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“Don’t Speak Latin in Front of the Books”: Latin as the *Lingua Franca* of Magic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

[1] There has recently been a bifurcation in the use of Latin, in which the study of the Latin language and of the Classics have become separate from Latin as it is used in popular culture (Farrell, 2001:96), where it has become predominantly a language of magic. Much like the contemporaneous *Harry Potter* sequence (1997-2007), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) makes gratuitous use of Latin for magical invocations. This discussion concerns itself with why the *Buffyverse* uses Latin as the *lingua franca* of magic by considering the use of the language as ‘magical’ in general popular culture and its history as a language associated with religion and magic. The term *Buffyverse* is used in lieu of the more widely accepted Whedonverses as this discussion concerns itself purely with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.¹



[2] From its first appearance in a classroom laboratory in “The Witch” (1.3), the performance of magic in the *Buffyverse* is strongly linked to the experimental sciences, with potions used in connection with spoken spells in order to induce a desired effect (Reston 1997). Before considering why Latin is used as the *lingua franca* of magic in *Buffy*, it would be prudent to consider why popular culture magic makes use of spells at all. Magic is described by Thon (2010:106) as “the strong connection between speech at action” and attention is called to the fact that magical ritual or spell casting “refers to the semantic appropriateness of utterances, especially lexemes, to the described reality.” The idea that all words have magical potential, depending upon their ‘semantic appropriateness’, is demonstrated in “Grave” (6.22), wherein Willow attempts to negate Giles’ binding field by listing a variety of Latin imperatives (notably “Solvo” and “Libero” [Fury, 2002]) before apparently stumbling upon the correct command (“Solutum” [Fury, 2002]). In this case, it is not necessarily Willow (or Giles or any of the other Latinate magic users) who are powerful on their own; rather, the language itself is imbued with power. Even Xander (who is remarkable because he is not remarkable) is able to cast powerful magic purely by “speak[ing] Latin in front of the books” (Espenson, 2000). But why is an ancient language imbued with such power when the everyday language of the characters (in a franchise where the use of English is so remarkable it is the subject of books and papers in its own right) is not? To understand this, it is necessary to turn back to the ancient authors of Egypt and Rome, for whom magic was an active part of life. To them, magic “is a [linguistic] category in its own right So they distinguished it from everyday speech” (Thon, 2010:107). Stripping English of magical potency means that characters are able to speak freely without fear of igniting books, and allows the show to feasibly take place within our reality where we too speak English without such fear.

[3] Imbuing the words with power also separates *Buffyverse* witchcraft from belief systems held in the real world. For modern Wiccans, it is not the words of spells themselves which are powerful, but the will (the desire) of the speaker. Where Willow

willed herself to be free but had to find the correct word to enact her will, modern Wiccans may use any combination of words to express their will and cast a spell since “the real magic in weaving spells comes from within” (Johnstone, 2006:69).

[4] Having now established the need for a magical language it is possible to consider why Latin has been chosen. As Harrison (2010:37) points out, “there are distinct advantages to using a real, ancient language rather than made-up words for magical spells.” Foremost of these is Pinsent’s (2006:31) idea that the use of Latin for magical ritual opens up the world for non-magical audiences. He suggests that authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, who fabricate languages for magic, make their rituals impossible for outsiders to access because it would be impossible for someone to learn words or phrases that do not already exist within the books. By contrast, an existing language such as Latin allows access to a wider world of magic than is offered in the text. Whilst Latin (as a dead language) is separate enough from daily life to be considered exotic, there are resources and opportunities for audience members to learn, if they so wish. This juxtaposition of magic with an accessible language facilitates suspension of disbelief by firmly grounding the fantastic in the mundane, which is particularly important in the genre of magical realism.

