

THE SURVIVAL OF A DEAD LANGUAGE

How Latin continues to thrive in a modern world, more than a century and a half after its death

By: IAN DAVIS-LEONARD

For centuries, the Latin language was a force on the world's linguistic stage. Isaac Newton's famous book "Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy" was etched in Latin, so too were the masterpieces written by Cicero, Caesar and Vergil, even philosopher Rene Descartes composed works in Latin during his time.

After dominating the world during the shift from B.C. to A.D., Latin quickly fell out of touch and as Rome fell, the language tumbled with it.

As the educational system failed in Europe from the 5th century onward, despite being the educational language, Latin faltered as fewer individuals attended school. The Renaissance in 1400 breathed new life into Latin as people across Europe embraced the classical writings and adopted Latin dictions and until the 1900s, academia required a comprehension of Latin as a written language.

By the 1960's, Latin was tossed into the wind by most, including the Catholic Church, who despite having many of its roots in the speech, decided the language was no longer obligatory. Student's too lost interest in the dead language.



Photo by Ian Davis-Leonard

Latin resides prominently over Gonzaga University's campus. Etched on the face of St. Aloysius Church is the phrase "House of God and the gate to heaven" written in Latin.

Now, Latin exists predominately in classrooms, antiquated texts or niche communities. Few can write Latin and even fewer can speak it, much of the lasting knowledge of the language is in the ability to read the speech, as it has slipped so far from the tongues of society that it is consider to be dead.

The language has fallen so far from everyday speech, that the dictionary uses Latin as an example when defining a dead language.

garners from students is also inconsistent.

When Father Ken Krall, a senior lecturer of classical languages, first began teaching Latin at GU nearly three decades ago, four or five students enrolled in a Latin class was considered good. The program now garners enough interest that it hosted two Latin 101 classes in the fall and has two Latin 102 classes this spring.

"About four years ago there was a huge push for the STEM fields across the country and we

Decisions which Oosterhuis believes are made by administrators with poor understanding of the classics.

"One of the important things to know is that it rarely makes financial sense to close [a classics department]," he said. "Classics departments are cheap, I don't have a lab, I don't require any equipment, I don't need graduate students or teacher assistants. I need a whiteboard and some markers."

Beyond being relatively cheap to fund, some students find Latin being an unspoken language, that seeks a different level of fluency and doesn't stress intimidating pronunciations like modern languages, to be an attractive benefit.

However, this does not mean the language is easier to learn.

Fr. Krall described his first experience learning Latin in high school "horrible" and "terrible," it wasn't till his time at the seminary that the language began to make sense.

"[Learning Latin] involves a whole different kind of thinking," Kauffman said. "The way we learn stuff as children is by repetition, we hear it so much that it become natural to us ... so there is that disadvantage [to Latin], doing it this way you don't get to have the repetition that much, you only get to see the words when it's written on the page."

Learning a language without

pronunciations the way Latin is taught poses significant cognitive challenges. Not only does it slow down learning ability, which creates large intellectual hurdles toward developing Latin proficiency, but it is also is easier to forget along the way.

"If you show up all gung-ho in Latin and expect it to be as easy as Spanish, you're going to be disappointed, so it requires some buy in from students," Kauffman said.

However, for the expanded challenge, the rewards are substantial.

"The way you learn [Latin] allows you to start reading actually interesting text a lot sooner, so it's a harder language, but you don't have to bother with learning how to say, 'where's the bathroom?' or 'can I please have that steak medium rare?' " Kauffman said. "After one year of studying you can read something that someone wrote over 2000 years ago and you can read it in his own words, which is almost a magical thing."

Additionally, students consistently profess a better understanding of grammar, syntax and how languages, particularly the English language, work after studying Latin.

Latin boasts strong ties to religion, including the history of the Catholic church, a linguistic relationship to botany, a foundational connection to choral music and being the root to much of the English language, in addition to being a necessity for studying classical civilizations, that assure the value of a Latin class can vary greatly between enrolled students.

Latin's existence as the origin for many academic arenas ensures the language won't go extinct.

Additionally, Latin enthalls niche groups of followers beyond academia with Latin conferences, online communities, a Latin Wikipedia and contemporary news sites in Latin, all which assist in keeping a dead language relevant in the modern world.

"Latin is on the upswing in this country," Oosterhuis said.

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dead lan·guage

noun

a language which is no longer in everyday spoken use, such as Latin.

Photo Courtesy of Dictionary.com

"Enrollments are not as high as they once were," said Dr. Nicholas Kauffman, a lecturer of classic languages in Gonzaga Universities classical civilizations department. "In 18th and 19th centuries Latin and Greek were part of everybody's college education pretty much all the way through and eventually it was a big deal when it switched and you could do a modern language instead of Greek or Latin. People thought the standards were slipping"

Despite its status as deceased, not everyone is ready to give up on Latin in its written, read or spoken format.

"One of the challenges is to properly articulate the value of [teaching Latin]," said Dr. Dave Oosterhuis, chair of the classical civilizations department at GU. "We are lucky that we are at a Catholic, Jesuit institution that sees the value in education of the classics."

Just as Latin's value through time fluctuates, the interest it

did see our numbers drop then, but that was pretty true across the humanities departments," Oosterhuis said. "We've been able to recover from that, we had reached a very high point and we haven't quite gotten back to that, but we have certainly stabilized."

At other universities, including other schools in the Pacific Northwest, classical departments, which are responsible for the instruction of Latin, are facing cuts and closures.

"I know a lot of people who five years from now they're not going to remember any Latin, but at least they'll understand proper English better."

-Taylor Tyrell, Latin student

"In any liberal arts, humanistic education, Latin is a key piece and would be relevant to a well-rounded, interdisciplinary education."

-Madison Schreiter, former Latin student

"Latin is awesome, everyone should take it. No, probably not everyone, it's for a specific type of person."

-Taylor Tyrell, Latin student

"Our language is based so much in Latin and Greek that it will always benefit people to understand how our language works by understanding Latin."

-Taylor Tyrell, Latin student



Photo by Ian Davis-Leonard

Latin 102 students read a work from ancient Roman philosopher Cicero as Dr. Kauffman, right, looks on.