

Book Review

James N. Adams. 2013. *Social variation and the Latin language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xxi + 933. ISBN 978-0-521-88614-7. GBP 89.99.

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More than fifty years ago Mohrmann argued that Classicists traditionally tended to view Latin as a monolithic entity¹ and that it was Romance scholars who deserve credit for putting forth a more diversified picture of the language in distinguishing Classical from what came to be called Vulgar Latin,² the assumed true ancestor of the Romance languages (Mohrmann 1961–1962: 91–93). Adams's book goes several steps further, presenting an in-depth analysis of varieties of Latin in connection to social stratification and (re-)establishing the importance of classical data for the study of language change.

Social variation and the Latin language is the third book in a series of three volumes by Adams that examine varieties of Latin in the Roman world: language variation in speakers in terms of bilingualism (*Bilingualism and the Latin language*, 2003), geographic varieties of Latin (*The regional diversification of Latin*, 2007), and now social variation in Latin.

The book under review examines phenomena in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon in Latin texts that represent or reflect a variety of sociolects, registers, and time periods. Drawing from a rich corpus of data, Adams presents a complex and diversified picture of social variation in Latin and he demonstrates that language change is not the exclusive prerogative of the lower-register varieties of Latin and that certain narratives about the shift from Latin to Romance are factually inaccurate. Adams's *Social variation and the Latin language* therefore re-opens the debate about the origins of the Romance languages and dramatically modifies our perception of social variation in a dead language, its relation with language change, the dynamics between low-register and “educated” language, and in that light the relation between Latin and Romance.

¹ The trend among Latinists was to regard Latin as “une espèce de langue stabilisée, langue parfaite qui n'était plus sujette à évolution” (Mohrmann 1961–1962: 91).

² “Vulgar Latin” is roughly speaking the substandard – predominantly spoken – variety of Latin.

The book is divided into eight parts, starting with an “Introduction” (Part 1, pp. 3–27), in which Adams defines and motivates his aims and methods. He subsequently examines more than thirty linguistic topics: ten in “phonology and orthography” ([Part 2, pp. 31–198], e. g. the vowel system [pp. 37–70], hiatus [pp. 101–124], aspirates [pp. 125–127], and final consonants [pp. 128–163]); six phenomena pertaining to “case and preposition” (Part 3, pp. 199–380), such as oblique case vs. prepositional expressions (pp. 257–320), nominatives and accusatives (pp. 201–256), or prepositions and comparative expressions (pp. 363–370). Several analyses address changes in “nominal, pronominal and adverbial morphology and syntax” (Part 4, pp. 381–611), affecting gender (pp. 383–452), morphological variation in demonstratives (pp. 453–481), definite articles (pp. 482–527), and several word formation processes (pp. 528–601). Part 5, “Aspects of verbal morphology and syntax” (pp. 613–740), discusses reflexive verbs and the passive (pp. 674–724), *habere* ‘have’ constructions (with perfective participle and infinitive respectively, pp. 615–673), and the ablative of the gerund (pp. 725–740). At sentence level (Part 6, pp. 741–773) analysis of subordination entails reported speech (pp. 743–746) and indirect questions (pp. 747–773). The last section of the analysis proper focuses on “aspects of the lexicon and word order” (Part 7, pp. 775–838), with three case studies – two pertaining to the lexicon (anatomical terms [pp. 779–791] and suppletion in the verb “go” [pp. 792–820]) and one to word order (infinitives in combination with auxiliary verbs, [pp. 821–838]). Part 8 – “Summing up” (pp. 839–871) – evaluates the “social background of Romance phenomena” (pp. 841–856), “submerged Latin” (pp. 856–862), the link between innovations and social class in Latin (p. 862), the relevance of grammarians (pp. 864–866), the relation between early Latin and the Romance languages (pp. 862–864) and between “social variation and Latin literature” (pp. 866–870) as well as “Latin and Greek” (pp. 870–871). The monograph includes three indexes: a subject index (pp. 911–913), an *index verborum* (pp. 914–920), and an *index locorum potiorum* (pp. 921–933), as well as a list of abbreviations (languages and primary sources, pp. xix–xxi) and an extensive Bibliography (pp. 872–910).