[5] There are any number of extinct or dead languages available for writers to choose, so the question of “why Latin?” is one which requires consideration. Within the *Buffyverse*, a variety of languages are used to invoke magic. Dawn, for example, learns Sumerian in order to widen her own magical knowledge and is proficient in the language by episode 7.15, “Get it Done” (Petrie, 2003). So why are the bulk of non-English incantations Latinate? In discussing *Harry Potter*, Harrison (2010:37) draws attention to the linguistic games that can be played with the Latin in the text and how Rowling uses the language to give extra information about her characters : “a child with some knowledge of ancient mythology may gain great satisfaction from guessing the nature of Remus Lupin’s problem, for example (he is a werewolf).” Within the Anglophonic sphere, even those who do not learn enough Latin to be able to translate complex spells and incantations know enough to get the ‘gist’ or understand the joke. Despite (or, perhaps, thanks to) its poor rendering, Xander’s spell *librum incendere* (Espenson, 2000) contains enough quasi-cognates to be comprehensible to an English speaking audience. This allows the audience to feel a part of the Scooby Gang, to share their special knowledge without needing to have undertaken special study of their own.

[6] However, this drive for cognates introduces an anomaly into the use of standard Latin as the principal language of magic. The spell used to defeat Adam at the end of Season 4 (“Primeval,” 4.21), contains a melange of ancient languages and non-standard grammar which, for all intents and purposes, are passed off as standard Latin. The spell names the four core Scoobies as four parts of the Ultimate Slayer: Spiritus/Spirit, Animus/Heart, Sophus/Mind and Manus/Hand (Fury, 2000). Of the four, only *manus* is appropriately rendered Latin. The translation of *spiritus* falls into the trap of the false cognate, as it more accurately means “breath, breathing, air, soul, life” (Mahoney, 2013). However, the translation of *spiritus* as “spirit” is the most

understandable of the three, as the ancients considered air and breath and spirit and soul to (essentially) be the same entity.

[7] *Animus* is more difficult to reconcile, since it works directly against the intention of the spell. Xander is referred to as the heart of the team, which is a trope often used to evoke the emotional centre of a group. *Animus*, however, is almost the polar opposite of this, referring to the rational, logical part of the soul. The word more appropriate to Xander's position is the feminine noun *anima* (which would have had the added bonus of being a component of the verb *animadverto* which can mean 'to pay attention to', 'to notice' or 'to observe').

[8] *Sophus* is the most out of place, as it is often employed in Latin as a noun meaning "a wise man" or "a sage" (or, as an adjective to mean 'wise' or 'shewd'). Whilst Giles is certainly a wise man, the incorrect use of *sophus* raises questions about the use of the spell. Is a wise man needed? Could a wise woman perform the spell? Why do the other cards require attributes whereas this card requires a whole person? The fact that the card needed was *sophus* rather than the more translation-appropriate *mens* (mind) suggests that Latin as shown in the Buffyverse works differently to that used by the ancients. The concept of the rules of magic having a grammar and vocabulary apart from the traditional grammar and vocabulary of written Latin also helps to explain when the Latin used throughout the show is broken; however, this concept creates the distance between audience and cast which had been initially closed by Latin's inclusion, because it is impossible for us to learn the rules from any grammar to which we do not have broad access.

[9] However, the idea that Latin is deliberately changed through non-standard grammar and declension is at odds with the gravitas with which the language is employed. The pomp and ceremony with which Giles casts the spell to undo all of Catherine Madison's work in "The Witch" (1.3) is representative of the mainstream conception of Latin as a language unfit for general or colloquial purposes (Reston, 1997). Paradoxically, this distances the audience from the ability to use language, suggesting that the audience could learn the Latin spells, but that it requires special education or privileges not afforded to the general populace.

[10] This general perception of Latin as a language for the educated stems from its use in the Christian church, which is a further reason for its use as the magical *lingua franca* in the Buffyverse (McClelland, 2001:6). This ecclesiastical invocation, McClelland suggests, is intended to call to mind "the Western European demonological tradition." Both the Church and its heretics used Latin as the principal written language which gave it an air of mystery and religious significance that pervades modern popular culture.

