



SOME OBSERVATIONS ON LATIN PRONUNCIATION AND SPELLING

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ABSTRACT: This article contains some thoughts and comments about the pronunciation and spelling of the Latin language. It discusses changes in the shape and pronunciation of Latin letters, their evolutionary stages and their current status.

KEY WORDS: phoneme, classical times, digraphs, Romance languages, syllable, semantic difference

In early Latin, the letter K was regularly written before A, but survived in classical times only in a very limited set of words. /z/ is an "import phoneme" in Classical Latin; the letter Z was used in Greek borrowings in place of zeta (Ζζ), which, by the time of its inclusion in the Latin alphabet, is supposed to represent the sound [z]. Between vowels, this sound could be doubled, i.e. [zz]. Some believe that Z could stand for the affricate /ds/.

Before velar consonants, /n/ assimilated at the place of articulation into [ŋ], as in the word quinque ['kʷiŋkʷe]. In addition, G denoted the velar nasal [ŋ] before N (agnus: ['aŋnus]).

The Latin R denoted either an alveolar quaver [r], like the Spanish RR, or an alveolar flap [ɾ], like the Spanish R not at the beginning of a word.

It is assumed that the phoneme /l/ had two allophones (much like in English). According to Allen (Chapter 1, Section v), it was a velarized alveolar lateral approximant [ɫ] as in English full at the end of a word or before another consonant; in other cases it was an alveolar lateral approximant, as in the English look.

V and I could represent both vowel and semivowel phonemes (/ī/ /i/ /j/ /ū/ /u/ /w/). PH, TH, and CH were used in Greek borrowings in place of phi (Φφ /p^h/), theta (Θθ /t^h/) and chi (Χχ /k^h/) respectively. There were no aspirated consonants in Latin, so these digraphs were most often read as P (later F), T, and C/K (with the exception of the most educated people who were well acquainted with Greek).

Doubled consonants were denoted by doubled letters (BB /b:/, CC /k:/ etc.). In Latin, the length of sounds had a semantic difference, for example anus





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/'anus/ (old woman) or ānus /'a:nus/ (ring, anus) or annus /'an:us/ (year). In early Latin, double consonants were written as single; in the 2nd century BC. e. they began to be denoted in books (but not in inscriptions) with a crescent diacritic known as sicilicus ("sickle"), which looked like an inverted C (∩). Later they began to write the double consonants familiar to us.

The phoneme /j/ occurs at the beginning of words before a vowel or in the middle of words between vowels; in the second case, it is doubled in pronunciation (but not in writing): iūs /ju:s/, cuius /'kujjus/. Since such a doubled consonant makes the preceding syllable long, the macron marks the preceding vowel as long in dictionaries, although in reality this vowel is usually short. Prefixed words and compound words keep /j/ at the beginning of the second word element: adiectiūum /adjek'ti:wum/.

Apparently, by the end of the classical period, /m/ at the end of words was pronounced weakly, either dull, or only in the form of nasalization and lengthening of the previous vowel. For example, decem ("10") should have been pronounced ['dekē:]. This hypothesis is supported not only by the rhythms of Latin poetry, but also by the fact that in all Romance languages the final M was lost. For simplification, and also in view of the incomplete proof of this hypothesis, M is usually considered to always represent the phoneme /m/.

In Latin, syllables could be long and short; this is not the same as distinguishing between long and short vowels. A long syllable either includes a long vowel or diphthong, or ends in a consonant (i.e., is closed); a short syllable includes a short vowel and ends with it (i.e., it is open).

If there is a single consonant or qu between two vowels, they start a syllable and thus the preceding syllable is open. If there are two or more consonants between vowels, then the last of the consonants goes to the next syllable, and the rest to the previous one, which thus becomes closed. The exceptions are combinations of stop consonants b, p, d, t, g, c with smooth r, l (type tr), which go entirely to the next syllable.

In two-syllable words, the stress is always on the first syllable. In words with three or more syllables, the stress falls on the penultimate syllable if it is long, and on the third from the end if the penultimate syllable is short.

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