

Latin Declension and Conjugation as Aid to English Syntax

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Abstract

Declension and Conjugation play significant roles in the study of Latin Language Grammar. It can be said that declension and conjugation are Latin. While the five declensions focus on the noun, pronoun adjective, and adverb (ablative), the four groups of conjugation, deal with the verb, essentially. 'Aid' in the context of this article implies that Latin is a reference point for effective use of the English language grammatically or syntactically. Syntactic theory which is concerned with the structure of languages is the basis for this article. The objectives of this article are to address the reasons why grammatical blunders are made in English and secondly, to find solutions by applying the Latin declension and conjugation paradigms. This article discusses two aspects of English usage using Latin as an aid. They include the subject/object structure in a given sentence; and the use of the English twelve tense and aspects. For the subject/object, the Latin Declension paradigm is the model for its explication. The twelve tenses and aspects are based on Latin's six aspects of tense structure irrespective of the four conjugations involved. The article hinges on the syntactic analysis of the English sentence using Latin declension and conjugation as aid. The essence of this article is to enhance the effective use of English by students and the general public. The article concludes with a recommendation that Latin be reintroduced in Nigeria's school system.

Key words: *Latin; Declension; Conjugation; English; Syntax*

Introduction

Latin is the mother language of all the Romance languages: Italia, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. This article does not wish to argue on this though because it is a public truth. However, even though English is not a Romance language, Latin has a lot of influence in its

usage etymologically and syntactically. Latin is the language of academics not being knowledgeable of Latin years back would amount to illiteracy. Latin as a subject and language believes in meticulousness and orderliness. It must be said too, that Latin is gender sensitive as every word is classified as either male or female, or neuter (an aspect that aids the Romance languages a great deal because of their similarities in declension paradigms). Macnaughton and Mcdougall (1981:175) opine that Latin was used in the Middle Ages and is still being used to date because ‘it expresses ideas clearly, accurately and in few words...’. This is very true about Latin. It is a language that believes in precision without recourse to too many words. For Freundlich (1963:187), the Romans established a republic after seven kings of Rome between 753 BC to 209 BC (see Aniga, 2018).

The Ancient Romans whose language is Latin, were laconic in the expression of their thoughts. In other words, they used few words to express their thoughts. They were also conservative with their republicanism. This republic spirit made them desire to create empires outside Rome. It was a successful venture as Rome was lord over many territories and in doing so, spreading the Latin language to the extent that it became the world’s first language just as English is today in the 21 century. Even though Mandarin (the Chinese language) is the most spoken by the population of Chinese worldwide, it is English that is the most used for academic, economic and political matters being the first official language in the UN. This makes English a very vital language in the world order. In other words, the usage of English for daily communication becomes genuinely needful.

Even though Latin is considered ‘dead’, it is still ‘alive’ in the use of English. Examples of this fact include a.m. (ante meridiem: before noon); p.m. (post meridiem: after noon); etc (et cetera: and the rest); et al (et alii, aliae, alia: and others);¹e.g. (exempli gratia: for example); i.e. (id est: that is); cf (confer: compare); per cent (per centum: by the hundred) and so forth. There are common Latin expressions used freely in English today without the user explaining their meanings to their audience. Such Latin phrases or expressions include ab initio (at the beginning); ad infinitum (everlasting); alma mater (nourishing mother) used for a college one attended; bona fide (in good faith); de facto (in fact; actually); de jure (by right; legally); nihil obstat (nothing is undesirable, especially in religious faith); imprimatur (let it be printed,

¹ Depending on the gender: masculine, feminine and neuter.

showing that it is free from doctrinal fallacies); in absentia (in absence); per annum (yearly); sine die (indefinitely); sine qua non (indispensable); status quo (the existing state of affairs); persona non grata (an unwelcomed person).

It is on record that many Latin expressions are used by Lawyers in the Law Court to drive home their arguments. They are so many. Here are just three examples: *errare humanum est* (to err is human); *in dubia noli agere* (in doubt, do not act); *audi alteram partem* (hear the other side). One that observes well will note that many states in the United States of America have their mottos written in Latin to date. Of course, the motto of the United States of America is in Latin: *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one, which implies being the best among other nations of the world). The best ranked universities in the United States of America have their mottos in Latin. These four will suffice: Harvard University (*veritas: Truth*); John Hopkins University (*veritas vos liberabit: The truth will set you free*); Brooklyn College (*nil sine magno labore: Nothing without great effort*); and Yale University (*lux et veritas: Light and truth*).

