Resolving Ambiguous Forms in Latin

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One obvious but crucial fact about Latin is that it is a rather highly inflected language. The surface appearance of a word (its pronunciation or spelling) changes as its function in the sentence changes. A radical form of such a language would give each word a separate form for each possible function. It might have a separate form for the instrument, the agent, the source, the location, the limit of motion, the person addressed, to name just a few. Such a system, however, would be unwieldy. Each word would have far too many forms and cases for convenience.

The Latin language represents a compromise: each case is used for several functions that the native speakers saw as closely related. Experienced readers of Latin come to think of each case as unitary, one thing, and rarely consider the number of "uses" each case has. It is unlikely that a native Latin speaker thought any more about the uses of the ablative in such sentences as "Roma discessimus" or "curru discessimus" than a native English speaker does about the uses of the preposition *of* in such phrases as "the Mayor of New York" or "the City of New York." The reduction of many possible syntactic functions to five cases (with special allowance made for the vocative and the locative) greatly simplified the morphology of the language.

The Roman simplified even further by sometimes allowing one surface form of a word to represent two, or more, different cases. Thus the dative and the ablative plural always look and sound the same. The resulting forms are said to be ambiguous. There are so many such forms in Latin that the 50 possible cases and numbers of the five non-neuter declensions are represented by only 35 surface forms. This compromise between completeness and simplicity in morphology must have appeared to the Romans as quite natural and workable. Non-native students of Latin do not agree wholeheartedly. While they may be pleased to have fewer different forms to memorize in each paradigm, in reading they will be less pleased because they have to decide quickly and efficiently which case to consider the ambiguous words in a particular sentence.

All Latin teachers have a repertoire of tactics for resolving ambiguous forms. Some they received in the oral tradition from their teachers and some they have developed from their own experience. Latin authors also expect their readers to use certain techniques to understand their writing. Readers who do not have in their repertoire a particular resolution tactic expected by the author of a Latin text will find that text difficult or impossible to understand. So it is important to teach our students as many such tactics as possible. Most Latin textbooks ignore the issue and leave teachers and students to flounder in their first exposure to continuous passages of "real" Latin.

What follows is an attempt to catalog all the possible tactics for resolving one particularly common and important ambiguity, that of the nominative and accusative plural of third, fourth and fifth declension non-neuter nouns. While they are in the form of rules, they are rules-of-thumb. For teaching purposes, they should be observed whenever they occur in classroom reading, they should be practiced and used, but they need not be memorized. Students do not have to recite the list or produce the exact wording of a rule. They should have them available and be able to use them when needed.

Each tactic consists of a *trigger*, the conditions under which the tactic applies, and an *action* which the reader is to perform when the rule fires. Once a rule has fired, the reader should consider the noun in question to be the case indicated by the rule and should forget any other possible parsings.

The tactics are grouped in the following list according to the part of speech of the triggering word. The order of the tactics is not indicative of their importance or frequency of occurrence. The tactics assume that the student is being taught to read Latin in the original word order, not to "decode" it by jumping around in the sentence as no Roman ever did. Students should acquire the habit of looking back to the earlier parts of the sentence to find the trigger of a disambiguating tactic. If they do not find one in the sentence start, they will have to remember the ambiguity and await the trigger which will follow.

PREPOSITIONS:

A. If the ambiguous noun is preceded by a preposition with no other object, consider the noun in question accusative.

1. *ad urbes*

VERBS:

B. If the verb of the clause does not agree in person or number with the noun, consider it accusative.

2. *urbes cepit*
3. *urbes cepimus*

(Note: over-reliance on this rule has led many teachers, and even one text book, to encourage students to decode a sentence by the "Find the verb, find the subject . . ." technique.)

C. If the verb of the clause takes an object in a case other than accusative, or if it takes no object, consider the noun nominative.

