B. X. DE WET ESSAY

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This essay is named in honour of Professor B. X. de Wet, who was Head of the Department of Classics at the University of Natal, Durban from 1975-89.

The finalists in 1993 were Theresa Biberauer (University of Stellenbosch), Samantha Masters (University of Natal, Durban) and Daniel Roux (University of Cape Town).

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF
SOME ASPECTS OF PALMER’S DISCUSSION OF
CHRISTIAN LATIN AS A ‘SPECIAL LANGUAGE’

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In Chapter VII of The Latin Language, Palmer attempts to characterise Christian Latin as what he terms a ‘special language’. Close analysis of this chapter, however, reveals various difficulties with respect to this classification. Some of the problems that arise are discussed below.

What Does Palmer Mean by ‘Special Language’?

Chapter VII is primarily concerned with illustrating that Christian Latin can justifiably be regarded as a so-called special language, a denomination that in itself is not overly helpful in revealing what it designates. Palmer clarifies what he means by this term as applied specifically to Christian Latin on p. 198: ‘... an idiom rich in technical terms and largely incomprehensible to the uninitiated...’. From the linguist’s point of view at least, this definition and its application to Christian Latin are problematic.

The term ‘special language’ (my italics) within the linguistic context implies a comprehensive communication system employed for a particular, specialised

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purpose. An example of a special language is sign-language, which is a self-
sufficient communication system employed specifically by those unable to hear and
which in no way lacks any of the devices available to users of any of the more
conventional spoken languages. Deaf people can express every known human
emotion by means of their sign-system, they can play games with it, learn, question,
explain and campaign in it. ‘Language’ in its generic sense denotes ‘the systematic,
conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols in a human society for
communication and self-expression’ and it consists of five generally distinguishable
components: (a) the phonological/sound system, (b) the morphological/word-form
system, (c) the semantic/meaning system, (d) the syntactic/word-order system, and
(e) the lexicon/vocabulary. That Palmer cannot possibly be conceiving of language
in the absolute sense of the above-mentioned definition becomes clear when he
admits that the ‘special language’, Christian Latin, could only be distinguished from
secular Latin on the strength of lexical peculiarities, that is, only in terms of one of
the five components comprising language. On p. 194 Palmer says, ‘The existence
of a special Christian vocabulary is ... beyond reasonable doubt. ... But ... it would appear that no important differences of syntax can be detected between
secular and Christian Latin prose.’ Christian Latin can thus not be viewed as a
separate, comprehensive communication system; it contains only a unique lexical
component, sharing the other four components with secular Latin. According to the
linguist’s (and most laymen’s) definition of the term ‘language’, Christian Latin can
thus not be regarded as a ‘special language’ at all. Palmer’s application of the term
to Christian Latin is undeniably confusing and inaccurate. Did he unintentionally
neglect to restrict the meaning of the term ‘language’ as he applied it or did he
genuinely have a misconception of the term’s full significance?

Once one has established that ‘special language’ as applied by Palmer does
not refer to a fully-fledged and uniquely specified language such as English,
Afrikaans, German or a sign-language, the following matter of importance is to
establish precisely what he did mean by the term ‘special language’. Palmer’s
observation that ‘individual acts of speech form part of a number of differing
"languages" which reflect differences in the degree of intimacy, local differences,
dialects, differences of social position, and so on’ (p. 181) casts some light on the
problem. ‘Language’ as he has employed it in the excerpt cited corresponds with
what the linguist would term ‘register’, that is, ‘a socially defined variety of
language, for example, scientific, legal, etc.’ Christian Latin may, to a certain
extent, be regarded as a register since, like the scientific or legal register, it is
employed under specific social circumstances. Christian Latin can, however, not
be viewed strictly in this sense since it was, as Palmer himself illustrates, more than
just a ‘variety of language’ employed according to the demands of the social
situation: the peculiar vocabulary of Christian Latin was found in all contexts, not

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necessarily only the strictly religious ones. This Palmer indicates implicitly in referring to a ‘Christian vernacular’ (my italics), that is, an everyday variety or ‘lect’ (p. 195) as opposed to a lect confined solely to religious occasions and uses. Christian Latin can thus also not be viewed as a special language in the purely register-oriented sense of the word since its use was not socially situation-bound.

The true denotation of ‘special language’ as conceived by Palmer emerges from his description of the speakers of such ‘languages’: they ‘have their own esoteric interests, a special world of objects and notions, and they develop the necessary linguistic machinery to communicate and co-ordinate their peculiar activities’ (p. 182). Particularly the reference to ‘esoteric interests’ and ‘a special world of objects and notions’ is significant for establishing Palmer’s conception of ‘language’: language employed for the particular (special) purpose of discourse on such topics is commonly called ‘jargon’, a term that The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language defines as ‘the technical language of a special field; the obscure use of specialised language.’

