

## DOES ORTHOGRAPHIC VARIATION PRECLUDE STANDARDISATION?

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### ABSTRACT

In this response to Adams' article I begin by talking a bit, in a fairly atheoretical way, about definitions of standardisation. This is because Adams' argument that Latin was not, in the first century BC, a standard language, rests to a large degree on his own view of standardisation: one which approaches it very much from the perspective of the modern nation-state with a highly centralised school system. I then focus on his main argument against the idea that the Latin of the first century BC was a standardised Latin: the range of spelling found in high register/official inscriptions. He is very much right to point this out, and in-depth investigation provides many insights in understanding these texts and the social context in which they were produced—but I do not think it is as strong an argument against standardisation as Adams does. Lastly, I discuss the concept of 'modern' vs 'old-fashioned' spelling, which, although briefly addressed by Adams, remains largely implicit: I think this can be usefully made more explicit, and turns out to be more complicated than Adams acknowledges.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this response to Adams' article, I begin by talking a bit, in a fairly atheoretical way, about definitions of standardisation. This is because Adams' argument that Latin was not, in the first century BC, a standard language rests to a large degree on his own view of standardisation, one that approaches it very much from the perspective of the modern nation-state with a highly centralised school system. I then focus on his main argument against the idea that the Latin of the first century BC was a standardised Latin: the range of spelling found in high register/official inscriptions. He is very much right to point this out, and in-depth investigation provides many insights in understanding these texts and the social context in which they were produced—but I do not think it is as strong an argument against standardisation as Adams does. Lastly, I discuss the concept of 'modern' versus 'old-fashioned' spelling, which, although briefly addressed by Adams, remains largely implicit. I think this can be usefully made more explicit and turns out to be more complicated than Adams acknowledges.

### 2. DEFINING STANDARDISATION

Adams begins the article by describing various processes and practices that have been seen as part of the theory of 'standardisation' and their application to Latin; on the whole, he takes a negative approach: rather too negative in my view. But I start off by acknowledging that there are ways in which the development of Latin differs from the kind of standardisation that took place in modern times in Western nation-states. In particular, there was neither an ideological

commitment to implementing standardisation of Latin among the whole speech-community nor any mechanism for doing so (such as major state intervention in schooling or the creation of codification resources such as dictionaries and grammars that were available to the whole community). The situation is in fact much closer to that described for Dutch in the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries by Rutten & Vosters (2021: 68–9; references omitted):

At the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, a range of metalinguistic texts were published that addressed various aspects of Dutch: style, spelling, grammar and rhetoric . . . The authors were ministers, classicists and poets, that is, well-educated members of an intellectual and cultural elite. Their approach has been called *Vondelianist* because seventeenth-century poets such as Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679) were their main normative points of reference . . . Their literary orientation was further emphasized by a strong focus on young poets as their target audience. The main goal of the Vondelianist approach was to offer grammatical and stylistic advice to those who were to perform the higher linguistic registers in public life, such as politicians, lawyers, ministers and literary authors . . . Whereas such earlier metalinguistic texts from the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries offered many concrete prescriptions and proscriptions, both orthographical and grammatical, the key issue is that we are dealing with specific members of well-defined social groups, who formulate grammatical and orthographical norms primarily for other members of these groups, which are particularly relevant when practising specific genres important to these groups. If we term this standardization, it should be clear that it is of a very local kind, both socially and generically.

If we want to restrict the term ‘standardisation’ for modern nation-state-type developments, then perhaps we should accept that Latin was not a standardised language at any time in antiquity.<sup>1</sup> However, Latin (as written by a fairly small elite) clearly did undergo a number of processes that are generally seen as being part of the process of standardisation (on which, in addition to the references given by Adams, see now Ayres-Bennett & Bellamy 2020).<sup>2</sup> In my view, Adams underplays these, because (here) he tends to see standardisation as a state, or the end-point of a process, rather than the process itself,<sup>3</sup> and hence as a binary—either there is uniformity (standardisation) or there is not (non-standardisation).<sup>4</sup>

He several times stresses the extent to which ‘[g]rammarians and other self-appointed experts’ opine about correctness and compares that to ‘an organised education system’ where ‘the authorities will argue in private about what is right and what is to be taught, and they will come up with rules and procedures’ (p. 368), for example ‘[t]here are multiple comments by self-appointed linguistic experts of the late Republic and early Empire on what they regarded

<sup>1</sup> Although Adams is more inclined to favour a sort of ‘standardisation’ (albeit in scare quotes) of spelling in the first century AD (p. 423); if this is truly to be considered standardisation it implies that in fact a modern education system is not necessary, since it no more existed in the first century AD than in the first century BC.