Adams’s analysis of social variation in Latin and its history is distinctly data-oriented. Each chapter or case study starts with an overview of (part of) the existing literature (e. g. pp. 528–531 on suffixation) and a definition of the topic before Adams provides his own detailed analysis implementing relevant results by others. Focus is of course on the Latin part of the developments discussed. The social spread of the phenomenon, its semantic and structural characteristics and motivation are identified, resulting in an assessment of the sociolinguistic status of the feature and its role in language change. Adams thus addresses the

question whether language change exclusively took place in Vulgar Latin or whether it also originated in higher registers.

Considering the length of Adams's study and the readership of this journal, I will here focus on a selected number of aspects of it that alter our perception of Latin and its development into Romance and therefore have an impact on the field of historical linguistics: (a) Vulgar Latin and the primacy of language change; (b) variation within (Vulgar) Latin; (c) language variation and data; (d) *Social variation* and conventional wisdom; (e) points of critique; and (f) conclusions: where does the book leave us?

1 Vulgar Latin and the primacy of change

Latin is an exceptional language because of its richly documented history, with texts that cover a wide range of periods, genres, and register. Where for other early languages we are lucky if we have one or two texts, for Latin we have the luxury of being able to examine what variety of Latin was the true ancestor of the Romance languages. It has traditionally been assumed that this was Vulgar Latin. Yet the question carries the risk of unduly narrowing our perspective to one variety only when we examine the data at hand, neglecting evidence that in fact may yield a more accurate picture. Another risk is oversimplification.

In the minds of certain scholars the identification of “Vulgar Latin” as a variety of Latin has indeed created a rather schematic picture in which Classical Latin as the educated language was considered a fossilized and segregated language, untainted by change, whereas non-standard Vulgar Latin evolved, increasingly developing Romance characteristics. Sometimes the varieties are almost defined in terms of bilingualism, as in Pulgram's schematic representation of spoken (Vulgar) vs. written Latin (Pulgram 1950: 461–462).³

On the basis of extensive data Adams, instead, consistently shows the complexity of the situation and the factual inaccuracy of a widespread narrative about the origins of Romance – stating that the Romance languages in structure and lexicon trace back to Vulgar Latin – which takes several forms (pp. 23–25): (1) according to one hypothesis, Latin varieties that survive in Romance are first attested in non-standard Latin and subsequently “spread across the social

³ According to some, the gap between the two varieties is unbridgeable. Hall, for example, for whom spoken Latin leaves insufficient traces in the written records, has advocated the need of reconstructing Proto-Romance on the basis of Romance comparative data (e. g. Hall [1974–1983]).

spectrum by the late period” (p. 23–24). This “narrative is so entrenched that scholars may see the pattern where it does not exist” (p. 24). (2) According to another reading, Proto-Romance phenomena are attested in early non-educated Latin (e. g. Plautus’s plays) and as spoken varieties subsequently disappear from the (written) radar to reappear again in Late Latin or Romance (so-called “submerged change”). Examples typically quoted in this context include e. g. the early Latin replacement of the dative by prepositional *ad* + noun, which continued into Romance (p. 24; 278). The degree to which these phenomena are assumed to “submerge” varies from scholar to scholar. In extreme interpretations, the hypothesis is often based on Romance rather than Latin data as in Pulgram (1975), who projects the Romance vowel system—based on vowel quality—onto early Latin (p. 24; Pulgram 1975: 249–256), establishing “a continuity (...) from some ancient preclassical spoken Latin,... to the Romance speeches” (Pulgram 1975: 249). (3) In a third approach, focus is on the appearance of Romance characteristics in late documents without addressing earlier potential occurrences. The underlying assumption is that Late Latin went through a period of “decadence”, during which language change took place and literary conventions got lost. An allegedly typical example is the usage of reflexive verbs as passives (pp. 674–719).

