

# TEACHING LATIN TO STUDENTS WITH AN AFRICAN HOME LANGUAGE: SOME LINGUISTIC COMPARISONS

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**Note: the following offers some pointers on linguistic contrast and similarities between the Latin and African linguistic systems to teachers and students with an African home language.**

**Grammar:** Latin, more than most other languages, needs to have its system clarified by recourse some formal grammatical ordering. Teachers should remember that, in the context of Latin language study, they are actually teaching *two 'foreign languages'* - i.e. Latin and 'Grammar'. Many students, also English and Afrikaans speakers, find 'Grammar' the more difficult. In the degree to which English and Afrikaans share common Indo-European elements with Latin, sentence structure can be explained to English and Afrikaans speaking students in terms of their mother tongue, but sometimes circumlocution is needed. Grasping a sentence structure like the *Accusative and Infinitive* in reported speech is difficult even for Afrikaans and English speakers, as it works very differently from their native tongue.

**Contrast teaching:** The theory of foreign or second additional language teaching involves two principles: finding points of similarity between the home language and the target language (the well-known principle of 'starting with the known'), and so-called 'contrast teaching,' where areas of greatest discrepancy are emphasised. For both, teachers need to be abundantly clear on what it is that they want students to learn. In the case of Latin, they should never be simply instructed in 'grammar', but both teachers and students must understand *what grammar does*—that is, they need to grasp the *nature* of the languages that are being compared or contrasted.

**Similarity:** Working with the familiar didactic principle of movement from the known to the unknown, one should start with points of similarity. A large number of such points may be noted, such as the systems of word derivation, formation of the imperative from verbal roots, morphological modification by means of prefixes, suffixes and infixes, tense formation (purely by chance, the Xhosa Imperfect is formed by means of *-be-* as infix, where Latin has *-ba-* as infix). There are certain similarities in the use of the subjunctive, use of two different verbs for quotation, rather like *inquit* and *dixit*, demonstratives parallel in meaning to *hic*, *iste* and *ille*, and frequent use of diminutives.

**Comparison of sentence structures:** Teachers should avail themselves of any devices which will serve to show African home language speakers (Xhosa in the Western and Eastern Cape, other languages elsewhere) how Latin sentence structures compare with usages in their mother tongue. Problem areas could be illustrated by means of an example or two in the students' mother tongue, but teachers need not even go as far as that. Most of us are unfamiliar with the African languages, or, at, best, speak them only imperfectly. The answer is to get students to do their own comparisons. Most Latin students are intelligently curious about language in the abstract, and how it works. One device is to ask a student how a particular English or Afrikaans expression could be rendered in Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana or whatever other language he or she speaks at home, and to think of the issues involved.

**Levels of language awareness:** What needs illustration depends on what the student needs to know about Latin. For Latin there are four progressive levels of language awareness involved:

1. Lexis and semantics, that is vocabulary and equivalent meanings, and the inflection of some of these words. This is studied by recourse to:
2. morphology in the abstract ('paradigms'), leading to:
3. recognition of morphology in context (the relationship between noun and verb endings), leading to:
4. recognition of structure, that is, the interpretation of the way a Latin sentence hangs together.

**Vocabulary:** First, the obvious level of similarity in *vocabulary*. There are of course no common roots between the two different language systems, as there is between members of the Indo-European family. The teacher needs to triangulate from the Latin, by means of recourse to a English-Xhosa (Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, etc) dictionary, in order to give students meanings or definitions of Latin words in their home language. To give meanings of Latin words in an African language is not so much 'teaching in an African language' as

creating an *area of familiarity*, what is called a ‘linguistic beachhead for the landing of more advanced troops’—that is, for the acquisition of other linguistic input.

**Morphology:** The fact that *morphology* is important in Latin and that meaning is indicated by inflection (i.e. both paradigms and recognition of Latin ‘shapes’) does not need excessive explanation for speakers of the African languages. Students should be shown that, whereas in the African language system, to indicate singular or plural, words change the ‘front parts’ (i.e. prefixes) of their nouns, adjectives and verbs, Latin changes the endings (suffixes). What does need careful elucidation for all students, however, is case usage, and we need a slightly different approach for speakers of an African home language than for the others. More of this later.

