

## Pidgin Latin

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### *Sammendrag:*

*When languages meet, one may become a «broken» Pidgin with simple grammar and rules. Latin and Greek were classical languages that live on in science. The scientific names and term of Latin and Greek roots are adopted in writing in all language groups, but when these names and terms are spoken, their pronunciation is not uniform, but is adapted to the national languages. When professional people attend international conferences and meetings, it is soon discovered that scientific names and terms are pronounced quite differently. The question is – who speaks Pidgin Latin?*

I dare call attention to a problem which is apparent at international meetings, i.e. the pronunciation of scientific names and terms, the majority of which are of Latin or Greek origin. There is a significant discrepancy between the usage of «native» English speakers and that of Continental Europeans. This is manifest at international meetings when the two cultures verbally clash, though not in writing. By English speaking, I mean people from the British Isles and Commonwealth countries, and of course the US, Canada and people from other countries educated at British or American universities.

If this difference were merely a matter of style it would not merit mention, but it actually jeopardises clear communication. As English is not my mother tongue, I have on several occasions had to «think backwards» to find the likely spelling of familiar names pronounced in strange ways by «Anglo-Saxons». For that reason, there is obviously a need for internationally accepted or consistent pronunciation rules.

I am a biologist, not a linguist, but I use English and my native language on a daily basis to convey facts and ideas verbally and in writing. I depend on using both languages, as do all of us.

English speakers claim that we do not know how Latin was spoken 2000 years ago. Admittedly, Latin has changed over the centuries, although the classical linguists know much about pronunciation. For many years I have used Wikén (1951) as a treasure trove on Latin grammar and biological terms. In Chapter 1 (l. c.) on pronunciation and spelling, the vowels a, e, i, o, u and y are pronounced as they are in Swedish. This is not very useful for people not versed in Swedish, though these vowels are pronounced similarly in the other Scandinavian languages and in German, as well as basically all of Continental Europe. In French, the (i) is sometimes pronounced as a continental

(a), e.g. noir (black). The interesting question is: Who speaks «Pidgin Latin» and «Pidgin Greek» – the Continental Europeans or the English speaking world? In my opinion, the English speaking world unwittingly does.

Latin was the lingua franca of medieval Europe, but was replaced by the vernacular in Italy, France and Britain; these national languages could easily adopt Latin words and terms. Even so, Latin remained the written language of science in Germany and Scandinavia for a much longer period of time (Hogben 1969). Personally, I prefer the clear and distinct pronunciation of Latin scientific names and terms used by the Germans, whose cultural and linguistic influence is felt in Central and Eastern Europe, the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic States and in Russia and the former Soviet Union as well. A close relation is usage in the European «Latin» Mediterranean countries of France, Portugal, Spain, Italy and Romania, in addition to their «outposts» in South and Central America, though admittedly the French do emphasise the end of each word.

How has this divergence come about? It seems that the usage in Continental Europe is more conservative and on the whole approximates the sound of the word as spoken in its original Latin or Greek form. On the other hand, native English speakers often pronounce scientific names as if they were English. The problem with this lies in the fact that English has a long and proud history of borrowing and Anglicising foreign words. The words are Anglicised to make them usable within the English idiom (or idiom?), but alas, this often renders them sounding quite unlike the root word. This lexicological larceny is a core characteristic of the language and has, in part, contributed to the phenomenal success of English as a flexible language with a huge vocabulary. It is only to be expected that scientific words of foreign origin would get the same treatment – unless otherwise there is a pressing need.

Well, there is a pressing need: It is obvious that uniformity is required for clearer communication. In order to achieve this, causes and remedies must be identified. As I have demonstrated, the primary cause is the reflex Anglicisation of strange words by native English speakers. But if a more appropriate pronunciation is required from them, we must inform – not censure.

Here is a start: the letters «i» and «y» are problematic. In Latin, «i» is **always** pronounced as «i» in «in», even in the beginning, middle or end of words. English differs. For example, to use the word «inside», the first i is pronounced as «i» and the second one as «i»(ai) in the personal I. Divide is another example. If the di in divide and divorce is pronounced di, all words starting with di should be pronounced likewise: dilute, not dilute; Digenea, not Digenea; direction/director; not direction/director, and diagnosis and diagram. Digit and digital are good examples of words in which the original pronunciation is retained. The same applies to combinations with bi- such as bilingual or bilingual. Bio is probably a lost case; biology in other languages becomes biology and will be impossible to change to the original, while the same applies to micro as in microscope. One is at a loss to determine when wind will be pronounced wind, as in «the wind is blowing», or wind as in «wind the clock». Another example is wild and wilderness. Similarly, 60 seconds make one minute, while a tiny object may be minute, and the live in «to live» and «live performance» varies with its context. Liberal and liberty are acceptable, but why does libation become libation?

