Harbor, N.Y.). Reprinted by permission.