<sup>2</sup> Adams flags up several of these. He does not discuss, for instance, elaboration, in the sense of Latin spreading into genres that had previously been reserved for Greek; and, only touches on its sense of expansion of resources such as vocabulary to deal with new genres. For more on ways in which the development of Latin can be seen as akin to standardisation, see Clackson (2011: 236–44 and 2015a: 37–41; but note the reservations expressed in Clackson (2015b)).

<sup>3</sup> Compare the much more nuanced discussion of standardisation at Adams (2007: 13–17).

<sup>4</sup> This binary is expressed very clearly on p. 423, where, allowing the possibility of a ‘standardisation’ in the first century AD, he states that ‘I am inclined to see this “standardisation” as largely the outcome of a gradual change of fashion, with the archaising forms falling out of favour over time. The modernisation did not happen overnight, as might have been the case if there had suddenly appeared a radical and influential reform movement’.

as correct items of morphology, and the items discussed above are merely a small selection. There is no sign of a consistent move to regularise the language, but instead there are constant disagreements. Caesar, for example is at variance with Varro and Verrius Flaccus and Cicero, Pliny takes issue with Caesar and with Varro, and Quintilian offers mixed or uncertain opinions' (p. 438).

This approach seems to me not to take sufficiently into account the possibility that there are degrees of standardisation, and stages in the process; and perhaps to overestimate the amount of disagreement between the various writers on language.<sup>5</sup> We are of course hampered by the spotty preservation of works on linguistic topics, particularly in the first century BC, but I think that an argument could be made that much of the disagreement in that period is based more around theoretical approaches to the study of language rather than major variance in the instantiation of the language itself. I don't deny that there were different opinions about what, for instance, ought to be the genitive singular of the fourth declension, but I would say that this kind of question in fact tends to represent a small flashpoint rather than a sign that standardisation is non-existent. The same is true for the variation between spellings discussed directly below.

### 3. SPELLING VARIATION AND STANDARDISATION

As I understand it, Adams' argument against standardisation of Latin in the first century BC rests mainly on the evidence of variation in official/high register inscriptions from this period: both within inscriptions and across them, the same phoneme is spelt differently—even in the same word or morphological environment. Sometimes there appear to be rules that are applied in a given inscription or inscriptions, but these are not consistently applied in all inscriptions.

The question, therefore, is to what extent the existence of variation is permitted in a standardised spelling system. I would argue (a) that the answer is possibly more than Adams allows; and (b) that there is perhaps less variation than Adams thinks when we look at the big picture.

In the first place, I am not sure that the development of even a relatively strict standard language necessarily rules out a certain amount of heterogeneity involving a fairly tightly defined number of acceptable variants, especially where these are hallowed by the usage of distinguished writers or text types (e.g. legal or 'official' texts). For example, the existence of universal schooling, widely agreed spelling norms across widely available media, and the existence of lexicographical and grammatical resources for present-day English does not prevent the existence of a certain amount of variation – dependent notably on geographical grounds (e.g. American vs British English), but also on fairly short-term chronological variation across two or three generations, register, writer's social background or just personal idiosyncrasy even among highly educated writers (I am thinking of things like use of double letters after short vowels in words like *buses* ~ *busses*, *focused* ~ *focussed*, *targeted* ~ *targetted* etc.; *shew* vs. *show*, *connexion* vs *connection*, *jail* vs *gaol*, *homogeneous* vs. *homogenous* etc.; the suffix *-ise* vs. *-ize*; *dreamed* vs. *dreamt*, *spelled* vs. *spelt*; and even how to write the possessive of words ending in a sibilant like *Jesus*, *Claudius*, *James* etc. (*Jesus'* or *Jesus's'*?)). And, of course, as already noted, readers and writers of English are not short of discussions and manuals that attempt to deal with