4. *urbes sunt*	(linking)
5. *urbes placent*	(takes dative)
6. *milites utuntur*	(takes ablative)
7. *milites laudantur*	(passive)
8. *milites stant*	(intransitive)

D. In the environment of an infinitive, consider the noun in question accusative.

9. *milites laudari a Caesare scio.*

NOUNS:

E. If there is in the environment an unambiguous noun which competes with the noun in question for the subject or object slot in the sentence, consider the noun in question to be the other case.

10. *urbes puella*
11. *urbes puellas*
12. *puella urbes*
13. *puellas urbes*

Note that the triggering word may be a word which was previously disambiguated:

14. *multas urbes homines*

(Because of *multas*, see rule K, *urbes* is unambiguously accusative, so the reader forgets it was ever ambiguous. When *homines* enters the sentence, the reader can immediately consider it nominative.)

F. If the noun in question is joined by a coordinating conjunction to another noun which is unambiguous or which can agree with the noun in question in only one case, consider them the same case.

15. *puellas et matres*

The reader must exercise some care in applying this tactic because the conjunction may sometimes be connecting not words but larger syntactical units. as in this sentence:

Caesar cepit urbem et cives timuerunt.

In this example, the conjunction is connecting the two main clauses, not the two nouns adjacent to it. Those two nouns, therefore, may be, and in fact are, in two different cases.

G. If the noun in question is in apposition with another noun, consider them the same case.

16. *equites, viri honestissimi,*

ADJECTIVES:

H. If there is in the environment a nominative or accusative adjective which disagrees with the noun in question in gender or number, consider the noun in question to be the other case.

17. *milites bonas*

I. If the noun is joined by a coordinating conjunction to a noun phrase introduced by an adjective, consider them the same case.

18. *milites et bonos*

J. If the noun is in apposition to a noun phrase introduced by an adjective, consider them the same case.

19. *equites, honestissimi viri,*

K. If there an unattached adjective which agrees with, or can be made to agree with, the noun in question, consider the noun in question to be the same case.

20. *reges bonos*

A good ancient author will not follow up those sentence starts in ways which will invalidate that decision. Sentences like the ones marked with * will not occur:

* *reges bonos pueros laudant.*

This rule holds true even if the adjective has other possibilities which do not agree with the ambiguous noun.

21. *naves magnae* may be taken as a nominative noun phrase.

Sentences like

**naves magnae Aegypti Agrippa cepit.*

will not occur.

Beware: the ancient authors observe this rule most carefully; the authors of modern textbook sentences do not.

Parallelism:

L. If the noun in question is in parallel construction with an unambiguous noun, consider it the same case as the parallel noun.

22. Pueros pater laudavit, puellas mater, parentes pueri.

The noun and adjective tactics, especially Tactic K, work only if the sentence is read in the original Latin word order. If the reader is jumping around in the sentence, these tactics are invalidated. Since the ancient authors use these tactics quite often, their removal from the repertoire of possible tactics makes many sentences difficult or impossible to follow.

Many of the tactics in the foregoing list are probably rather familiar. Some, like tactic A (for prepositions,) are probably obvious or even trivial to most Latin teachers. Some, like B (disagreement with the verb), are probably over-used by many readers when noun tactics would be successful sooner in the sentence. Some, like K (agreement with adjectives), may be an addition to many teachers' repertoire. In any case, the attempt to articulate and explain a complete list of such commonsense tactics, can only clarify our largely subconscious reading techniques. Once we are aware of them, we can communicate them more effectively to our students.

BOOKS RECEIVED: continued from inside back cover

Fleming, Stuart. *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change.* University of Pennsylvania Museum: Philadelphia, 1999. pp 208. ISBN 0-024171-73-1.

Jaro, Benita Kane. *The Lock.* Bolchazy-Carducci: Wauconda, 2002. pp 280. ISBN 086516535-1.

Lawrence, Caroline. *The Thieves of Ostia.* Orion Children's Books: London, 2001. pp 195. ISBN 1-84255-079-9.

Lawrence, Caroline. *The Secrets of Vesuvius.* Orion Children's Books: London, 2001. pp 213. ISBN 1-84255-080-2.

