

Expressions of possibility & ability, permission, necessity & duty

Latin MILC – W7, MT 2012

November 20, 2012

1 Possibility & ability

There are only a few minor complications in expressions of possibility in Latin. In its most straightforward manifestations, the verb *possum* and a prolativum infinitive are used.

1. You might have seen what the enemy was doing, but perhaps you preferred to be improvident and blind.
Quid facerent hostes, videre potuisti; sed haud scio an improvidus esse ac caecus malueris.

Note that there is no passive of this verb; if a passive needs to be expressed, it will be found in the infinitive, whereas the person will be indicated on the inflected verb.

2. *Nulla modo eis persuaderi potuit ut sententiis suis eum absolvent.*
They could not be persuaded to acquit him by their verdict
3. He thought that he would easily make them amenable to this plan, both in public and privately, since they were oppressed.
Existimat publice privatimque oppressos facile ad tale consilium adduci posse

To translate English ‘(im-)possible’, ‘(im-)possibility’, you will need to apply one of two strategies: you can either render it as a personal expression (‘It is impossible...’ = ‘No one can ...’), or you may use a separate clause, as discussed previously, beginning with *feri potest ut/ne*

4. It was impossible for a citizen of Rome to consent to obey a despot of this kind.
Eius modi domino non potuit fieri ut civis Romanus parere vellet.

Finally, do note that *potest* can only be used impersonally with passive infinitives or impersonal verbs.

5. *Tiberim accendere nequaquam potest*
You cannot set the Tiber on fire by any means.

2 Permission

Translating ‘may’ or ‘might’ will require you to analyse whether the auxiliary verb is used in the meaning ‘I have the power...’ or ‘I have permission...’. In the case of the former, an expression with *possum* or such is called for; only in the latter case would you use *licet*. Construe this verb with a dative (of the person to whom permission is given) and a prolativum infinitive.

6. *Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi.*
What is permitted to Iuppiter is not necessarily allowed to a cow.
7. Allow me to spend my life at least in dire poverty.
Liceat mihi innocenti vitam in egestate degere.

3 Necessity & duty

3.1 Gerund & gerundive

The gerund(ive) is by far the most common way of translating ‘ought’, ‘need; or ‘must’.

Here, two distinct situations need to be observed: if the verb in question is intransitive (i.e. does not take an object), one uses the gerund with a dative for the person in question; if a transitive verb needs to be translated (and there is thus an object), this ‘object’ will (usually) be in the nominative, the gerundive used will adopt its gender and number, and the agent (i.e. the person who ‘must’) will be set in the dative.

8. *Si Galli bellum facere conabuntur, excitandus nobis erit ab inferis C. Marius.*
If the Gauls try to make war, we shall have to call up from the dead Gaius Marius.
9. Everyone must use their own judgement.
Suo cuique iudicio est utendum.

3.2 *debeo, oportet, necesse est*

Compared to the the gerundive, other renderings of ‘must/need’ are less common; they will, however, prove useful as they allow you to vary your style, and avoid repetition.

Oportet, which takes an accusative (for the person who ought to do something) and a prolativum infinitive, expresses a duty towards oneself.

10. *Qui alteri exitium parat, eum scire oportet sibi paratam pestem parem*
He who plans the ruin for another ought to know that for him similar destruction is in the planning.
11. You see then that he turned the money, which he ought to have given to his people in return for the produce, into his own profit.
Iam vero ab isto omnem illam pecuniam, quam his oportuit civitatibus pro frumento dari, lucri factam videtis.

Debeo, on the other hand, expresses a similar duty, but more commonly to others. This verb is used with a prolativum infinitive, as well, but is fully personal.

12. Did they have to bear arms against their fatherland with that man, Coriolanus?
Num ferre contra patriam arma illi cum Coriolano debuerunt?

Necesse est is used less commonly, and expresses purely logical or strictly inevitable necessities.

It can be used variably with acc. + inf. (usually for logical, abstract matters), dat. + inf. (for persons) or with the subjunctive.

13. *Bis bina quattuor esse necesse est,*
Two times two must be four.

4 Assignment

4.1 Translate into Latin

1. This (is what) you ought to have done; you might have fallen fighting in battle; and you were bound to die a thousand deaths rather than sacrifice the nation to your own interests.
2. Are you not ashamed of having in your old age, in order to please your worst enemies, been false to your friends, and betrayed your country?
3. Do not be afraid; I shall leave you to come to Rome as often as you please ; and when you come there be sure you stay in my house if you can.
4. Twice two must needs be four; it does not follow that we must all consult always our own interest.
5. You will, therefore, learn from the foremost of present-day philosophers, and you will go on learning as long as you wish; and your wish ought to continue as long as you are not dissatisfied with the progress you are making.
6. I am afraid that this letter will not reach you across the enemies' lines. We have now been invested here for a whole month , and I cannot help beginning to despair of the whole state of affairs. The numbers of the enemy are such as we had never dreamed of, and as all the roads are closed, no supplies can be brought up ; scarcely any letters reach us, so that it is impossible to doubt that we are involved in very serious danger. Do you therefore not hesitate to write to the general to hasten to bring us assistance, and do not allow yourself to think that I am writing thus with the intention of calling him away from his great designs and bringing him here for the sake of our safety.

4.2 Reading & Analysis

For next week, please read the rest of ch. 6 of Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae* below.

Sed postquam res eorum civibus, moribus, agris aucta satis prospera satisque pol-
lens videbatur, sicuti pleraque mortalium habentur, invidia ex opulentia orta est. Igitur
reges populique finitimi bello temptare, pauci ex amicis auxilio esse; nam ceteri metu
perculsi a periculis aberant. At Romani domi militiaeque intenti festinare, parare, al-
ius alium hortari, hostibus obviam ire, libertatem, patriam parentisque armis tegere.
Post, ubi pericula virtute propulerant, sociis atque amicis auxilia portabant magisque
dandis quam accipiendis beneficiis amicitias parabant. Imperium legitimum, nomen
imperi regium habebant. Delecti, quibus corpus annis infirmum, ingenium sapien-
tia validum erat, rei publicae consultabant; hi vel aetate vel curae similitudine patres
appellabantur. Post, ubi regium imperium, quod initio conservandae libertatis atque
augendae rei publicae fuerat, in superbiam dominationemque se convortit, inmutato
more annua imperia binosque imperatores sibi fecere: eo modo minime posse puta-
bant per licentiam insolescere animum humanum.

Please hand in your assignment by Friday 6pm, either by email to robin.meyer@ling-phil.ox.ac.uk, or by pigeon post to Robin Meyer, Wolfson College, Linton Rd.