**Sentence Structure:** *Sentence structure* is the level where most careful preparation of students from an African home language background needs to be done, because of great basic differences between the Indo-European and African linguistic systems. The most basic point of similarity is that *neither Latin nor the African languages use an article with nouns*. What can be a major hurdle to English and Afrikaans speakers when they learn to translate, is no problem at all to many African students.

**Inflection:** Equally, what we express in English by means of auxiliary verbs and other forms of periphrasis, is frequently expressed by mere inflection, in both Latin and the African languages. Tense and mood are indicated in Xhosa, as in Latin, in inflection of verb stem and endings, by means of infixes and suffixes. Black students sometimes have problems, not with Latin, but with those forms (mostly periphrastic tenses) of English verbs which require as equivalent a single word in Latin, as also in the African languages. This is a point of similarity which needs attention. It is with this kind of problem that we must try to cope by offering students direct access to understanding Latin via their home languages, without their needing to be confused with English periphrasis.

**Subjects imbedded within verbs:** The use of nouns in the African language system in some part resembles the Latin system. The prefixes of nouns are inflected, and there is agreement (or concord) between nouns, adjectives and verbs by means of these prefixes. Here too, English-speaking teachers must remember that, as in Latin, a Xhosa, Zulu or Sotho verb often has its subject already implied or imbedded in its own inflection, and so, if students when translating leave out the subject, e.g. if they write a sentence like: ‘are playing’, in stead of ‘*the boys are playing*’, this is an inappropriate application, to English, of a common Xhosa usage. We as teachers are quick to criticise such aberrant English. Yet the sentence ‘are playing’ reads just like Latin ‘*ludunt*’, where no separate subject is required. So this construction is familiar to us from Latin (which works in a similar way). Neither the Romans nor Xhosa speakers are ‘stupid’. Their language systems merely differ from English, and what occurs as contamination when English is the language of learning could be processed directly and with insight by a speaker familiar with the African language system.

**Agreement and concord:** In Latin nouns and adjectives agree and are inflected to express a relation to the verb. In Africa South of the Sahara a form of the noun-prefix, called a *concord*, is repeated as prefix before any other word in the sentence to which it is related (to the verb, as subject- or object-concord, to adjectives and their sub-forms, relatives, and to other nouns as possessives and copula). Such concords are NOT separate words, but are *morphemes*, that is, an integral part of the words to which they are attached. In Xhosa and Zulu they are written as an attached part of the word, that is, like an inflectional beginning attached to a stem (where Latin words have inflectional endings), but in the Sotho languages they are written as detached, separate units. This has to do with the particular orthography devised by particular lexicographers in particular areas. Some of these concords also occur where in Afrikaans or English we would expect a separate preposition—that is, just like the Latin Ablative or Locative, a single inflected word can work as a nominal adverb.

**Growth points in a sentence:** But when we start looking at sentence structure more closely, a word of caution: ‘contrast teaching’, is more useful than going from known to unknown in a one-to-one application. Apparent similarity of inflection is not of great use, for in Latin the verb is the ‘point of growth’ in a sentence, whereas, in the African language system, focus is on the noun as ‘growth point’. Teachers must be clear on what they themselves are doing in language before attempting contrast teaching.

**Growth points and word order:** What is meant by ‘growth point’? In the Indo-European system a sentence expands *adverbially* in the sense that the *cases of nouns* which appear with verbs in a sentence are dictated by the *nature of these verbs*. This is particularly true of Latin, where verbs can, according to this rule, be divided into six groups, on which more below. The rule also applies to English, in the degree to which inflection (such as *who/whom*) occurs in English (e.g. *I see him; he sees me*), but with the addition of another

factor: word order. In English ‘*Dog bites man*’ has a particular sense that is the direct opposite of ‘*Man bites dog*’. Such illustrations are our staple when teaching students the irrelevance of word order for arriving at meaning in Latin.

**Noun classes:** In Latin word order has to do only with emphasis and nuancing of the speaker’s or writer’s intention. In the African language system word order is also important. The sentence expands *adnominally*: that is, the *shape and nature of the noun as subject* dictates the shape and function that the other words in the sentence assume, and the order in which concords are arranged (before, for instance, a verb stem, the subject-concord precedes the object-concord). Just as with Latin, with its *declensions*, grammarians have divided nouns in the African languages words into convenient *classes*, in this case assigned according to the form and plural inflection of the noun-prefixes. A glance at any appropriate dictionary will give teachers the forms pertaining to the dominant local African language.