<sup>5</sup> I also suspect the contrast between the 'self-appointed' Roman grammar experts and the 'authorities' of a properly organised education ignores a much more patchwork and contingent process by which standardisation in modern languages, and the appointment of 'authorities' who (attempt to) do it, are implemented – as, for instance, the famous 'zombie rule' not to end a sentence with a preposition, in the promulgation of which the poet Dryden seems to have played a major role (Yáñez-Bouza 2015: 284–91). And a glance in a bookshop, newspaper, or the internet will reveal no shortage of self-appointed authorities on modern English usage, emitting contradictory language advice.

variation of this type (and which often disagree amongst themselves): the existence of variants and the attempt by ‘experts’, ‘self-appointed’ or otherwise, to adjudicate among them—should be seen as part of the ideology of standardisation in English rather than evidence against it.

Secondly, I would emphasise the narrowness—that is the restricted repertoire—of the variant spellings that Adams finds in the first century BC/AD inscriptions he looks at: essentially variation between <ei> and <i> to write /i:/, between <ss> and <s> after a long vowel or diphthong; the use of <u> or <i> for the ‘intermediate vowel’ in certain words before a labial in non-initial syllables; use of <q> for /k/ before /u/; writing of long /u:/ with <u>, <uu> or <ou>; use of <xs> for <x>; *quom* for *cum*; and the spelling of preverbs.

The kinds of spellings that Adams focusses on all have a pedigree of use in earlier high-register inscriptions, and almost all would continue to be discussed by writers on language for hundreds of years to come, with either use of the older, or change to the younger, form (where this is relevant) often associated with particular famous men of the past. Thus, Quintilian, for instance, in the section on *orthographia* (in Latin, *recte scribendi scientia*) of his *Institutio oratoria* (1.7), associates use of double letters for long vowels with Accius; mentions <ei> with reference to the advice of Lucilius; notes of <ss> that it was used by Cicero and Virgil; attributes the spelling of the ‘intermediate vowel’ with <i> to Gaius (Julius) Caesar; the use of <uo> for <uu> to his teachers; and mentions with implied approbation use of *quom* for *cum* (in the sense ‘when’), with disapprobation use of <xs>, and, leaving the question open, how to deal with assimilated prepositions in compounds.<sup>6</sup> As far as I’m aware, Quintilian does not mention the use of <q> before /u/, but it was a topic of continued debate from Cornutus in the first century AD, and was still recognised as something their ancestors did by writers of the fifth century like Servius and Cledonius (see Zair 2023: 138–43 for a collection of relevant passages). The spelling of *cum* as *quom* (or *quum*) is discussed by Quintilian, Velius Longus, Curtius Valerianus, Terentius Scaurus, Marius Victorinus and Caesellius Vindex (Zair 2023: 166–7).

By comparison, there are a number of ‘old-fashioned’ spellings that do not appear in these texts, having apparently been ‘edited out’ of the repertoire of acceptable spellings fairly early on: e.g. <uo> for <ue> before a coronal other than /r/ in syllable onset;<sup>7</sup> <ai> for <ae>;<sup>8</sup> single letters for geminate consonants;<sup>9</sup> <e> and <o> for (\**ei*) <e:/ > /i:/ and (\**ou*) <o:/ > /u:/, respectively; <ar> for /ad/ before a labial; omission of word-final /s/; omission of word-final /m/; obviously <o> for <u> in most final syllables, etc.

This goes all the more, of course, for spellings that reflected socially deprecated sound changes. It is not easy to be precise about when sound changes took place in the city of Rome in the first century BC, but loss of word-initial /h/ is clear; /ε/ to /i/ in hiatus had probably already occurred;<sup>10</sup> /au/ > /o:/ took place in casual style at least in some lexemes (Adams 2013:

<sup>6</sup> Except in cases of compounds of *ex* followed by a word beginning with /s/ (a distinction maintained by the few other writers on language who mention <xs>; Zair 2023: 170–71).

