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THINKING ABOUT WAYS TO DISPLAY LATIN SYNTAX INFORMATION IN A TRANSLATION TOOL

Most of us probably learned Latin at school. Those lessons focused on grammar - amo, amas, amat - and also on rote learning of vocabulary. All of this is essential, and I really wish that I could remember more of it than I can today.

But this focus means that questions of Latin syntax are often dealt with only superficially, or not at all. I saw evidence of this, back in 2006 when I was running the project to translate Jerome's *Chronicle*. Anybody could contribute by doing an entry. Often I would see people stumble on something like an ablative absolute, through sheer ignorance.

It occurs to me that some people reading this won't know what that is, so I'd better try to explain as simply as I can. Let's look at this Latin sentence.

Urbe capta, cives fugaverunt.

???, the citizens fled.

Urbe is the ablative of the noun *urbs, urbis*, = city so would ordinarily mean "by/with/from the city". Gender is feminine. It's singular.

capta is also in the ablative, but is a perfect passive participle of the verb *capio, capere*, etc = "capture, seize". By itself it would mean "having been captured". It too is in the feminine gender, and also singular, so it agrees with *Urbe* in case, number and gender.

The combination is an ablative absolute - the word "absolute" is just noise - meaning "the city having been captured", or, in better English "after the city had been captured", and indicates time. A noun and a participle in the ablative and agreeing with each other ... start thinking "ablative absolute".

This is a Latin construction. The term "ablative absolute" is just a label for this Latin construction, where they put the words together to indicate something not found in the bare words individually. It's just one of the bits of know-how that you need for Latin, and it's really really common.

There are many other such bits of trickery. Students are taught how to recognise them. This stuff is what you memorise.

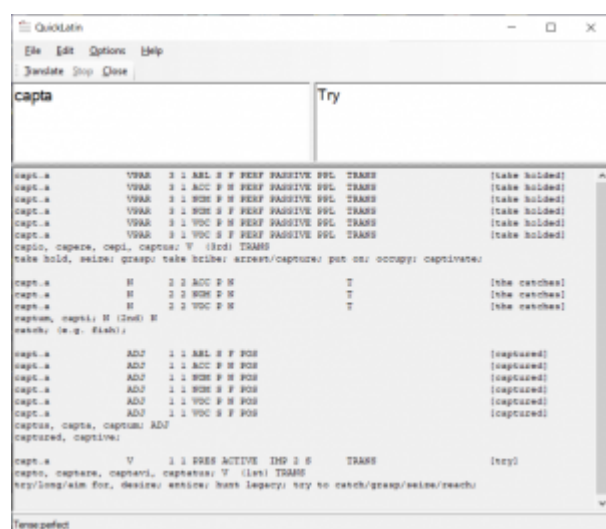
Now we have quite a few tools on the web for handling Grammar. There is my own [QuickLatin](#), Whitaker's Words, and probably many more that I haven't come across. A "lexical parser" is not that uncommon.

But none of these signal these kinds of structures.

For last week or so I've taken Morwood's Oxford Latin Grammar to bed with me, and I've been reading through the descriptions of Latin clauses and structures which make up the second half of the book. It is very clear, to be sure. But tired brains do not absorb this sort

of thing very well, and most readers of this blog will have jobs and other tasks to attend to. And ... do we need to rote learn these things? Truly?

It's a UI or UX problem, in a way – User Interface or User Experience. How could this information be presented to somebody with a line of Latin text in front of them? If we hover over the individual words, we can have the grammar laid out for us alright, like this:



But how do we signal to the reader that “urbe capta” is an ablative absolute, and pop up some kind of info about how to handle them?

There are two problems here. The first is how to detect the presence of such a construction. I suspect that those familiar with algorithms will have ideas in mind already, perhaps about “fuzzy logic” or “AI” or whatever.

Then, once we recognise that this is, or might be, such a construction, how do we signal it to the user?

I’m not sure of the answer to either of these questions, to be honest. But I’m thinking about it. This information could be, and should be, captured and condensed. It needs to be indexed in a way that allows you to find it from the sentence, rather than in the way that grammars tend to present it.

Ideas are welcome!