That Palmer does, to some extent, conceive of Christian Latin as a jargon of sorts is evident from his references to its ‘exclusiveness’ (p. 182) and to the fact that it was (originally at least) ‘largely incomprehensible to outsiders’ (p. 183). The most convincing argument for interpreting ‘special language’ as a jargon is, however, furnished when Palmer states unequivocally that we ‘are dealing with a particular adaptation of the Latin language to express new “things”—objects, acts, notions, forms of organization . . . ’ (p. 194; my italics).

Now that we have established what precisely Palmer had in mind when denoting Christian Latin as a ‘special language’, a further problem arises. At the conclusion of his argument he alludes to the well-known fact that Latin was the basis of the Romance languages in Western Europe. Palmer, however, specifies Christian Latin, which he has characterised throughout as a variety of secular Latin employed by adherents of the Christian faith, that is, a ‘sub-language’ of secular Latin, as the Latin basis of the Romance languages. He states that the ‘(Christian) group absorbed the whole community, and its special language became the xonv of the Western world. It is medieval Latin.’ (p. 205) How can a jargon give rise to a fully-fledged language, or, even more incomprehensibly, how can it form the basis for an entire family of languages? In this instance, Palmer is inaccurate in employing the term ‘special language’ since the language of a group that ‘absorbed the whole community’, that is, became the dominant language in a community, can no longer be regarded as a ‘special language’; it has now become what Palmer earlier refers to as a ‘common language’, that is, a language ‘in general use among the majority of the members of a given community’ (p. 182). Once Christian Latin had permeated secular Latin and the two had become inextricably combined (that is, when the vast majority of the citizens of the Roman Empire had been Christianized), the distinction between the two varieties of Latin was neutralised.

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Palmer would have thus been more correct in concluding that medieval Latin was born when Christian Latin and secular Latin no longer represented distinct varieties of the same language. What had previously been a specialised jargon relating only to matters religious became part of the common vernacular either in its original technical sense or with an adapted meaning and, in the process, a new, more multifaceted language was born.

_Palmer’s Views on ‘Terminological Hair-splitting’_

Probably at the root of all the confusing application of linguistic terminology in Chapter VII is Palmer’s rejection of several key concepts in the assessment of a language and its status. On p. 195, for instance, Palmer categorically dismisses the usefulness of determining whether Christian Latin was an ‘agglomération’ or a system ‘sensiblement une’. This distinction is, however, of cardinal importance in determining the light in which one should view Christian Latin. If it is merely an ‘agglomération’ of peculiar lexical items, it cannot justifiably be regarded as a language since ‘language’ necessarily implies a system whereby meaning is regularly and methodically conveyed in all its facets. If we were to regard Christian Latin as an ‘agglomération’, we would necessarily be viewing it as an incomplete collection of terms and usages not sufficiently ordered and systematic to enable successful communication. Christian Latin as Palmer views it throughout his argument—in the sense of a jargon—would be an ‘agglomération’ of terms dependent on secular Latin for its completion (the latter provides the syntactic, morphological and phonological basis for Christian Latin). In concluding that Christian Latin was the basis for medieval Latin, Palmer, however, suggests that he is now regarding it as a system ‘sensiblement une’ since only a self-sufficient language can give birth to another self-sufficient language. Had Palmer thus taken the trouble to indulge in some so-called ‘terminological hair-splitting’, he might have been clearer in his own mind as to his own view of Christian Latin.

Another set of terms which Palmer could fruitfully have considered is what he terms ‘de Saussure’s fatal dichotomy between "la langue" and "la parole"’ (p. 195). This distinction is as significant and valid in assessing Christian Latin’s status as a language as the above-mentioned distinction between ‘agglomération’ and system ‘sensiblement une’; it is actually ‘fatal’ not to bear it in mind!

Ferdinand de Saussure defined ‘la langue’ as the ‘basic language-system shared by a speech-community’. In the Roman Empire, the ‘langue’ would thus have been Latin. The fact that it was spoken variously in the various provinces is of no importance here; these are idiosyncrasies related to ‘la parole’, that is, the concrete utterances of a speaker. If Palmer had taken into account the significance of ‘la langue’, he would never have termed Christian Latin a ‘special language’, for the lexical peculiarities characteristic of Christian Latin do not constitute a ‘basic language-system’, but they depend in their turn on another system, the morphological, syntactic system of secular Latin. When Christian Latin first emerged, it was
thus more closely related to the idiosyncratic ‘parole’, since it characterised the speech-habits of a minority of speakers. Later, when it became part of secular Latin, it constituted one of the components of ‘la langue’. Christian Latin was never at any point a self-sufficient ‘langue’; hence the inaccuracy of the term ‘special language’.

Although Palmer undeniably furnishes his reader with extensive evidence for the existence of a unique Christian vocabulary or lexicon, he fails to provide any proof for the existence of a unique Christian language. His failure to recognise Christian Latin’s limited function and capacity and his subsequent incorrect designation thereof as a ‘special language’ may be attributed almost entirely to the fact that he failed to consider the purely linguistic aspect of Christian Latin sufficiently. From this one may learn the importance of assessing any language in all its aspects: linguistic, historical, social, literary, political, and so on. No language can be described in full by a one-sided approach such as that attempted by Palmer.