<sup>7</sup> That is, before /t/, /s/ and /r/ when followed by another consonant (and, in principle /d/, although I am not sure there are any examples), e.g. *uoster* > *uester*, *uoto* > *ueto*. This change is first attested in the *Lex repetundarum* of 123–122 BC (CIL 1<sup>2</sup>.583; CIL = Mommsen, Theodor et al., 1863-); attributed by Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 1.7.25–26) to Scipio Africanus.

<sup>8</sup> Quintilian (*Inst. Or.* 1.7.18–19) attributes Virgil’s use of <ai> for the 1<sup>st</sup> declension genitive singular to his being a ‘great lover of archaism’ (*Vergilius amantissimus uetustatis*).

<sup>9</sup> The use of double letters to write geminate consonants was a fairly late development. The first example of a double consonant being written double is apparently *Himnad* (CIL 1<sup>2</sup>.608, 211 BC; CIL = Mommsen, Theodor et al., 1863-), but single letters continue to be used for some time afterwards.

<sup>10</sup> Note *polliciarus* = *pollicearis* in the first century BC Johns Hopkins curse tablets from Rome (CIL 1<sup>2</sup>.2520; CIL = Mommsen, Theodor et al., 1863-; Sánchez Nataliás 2022 nos. 10, 13, 14), *soliam* = *soleam* (CEL 9, late 1st century BC, Egypt; CEL = Cugusi, Paulo, 1992–2002), and *debo* = *debeo*, *fator* = *fateor* (Camodeca 1999 no. 52, Puteoli, 37 AD), implying raising followed by desyllabification, followed by loss with palatalisation of the preceding consonant, already by the early first century AD.

81–7); /aɛ/ > /ɛ:/ and /oɛ/ > /e:/ are found in southern Italy in the first half of the first century AD;<sup>11</sup> there are differing views on how early /i/ developed to [e] in at least some contexts (compare Adams 2013: 41–3, 51–61; Marotta 2015; Zair 2023: 60–64), but at any rate first century AD inscriptions from Pompeii again show the change.

Spellings reflecting these changes are completely (or nearly completely) absent in the kinds of texts that Adams is looking at.

The distinctions drawn here map well onto those made by Quintilian in the later first century AD. On the one hand, there are ‘barbarisms’, of which one type (the third in Quintilian’s categorisation), is ‘the adding to any word a letter or a syllable or taking one away or replacing one with another or putting the right letter in the wrong place’.<sup>12</sup> Barbarism is a vice (*uitium*). By comparison, the ‘archaising spellings’ fall under the heading of *orthographia*, which includes doubtful cases on which educated people can disagree, and ‘on these matters, the school teacher should use his own judgement, for this ought to have the greatest weight’.<sup>13</sup> Quintilian, therefore, envisages a system whereby some spellings are entirely unacceptable and others are acceptable. Within this latter category are a number of spellings, in general those which were used by writers of the second or first centuries BC, whose use is a matter of personal choice, since they now seem rather old-fashioned.

The same system seems to me to pertain in the first century BC, on the basis of the evidence presented by Adams:<sup>14</sup> in the inscriptions considered by him there are certain spellings that are rigidly excluded because they are ‘barbarisms’; there are, of course, many spellings that are entirely consistent across the inscriptions;<sup>15</sup> and there are a relatively small number of spellings where there is acceptable variation.<sup>16</sup> What we do not have is free variation with regard to all spelling. This is not inconsistent, in my view, with the idea of standardisation.

What Adams has thoroughly demonstrated is that the inscriptions do very much differ from most modern instantiations of standardised spelling by dint of their lack of consistency when using the spellings in which variation is allowed.<sup>17</sup> Again, however, note that this variation is constrained to these specific spellings (we normally do not find variation between absence and presence of the final <m>, for instance). This may reflect different ideas of what makes a text pleasant to read, with variation rated higher than consistency. We return to the question of the extent to which particular processes need to have occurred to claim that ‘standardisation’ is taking place.

