



Dmitri Sitchinava. A Review of **Adams J. N.**
Social Variation and the Latin Language.
 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 933 pp.

An Event for Classical Philology and Linguistics

The author of this book, *Social Variation and the Latin Language*, James Adams, is a unique figure amongst contemporary Latinists. An Emeritus Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, he has, as a single author, in the course of ten years published, besides this, two other fundamental monographs, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (2003) and *The Regional Diversification of Latin 200 BC — AD 600* (2007). These three works together make up two and a half thousand pages. The high level of these works has already been remarked upon by many reviewers, and Adams's trilogy will evidently be the standard work on the subject for many years to come. All three works were published not at Oxford, but at 'the other place', as they say, by Cambridge University Press.

As is known, Latin, like the majority of other languages in the world (and particularly those used in such large and complex societies) was diverse in a socio-linguistic sense. The term 'Vulgar Latin' (*sermo vulgaris*, or, in Russian usage, the somewhat gentler term 'popular Latin') has been used for a very long time, and is associated with the Latin *vulgus*, the ordinary people. The traditional picture is of the linguistic changes leading from Latin to the Romance languages taking place within the language of the common people. The social and cultural elite used a more conservative classical Latin, and this is the language which was used in

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literary compositions (with the minor exception of the stylised language of slaves and freedmen in authors such as Plautus or Petronius), but was not the ancestor of Romanian or Portuguese. In this way, Roman society was practically bilingual, and 'Vulgar Latin' was supposed to have been a linguistic system quite separate from that of the higher echelons of society (the so-called 'two-norm theory'). There are many research works and grammars of Vulgar Latin based on epigraphy and other everyday texts such as the Pompeian graffiti or the Vindolanda tablets, the Roman equivalent of the Novgorod Birch-Bark Letters, and on literary texts which reflected the speech of the ordinary people. Overall the sociolinguistic information on a dead language is obviously limited: we cannot know the exact social origin of the authors of the multitude of texts, and, on the other hand, there is exceedingly meagre documentation of the language of entire social groups. This lack of differentiation is the reason why the term 'Vulgar Latin' became so widespread and, to a certain extent, useful in practice: the sources often do not provide a more detailed stratification than 'the elite versus the common people'.

Nevertheless, sociological research into modern languages (above all the works of the outstanding sociolinguist William Labov must be mentioned) has shown that as well as linguistic change 'from below', there is also linguistic change 'from above' (the language of the elite is regarded as more prestigious, and the lower classes imitate it), and large-scale shifts that embrace the whole of society. As for the isoglosses (phonetic ones, for example) that are supposed to divide society into distinct social classes, nowadays this sort of correspondence is an extremely rare phenomenon, if indeed it has ever been observed at all. Social difference in language is a continuum of signs, not a distinct boundary. Besides, it is necessary to distinguish between the casual and careful speech of representatives of one and the same social stratum, and their linguistic markers may be quite strongly differentiated. Was it not the same, in general terms, in the Latin language community?

The author concentrates his attention on this problem with reference to Latin, studying thirty or so specific subjects at all levels of the language, from phonetics to syntax, from a socio-linguistic point of view. It is the discussion of specific linguistic changes that makes up the greater part of the book, about eight hundred out of the nine hundred pages; theoretical questions and the views of the author's predecessors are mentioned, but not examined at length (the first, theoretical, part takes up only twenty-three pages). The book is, in the author's own words, topic-based, it relies upon a multiplicity of facts from the language system itself, and its greatest merit lies in this wealth of verifiable detail. We are presented with a model of sedulous corpus (or if you prefer, philological) research into a multitude of

texts originating in the most diverse social strata. The author uses a wide range of texts (both the ‘lower register’, such as veterinary prescriptions, and the Roman classics) and ancient ‘sociolinguistic’ *testimonia*, realising that many of these are ambiguous, digressing into case studies of particular works. The examples are discussed in detail, and the author draws our attention to the problems of interpretation of particular examples, their frequency, semantic questions (for example, the difference between the perfect and possessive-resultative constructions or between articular and demonstrative usages). He draws on the works not only of classical philologists, but of theoretical linguists and typologists (for example, Greville Corbett’s *Number and Gender* and Anna Siewierska’s *The Passive*). This research, therefore, is not only a text on the subject declared in the title, but also a closely written fragment of the historical grammar of Latin as such, which has a considerable value apart from its sociolinguistic side.

