

Visual Latin

When you are learning a language, you are almost always taught morphology and syntax. This is traditional grammar. However, there is more going on in a language than morphology and syntax. For example, different languages have different perspectives in expressing ideas and describing situations. Such things are beyond morphology and syntax.

In English, we tend to describe everything as a kind of process. The verb is the centerpost of the sentence. It is a definer and controller of relations, and the meanings of most elements of a sentence depend on their relation to the verb. The subject-verb relation is the essential feature of proper English grammar. The verb is the primary syntactic controller of the sentence. You may have noticed that writers, especially poets, sometimes try to escape the tyranny of this and describe things in a more image-like, verbless way.

Roman-era Latin is a language that consistently describes things in an image-like way and in which the verb has a function very different from the control function it has in English. The Latin sentence is a mosaic-like image of an idea or situation. This image-sentence is built mainly around relations among case-bearing elements. The function of the verb, if there even is a verb, is to *activate* or *animate* the image. It is not a controller. It is not the centerpost of the sentence, nor is it even necessary. The Latin verb is just another tile in the mosaic, just another image element, although a dynamic one, not a static one.

The Latin grammar taught in schools sticks to morphology and syntax and almost never gets into the ways Romans actually expressed themselves. The fact is, Romans were making pictures all the time when they talked and wrote, not describing processes. Students of Latin who do not grasp this usually find Latin mysterious and hard to read. They tend to translate in a stiff, phrase-by-phrase way, attempting in vain to force Latin expression into the English mold. Most published translations of Latin classics show this tendency, and are unpleasant to read and hard to make sense of as a result.

A Latin sentence is an image of an idea or situation, built up an element at a time. There are two kinds of elements: relational elements and verbal elements. Each element is an image element, a tile in the mosaic. Neither exercises a syntactic control function at the sentence level. In fact, there are no syntactic control functions in the sentence at all. All control functions are built into the elements themselves.

Relational Elements

The relational elements are all the case-bearing words: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, participles. They are 'relational' because cases express and define relations: belonging, location, separation, result, effect, and so on. In typical grammar books, the five

Latin cases are defined primarily as syntactic controllers. But this is not really true, at least not really true to Latin. Remember that Latin is an image language, not a process language. Each Latin case primarily expresses an *idea*. It has a kind of semantic meaning. It is more appropriate to Latin to think of a case as the carrier of a particular idea rather than as the marker of a particular syntactic function. Every relational element of a Latin sentence has one of these case-ideas built-in. There is no such thing as a relational element without case.¹

Each case represents a simple, general idea. Although there are many variations and nuances in the way a particular case may be used, the general underlying idea is always there. Romans did not have to think through a long list of specific applications—ablative of this, dative of that, and so on. They just intuitively knew the simple, underlying case ideas.

The underlying ideas of the first four cases are:

nominative: subject and protagonist; what the sentence is about

genitive: belonging, as possession, quality, or attribute

dative: objective, in the sense of utility or effect

accusative: objective, in the sense of result or end point

The ablative case of the Roman-era is the merger of three older cases—ablative, locative, instrumental—and may thus express one of three underlying ideas:

ablative: separation

locative: location

instrumental: means, manner, accompaniment, prevailing situation

Verbal Elements

The verbal elements are the true verbs, verbs that do not have case. A verb expresses tense, mood, and voice. The main function of a verb is to add these ideas to the image. It has nothing to do with defining or controlling relations. A Latin verb is very precise with respect to these ideas, much more so than an English verb. If an action is in the future from the speaker's point of view, it is in a future tense. Meaning is the whole point. Some Roman letter-writers used the past tenses throughout, so that the meaning would be accurate from the readers point of view! Romans used the subjunctive mood, rare now in English, almost as frequently as the indicative mood, and always where the meaning required it. They also made frequent use of the passive voice, but, because it was specifically meaningful, it did not impart the dead feel to a sentence that its habitual use in English often does.

The infinitive, even though it is historically a noun, is without case and is best considered a verbal element in Latin.

1. Indeclinable nouns have case, even though they have only one form.