The Five Latin Declensions and their Case Paradigms

Latin is very inflectional as the endings change based on the cases (Humphreys, 2005:5). The five cases represent the different cases or grammatical structures. The five declensions are concerned with the cases of nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. The following paradigm throws more light:

Nominative case (subject): Regina – Queen

Accusative case (object): Reginam – Queen

Genitive case (genitive): Reginae – Queen’s or of the queen

Dative case (indirect object) reginae – for/to the queen

Ablative case (adverbials) from/with/by the queen²

Much space will not be spent discussing all the differences between the five declensions in their singular and plural forms and as they relate to gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter. The above example suffices. The word, *Regina* belongs to the first declension and it is singular and feminine.

Now, let us pick one of the Latin personal pronouns, ‘ego’ to illustrate the case inflection of the numerous pronouns there are in Latin.

² Apart from these prepositions *ab/a* (from; by), *cum* (with), ablative case can also go with the following prepositions: *ante* (before), *post* (after), *pro* (for; on account of), *in* (into).

Nominative case (subject) ego/nos– I/We

Accusative case (object): me/nos– me/us

Genitive case³ (possessive): mei/nostrum – of me/us

Dative case (indirect object) mihi/nobis – for/to me/us

Ablative case (adverbials/adjuncts) me/nobis - from/with/by me/us

Latin pronouns include the following: the personal pronouns used as examples above for the benefit of this paper and the rest that cannot be discussed due to space: the reflexive pronouns (se: myself, yourself, yourselves, himself, herself, themselves, ourselves); the demonstrative pronouns (is: he; ea: she; and id: it; ii: they-masculine; eae: they-feminine; and ea-they-neuter). Each of these is declined to arrive at cases. Other pronouns are ille, illa, illud (singular) and illi, illae, illa (plural);⁴ the relative pronouns, quid (masculine ‘who’; quae (feminine ‘who’; quod (neuter ‘who’). Definite pronoun *idem* (same for all the three genders) and intensive pronoun, ipse/ipsi (oneself, himself, itself; themselves).

Examples of English Usage based on Latin Cases

In all the above details, we are most concerned with the use of the subject and object given the abuse of them in contemporary English in Nigeria and other places where English is a second language. We shall use the following examples to drive home our illustration using the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘We’ and the relative pronoun, ‘Who’. Latin teaches that whenever a noun or pronoun is preceded by a preposition, it turns to accusative (object case: see questions examples 1-6). On the other hand, we use nominative case when it is the subject of the sentence (see examples 7-10). This rule is grossly abused by our broadcasters and other users of English. The following English expression will help in illustrating the correct use of English with the aid of Latin so far discussed.

1. The programme is **for** you and **me/I**.
2. The orange is **between** John and **me/I**.
3. The woman is **against** my parents and **we/us**.
4. The money is for who/**whom**?

³ Genitive case plays a vital role in the study of Latin by the fact that it determines the group a word belongs when checking it up in a dictionary. The singular genitive markers of the five groups or declensions are as follows: ae; i; is; us; and ei.

⁴ A special Latin pejorative pronoun that could be translated depending whether it is in singular or plural form to mean, ‘that stupid, terrible, unscrupulous man, or woman or thing/men, or women or things’).

5. The assignment was done **by** Ade and he/**him**.
6. I am **from** Okoro and they/**them**.
7. John and me/**I** are friends.
8. It was him/**he** who accomplished the feat.
9. **Who**/whom did you tell about the success.
10. It was us/**we** who eventually won the case at the court.

The Six Tense Aspects of the Four Latin Conjugations

There are four types of conjugation in Latin, but one group will be used in this article to illustrate the behaviour of Latin conjugation due to space. However, it must be said that Latin conjugation deals with verbs. It, therefore, controls the tense and aspects. The following constitute the study of the conjugation which when closely studied are same in English:

- The three persons (the personal pronouns and their noun equivalent);
- The two numbers (singular and plural);
- The three moods:

Indicative: expresses facts and sentiments,

Imperative: expresses commands,

Subjunctive: expresses conditions that must be met before an action takes place

- The Voice:

Active: expresses the real dower of a given action in a sentence,

Passive: expresses what is done to the subject.