**Latin sentence structures depending on nature of verbs:** When traditionally grounded Classics teachers say to a student ‘look for the verb, then look for the subject,’ they are tacitly working with an over-familiar, almost intuitive, system that not all have explicitly formulated for themselves. Latin sentences have one of six basic structures, depending on the *nature of the verb*. By ‘nature’ is meant *the syntactic implication involved in its semantics*—that is, *the verb’s meaning dictates which other words will comfortably occur with it within a sentence*. So, for instance, semantic groups like *sit, stand, lie, walk*, all have to do with body movement, and cannot normally apply to inanimate objects, but, grammatically more importantly, *none of these can take an object*: they are what is termed *intransitive*, and when we loosely say ‘I can’t stand him’, or ‘I’m going to walk the dog,’ we are actually using secondary meanings, either metaphorical or causative.

## COMPARATIVE TEACHING OF SENTENCE STRUCTURE IN LATIN TO SPEAKERS OF AN AFRICAN HOME LANGUAGE

The six basic structures of Latin sentences therefore develop from verbs that fall into six different kinds of semantic groupings. That is why it is important that students be trained to *state and explain* case functions *in relation to verbs from which they develop*. It is most important that students become aware that the *nature* of the verb depends on its *meaning*. Therefore vocabulary learning is an absolute *sine qua non*, from the first year of Latin study onwards. Students must be encouraged to consider the appropriate allocation to a particular semantic set (and therefore the structural implications of the meaning) of each Latin verb they encounter. Students need to be made aware of the six different types possible in simple sentences. These structures need to be understood fully for students to be able to read any sentence correctly. Complex and compound sentences still have verbs from these six types, and no others.

Below follows in schematic form the basic groupings of Latin verbs which determine the structure of Latin sentences. All Latin sentences fall into one of these six categories. Compound and complex sentences are comprised merely of a combination of two or more of such structures. *There is no other type in Latin*.

### SIX TYPES OF LATIN SENTENCES DEVELOPING FROM SIX TYPES OF VERBS

1. Intransitive verb;
2. Transitive verb;
3. The verb ‘to be’:
  - (a) as copulative (with nouns or noun + adjective),
  - (b) used absolutely + prepositional phrase denoting place;
4. Impersonal verb;
5. Passive verb;
6. Verb expecting prolativative infinitive (‘modal verb’).

Interpretation of these structures should be facilitated for students from an African home language with reference to comparable phenomena in the African language system. This in many cases will mean conscious awakening of students’ awareness of their own linguistic mannerisms. Native speakers of a language work on the intuitive level. In this case students can be asked to think about how a particular sentence or phrase in English or Afrikaans (reflecting the appropriate Latin construction) would be put in their home language, and

then to require them to analyse what is involved in this particular utterance. The ‘triangle’ will be complete only when the Latin construction is presented to them and they are required to make a direct association with the equivalent expression in their home language.

**A consistent linguistic system:** These structures work as follows in the African language system, which here will be illustrated with reference to Xhosa, but work in a similar fashion in Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Venda, Swazi, Shangaan, Tsonga and Ndebele\* or any other Sub-Saharan African language. It should again be stressed that local languages may differ in form or appearance, but that the system is consistent. To adapt the schema below to one of the other African languages, recourse to the preambles preceding a particular language in the *Multi-language Dictionary* of Grobler *et al.* (Reader’s Digest 1991) may prove adequate. However, it is easier simply to require a particular student to apply his or her mind to a particular structure, as suggested above. The teacher needs only to be actively aware of the *fact* of difference between the Indo-European and African language systems. Yet, as with Greek, tonal pitch also plays a role in the differentiation of meaning in the African languages.

\* The so-called Nguni languages (Xhosa, Sotho, Swazi and Ndebele) are close, with similar morphemes and some shared vocabulary. The second (Sotho) group comprises Sotho, Pedi, Tswana, Venda, Shangaan and Tsonga. They too have noticeably common elements. The sounds common to the two groupings underwent profound shifts from a postulated common source in prehistoric times (For example, Nguni aspirated *th-* has as Sotho equivalent a rolled *rr-*).