Discipline is acceptable, but disciple by miracle (or miracle?) becomes disciple. Seawater is salty and its salinity can be measured, but is salty water saline or saline? I have heard some unusual pronunciations of Pisces, which is a collective name for fish, as well as a zodiac sign. It is pronounced as it is written – *Pisces*. Can anyone explain why *Trichodina* is pronounced *Trichodina*? The terrible fossil reptiles *Dinosauria* receive much attention in the media, but illogically become dinosaurs. A titan is gigantic (or gigantic?) in size, but there is no reason to say *titanic*, as in the famous ship and the film, *Titanic*, and the metal *Titanium*. The red dye *carmine* is wrongly pronounced by many as *carmine*. The arthropod exoskeleton is made of *chitin*, not *chitin*, and the sea urchins belong to the *Echinodermata*, not *Echinodermata*. The genus *Pinus* comprises pine trees, but a pin is a pin. A metal rope is a wire, but should virus be pronounced *virus*, as in other languages, or *virus*? A person may be wise, or even vice- or nice, but when travelling abroad he may need a *visa* (which is the plural form of *visum*). In other languages, *vagina* is pronounced *vagina*, and so it should be in English as well. A military regiment is pronounced as it is written, though the Canadian city *Regina*, derived from the Latin word for queen, is pronounced *Regina* in that country. A man may be full of virility, but is he *virile* or *virile*? Does an investment banker read financial or financial magazines (or magazines)? A central point is *origo*, leading to original and originate, but can anyone explain why the star constellation *Orion* is pronounced *Orion* in English; if the Greeks pronounced it that way, they would have spelled it differently! When something is small the word *mini*, as in *mini skirt*, conveys this, but why does the star constellation *Gemini* – the twins – become *Gemini* in English, or rather in American English? On the same note, is *missile* or *missile* correct? Is *iso*, as in *isotope* or *isobar*, pronounced *iso* or *iso*? The *s* in *island* is not pronounced, it could just as well be written *eyland*, as it is in Dutch. In the Scandinavian languages, *Island* is the name for *Iceland*, and is pronounced *is* (long i), meaning ice.

It is pronounced *define*, but when something is definite or done, is it finite of finite? It is pronounced *olive oil*, not *olive*, and for *regina*, the root *regina* as in the queen, the male form is *Reginald*. In medicine, police, fugitive and median, the *i* is pronounced *i*.

Ideally, spelling and pronunciation should be closely linked in any language. This is particularly important for young children when they start learning to read and write their native language. English has double standards, or rather, multiple standards. The letter *i*, as in the personal *I*, is by convention pronounced *i*, but when this letter is linked to other letters to make words, some strange sounds ensue. The first time I came across *recipe*, I wrongly pronounced it *recipe*. *Idiot* is acceptable, but the initial *i* in *idol*, *icon* and *idyll* in other languages is pronounced *i*. This also goes for men's names like *Ivan*, *Igor* (both Russian) and *Ivar* (Scandinavian). Geographical names such as *Italy*, *India* and *Iraq* are acceptable, but how do the people in Spain and Portugal pronounce the name of their peninsula – *Iberia*, not *Iberia*? *Siam* is another name for *Thailand*; how do the «natives» pronounce the name of their country – *Siam* or *Siam*? The generic name for the bird *Ibis* is *Ibis*, and so should it also be pronounced in the vernacular. There is no need for the *i* in *Niger* and *Nigeria* to be pronounced *i*. Every fourth year the world's parasitologists meet for their International Congress of Parasitology, shortened to *ICOPA*, which becomes *ICOPA*, but the initial *I* in

the full name is international – the natural solution should be *ICOPA*. A terminal *i* also tends to become an *i*, as in *alibi*, *rabbi* and *fungi* – in other languages it is an *i*. How should infinity and finite be pronounced – the latter inexplicably as *finite*? Invisibility is yet another good example without fancy twists while indicate/indication is another example, but if you do something against the law, you may be indicted. I once listened to a TV program on early Christianity in the Greek world that referred to the city of Philippi, which the American professor pronounced Philippi. If the Americans claim their university system is among the best in the world, it is a disgrace that their knowledge of the pronunciation of classical languages is so poor and that his students, who shall become the next generation of teachers, would perpetuate such sloppy pronunciation ad nauseam.

The Americans have no problems pronouncing it Hawaii, not Hawaïi, as they do with scientific names ending in *i* or *ii*. Many native English speakers do not even handle their own language properly since dissect is often pronounced disect, but as dissolve is spelled with a double *s* and intestine wrongly becomes intestine.