These interpretations implicitly ascribe the primacy of language change to Vulgar Latin, even if this was generally not acknowledged. Yet this alleged primacy is so deep-rooted that “it is not unfair to say that scholars have sometimes blindly assigned phenomena to Vulgar Latin that were well established in the literary language (as well as lower varieties), for no better reason than that these phenomena influenced the Romance languages” (p. 842). The question is whether features that have been identified as “Vulgar” in the past are indeed distinctive characteristics exclusive to low-register Latin.

In addition, the identification of Vulgar Latin as the sole origin of the Romance languages tacitly excludes Classical Latin from diachronic analysis. Relevant diachronic data from educated texts have been ignored, which ironically only confirmed the prevalent narrative. Moreover, the assumption that change is the prerogative of Vulgar Latin does not correspond to the sociolinguistic reality as we know it from modern languages, which vary according to social groups and situations and where change spreads from “below” as well as “above”. It is precisely this incongruity that Adams identifies at the beginning of his book and that leads him to question “whether in Latin change that was to affect the Romance languages came only from below” (p. xv). In fact he finds that there is “evidence for linguistic innovation at higher social/educational levels that was to leave its mark on Romance” (p. xvi).

This book identifies for each phenomenon analyzed the varieties of Latin in which it occurs, its grammatical and sociolinguistic characteristics, and its role in the history of the language.

2 Variation within (Vulgar) Latin

Vulgar Latin often is identified as the language of “the masses” (e. g. Herman 1979, 2000). Alternatively scholars are remarkably silent or vague, referring to its speakers as “l’homme de la rue”, for example or “le peuple”, Väänänen 1981: 14; *passim*). Even if it is acknowledged that there is variation according to time, location, and social group (e. g. Herman’s “stylistic variants”, 2000: 18), to date no systematic attempts have been made at social classification of relevant linguistic features and as a result Vulgar Latin generally is presented as distinct and different from Classical Latin (e. g. Herman 1979; 2000) but without connection to social stratification in Roman society.

Non-standard Latin was not monolithic, however, and from the beginning of his book Adams identifies the sociolinguistic characteristics of linguistic phenomena, where possible in conjunction with precise social groups. Starting with a detailed – yet concise – discussion of varieties of non-standard Latin, and the sources that provide the relevant information (pp. 12–22), Adams identifies characteristics of the language of slaves, for example, as found in Plautus and inscriptions (p. 16–19), of freedmen (Petronius, pp. 16; 419–422), rustics (p. 17), midwives (pp. 15; 568–569), or the military (pp. 17, 545; 852–856). Social stratification of linguistic phenomena is a recurring feature throughout the book, as the references above illustrate, even if for many phenomena it is not possible to specify the precise substandard variety (e. g. p. 23, and further discussion pp. 853–856) or if certain phenomena are exponents of (technical) registers rather than sociolects (e. g. certain suffixes p. 563).

Social stratification may also have diachronic implications, as illustrated in the analysis of the neuter: Adams establishes a relative chronology for a eclipsing grammatical category (pp. 448–452) on the basis of patterns in “gender deviations” in a number of substandard texts, revealing the early lack of evidence of a weakening neuter vs. its later increasingly tainted position that anticipates its loss (pp. 419–431).

3 Language variation and data

Adams is a master at bringing together evidence from different types of source, stating that “a selective treatment may produce misleading results” (p. 23). He

uses primary sources in combination e. g. with comments and historical data. Examining the status of gender (pp. 383–452), for example, he combines extensive data from Plautus, Petronius, Oribasius, and the Vindolanda tablets (early 2nd c. A.D.), comments by Jerome (pp. 450–451), and the “role of school tradition” as reflected in Anthimus’s texts (pp. 426–427; 448–449; 450), identifying the social stratification and stages of a disappearing grammatical category, and the “leading role” of lower sociolects (p. 448).

Similarly, with data from primary sources in combination with distribution patterns in Romance, Adams identifies the geographic distribution of the low-register pronoun *illui* (‘he-DAT.SG) and the (historical) primacy of the feminine variety – *ill(a)ei* – in that development (pp. 459–462), undermining the prevalent interpretation that claims the contrary, often without valid data (p. 461).