## EQUIVALENT SENTENCE STRUCTURES IN LATIN AND XHOSA

### 1. Latin sentences with intransitive verb

Personal subject-concords are added to the stem indicate the person, and, like Latin personal verb endings, have no other purpose:

1	ndi-hamba	si-hamba	I walk	we walk
2	ù-hamba	ni-hamba	you walk	you walk
3	ú-hamba	ba-hamba	he/she/it walks	they walk.

In the third person there may be a whole variety of concords, depending on the prefix of the original noun as subject (which may or may not be present in the sentence).

If the sentence has no other extension, a longer form of the verb occurs with infix of **-ya-**.

### 2. Latin sentence with transitive verb

*Subject + Subject-concord + -ya- (or -object-concord-) + -verb stem + object,*

So, this implies ‘word order’, but emphasis may change word order. Order of concords before the verb stem indicates subject / object relationship.

### 3. Latin sentence with verb ‘to be’

#### (a) As copulative

In the African language system there is no verb ‘to be’, but the *subject-concord* or the so-called *indefinite copulative* (in Xhosa **ng-/yi-**) works as a copulative before the word (either noun or adj) to be attached to the subject.

#### (b) As absolute:

(1) ‘there is ... *est/sunt*’:

*Subject-concord or indefinite copulate before the subject*

(2) ‘... is’ + prepositional phrase denoting place:

*Subject-concord or indefinite copulate before the subject, with locative form of noun denoting place.*

### 4. Latin sentence with impersonal verb:

There are in fact two kinds of impersonal verbs in Latin:

(1) **Avalent** (having no noun, that is, with no case developing from the verb), as in *pluit* (‘it is raining’):

*Noun-concord + verb stem / abstract noun*

(2) **Monovalent** (having a single noun in an oblique case developing from it), as in *decet mihi /oportet me /bonum est* ('I ought to', 'I should', 'it is good')  
*Noun-concord + adj stem = 'good' + word for 'that' + noun clause.*

**5. Latin sentence with Passive verb + agent + instrument**

Very much as in Latin, the verb-ending is altered by means of a *suffix* (in the case of Xhosa **-w/-iwa-**) with the necessary sound changes, and the *agent* is expressed by means of the '*indefinite copulative*',

i.e. **ng-/yi-** / *subject-concord repeated before a full noun*

*Instrument is expressed by a prefix nga- before a full noun:*

**6. Latin sentence with verb expecting prolative infinitive (modal verb):**

In the African language system a different point of view obtains:

(a) *possum* = 'I can':

(1) may be expressed by use of the *potential mood* (in Xhosa by the infix **-nga-** between the subject-concord and the rest of the word), but:

(2) it can also be expressed by *subject-concord* + '*with*'/ '*and*' (**-na-**) + *infinitive of verb*.

(b) Other words such as *volo, cupio, incipio, debeo*, are expressed by a finite verb followed by an infinitive, as in Latin, but: although the infinitive works like the Latin verbal 'growth point' and can have an object, future tense or negative forms, it is seen as a *verbal noun*, for it is qualified by an *adjective or relative*, not modified by an adverb.

**Importance of case usage:** The above has served to establish that the basic sentence structures in Latin and Xhosa (or any of its sister languages) are essentially different. In the end teachers and students must remain aware that Latin is the target language, and that teachers are trying to show students *how Latin works*, and where English (or Afrikaans) as medium fails, possible points of confusion must be addressed by other means. The biggest source of early confusion for all students is the matter of *cases and case usage*. Teachers know that, to induce Afrikaans and English speakers to understand the function of the Latin oblique cases, they often need to use prepositions: *Dative*: 'to the girl (or table)'; *Genitive*: 'of the girl'; *Ablative*: 'by, with, from the girl ...' etc. The African language system has few prepositions. For students who are African home language speakers, and for whom prepositions in Afrikaans and English sometimes cause problems, teachers should rather be able to illustrate case usage directly, by means of direct equivalence.

**Recognition of cases:** Further, for any students the phenomenon that inflection, and not word order, indicates meaning, holds some problems. Before teachers can get students to understand the function of Latin inflectional endings within sentence structure, they need to think very carefully themselves about *how* cases in Latin are recognised, what cases *do* in Latin, and *what English speakers are doing* when they try to express their equivalents.