Now to the crux of the matter, the Latin six tense aspects. Latin, in its wisdom, classifies the six aspects into two groups as follows:

Primary	Historic
Present simple	Imperfect
Future simple	Perfect
Future perfect	Pluperfect

The above classification helps a great dealing in understanding the English tense and aspect. For instance, the future tenses being classified as primary are apt. What this implies is that the future tense even when it is in future perfect is talking of now though making some assertions about the future. In explicating the above tense aspects as an aid to English twelve (12) tense aspects, we

shall simply use the active voice of Latin as examples and use the first group of conjugation.

Below are the four groups at a glance:

First Conjugation/	-a stem	are	laudo (I praise or I am praising)
Second Conjugation	-e stem	ere	moneo (I advise or I am advising)
Third Conjugation	-u stem	ere	duco (I lead or I am leading)
Fourth Conjugation	-i stem	ire	audio (I listen or I am listening).

Each of the four conjugations is classified into four principal parts⁵ that every student of Latin must be mindful of. They are:

Present Indicative	e.g., laudo (I praise or I am praising)
Present infinitive	e.g., laudare (to praise)
Perfect indicative	e.g., laudavi (I praised or I have praised; or I began to praise)
Participle	e.g., laudatum (having praised)

The four principal parts of Latin are the platform on which the syntactic study of the language is based. Let us quickly go to the six tense aspects that are our cardinal focus.

Latin Present Simple

It is conjugated as follows in active voice:

Laudo	I praise/ I am praising
Laudas	You praise/You are praising
Laudat	He/She/It praises/is praising
Laudamus	we praise/ we are praising
Laudatis	You praise/You are praising
Laudant	they praise/They are praising

English version of Latin Present Simple

Two tense aspects are derived from this. They are:

1. Present Simple Tense

This expresses an action that happens often: every second, minute, day, week, fortnightly, monthly, yearly, etc.

The teacher teaches well whenever he comes to class.

⁵ Similar to the English version of present simple (do/does)/infinitive (to do) /simple past (did)/past participle (done).

They practise their sport every day.

2. Present Continuous tense

This tense expresses an action taking place this very minute.

Professor Oduyoye **is speaking** to the audience now.

I **am writing** on tense and aspect as you eat there.

From the Latin translations of the third person singulars, He/She/It in 'Present Simple', it is important to note that /s/ is added at the end of the verb to indicate a singular verb. Many a user makes mistakes on this aspect of concord. Study these illustrations:

He (Seun) come/**comes** here daily.

She (Ada) do/**does** her assignment diligently.

It (The goat) bleat/**bleats** whenever it is hungry.

What many learners of English do not realise it that every verb is plural and to singularise them, s, es, ies end them. For instance

The men (They) **teach** well.

The man (He) **teaches** well.

The women (They) **go** to work on time.

The woman (She) **goes** to work on time.

Monkeys (They) **carry** their babies on their bellies.

A monkey (It) **carries** its baby on its belly.

Latin Future Simple

It has two ways to conjugate it. The first and second groups end in *bo* suffix while the third and fourth groups end in *am* suffix. Let me give an example using each classification.

Group One:

Laudabo	I shall praise/ I shall be praising
Laudabis	You will praise/You will be praising
Laudabit	He/She/It will praise/ will be praising
Laudabimus	We shall praise/We shall be praising
Laudabitis	You will praise/You will be praising
Laudabunt	They will praise/They will be praising

Group Four:

Audiam	I shall listen/I shall be listening
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Audies	You will listen/You will be listening
Audiet	He/She/It will listen/will be listening
Audiemus	We will listen/We will be listening
Audietis	You will listen/You will be listening
Audient	They will listen/They will be listening

English version of Latin Future Simple

Two tense aspects are derived from this. They are:

3. Future Simple Tense

This tense expresses one's desire or plan to engage in an action at a particular time in future. The future could be the next minute, day, week or year.

I **shall see** you tomorrow.

The President **will address** the nation in an hour's time on the youth protests against police brutality.