[11] Latin was not, however, the first official language used by the Christian Church in the West. The original founders of the church used Greek in their day-to-day lives and, even when Latin began to be in use, for the most important church functions. Irenaeus preached in Latin but refuted heresies in Greek (see Smith, 2013). Even in Rome, the letter of Clement to the Corinthians is written in Greek (Pearse, 2003). In fact, the earliest Latin document coming from the church is dated 20th January 250 (Knight, 2009a). Latin is not, then, a language connected to the church from its

inception but a language that serves a professional, practical purpose (much as the translations of treatises on medicine, botany, and mathematics did). For the medieval church sorcerers (on whom the popular culture witch is based, according to Peters, 1978) the books of magic that they scribed were mostly practical in purpose, with Klaassen (2007:52) positing that '[p]ractical operations account for at least 95 percent of the ink their scribes shed.' It is natural, then, that these instruction manuals in magic were written in Latin in same way as other academic and instructional texts. Magic as a medieval construct, then, belonged to the educated few, who used Latin as the primary language of intellectual communication.

[12] However, Latin very quickly became integrated into the day-to-day running of the Church. Latin was the more familiar speech for the majority of Christian across Europe and Africa as a result of the expanding Roman Empire, and it became the preferred language of Pope Victor who, according to St Jerome (cited in Knight, 2009b), was the earliest Christian writer in Latin. This also meant that a shift happened within the church, with liturgies and scripture being translated from Greek to a more commonly understood Latin. This shift is notable in that the books and instructions written by the monks and sorcerers mostly took one of two forms : those which rely upon angelic invocation to cause the magic to work and those which invoke demonic activity (Klaassen, 2007:52). These demonic workings were often reworkings of liturgical formulae (Klaassen, 2007:52) and so were written in Latin.

[13] This demonic liturgy is demonstrated by the vampire Angelus in the 1998 Whedon episode "Becoming: Part 1" (2.21). In a deliberate parallel to a religious ceremony, Angelus spreads human blood across his palms (invoking imagery of the wine taken during Communion, which is in turn representative of the blood of Christ) and chanting a Latin invocation in order to awaken the demon Acatla, which Angelus would command to destroy the world. Directly contrasted with this are Willow's two "Ritual of Restoration" spells which specifically invoke gods (in Romanian, "Te implore, Doamne") in order to produce a 'good' effect and restore Angelus' soul.

[14] Willow's "Ritual of Restoration" is depicted as being in the Kalderash tradition—a spell presumably created by this subset of the Roma people in order to invoke their revenge on the demon Angelus. While both versions of the Ritual are principally written in Romanian, they also contain a significant amount of Latin (6.89% of Willow's first attempt and 8% of her second). The question here is why the Roma decided to use Latin while their native language is powerful enough to form the majority of the spell. While there is no in-text explanation for this, I posit that the inclusion of Latin here is further proof of its use as the important language for magic in the Buffyverse (the placement of the Latin at the beginning of the spell may exist to activate the magic, with Romanian then used to channel will) and as a trigger for the audience to expect some kind of magic to take place. Cuing the audience into relating magic to the sounds of Latin means that it is not necessary for the words to be understood (or the attempted cognates recognized) in order for them to know that there will be a magical consequence to the spell.

[15] Introduced in "Out of Sight, Out of Mind" (1.11) and referred to throughout "Prophecy Girl" (1.12), The Pergamum Codex is one of the oldest examples of a Grimoire within the show (Whedon, Gable, & Swyden, 1997; Whedon, 1997a). It contains the most complete prophecies about the Slayer's role in the end years. Giles believes that the book had been lost in the fifteenth century, establishing its existence well within the historical period in which Clergy used Latin as their primary form of communication. Study of the book showed that a multitude of passages (including references to a variety of magics, such as bacchanals as well as spells) were Latin translated from a demonic language, which strengthens the idea of a link between the Latin-using intellectual elite of the Middle Ages and the reasons for using Latin as a language to invoke magic. This link is made more explicit through the Du Lac manuscript ("Lie to Me" [Whedon 1997 b, 2.7], "What's My Line: Part 1" [Gordon & Noxon 1997, 2.09], "What's My Line: Part 2" [Noxon 1997, 2.10]) which is specifically mentioned to have been written in "archaic Latin" so that only church members could be privy to its information and which contained dark rituals and spells.

[16] The idea that Latin is a language fit only for intellectuals and 'nerds' is reinforced by the character of Oz, who specifically mentions that he never studied Latin. Throughout his appearances, the intelligent Oz is depicted as a man of few words, so it comes as no surprise that he has little or no use for a second language. However, he is also depicted as a character who is admired for being "cool," which is a desirable trait for high school students. This rejection of Latin by the only member of the Scooby Gang who retains any kind of street cred (which Buffy has lost since her transfer from Hemery and which neither Willow nor Xander ever had) continues to reinforce the language as something which is either pointless, uncool, or best left to the academics (often coded as geeky), such as Giles.