Silverstein, Shel, trans. Jennifer and Terrence Tunberg. *Arbor Alma: The Giving Tree in Latin.* Bolchazy-Carducci: Wauconda, 2002. pp 60. ISBN 086516499-1.

Williams, Rose. *Duces Romanorum.* Wimbledon Publishing Company: London, 2001. pp 125. ISBN 189885547-1.

ROMAN GLASS

OBSERVATIONS ON AN ANCIENT INDUSTRY

by Stuart Fleming

Fig. 1 (above): Montage of the various kinds of cosmetic lotion bottles (unguentaria) produced by the fledgling Roman glassworking industry during the first half of the 1st century A.D. (11 cm on the left)

INTRODUCTION

"Glass vessels for eating and drinking are to be considered in the class of household goods, just as earthenware vessels are, not only the common ones, but also those that are more costly." (Paulus, *The Digest* XXXIII.10)

The Romans did not invent glass—as far as we can tell, that innovation occurred in northwestern Iran around 2200 B.C. Nor were the Romans responsible for the novel chemistries which were developed over the centuries for the coloration of glass. Most of those matters had already been resolved in Egypt by the times of the young pharaoh Tutankhamun (circa 1330 B.C.), and were superbly adapted in the Hellenistic world of the eastern Mediterranean late in the 3rd century B.C. What the Romans did contribute to the history of the glassmaking craft is simply stated—they *industrialized* it, making it the domestic material of the plebians and slaves.

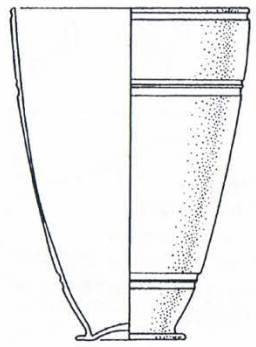

Fig. 2: Wine beaker with lathe-cut decoration: 1st century A.D. (12.5 cm)

THE AUGUSTAN WATERSHED

The speed at which that industrialization came about is fascinating. Even though Roman merchants were in close contact with the Hellenistic world by the early 2nd century B.C., they and several generations of their successors took

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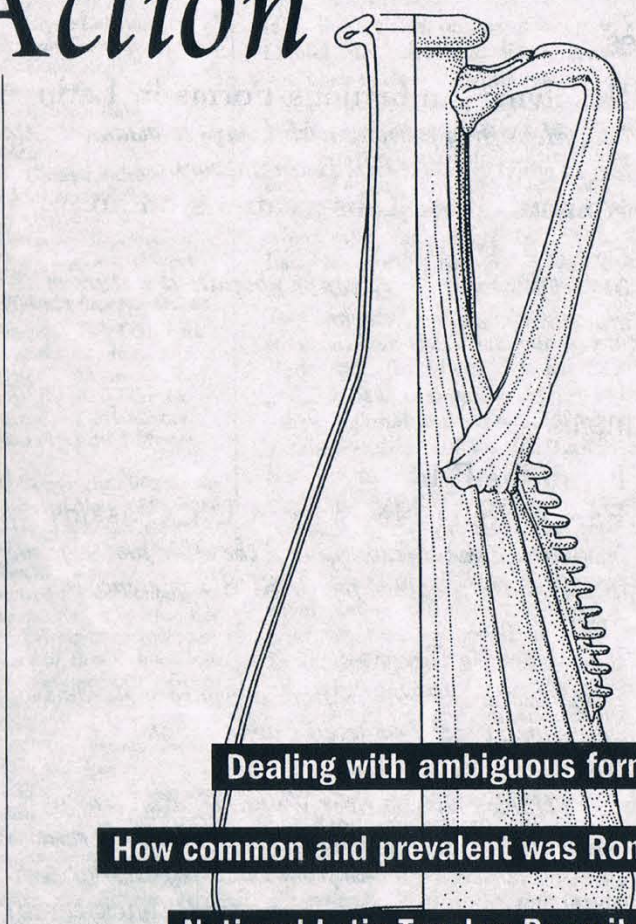

Dealing with ambiguous forms in Latin

How common and prevalent was Roman glass?

National Latin Teacher Recruitment Week

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