The ‘worm’s eye view’ conceals a number of facts indicating changes in the speech of the elite from the researcher. For example, the orthography of vulgar texts, such as *pane* for *panem* (acc. sg.), is regarded as evidence for certain phonetic changes in the language of the Latin *vulgus*. At the same time, in most cases this is simply a matter of the greater strictness of literary orthography, which conceals the actual pronunciation, while the phonetic changes were the same at all levels of society (in the same way that a Russian who follows today’s norms of spelling and pronunciation writes in the twenty-first century *корова* and *видишь* in accordance with fourteenth-century pronunciation, but neither pronounces unstressed /o/ as [o] nor palatalises the final /j/). On the whole the written form of the language is more conservative than the oral form, which makes the study of the chronology of change difficult; the author adduces examples from the history of Dutch (p. 25), where a certain choice of conjunction made its way with great difficulty into the literary language (against the furious opposition of purists) only at the end of the twentieth century, although, as we are fortunate enough to know, it had been in existence since the seventeenth.

Sometimes forms deprecated by the grammarians of antiquity or even explicitly labelled as ‘plebeian’, ‘rustic’ or ‘common’ are assigned to Vulgar Latin. The problem is that (just as in modern languages) the school norm (and even more, the stigmas associated with it) was entirely artificial or excessively archaising. Turning to a real corpus of texts we immediately find that such a subtle stylist as Livy regularly used constructions that Varro, for instance, forbade. Among the grammarians, a categorical ‘nobody speaks Latin like that’ more often than not means ‘that is exactly how everybody speaks Latin.’ A number of words that have survived in Romance languages, such as *manducare* in the sense of ‘eat’ (cf. French *manger*) are generally considered

‘vulgar’, but the Emperor Augustus used them in his private letters just like Petronius’s freedmen. The author expresses his attitude to the traditional view most clearly on p. 819: ‘This case study makes nonsense of any view that developments showing up in the Romance languages must have their origin exclusively in a shadowy Vulgar Latin distinct from the classical language.’

On the whole the linguistic situation of Latin, particularly Late Latin, reminds one in some respects of the substantially simpler mediaeval East Slavic situation (both of the Old East Slavic and Middle Russian periods), where there were also several registers of writing: the literary, with their orientation on Church Slavonic, and everyday/business texts which were closer to colloquial speech and had a substantially wider variety in their orthographical, grammatical and lexical features (but of which, as from Rome, an incomparably smaller corpus has come down to us). Just as in Vulgar Latin, the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical changes which lead to the modern East Slavonic languages can be traced more reliably in everyday texts than in literary ones. The same people could certainly write both sorts of text, and they were even specially taught to do so (compare the birch-bark letters on mundane topics written by priests, or the addition using everyday spelling made to the main text, written more strictly, by the same scribe), and occasionally elements, including dialect elements, reflecting the actual speech of the scribes find their way into literary texts. As far as we can judge from the meagre evidence, there were no firm linguistic boundaries between social classes where everyday speech was concerned: specific written texts occupied various position on the literary–colloquial continuum according to different linguistic parameters. Everyday lexis that was considered ‘low’ is not well represented in traditional literary texts. Rus’, obviously, did not have such a highly developed and thematically diverse literature, normative education or metalinguistic reflection as Rome, its society was much less stratified, and the local ‘barbarian’ substrate and adstrate played a much smaller part, but still, there were many similar phenomena.

