

BOOK REVIEW

The Non-Literary Latin Letters: A Study of Their Syntax and Pragmatics. By Hilla HALLA-AHO. Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 2009. Pp. 189. Paper. ISBN 978-951-653-363-9.

Hilla Halla-aho takes on two challenges in this monograph, which is based on her dissertation. The first is to make meaningful linguistic observations about a corpus of extremely fragmented and diverse Latin letters, spanning several centuries, uncovered in places as disparate as northern Britain, Switzerland, Egypt, and North Africa, and written by people at whose linguistic and social background we can only make educated guesses. The second is to find significant insights that have not already been uncovered by the prolific J. N. Adams, whose publications on matters related to Halla-aho's subject take up a full page and a half of her bibliography.¹ Despite these challenges, Halla-aho largely succeeds.

The letters themselves are inherently fascinating. They date from the late Republic or Augustan period through the 3rd century CE and are mostly preserved on papyri or ostraca, though the Vindolanda letters from Northern Britain were written in ink on wooden tablets, as were those from Vindonissa (modern Windisch in Switzerland). Many of those discovered in Egypt and North Africa turned up in troves that also included Greek letters, indicating a high degree of bilingualism in the surrounding culture. At least one of the writers, Claudius Terentianus, wrote letters in both languages. Many of the letters were probably dictated to scribes, but some, including five written by a certain Rustius Barbarus in Egypt, are probably autographs.

¹ See especially J. N. Adams, *The Vulgar Latin of the Letters of Claudius Terentianus* (Manchester, 1977); "The Language of the Vindolanda Writing-Tablets: An Interim Report," *JRS* 85 (1995) 86–134; "Petronius and the New Non-Literary Latin," in Josef Herman and Hannah Rosén (eds.) *Petroniana: Gedenkschrift für Hubert Petersmann* (Heidelberg, 2003) 11–23; "The New Vindolanda Writing-Tablets," *CQ* 53 (2003) 530–75; and "The Accusative + Infinitive and *quod-/quia*-Clauses. The Evidence of Non-Literary Data and Petronius," in S. Kiss, L. Mondin, and G. Salvi (eds.), *Latin et Langues Romanes* (Tübingen, 2005) 195–206.

In discussing the letters Halla-aho avoids using the term “vulgar” Latin, partly because some of the letters are written by quite literate authors, but mostly because she thinks the term is incoherent and inconsistently used, and hence not useful. Rather, Halla-aho prefers us to conceive of Latin as a diverse language system encompassing wide synchronic and diachronic variation in a variety of speech situations. Many of the letters include elements that might be considered typical of literary, non-literary, or spoken Latin, and Halla-aho’s aim is to locate these elements within the range of normal variation and change in Latin rather than characterize them with such a blunt and vague term as “vulgar.” She rightly points out that it is inadvisable to view these letters simply as representations of spoken Latin in either its phonological or syntactic aspects, since the letter-writers were probably schooled in traditional orthography, which would obscure any regional or diachronic sound changes in their spoken dialect, and since the syntax of even informal written language has been shown to vary significantly from that of spoken language.

Halla-aho focuses on a few matters of syntax and pragmatics, avoiding the issues of phonology, morphology, orthography, diction, and many issues of syntax that have been addressed by Adams. In particular, she takes up problems of epistolary phraseology, sentence connection, syntactic incoherence, and word order. Her theoretical framework for both syntax and pragmatics is that of Functional Grammar pioneered by Simon Dik and promoted in Latin studies by Harm Pinkster and others.

Halla-aho’s analysis shows that fixed, polite epistolary greetings and closings show regional variation, with letters of Egyptian origin displaying a certain porosity between Latin and Greek (which also shows up in syntax). Thus, for example, the frequent polite greeting-phrase *opto te bene valere* appears to be a calque of Greek *εὐχομαι σε ὑγιαίνειν*, or perhaps the Greek is a calque of the Latin; the origin of the phrase in this use is not known, although the earliest attestation is in Latin. Somewhat more surprisingly, even the least literate writers sometimes use elegant phrases that turn up in Cicero or Pliny (e.g. *in notitiam tuam ... perfero*).

Halla-aho documents the frequent use of *item* and *et* as sentence connectors, and in some cases ascribes to *et* the pragmatic function of introducing new topics: *... per omnia me securum fecit et ideo peto a te ...* “... he made me secure in every respect and so I ask from you ...” (*CEL* 169, 10-16 = *P. Oxy.* I 32), a use of *et* that is quite rare in literary prose and poetry. My own view is that *et* in these instances does not actually carry any pragmatic discourse function, but rather is a

pragmatically blank sentence connector that these writers use in contexts where literary Latin would require a particle or conjunction carrying a more specific discourse function.