The letter *e* may also need comment. Take even for example. The first *e* is almost pronounced as an *i*, while the second *e* becomes a clear *e*. The double *ee*, as in need, also becomes an *i*. And England is pronounced Ingland, while in German and the Scandinavian languages the initial *e* is a clear *E*.

The letter *y* – ypsilon – did not exist in Latin, but under the influence of Greek culture and language it was adopted into Latin. In Continental Europe *y* is pronounced almost as the German *ü*, though in English there are many words in which it is pronounced nearly as an «*i*», as in *baby* and *system*, and the name *Henry*; in other words, it is pronounced as «*why*», as in *try* and *fly*. To a non-native English speaker this is bewildering, yet native speakers seem to have no hesitation in extending their cryptic rules to words from other languages. For instance, the Greek word for leaf is «*phyllum*», which is pronounced *fyllum*, with a short *y* as in «*system*». But when one *l* is removed, the word *phylum* results. In Continental Europe the *y* becomes a long *y*, as in *system*, while in English they becomes a *why*, yielding *fyllum*. In my field, the nematode genus *Hysterothylacium* has two *y*'s, both of which should be pronounced as a continental «*y*», but English speakers tend to pronounce the first one as «*y*» – as in *Hystero* – while the second becomes a «*why*» – as in *thylacium*. The cestodarian genus *Gyrocotyle* also has two *y*'s, and they should both be pronounced as the «*y*» in *system*. The same applies to the monogenean genus *Gyrodactylus*. *Hydra* is another example. People in London can stroll in Hyde Park, but that pronunciation does not apply to foreign words such as formaldehyde, not formaldehyde. In Spanish, the *y* tends to become an *i* in writing, hygiene – *higiene*, syphon – *sifon*, and is pronounced as *i*. In English, the *y* in *dynamo*, *dynamic* and *dynasty* is pronounced «*ai*», while in the continental languages it is pronounced *y*, as in *system*. The *y* in *pyramid* is *y*, as it is in *crystal*. The legacy of the Danish influence in southern England is still felt in place names such as *Danby* and *Grimsby*; the *by* is pronounced as in *baby*, not as *by*. *By* is still the word for town in Scandinavia. A book is written by an author; it is pronounced the same way in German, but is spelled *bei*.

English is not my native language – I had to learn it out of a book when I was young. In science, the results of our research must be made available to the world, which in practice

means that we have to publish in English. In many ways, English is an easy language with only one gender, not two or more (masculine, feminine and neuter) as in several other languages. And its grammar is rather loose; things can be said in many different ways. But attaining the clarity and elegance of the English language as shown by native speakers is difficult to attain for people whose mother tongue is not English.

Clearly, the Anglicisation of foreign words is a largely unconscious process. By raising this process to consciousness, and by giving a few indicators of the original pronunciation, it is hoped that some disparities between English and continental phonetics may be remedied. Better still, a more comprehensive but readable treatise on the subject is required for English mother tongue life scientists.

Millions of Continental Europeans live and work in the UK, the Commonwealth and North America. In order to communicate with the native English speakers, they have to commit themselves partly to verbal prostitution.

Good manners are learned at home. For years (now retired), I advised my students to use the pronunciation of scientific names and terms they have been taught at home, that is in Scandinavia, when they would eventually travel the world. If English speaking people have difficulties understanding us, it is their problem, not ours.

In which parts of the world are the proper Latin and Greek pronunciations used for scientific names and anatomical terms? Is it Continental Europe – the Scandinavian countries, Germany and its German speaking neighbours, the low countries, the «Latin» countries (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Romania) and probably their cultural extensions to former colonies (French Indo-China, South and Central America)? Russia and the former Soviet Union use proper Latin pronunciation, as is generally the case in Eastern European countries strongly influenced by Russian and German academic traditions. In Japan, scientific names are also pronounced as they are in Continental Europe. What about Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, the former jewels in the British Empire? What about Indonesia as a former Dutch colony? What about the Arab and Turkish speaking countries, and of course China? The former British possessions – the Commonwealth – are still influenced by the British way of doing things. Officially, the US has no colonies, but as a modern empire its academic system influences the rest of the world.

If Continental Europe opens its universities and professional teaching and academic institutions to attract students from all over the world, the language of instruction is likely to be English. One cannot expect that young people from Asia, Africa or the Americas shall spend a year or two learning German, French, Hungarian or any other European language. It is my hope that the longstanding Continental European tradition in pronouncing scientific names and terms of Latin and Greek origin will prevail and that professors and teachers will uphold this tradition. We should not belittle ourselves by using Pidgin Latin and Pidgin Greek when we know better.

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