4. Future Continuous Tense

This tense expresses an assumption that something will be going on at a particular time in future.

The two top teams **will be playing** in two hours' time.

Dr Adegbola **will be addressing** the participant this time next year.

In Latin, it is explicit that the first person singular and plural pronouns take the auxiliary verb, 'shall' while the other pronouns take 'will'. This practice should be the case in correct use of English. This is because 'shall' denotes an obligation which 'I' and 'We' can guarantee. 'Shall' can only be used for the other pronouns and their noun equivalent in the course of legal discourse. For instance,

It **shall be called** by the name, 'Nigeria Academy of Letters' by the present law.

The man (He) **shall** now own the compare based on the verdict of the law court.

Latin Future Perfect

The conjugation group determines the stem of the verb. But the suffixes are uniform for all four groups. Let us continue with the first group:

Laudavero	I shall have praised/I shall have been praising
Laudaveris	You will have praised/You will have been praising
Laudaverit	He/She/It will have praised/will have been praising

Laudaverimus	We shall have praised/We shall have been praising
Laudaveritis	You will have praised/You will have been praising
Laudaverint	They will have praised/They will have been praising

English version of Latin Future Perfect

Two tense aspects are derived from this. They are:

5. Future Perfect

This tense assumes that before a particular time in future, some action will have taken place.

By this time tomorrow, I shall have taught the students.

Nigeria will have become a developed country by the year, 2050.

6. Future Perfect Continuous

It expresses the assumption that before a particular time in future, something will have been going/taking place.

The class will have been going on by the time you join us.

He will have been working in the company by the time she marries him next year.

Latin Imperfect

The conjugation group determines the stem of the verb. But the suffixes are uniform for all four groups. The suffix in this tense is *bam* which then undergoes inflection as shown below:

Laudabam	I was praising
Laudabas	You were praising
Laudabat	He/She/It was praising
Laudabamus	We were praising
Laudabatis	You were praising
Laudabant	they were praising

English version of Latin Imperfect Tense

7. Past Continuous Tense

Just as in Latin, this tense expresses an action that began in the past but was not concluded by the time another action took place.

He **was eating** when I called yesterday.

The football marching **was going** on when they visited me last night.

NB: This tense can be equated to English 'Past Continuous Tense' as well.

Latin Perfect

The conjugation group determines the stem of the verb. But the suffix is uniform for all four groups.

Laudavi	I praised/I have praised
Laudavisti	You praised/You have praised
Laudavit	He/She/It praised/have praised
Laudavimus	We praised/We have praised
Laudavistis	You praised/You have praised
Laudaverunt	They praised/They have praised

English version of Latin Perfect Tense

8. Past Simple Tense

This tense expresses a dead action which took place in the past which could be a minute ago, an hour ago, a day ago, a week ago, etc.

The girl scored the highest mark in the test last week.

We were at the party last night.

9. Past Continuous Tense (See the Imperfect Tense above)

Latin Pluperfect

The conjugation group determines the stem of the verb. But the suffix is uniform for all four groups.

Laudaveram	I had praised
Laudaveras	You had praised
Laudaverat	He/She/It had praised
Laudaveramus	We had praised
Laudaveratis	You had praised
Laudaverant	They had praised

English version of Latin Pluperfect Tense

10. Past Perfect Tense

This tense implies that two dead actions have taken place. The Latin term is more explicit. It means that two or more actions took place in the past. The auxiliary verb 'had' is very key in this tense. The 'had' must precede the verb of the action that took place first of the two or more actions.

I **had eaten** before you came today.

Not,

I **ate** before you came today.

He **had had** his class before we arrived.

Not,

He **had** his class before we arrived.

11. Past Perfect Continuous Tense

This tense expresses an action that had been in progress before another action occurred.

Professors Achebe and Soyinka **had been writing** before I **was born**.

I **had been studying** Latin before I **met** you.

NB: One of the English Tense Aspects, 'Present Perfect Tense' is hanging between the primary and historic Latin Tense categorisation. It is a tense that expresses an action that began in the past and is still on to date.

Examples of Present Perfect Tense are:

The man **has driven** the car for ten years.

The couples **have married** for decades.