The second part of the book is called ‘Phonology and Orthography’, and has the ambitious aim of giving ‘a full discussion of most, if not quite all, of the major phonological changes that took place in the history of recorded Latin and left a mark on the Romance languages.’ It gives a detailed examination of the problem of interpreting misspellings, which are one of the most important sources of phonological information, their typology, frequency and how systematic they are, etc. The subjects discussed in the section are the vowel system, diphthongs, syncope (such as *calidus* > *caldus*, ‘hot’), contraction, incorrect use of initial *h*, the fate of final consonants, assimilation of consecutive consonants (such as *kt* > *tt*, as in Italian), and variation between *b* and *v*.

Adams comes to the conclusion that in practically all these cases the changes affected every layer of society and were gradual; the grammarians themselves make mistakes in the quantity and quality of vowels, and the affirmation of the old norms was in many cases hypercorrect. The author draws attention to the fact that one cannot entirely identify early Vulgar Latin changes (such as *orum* for *aurum*) with later Romance changes (modern Italian and Spanish *oro*) and hypothesise that there were Romance forms in the language of the common people of the Roman Republic that remained ‘submerged’ for a thousand years. There is no direct continuity between these monophthongisations, and they have a different phonetic basis; besides, this phenomenon in the early Latin period, like many others, was lexically restricted. Cases have been noted of an artificial restoration of a number of pronunciations (for example, the final *-s* stigmatised by Cicero as ‘rustic’) in the speech of the educated classes, which then spread ‘from the top down’. It cannot be excluded that certain ‘rustic’ variants really were associated with dialect differences within Italy, and not directly with social differences in Rome. There is hardly a single phenomenon in Latin phonology at any period that indicates a direct opposition between the speech of the common people and the elite (except perhaps the *ae* > *e* change, but this too can be explained in other ways).

The third part, ‘Case and Prepositions’, deals with the development of prepositional groups and the loss of the Latin cases in the Romance languages. Here there is an examination of the syntax of the direct cases (nominative and accusative), the oblique cases and prepositional combinations, locative constructions, the reflexive dative (the ‘superfluous’ pronoun, regarded as a mark of uneducated speech, in phrases such as *quid tibi vis?*), and prepositions in comparative constructions. The majority of changes in this field (the author provides a list of eleven shifts) began ‘from below’, but there were also those that were introduced by elite speakers and which spread as prestigious (the preposition *ab* + comparative). Overall it is impossible to say that all the prepositional combinations that subsequently evolved in the Romance languages originally belonged only to the language of the common people (although the social dimension in this development is very significant); there are similar innovations in such classical authors as Sallust, Ovid and Tacitus, without any stylistic nuance.

The fourth part, ‘Aspects of Nominal, Pronominal and Adverbial Syntax’, consists of the sections ‘Gender’, ‘Demonstrative Pronouns: some Morphological Variations’, ‘The Definite Article and Demonstrative Pronouns’, ‘Suffixation (mainly adjectival) and Non-Standard Latin’ and ‘Compound Adverbs and Prepositions’. For the use of gender two more specific social categories than the vague ‘common people’ are identified, namely soldiers and craftsmen. It is

in the speech of these two groups that the use of neuter plural instead of masculine (*gladia* for *gladii*, ‘swords’) first became common; we can see it in particular in the Vindolanda documents. New case forms of the demonstrative pronouns such as *illaei* are also typical of the lower classes, but the combination of demonstrative pronouns with forms such as *ecce* (cp. *ecce (eccum) iste* > Fr. *ce*, It. *questo*; *ecce hic* > Fr. *ici*) were common amongst educated Romans too. As for the use of the pronouns *ille* and *ipse* as articles, it is essentially absent from Latin sources of both high and low registers. A number of suffixes such as *-os-us* and *-ari-us* are not connected with a sociolect, but with a specific lexicon, and are frequent in Cicero; only a few diminutives (*-in-us*, *-inn-us*) are to be recognised as non-standard. Compound adverbs and prepositions (such as *de-intro* > It., Sp., Port. *dentro* ‘inside’) are condemned by the grammarians, who at the same time let slip that they are ‘common expressions’ (*communis elocutio*).