Adams’s primary documents frequently include comments by contemporaries, grammarians as well as authors, which are illuminating. Well-aware of sociolinguistic differences, the Church Fathers, for example, adapted their style accordingly: Augustine uses substandard *ossum* instead of *os* ‘bone-NOM’ arguing that “uneducated Africans” were unable to distinguish long from short -o (*ōs* ‘bone’ vs. *ōs* ‘mouth’; pp. 48–49). *Ossum* is a backformation on the basis of the neuter plural *ossa*, and marks the sociolinguistic distinction between “correct Latin” and ““mass” usage”.

Contemporary evaluations are often clarified by Adams in the light of their historical context, which is crucial for the way we read them today. Several grammarians, for example, suffered from linguistic nostalgia and their assessment of a given feature may therefore not always point to a new trend from which the educated language needed to be protected—a widespread quasi-automatic assumption – but rather a plain “archaism”, as we know from the writings by Augustine, for example (p. 125): the favorable assessment of aspirates in initial position by grammarians reflects an archaism rather “than a defense of educated usage against a new trend” (p. 13; 125–126), because the omission of the original initial aspirate was a “feature of speech across the social spectrum” (p. 126).

Sources consulted by Adams also typically include evidence that has been there all along, but to date has been ignored, such as *habeo* + Perf.Participle constructions, which came to be defining structures in Romance. These structures were identified long ago already by Thielmann (1885) as occurring in classical texts and as being typically absent in third, fourth, and 5th century texts (1885: 539–542). Yet these findings to date have on the whole been left without consequence for our interpretation of the sociolinguistics of Latin or its history. The corresponding chapter (pp. 615–651) provides ample data showing that these structures indeed did not originate in substandard, but rather in classical texts. This example illustrates an important phenomenon: with the

exclusion of classical data from diachronic research, *habeo* + Perf.Participle has not been identified as a change “from above”. Findings of this type affect our methods of analysis and the way we perceive language change. Similar patterns were found in the emergence of Romance *mente*-adverbs, which represent a distinguishing feature of Romance as well. Analysis has shown that they originated in the educated language (Bauer 2003; 2010). Earlier, word order change has also been identified in Classical Latin, undermining its allegedly “colloquial” nature (Linde 1923, Adams 1977, Bauer 1995). These developments illustrate Adams’s statement that the “picture may sometimes be drastically altered if neglected literary texts of earlier periods are taken into account” (p. 25).

4 *Social variation and conventional wisdom*

Adams examines numerous phenomena that in the past have been inaccurately labeled as substandard. A case in point is the analysis of reflexive verbs, which traditionally have been described as belonging to “lower social varieties of the language” (p. 717). Assessment of a variety of texts, among them the *Mulomedicina Chironis* and its rendition by Vegetius, shows that reflexive verbs were not merely expressions favored by “the masses” alone (e. g. pp. 695–711). Reflexives played an important role in the replacement of synthetic passives. While the development of reflexives cannot be isolated from impersonal and middle formations in *-r* as Adams correctly points out (p. 717),⁴ he also finds no sign of a massive loss of synthetic passives in the written language, not even in its low-register varieties (p. 724). This brings to mind patterns noted in other segments of morphology as well: synthetic forms seem to be rather robust over time (Bauer 2012). Moreover, Adams demonstrates that synthetic passives continued to be used in writing, with reflexives occasionally replacing them. This pattern may reflect the true nature of passives as a phenomenon of non-casual (written) language, a trend observed in today’s languages of Europe as well (pp. 674–677; 680–682). As a result, the development of alternatives for the synthetic passive may be a submerged change, but not necessarily a low-register one (p. 718–719)

The chapter on “suffixation (mainly adjectival) and non-standard Latin” (pp. 528–581) strongly undermines the conventional wisdom that certain suffixes

⁴ Formations in *-r* (e. g. La. *itur* ‘one goes’) are original in Indo-European; *-r-* became the marker of passives in a number of Indo-European languages (Bauer 2000).

