

Interpuncta Verborum: Reassessing Punctuation in the Latin Classroom

“What do you mean the Romans didn’t have punctuation? How did they know when to stop? Why do we have periods in our Latin books then?” A teacher frequently encounters such questions in the teaching of Latin, especially during the levels I and IV (or advanced). Within the first year, questions will arise from native English speakers often regarding the word order of a Latin sentence, which in general will follow the flexible Subject-Object-Verb order (cf. English’s rigid Subject-Verb-Object order). In this case, one may explain such a word order via the “lack” of modern punctuation, wherein verbs typically indicate a change from one sentence to the next. After this explanation, the student is usually satisfied and returns to their text, which is rich in modern punctuation.

Years later, upon working with authentic Latin texts, students will again ask questions similar to the ones they had in their first exposure to the language: “How did the editors of this text determine this punctuation? Did the original manuscripts have the same punctuation? How do we know that this word belongs with this phrase and not that one?” These targeted questions arise when the teacher introduces the history of the text itself via Medieval manuscripts (if he or she does at all). Ultimately, readers of Latin, students and teachers alike, are at the whim of the editors, who determine and suggest how a line or a word should be interpreted. However, it is at this point that the investigative Latin student should realize that *he or she* is the ultimate interpreter, especially when it comes to punctuation, which can often be a hindrance in a text rather than an aid.

Through the lenses of beginning and advanced Latin classrooms, this paper will investigate the role of modern punctuation in the Latin classroom and will evaluate the potential benefits of a return to the *interpunct*, represented as a dot or triangle placed between Latin words.

In the former, it must be acknowledged that this modern punctuation in the presentation of Latin has been a tradition since the Medieval period, before which the systems of *scriptio continua* or the interpunct dominated writing (Hodgman 1924; Wingo 1972). Particularly for speakers of English, modern punctuation is widely upheld as an aid for students to transition into Latin. In the latter, it is the opinion of the author that the usage of the interpunct in Latin I and beyond may be a superior tool for students of Latin in the following ways: 1) to introduce students to authentic materials more quickly and more systematically (such as inscriptions, coins, and manuscripts), 2) to allow students the opportunity to read Latin in the manner that the ancient Romans in the Classical period would have read it (Wulluee 2011), 3) to provide for students the immediate understanding of the necessity of Latin S-O-V word order, and 4) to prepare students for the reality of surviving Latin texts, manuscripts, and the process of “editing”.

For a visual of this comparison between modern punctuation and ancient word dividers (or lack thereof), note the following sentences, which differ in formatting:

Modern Format: *Roma in Italia est.*

Scriptio Continua Format: ROMAINITALIAEST

Interpunct Format #1: ROMA•INITALIA•EST

Interpunct Format #2: ROMA•IN•ITALIA•EST

Bibliography

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