<sup>11</sup> Exactly when this took place at Rome is uncertain, but there is little strong evidence, *contra* Adams (2013: 73), to think that it was non-urban.

<sup>12</sup> tertium est illud uitium barbarismi, cuius exempla uulgo sunt plurima, sibi etiam quisque fingere potest, ut uerbo cui libebit adiciat litteram syllabamue uel detrahat aut aliam pro alia aut eandem alio quam rectum est loco ponat (Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 1.5.10).

<sup>13</sup> iudicium autem suum grammaticus interponat his omnibus: nam hoc ualere plurimum debet (Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 1.7.30).

<sup>14</sup> Although not only by him: see Clackson (2015b), and Nikitina (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Either because they map well onto the actual phonology of Latin at the time or because they have become the standard spelling, e.g. the representation of word-final nasal vowels by the vowel followed by <m>.

<sup>16</sup> In most cases, such as <ei> for /i:/, consisting of older spellings beside newer ones that have emerged as the result of phonological change. However, in the case of <xs> next to <x>, there is no phonological change: <xs> simply emerges as a variant in the second century BC (see below).

<sup>17</sup> A curious feature of Adams’ lengthy exposure of this variation, and his overall anti-standardisation position, is his unabashed use of language that implies the existence of a standard: the writers of inscriptions are continually making ‘lapses’, ‘errors’ and ‘slips’, they ‘fail to achieve consistency’, despite ‘aspiring’ to it. None of this sits very well with his acute observations that texts do not ‘consistently opt for the ‘archaising’ or the modern alternative, but they mix together old forms and modern’; ‘[p]erhaps it is a mistake to be making an implied comparison between such texts and a modern language such as English in the age of printing, when everything published is overseen by editors’ (both p. 390).

#### 4. ‘ARCHAISING’ SPELLING

I have left to the end a remaining aspect of Adams’ discussion of spelling, which is his repeated use of terms like ‘archaising’ and ‘old-fashioned’ when referring to the variants he discusses.<sup>18</sup> Late on he defends this usage, saying: ‘[i]t is legitimate to use the term “archaising”, because from early on modern or phonetic spellings intrude from time to time into documents or texts which otherwise use the older (nonphonetic) alternative, and these older forms are commented on as being such by ancient critics’ (p. 453). A little later (pp. 456–7) he comments that ‘[t]he problem faced by any writer in the first century BC is that for centuries old-fashioned spelling had been an ideal, but in genres that were not clearly specified, and constant phonetic changes were causing the intrusion of modernisms’.

In a sense, this is a side-issue to the question of standardisation, since for Adams’ argument, what is important is the existence, rather than the precise origin, of variation and inconsistency. Nonetheless, it is important to devote some consideration to his ideas around ‘archaising’ spellings, since I believe they provide a rather misleading perspective on the development and codification of Latin orthography: ‘old-fashioned’ spelling as a centuries-old ‘ideal’, breaking down in the first century BC.<sup>19</sup> Once again, we seem to run up against the idea of a binary, this time of ‘modern’ versus ‘archaic’, without acknowledgement that spellings might have different histories.

I assume, from his framing, that he thinks that spellings become ‘old-fashioned’ once a phonological change in the phoneme(s) they represent leads to the creation of an alternative ‘modern’ spelling. But this is not a particularly useful way of looking at the history even of <ei> for /i:/, which is Adams’ primary example. This had originally represented the diphthong /ei/, which monophthongised to /e:/ by the mid-third century BC, and then raised to /i:/ in the mid-second century (Meiser 1998: 58). While it is true, therefore, that the digraph <ei> had not represented a diphthong for quite some time by the first century BC, it had represented the unique phoneme /e:/ (as opposed to <e>, which was used for /ɛ(:)/ until the mid-second century),<sup>20</sup> and had even subsequently remained useful as a way of representing long /i:/, distinct from <i> which also represented short /i/.