The fifth part, ‘Aspects of Verbal Morphology and Syntax’ discusses the construction that produced the Romance perfect (such as *habeo receptam epistolam* ‘I have a received letter’ > ‘I have received a letter’). Adams is of the opinion that these constructions were not yet grammaticalised in the classical period as a means of expressing a perfect and retained their possessive meaning, with the possible exception of constructions with autosemantic verbs of ‘mental acquisition’ (such as ‘finding out’) in Cicero, which co-existed with the construction *est mihi* + participle. They are highly idiomatic in character and may not have any synchronic connexion with the Romance perfect. This perfect construction can hardly have existed in Vulgar Latin, as it is often thought: its grammaticalisation was still ongoing in Old French. Nor can the origins of the modern Romance future (such as *dicere habeo* > Fr. *dirai*), and with it the conditional, be referred to the language of the lower social strata: such combinations with this meaning have not been found in Latin texts of the lower register (which preserve the historical future tense); they predominate – with the sense of an obligation – in texts of learned authors of African extraction. Equally ‘unplebeian’ is the use of the reflexive in the sense of a passive, and the synthetic passive, which the Romance languages have lost, persists just as long in non-standard texts.

The sixth part, ‘Aspects of Subordination’, deals with such syntactic features of Late Latin/early Romance as indirect speech (the replacement of the *accusativus com infinitivo* with the subordinating conjunction *quod*) and indirect questions (the replacement of the conjunctive by the indicative); only the second may be regarded as a ‘change from below’.

The seventh part, ‘Aspects of the Lexicon and Word Order’, begins with a lexicological examination of a number of particular units of

the Latin vocabulary: the lexical field of anatomical terms and verbs with the meaning 'to go', which combine to form a suppletive paradigm in Romance languages (cp. Fr. *je vais* from *vadere*, *j'allais* from *ambulare* and *j'irais* from *ire*). Adams shows that half the classical Latin anatomical terms have been lost in modern Romance languages, while the greater part of this vocabulary is derived from marginal or unattested etyma. This leads to the idea of a submerged layer of Vulgar Latin lexis, though it cannot be excluded that these words were used colloquially by the elite, but for stylistic reasons did not make their way into literary texts (though a few did slip through). As for the suppletive conjugation of the verb 'to go' the phonetically weak forms of *ire* which were the cause of this phenomenon had begun to disappear from prose even in the Republican period. The word *vadere* itself originally had an elegantly literary flavour, and only later, and exceedingly slowly, did it 'descend' into colloquial speech. After this the position of the infinitive with auxiliary verbs is examined (*ire volo* versus *volo ire*). It turns out that, according to the evidence, the written norm of Latin (word order SOV) co-existed with the norm of casual speech (word order SVO) which later triumphed in the Romance languages.

In the ultimate chapter, 'Final Conclusions', Adams lists the linguistic changes that embrace Latin as a whole, both 'from above' and 'from below'. He also discusses the question of particular socio-linguistic groups within 'the common people' (the plebs, the freedmen, the soldiers), 'submerged' and undocumented phenomena (that nevertheless manifested themselves in the Romance languages) and the possible mutual influence of Greek and Latin in the relevant period.

Adams's book is a generalising and at the same time astonishingly detailed work on the transition from Latin to the Romance languages as such, and equally the most up-to-date and extensive exposition of the social dimension of Latin (particularly when taken in conjunction with the two preceding works mentioned at the beginning of this review). It is beyond question an outstanding event both for classical philology and for sociolinguistics.

Translated by Ralph Cleminson