## **CASE USAGES: A COMPARISON BETWEEN LATIN AND THE AFRICAN LINGUISTIC SYSTEM**

Below follows a schematic comparison of the manner in which 'Latin case usage' is expressed in modern Indo-European languages and in the African language system, with examples again mostly cited from Xhosa

The first column indicates the 'signals' (Latin case endings) whereby cases are recognised. The asterisk stands for the endings of consonant stems. A policeman may be recognised by his uniform, but his 'job description' states what he does (as in the second column, what the cases do, and where their equivalents occur in the Indo-European languages). The second column therefore shows what English speakers use to express the equivalent function. It often relates to word order, but often another word needs to be added, most often a preposition. The third column gives in theory how these different word functions are expressed in the African language system (that is, how they are recognised), again with examples from Xhosa.

**HOW ARE LATIN CASE USAGES EXPRESSED IN THE AFRICAN LANGUAGE SYSTEM?**

<u>Latin</u>	<u>English or Afrikaans</u>	<u>African Languages</u>
<b>Nominative</b> -us -a -um * -es -us -ae -i -s	The 'subject' First noun in sentence 'Do-er' of verb	Noun whose concord appears at front of a verb-sound-group
<b>Accusative</b> -m -s -a	The 'object' 'Suffer-er' of verb	Noun whose concord works as <b>infix</b> between subject concord and verb stem
<b>Genitive</b> -e -i -s -(r)um	Only noun that mostly relates to another, often 'possess-or'	Noun whose concord is attached to another noun (Xhosa: before the infix <b>-a/-ka-</b> )
<b>Dative</b> -e -o -i -i(bu)s	Receiver/recipient after certain kinds of verbs, e.g. 'give', 'indirect object' often 'get-ter'	Noun that occurs <b>with another noun</b> after certain kinds of verbs. Its object concord may be infixed or may not occur. Word order shows which is <b>recipient</b> , which is <b>object</b> .
<b>Ablative</b> -a -o -e -u -i -i(bu)s	Series of functions mostly illustrated with <i>prepositions</i> : <b>Place:</b> in, on, under, next to <b>Separation:</b> from <b>Accompaniment:</b> with <b>Time:</b> at, during <b>Agent:</b> by  <b>Instrument:</b> with	Series of words formed by various <i>prefixes</i> or <i>infixes</i> before nouns: e.g. <b>in Xhosa:</b> <b>Place:</b> Infix <b>-s-</b> , other locative prefixes <b>Separation:</b> locative prefix with suitable verb <b>Accompaniment:</b> Xhosa: <b>ku-</b> , <b>na-</b> (=and) <b>Time:</b> Xhosa also <b>ku-</b> <b>Agent:</b> 'Indefinite copulative' i.e. <b>ngu-</b> or <b>yi-</b> or concord of noun (repeated) before noun of a specific class. <b>Instrument:</b> Prefix (Xhosa <b>nga-</b> )

Two things should be noted: first, the inflectional prefix or prefixes (concord) of the noun or nouns recur in the sentence *in front of all other words to which these words relate*, and, second, when two or more conCORDS occur, *the order in which they appear* indicates meaning. Where in Latin the order of nominative and accusative does not indicate the function of particular words in a sentence, in an English sentence a subject normally comes before the object. So, too, in the African language system the subject-concord precedes the object-concord, and both are attached to the front of a verb stem. Sometimes nouns are related *to each other* with conCORDS, as in the possessive, the Xhosa equivalent of the Genitive, with the addition of an infix **-a/-ka-**.

**CONCLUSION: FOSTERING AWARENESS OF STRUCTURAL DIFFERENCES IN TWO LINGUISTIC SYSTEMS**

These few pointers in the abstract should make Latin teachers more aware of their students' level of unfamiliarity with what to them may seem axiomatic. What is offered above should facilitate learning of Latin sentence structure by speakers from the African language system, when their teachers make them conscious of such points of comparison. They should be encouraged always to be on the lookout for such similarities or contrasts. Sustained thought about language in the abstract will further result in the kind of thinking skills that is often touted as an important byproduct of the study of Latin. When both teacher and student reach the point that they understand and enjoy, say, a poem of Horace or Ovid, without the intermediation of either of their divergent home languages, they have reached the end for which they have been striving. In this process recourse to a student's home language is a valuable tool.