

Caveat Emptor: Lovers of Latin Try to Sell a Dead Tongue

They Update It With a Word for 'Internet,' but Europe Isn't Buying

By MATTHEW DALTON

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INCOURT, Belgium—A modest white schoolhouse near Brussels is in the vanguard of a long-struggling movement of Latin enthusiasts who refuse to say *requiescat* in place of the ancient language.



Gilles Licooppe, founder of the Latin-speaking group at Schola Nova, Matthew Dalton

native speaker of *Francis-Gallois* (French), who dreams of resurrecting Latin as Europe's *lingua franca*.

"We have a single money, the euro," Mr. Feyer says. "We should have a single language, Latin."

Given the economic problems created by the euro, it might seem like a non sequitur to encourage a single language for the continent. But a hard core of Latin enthusiasts say the language would foster a sense of European unity that's been lacking since the decline of the Holy Roman Empire, which used Latin as one of its official languages.



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Chief among them is Gilles (Guy) Licooppe. A retired radiologist, Mr. Licooppe hosts a Latin-speaking group at his townhouse in Brussels, not a mile from the headquarters of Europe's contemporary, transnational entity, the European Union.

At a recent meeting, members bemoaned the outright hostility of Europe's powers-that-be toward Latin. They lamented a plan instituted by former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to improve Italian competitiveness—called *inglese, industria, informatica* (English, Industry and Information Technology)—that cut the study of Latin in many Italian schools.

"Where is the liberty of the people?" Mr. Licooppe asked. "Because there are many who want to preserve the study of Latin."

"That's the legacy of Berlusconi," said Mathieu Lemaerts, a professor of rhetoric and bell-ringer at a church in Tongres, Belgium.

Ever since the empire officially ended during the Napoleonic wars and Europe dissolved into a patchwork of fractious nation states, Latin has been more a scourge of Western schoolchildren than a living language.

A loose group of scholars and enthusiasts now connects the "Living Latin" movement. A number of them live in Germany and Austria. Despite not being derived from Latin, German's grammatical structure—heavy on declensions—makes Latin easier for German speakers to grasp.

Among Latinists, the idea of updating the language is controversial. The *Academia Vivantium Novum*, a school in Rome where students from around the world take immersion courses in Latin, deplors the corruption the language suffered during the Middle Ages. It aims to preserve Latin as it was spoken during the time of Cicero, not adapt it to the era of Mr. Berlusconi.

"We already have a common language that would allow us to speak about these trifles," said Luigi Miraglia, director of the academy, in a speech (in Latin) earlier this year. "If we must speak about Coca-Cola or McDonald's, we can speak English."

"The dead language is important because it is dead," Mr. Miraglia said in an interview. "We have students coming from all over the world, and it is very beautiful seeing them have one language. But the more important thing is that they can speak with Petrarch, Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus and Thomas More."

Mr. Feyer responds: "Sometimes, I find *Vivantium Novum* too parrot."

Started as a school for one of Mr. Feyer's sons in 1985, *Schola Nova's* student body has grown steadily and now numbers over 50. In the process it has churned out dozens of Latin speakers, of varying ability.

On a recent school day, Mr. Feyer exhorted a classroom of teenagers in Latin: "English speakers and writers, and the Chinese, also, have a huge, very important language. Europeans also have a very important language, and that language is"

"Latin," a few of the students mumbled.

"You need to say it more loudly, because the whole world is listening," Mr. Feyer said, capping his hands to his ears. "Europe has a common language and that is"

"Latin" they responded.



Stéphane Feyer, Matthew Dalton

"It's absolutely absurd to have a Tower of Babel," Mr. Feyer said later. "If the politicians want to do something reasonable, it could be done progressively: For example, keep English as the language of economics, and use Latin as the language of administration."

Latin campaigners have over the years petitioned EU officials to add Latin as one of its official languages (there are now 24), or even to designate Latin as a pan-European language. But the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, has nixed the idea.

Mr. Feyer recently asked the commission to include Latin in an annual competition it runs for young translators, with the Latin name *Juvenes Translatores*. Again, the commission said no; the competition is reserved for Europe's official languages.

"It's not realistic to say, guys, all right, we're all going to switch to the language of *Caelius*," said commission spokesman Dennis Abbott. "And it's questionable whether this solution would be useful in relations with the rest of the world."

"Government powers are hostile," Mr. Licooppe said. "That's because of European nationalism."

Others see weak government support for the movement as merely a casualty of Europe's economic crisis. Kurt Smetak, a professor at the University of Vienna who is president of *Academia Latinitatis Promovenda* (Academy for Promoting Latin), said the group used to receive support from the Italian government, but that ended three years ago because of the country's financial troubles.

Mr. Smetak defends efforts to update the language. For one thing, giving directions for conferences gets difficult if, instead of using the modern Latin word for train (*ferrovia*), you must write something like *vehiculum in bharia ferro cursum*: "vehicle running on two iron."

"It's not practical," Mr. Smetak said.

Even if they want to update Latin for the modern world, many enthusiasts are skeptical of the latter dreams of Mr. Licooppe and others to revive Latin as a European language.

"It's a kind of crusade he's undertaking, and I admire him for that," said Rafael Gellón Gómez, a Latin speaker who works for the EU. "But I'm pessimistic about the outcome."

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