[17] These strong classicist and classist perceptions of the language appear to be evident in the use of Latin in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In popular perception, Latin is a language of academia (likely due to a combination of the circumstances in which the majority of people learn the language and its appropriation in the scientific and mathematical domains) and it is the Oxford-educated character of Rupert Giles and Willow, who has a storyline devoted to her inability to move behind her identification as 'high-school geek' who make most use of the language. Indeed, the first instance of the language within the series is from Giles, who acts with an air of ritual and solemnity as he recites the broken Latin spell in "The Witch": "*Centrum est obscurus, tenebrae respiratus*" (Reston 1997, 1.3).

[18] Through its ability to be simultaneously foreign and exotic, learnable but out of reach, Latin is, and will continue to be, the *de facto* language of magic in popular culture, and the *Buffyverse* is no exception. Overbey and Preston-Matto (2002:73-74) draw attention to the fact that language is power in the world of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, that "speech acts, particularly in the form of spells . . . , function as literal weapons" (Knoblauch, 2010:2) and that the multitude of ways in which language is used by the characters demonstrate that "magic is the syntax—it is magic that provides the rules and governs the language," (Overbey & Preston-Matto, 2002:80). Any 'mistakes'

or 'non-standard' usages of Latin can be explained (in-universe, at least) as the magic owning and governing the language, causing structures to change in order to channel the magic most effectively. For the inhabitants of the *Buffyverse*, Latin is not the language of magic so much as it *is* pure magic, wielded by those who have taken the time to learn.

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Appendix: Examples of Latin Magic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Episode Title	Latin	English Translation of Latin (If Applicable)	Notes
General	Formatia trans sicere educatorium	Enter all of you who seek knowledge	Motto of Sunnydale High. While not strictly magic, it is joked that this constitutes a welcome for vampires.
General			Ethan Rayne is a sorcerer with fluency in Latin
"The Witch" 1.3	<i>"The center is dark. Centrum est obscurus. The darkness breathes. Tenebrae respiratis. The listener hears. Hear me! Unlock the gate. Let the darkness shine. Cover us with holy fear. Corsheth and Gilail! The gate is closed! Receive the dark! Release the unworthy! Take of mine energy and be sated! Be sated! Release the unworthy! Release! Release! Release!"</i>		Used by Giles to undo the effects of spells and curses performed by a Witch
"Out of Mind, Out of Sight" 1.11 "Prophecy Girl" 1.12	Pergamum Codex		Translated into Latin from a demonic language. Contains the most complete prophecies about the Slayer
"Lie to Me" 2.7 "What's My Line: Part 1" 2.9 "What's My Line: Part 2" 2.10	Du Lac Manuscript		Written by Joseph du Lac in archaic Latin so only church members could read in. Contained dark rituals and spells.
"Becoming: Part1" 2.21	<i>Acathla ... Mundatus sum ... pro te necavi. Sanguinem meum ... pro te effundam ... quo me dignum ... esse demonstrem.</i>	Acathla ... I am cleansed ... For you I have killed ... My blood ... pours to you ... Which makes me worthy ... as I demonstrate.	Angelus kills a human, spreads blood on his palm, then recites an