are “stylistic or social” and that Vulgar Latin had an “inordinate love for ponderous derivatives and compounds” (Cooper 1895, p. 529). Systematically examining a number of these formations, Adams finds numerous examples in literary texts that undermine that interpretation. Moreover, the suffixes *-aris* and *-arius*, for example, are not exponents of “social or stylistic distinction”, but rather occur in “free variation” (pp. 579; 538–545; 553–555). And if examples like *bibosus* ‘given to drink’ were colloquial, the suffix *-osus* ‘full of’ in itself was not (p. 531; 571–574), showing that it is “difficult to find suffixes that inherently belong to lower social varieties” (p. 530). Similarly *medianus* was not a “sub-standard synonym of *medius*” (p. 550), because both formations were semantically motivated (pp. 550–551). Adams painfully reveals the lasting impact of Cooper (1895) on the field and the ease with which later scholars have taken over his conclusions without checking their accuracy.

Another conventional wisdom that Adams tackles is the chronology of change in a dead language, which is often said to be impossible because the evidence comes from written sources. Adams argues to the contrary, saying that testimonies of contemporaries (e. g. grammarians; pp. 25–27) allow one to identify gradual change, as in the loss of aspirates. The disappearance of intervocalic *-h-* (e. g. *nihil* > *nil*), for example, was early, even if attempts were made at conserving it in writing. The loss of aspirates in initial position was later and there too attempts were made to restore the practice— in Augustine’s period, for example—resulting in incorrect usages (e. g. hypercorrection). Augustine’s assessment shows that the loss of initial aspirates itself was not a sociolinguistic feature, but that its consistency was. Consistently absent in lower registers, there is variation in higher registers – an effect of (pedantic) restoration (pp. 125–127). This development shows how social factors and diachronic development are intertwined, offering a picture that is much more complex—but also more accurate.

One of the classic thorny topics in Romance linguistics is the distribution of final *-s* (pp. 132–147), which distinguishes Eastern from Western dialects. The widespread assumption is that in contrast to the West, final *-s* did not materialize in the East by the late Republic and thereafter, allegedly reflecting a submerged phenomenon (pp. 142–144). Yet Adams finds that in uneducated speech of the first three or four centuries A.D. “*-s* was not deleted at all” (p. 147; 132–147) and he demonstrates the “stability of *-s* as opposed to the constant omission of *-m*:... it is the contrast that is important” (p. 135), undermining the hypothesis of submerged continuity between early Latin and Eastern Romance. In the process Adams identifies the misinterpretation common in the handbooks of the loss of final *-m* (*panem* ‘bread-ACC’ > *pane*) as a “Vulgar” feature (pp. 129–132).

5 Points of critique

In terms of “critique” I draw attention to a few points. The selection of the linguistic topics discussed in this monograph was not random, because they “encapsulate many of the differences between Latin and Romance” (p. xvi). Yet while these phenomena do indeed reflect major developments, others are not included and one wonders about the criteria for the selection made.

Equally little attention is paid to the precise reasons that made scholars in the past come to the conclusion that Romance traced back to “Vulgar” rather than “Classical” Latin. One of the reasons was that several lexical items in Romance are of Latin origin, but are exclusively attested – if at all – in non-classical documents. Adams refers to this phenomenon in the introduction to chapter XXX on the Lexicon (pp. 777–820), merely indicating that the phenomenon gives “some justification to the term Vulgar Latin” (p. 778) and “must have been one of the impulses behind the term” (p. 718).

On a more practical note, the indexes do the work no justice. In a book of more than 800 pages discussing around thirty topics, a “subject index” (pp. 911–913) with 75 or so entries (several with subcategories) is rather meager, leaving many important subjects unmentioned. Finally, the running heads feature the title of the chapter, not their numbers. Yet cross-references to sections in the text typically feature numbers (e. g. XXX.2.4), making it rather time-consuming to locate references.

6 Conclusions: where does the book leave us?

Sociolinguistic analysis of a dead language – integrating philological (in the British sense) evidence – and the identification of sociolinguistic stratification in long-term language change, are rather exceptional – though not impossible. Adams’s book shows that the dearth of this type of study may be accounted for by the unfamiliarity of sociolinguists with diachronic data and analysis of dead languages rather than the sheer impossibility of this type of research.