Also frequent in the letters is paratactic asyndeton: *caligae autem nucl[e]atae nugae sunt, bis me in mensem calcio* “boots with buttons (?) are worthless, I provide myself with footgear twice a month” (*P. Mich.* VIII 468, 25). Paratactic phrasal complements also frequently appear without their typical syntactic markers, e.g. *dico illi, veni interpone te* “I say to him, come, intervene” (*P. Mich.* 471, 27–9). The latter, especially with *verba sentiendi et dicendi*, Halla-aho cautiously describes as reflecting everyday speech patterns, though she does not draw the same conclusion for parataxis in general. Her discussion of the problems with assuming that parataxis is typical of oral language, and hypotaxis typical of the written register, is both linguistically informed and circumspect.

Syntactic incoherence is also a prominent feature of the letters, but from different causes; sometimes from speakers’ “contaminating” (i.e., mixing) two constructions, sometimes because the writers do not have full control of the written register they are attempting, and sometimes because of the writer’s shift of narrative point of view mid-sentence. Since many of the letters are dictated, incoherence often occurs because “speakers typically do not plan very much ahead what they are going to say.” (p. 90). More interesting are Halla-aho’s observations on the nonstandard uses of the accusative case. She argues that the accusative appears to be taking on the status of a “default” or unmarked case for some speakers, e.g. *interveniente Minucium Plotianum triarchum et Apuleium Nepotem scriba(m)* “in the presence of Minucius Plotianus, a trierarch, and Apuleius Nepos, a scribe” (*CEL* 156, 10), where only the first word is in the correct (ablative) case; the rest of the construction resembles an accusative absolute. Compare also *et me iacentem in liburna sublata mi s[unt]* “while I was lying on the ship they were stolen from me” (*P. Mich.* VIII 468, 13). Accusative constructions like these are often used to introduce new topics and are clearly related to literary prolepsis, in which a topical phrase, typically accusative, is picked up by a resumptive pronoun.

Halla-aho’s sixth chapter, on word order, is somewhat less satisfactory, though still worthwhile. She focuses first on the order of object (O) and verb (V) and surveys typological treatments of Latin in the Greenbergian tradition. She counts up occurrences of OV vs. VO word orders in main and subordinate clauses, finds significant variation, and attributes the differences to varying degrees of literary Latinity among the writers, and to Greek influence in some cases. This is

good as far as it goes. She also undertakes a pragmatic analysis of the linear placement of themes as well as topical and focal elements, employing the distinctions among strong vs. weak, broad vs. narrow, and contrastive topic and focus that are used by most of the adherents of Functional Grammar working in Latin. She finds what others have also found, namely that linear, surface-level sentence positions are not reserved for any of these pragmatic functions in Latin. She says, “It is an interesting conclusion that both topical and focal constituents seem to occur both preverbally and postverbally” (p. 153) and quotes de Jong² to the effect that the topic-focus distinction is unable to explain variation in Latin word order. She does, however, argue that topic-initial sentences are especially preferred in the letters, and also that contrastive focus strongly prefers to appear sentence-initially. But although she cites Devine and Stephens’ work on Latin word order³ a few times, she does not at all address their central thesis that Latin is a discourse configurational language like Hungarian or Korean, whose syntax includes an array of pragmatic phrasal projections which have tree-structural rather than linear positions for pragmatic functions, and which may thus explain a good deal of variation in Latin word order. Although incorporating Devine and Stephens’ theoretically sophisticated perspective fully into this short monograph would have been nearly impossible, some acknowledgement of its contribution was warranted, especially since the pragmatic analysis using the Functional Grammar framework yielded such weak results.

But on the whole, Halla-aho’s treatment of this interesting and challenging corpus is perceptive and thoughtful, offering valuable insights into varieties of Latin that, even if they stand at the edge of our experience as classicists, nevertheless were certainly quite mainstream for millions of people, over many centuries, who used Latin as an everyday language.

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² Jan R. de Jong, “Word Order in Cato’s *De Agricultura*,” in J. Herman (ed.), *Linguistic Studies on Latin* (Amsterdam, 1994) 91–101.

³ A. M. Devine and L. D. Stephens, *Latin Word Order. Structured Meaning and Information* (Oxford, 2006).