Reading Seeing and Understanding Latin

Reading Latin. Easy as it sounds, Latin teachers, whether in high schools or at universities, know it is not. Students are able to *read* – in modern languages – and they know *Latin* – we teach them. Yet they are unable to combine both into *reading Latin* as a process of direct communication – without translating – by which the Latin words are converted into images in the mind.

Among the range of recent research on Latin word order, the challenging approach of professor Wim Verbaal (Ghent University) may be the most useful to tackle this problem. Verbaal detected a fixed pattern of semantical 'positions' that lies underneath every Latin expression.

An Applied Research Project was set op to find an answer to the following research question:

> How can linguistic knowledge of Latin word order contribute to the development of a reading method in which the very patterns of Latin word order form the basis of a systematic way of reading?

The theoretical basis of the reading method is twofold. The first is knowledge of word order (Bauer, Devine & Stephens, Spevak) and the 'positional pattern' (Verbaal). The second is the ancient practice of colometry: writing out a sentence *per cola et commata* (Habinek, Hoyos, Johnson).

The research approach was that of educational design research. To get a clear view on all aspects of the problem and to select the criteria for design, a needs and context analysis was conducted by means of interviews with teachers and focus groups with pupils. For the next one and a half year the method was developed by iterative phases of testing, evaluating and refining. This took place in 10 different classes from 1st to 6th year of secondary school.

Based upon knowledge of word order and colometry and designed according to the criteria emerging from the context analysis, a reading method was developed focusing on the way the story is directed by the Roman author. The essence of the method can be summarized thus:

- the text (beforehand) is arranged in *cola*
- the text is read *colon* after *colon* (mostly by means of a ppt-presentation)
- each *colon* is (initialy) discussed on 4 levels (morphology – position – content – expectation)
- there is no formal translation

A sentence becomes a scene and word order is extremely important in the correct description of that scene. Who do you see first? What is being zoomed into? Why has the

author directed the scene thus? The visual support of the colometric arrangement helps to add to and adjust the image as the sentence is unfolding.

In the final evaluative discussions with both pupils and teachers almost all participants were highly positive about the reading method. Pupils proudly testified that they were able to understand the Latin *as they were reading* in all its fullness and complexity. They experienced the difference between reading, seeing and understanding a Latin text and reading a translation.

The reading method is described in Hulstaert, K. (2016). *Latijn: lezen zien begrijpen. De positionele method in de klas*. Gent: Skribis.

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