Linking the Latin Declension and Conjugation to Effective English Usage

There is no doubt that the study of Latin as explicated so far in the paper using Latin Declension and Conjugation is an aid to English usage. Apart from the subject/object earlier discussed, it is clear from the study of the six Latin tenses being placed side by side with those of English, that the use of concord especially under the third person singular is aided by the translation of the Latin versions. The use of 'been' and 'being' can silently be distinguished by a vigilant student who has had the opportunity of studying some Latin grammar. 'Been', is normally preceded by the auxiliary verbs, **has, have, and had**. It is constant. But 'Being' as a verb is preceded by the 'to be' verbs, **am, is, are, was, and were**. It is also constant.

Basic understanding of Latin Declension cases and Conjugation, the dynamics of the verb will no doubt guide and aid any person who wishes to be proficient in the use of English. This is

because these two pillars of Latin prepare one to understand the basic syntactic rule of S.V.O.O.A.⁶

Excerpts from ‘The Story of Perseus’ according to Gray and Jenkins (1934: 23 Edition of 1965), pages 1 to 26.

1. Acrisius cupiebat Perseum nepotem suum interficere.

Translation: Acrisius was desiring to kill Perseus, his grandson.

Because Perseus is the receiver of the action of the intended killing, it is written in the accusative case, ‘Perseum’ and therefore is the object of the sentence while the subject is ‘Acrisius’.

2. Perseus igitur multos annos in regno Polydectis, et cum matrem vitam laetam agebat.

Translation: Perseus therefore, was living in the Kingdom of Polydectes (Polydectes’ Kingdom), and with his mother **was** having a happy life.

Perseus is now the subject. Polydectis is in genitive (possessive case). Note that with the conjunction, cum (with) the verb is ‘was having’, not ‘were having’. It is the standard in Latin and has become a standard too in English concord. E.g., The man with his son **was/were** here.

3. Propter hanc causam Minerva speculum Perseo dederat.

Translation: Because of this reason, Minerva (Subject) had given a mirror (direct object) to Perseus (indirect object). Perseo is the dative form of Perseus in second declension Latin.

NB: Latin does not have equivalents of definite (the) and indefinite articles (a, an, some) as in English, French and other languages. It is the user of English that provides the articles appropriately.

4. Tum, Perseus ad regem et reginam appropinquavit et dixit: ‘Ego sum Perseus, filius Iovis.’

Translation: Then, Perseus (subject) approached the king and the queen (object) and said, ‘I am Perseus, the grandson of Jupiter.’

⁶ S stands for the subject; V for verb; first O for direct object; second O for indirect object; and A for adjunct which serves as adverbials of place, time, manner, reason, purpose, degree, and concession. The Latin ablative of course, takes care of all these adjuncts.

NB: Note carefully that after a linking verb in ‘I am...’ the noun Perseus, not Perseum is used. This is grammatically supported by the fact that it must be a nominative or subject that comes after a linking verb. E.g. It was Lucy (**she**/her) who won the race.

5. Tandem igitur cum uxore suaregno Cephei discessit.

So, eventually, he (Perseus) departed (discessit: third person singular) with his wife from the Kingdom of Cepheus/Cepheus’ Kingdom. Note that Latin used third person singular verb because of the conjunction ‘cum’ (with).

6. Ille autem, ubi Perseum vidit, magno terrore commotus est; nam propter oraculum nepotem suum adhuc timebat.

Translation: The terrible man (Acrisius), however, when he saw Perseus (written Perseum: object), was affected by great fear; he was fearing (correct in Latin but better translated, he was afraid) on account of **what the oracle had said about (implied from the entire story)** his grandson).

The six excerpts should give us some insights into how connected Latin is to contemporary English. This connection solidifies the article’s argument that Latin is an aid to English usage, syntax wise.

Conclusion

In this article, it has been argued that English, though not one of the Romance languages, owes much of its grammatical system to Latin declensions and conjugations. It, therefore, follows that the knowledge of Latin will help a user of the English language master their basic grammar and speak and write with confidence. It is not out of place to then recommend that Latin be reintroduced in the primary schools (and even in the junior secondary schools) just as history in Nigeria after many years. With the introduction of Latin, the current problem of grammatical blunders in case, concord and tense will be checked and the right usages mastered!

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