The story of the ‘intermediate’ vowel in non-initial syllables prior to labials is equally complex. In words in which we find variation, it is true that on the whole there is a movement over time from a spelling with <u> to one with <i>. But, again, the earliest instance of an <i> spelling is not until the second half of the second century BC, and we have no reason to think that use of <u> prior to that is ‘old-fashioned’ rather than reflecting actual pronunciation. Moreover, the shift from <u> to <i> over time is highly variable on a word-by-word or morpheme-by-morpheme basis, and some words retain <u> as the usual spelling for the entire history of Latin (Zair 2023: 82–108). So it is very hard to be sure which spellings are ‘old-fashioned’ at particular points in the first century BC, and even if they are, they will have become ‘old-fashioned’ only fairly recently.

The history is even more compressed for some of the other spellings, such as ‘archaising’ <uo> in *suom* in the *Lex Tarentina* (p. 383), for which text Adams accepts a dating to a decade or so after the Social War. But I argue that the sound change /uɔ/ to /uu/ probably only took place early in the first century BC (Zair 2023: 109–28), and <uo> remained more common than <uu> for this sequence throughout the first century BC. It is quite likely that for the

<sup>18</sup> I have written at some length elsewhere about the problems inherent in using terms like ‘archaising’ and ‘old-fashioned’ when it comes to spelling (Zair 2023: 10–15, 258–61).

<sup>19</sup> Ironically, since the picture of a consistent ‘old-fashioned’ orthographic ideology that Adams draws looks a lot more like a process akin to standardisation than the reality does.

<sup>20</sup> It is true that inscriptions of this period sometimes also use <e> for /e:/, but this seems not to have been favoured for very long, with <ei> being maintained as the normal way of representing the phoneme.

drafter of the law, only <uo> was available; even if he did have a choice between that and <uu>, the latter would probably have been innovative rather than <uo> being ‘archaising’. Likewise, the reduction of /ss/ to /s/ after a long vowel or diphthong probably took place around the start of the first century (Meiser 1998: 125; Weiss 2020: 66, 170).

For another thing, we should note that the idea of a modern = ‘phonetic’ vs an archaic = ‘nonphonetic’ variant does not work for all of the spellings Adams considers. Strictly speaking, the digraph <xs> for /ks/ is actually younger than <x>: its first appearance in a Latin inscription is in the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* of 186 BC (see Mancini 2019 on the history of <xs>). Nor is <x> any more ‘phonetic’ than <xs>. The same applies to <q> rather than <c> before <u> (and both possibilities had been available for centuries by this point, so it is hard to tag one as ‘modern’).<sup>21</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

Adams is clearly right that the Latin language did not, at least in the ancient period, ever reach a point of complete standardisation, if this is defined in terms of modern Western nation states with a system of universal education. However, if we take a more nuanced approach, which considers standardisation as a process or an ideology that can have a number of instantiations, the case against standardisation in the first century BC seems less certain.

The major part of Adams’ investigation of the question of standardisation in the first century BC focusses on spelling. Adams makes a very clear and strong case that variation of spelling was admitted, if not actually promoted, in a range of high register texts of the first century BC. Where there are consistencies, for example particular rules on when to use <ei> to represent /i:/, within texts, these are not extended across more than a subset of texts. This is backed up by evidence of discussion and disagreement between scholars and writers on language and how to use particular spellings. The question, once again, is to what extent this precludes standardisation.

I would argue that, although variation was permitted (and perhaps even encouraged), if we look more closely, we see this variation is actually restricted to a relatively small group of orthographic features, all of which had been accepted in high register inscriptions in the recent past, and most of which would continue to be the subject of debate amongst writers on language – and, indeed, to remain in use among at least some writers for a considerable time afterwards (Zair 2023 *passim*). There is a sharp divide to be drawn between these and other features, for which only a single spelling had been established by the first century BC, and any other spelling was inadmissible—whether it featured in earlier inscriptions, such as the absence of the final <m> or <s>, or whether it reflected relatively innovatory sound changes such as /aɛ/ > /ɛ:/. Although different, perhaps, in detail and scale to the kind of variation we see in a standardised language like modern English, I do not believe it is necessarily different in type.

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<sup>21</sup> Except with hindsight: we know which alternant will eventually win out. But this information was not available to writers in the first century BC.

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