Social variation presents perhaps “a selective history of the Latin language” (p. 23), but it is a notably rich history. “Selective” may be taken in the sense that it examines a number of selected items, but not in the sense of ‘narrow’ or ‘limited’. The book is too rich for that. First of all, it is very rich in data and findings. Moreover, it is rich because more than thirty phenomena are thoroughly analyzed; it is rich in documentation, bringing together data from

a variety of sources, and rich in that it integrates sociolinguistic variation, philology, and language change.

The work is remarkable in other respects as well. Adams repeatedly points out that there is a lack of balance between the little we know about non-educated varieties and what we know about Classical Latin and its users. Yet ironically it is about Classical Latin that we do not know much in terms of language change. Adams make an important contribution in restoring the balance.

First, the work provides a much more complete and more accurate picture of linguistic varieties in Latin and their history than any other work hitherto published. Similarly, in terms of “ancestor of the Romance languages” a very nuanced scenario emerges. A number of changes are indeed instances of ‘submerged change’, e. g. the emergence of *illic* and *illunc* (pp. 454–456), or the “flowering” of the diminutive suffix *-inus* (pp. 569; 566–569). Yet at least as important is the finding that other changes that have been identified as ‘submerged change’ in the past turn out to be changes across the social spectrum that may have started out as a mere semantic or grammatical variation (e. g. *ad* + noun, pp. 278–294). Other changes have to do with the distinction between spoken and written Latin, e. g. synthetic passives. Adams therefore convincingly shows that low-register varieties do not have the primacy of language innovation and change. One of the questions to address then is how this new perspective modifies the way we collect and assess Latin data. The inclusion of educated documents in diachronic analysis does not mean that ‘anything goes’. Adams’s reconstructions of social variation and change are the result of careful and deliberate evaluation of a high number of data from a rich variety of sources, providing direct and indirect evidence. Consequently, while this study specifically undermines the hypothesis that the Romance languages exclusively trace back to Vulgar Latin, it does not imply that any Latin document is a reliable linguistic source.

Moreover, in terms of language contact as an instigator of language change, Adams’s results are likewise highly relevant. In the context of Latin, borrowing from Greek is an assumption easily made, but as Adams shows not always justified: there is “some evidence for the influence of Greek on Latin and a little for the influence of Latin on Greek, but there are also similarities where it is not possible to pin down the direction of the influence” (p. 871).

Finally, examining the characteristics of the changes that Adams establishes as coming from “below”, “above”, and “language in general”, I observe an important regularity, which Adams to my knowledge does not identify. There is, overall, a difference between changes from below on the one hand and the other changes on the other: changes from below often affect and eventually

annihilate grammatical distinctions or categories, such as the loss of case use marking motion vs. stative location, the reduction of gender distinctions—with the eventual loss of the neuter – the combination of a passive verb with an accusative, or indicatives and infinitives infringing the grammatical territory of the subjunctive.⁵ Changes that affect “language in general” tend to start out as varieties that may have special semantic value (e. g. *ad/de* + noun). These usages are typically in accordance with the original meaning(s) of the preposition or convey “a nuance” such as reflexive datives with transitive verbs (p.361). Similarly, the use of a present indicative replacing a future synthetic form is not a grammatical mistake either. This observation can also be made for changes from above: adjective + *mente*, *habeo* + Perf.Participle, *dico* + *quod* constructions may be motivated, but they are not grammatically incorrect. Consequently, changes that originate in language in general and in higher registers comply with the rules of grammar even if in the end the grammatical system changes. These patterns show that the Romance languages are not merely the result of language decay, which further contributes to the nuanced picture that Adams offers of the varieties of Latin and their evolution into Romance and opens new vistas of research.

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⁵ From this perspective, the creation of a colloquial differentiated third person dative pronoun (*illui/ill[ae]*, M/F) is interesting, extending an existing category. The process is found in other colloquial varieties as well, such as Am. Engl. pronominal *ya’ll* ‘you-PL’ (< *you* + *all*), complementing SG *you*.

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