			incantation in Latin, and tries to pull out the sword, in vain
"Becoming: Parts 1 and 2" 2.21, 2.22	Ritual of Restoration; Willow's First Version: <i>Quod perditum est, invenietur. Not dead, nor not of the living, spirits of the interregnum, I call. Gods, bind him. Cast his heart from the evil realm. Te implor, Doamne; nu ignoră aceasta rugămintele! Nici mort, nici al ființei, lăsa orbită să fie vasul care-i vă transportă sufletul la el. Așa să fie! Așa să fie! Acum! Acum!</i>	Willow's First Version What is lost is found. Not dead, nor not of the living, spirits of the interregnum, I call. Gods, bind him. Cast his heart from the evil realm Te implor, Doamne; nu ignoră aceasta rugămintele! Nici mort, nici al ființei, lăsa orbită să fie vasul care-i vă transportă sufletul la el. Așa să fie! Așa să fie! Acum! Acum! ²	Performed in Romanian plus Latin/English to restore a vampire's soul
"Revelations" 3.7	<i>Exorere, Flamma Vitae. Prodi ex loco tuo elementorum, in hunc mundum vivorum.</i>	Arise, Flame of Life. Come from your place of the elements, into this world of the living	Creates the living flame to destroy the Glove of Myhnegon
"Helpless" 3.12	<i>Cruciamentum (Tento di Cruciamentum³)</i>	Torment	Slayer test
"Bad Girls" 3.14	<i>Potestatem matris nostrae in tenebris invoco maledictum filium tuum ab omni periculo custodias nunc et in saecula!</i>	I call upon the power of our mother in darkness, protect your accursed son from harm now and forever!	Used by Mayor Wilkins to make himself invulnerable, as part of his ascension.
"Choices" 3.19	<i>Sis modo dissolutum exposco, validum scutum! Diutius nec defende a manibus arcam, intende.</i>	I demand that you be now dissolved, powerful shield! No longer protect the box from our hands, hear us.	Dissolves energy shields
"Graduation Day: Part 1" 3.21	<i>Infector Mortis</i>	Killer of the Dead	Mystical poison capable of killing vamps
"Who Are You?" 4.16	<i>Incendere</i>	Burning	Xander used librum incendere
"Blood Ties" 5.13	<i>Discede</i>	Be gone	Teleportation spell used by Willow against Glory
"Bargaining: Part 2" 6.2	<i>Incendere</i>	Burning	Tara cast against the Hellions, but it didn't really affect them.
"Life Serial" 6.5	<i>Opus orbit est, et ea in medio, tempus ad calcem intendit</i>	The work is a circle, and she is at the centre, time stretches out as far as it can.	Chanted by Jonathan to place Buffy in a time loop.
"All The Way" 6.6 "Tabula Rasa" 6.8	<i>For [target(s)], this I char. Let Lethe's Bramble do its chore. Purge their minds of memories grim, of pains from recent slights and sins. When the fire goes out, the crystal turns black, the spell will be cast. Tabula Rasa, Tabula Rasa, Tabula Rasa.</i>	For [target(s)], this I char. Let Lethe's Bramble do its chore. Purge their minds of memories grim, of pains from recent slights and sins. When the fire goes out, the crystal turns black, the spell will be cast. Blank slate, blank slate.	Erases memory
"Villains" 6.20	<i>Irretite</i>	Ensnare	Used by Willow to capture Warren.
"Grave" 6.22	<i>Incurso</i>	I attack or I invade	Green gas to envelop its target. Used against Dark Willow
	<i>Tego</i>	I shield, I protect, I conceal, I hide	Summons a nearby object to get in between an attacker and victim
	<i>Solutum</i>	Soluble	Negates a binding field
	<i>Solvo</i>	I release	Failed attempt by

			Willow to dissolve the binding field. Suggests that any Latin word can be used as a spell?
	<i>Libero</i>	I free	Failed attempt by Willow to dissolve the binding field. Suggests that any Latin word can be used as a spell?
	<i>Vincire</i>	Bind	Creates a binding field around Dark Willow
"Conversations with Dead People" 7.7			Jonathan is revealed to be fluent in Latin and Klingon. His sorcery may necessitate a fluency in Latin.

Notes

¹ Whilst the conclusions made herein could be generalised to include wider aspects of the Whedonverses as a whole, the author has not analysed any of Whedon's other works for uses of Latin and so is currently unable to make such claims.

² This untranslated text is Romanian and not Latin. The author is not proficient in Romanian, but a rough translation could read : 'I beseech you, oh Lord, not to ignore this request. Let this orb be the vessel that will carry the soul to him. So be it! So be it! Now! Now!'

³ "Tento di Cruciamentum" does not translate well from Latin. 'Tento' means 'held' and so we could do a very loose translation of 'Held in Torture' but 'di' isn't a word in Latin. It appears that we have a mix of Latin and modern Italian, with 'tento di' being Italian for "I try to..." resulting in a mixed translation of "I try to torment".