

Workshop: “Qualitative and quantitative approaches to Latin lexical semantic variation and change”

Date: Thursday, June 10 2027

Organisers: Barbara McGillivray and Andrea Farina (King’s College London)

In case of questions about this workshop, please contact: barbara.mcgillivray@kcl.ac.uk

Latin lexical semantics has a long and distinguished tradition grounded in philological and lexicographical research. Landmark reference works such as the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* continue to shape our understanding of the semantic structure of Latin across its long history, and sustained attention to polysemy, semantic extension, synonymy, metaphor, and lexical fields has illuminated numerous aspects of Latin usage across its many periods and registers.

A consistent theme in this research is the centrality of context. Variation across genres, registers, and communicative settings has long been recognised as essential to interpreting Latin word meanings (Cuzzolin 2014), and philological work has demonstrated how semantic tendencies are tied to literary tradition, technical precision, stylistic choice, and cultural change (Adams 2013; Haverling 2012). Studies of technical sublanguages — legal, medical, and scientific — have further shown that semantic development often proceeds differently within distinct textual traditions (Langslow 2000; Powell 2011; Roelli 2021). The study of lexical fields has similarly revealed how individual meanings shift in relation to neighbouring items, reflecting broader reorganisations within the lexicon (e.g. Fruyt 1994; Torrego 2020). These philological and lexicographical traditions remain indispensable for interpreting meaning within its historical and textual environment.

The growth of large, digitally accessible Latin corpora and lexicographic resources has more recently opened new possibilities for investigating semantic variation and change at scale. Repositories such as the Corpus Corporum (Roelli 2014) and lemmatised corpora developed through projects like LASLA, together with interoperable lexical resources such as Latin WordNet (Litta et al. 2023), now provide an empirical base broad enough to revisit long-standing questions through distributional and corpus-based methods (McGillivray & Kilgariff 2013). Initial studies applying such methods to Latin suggest that quantitative approaches can identify patterns of semantic shift and lexical diffusion that are less visible within individual texts or traditions (Eger & Mehler 2016; McGillivray & Nowak 2025). Crucially, however, Latin's diachronic breadth, its varying registers, its complex manuscript transmission, and the longstanding coexistence of L1 and L2 usage all require that quantitative evidence be assessed and interpreted within the rigorous philological standards that have long guided the field.

This workshop brings together qualitative and quantitative perspectives on Latin lexical semantics, with the aim of developing a more integrated methodological dialogue. Central questions include: how is semantic variation distributed across text types and registers? How do lexical fields evolve across Latin's many historical periods? How do semantic innovations arise and become established in different communities of use? And how may different forms of evidence — philological, corpus-based, and computational — together enrich our understanding of Latin word meaning? We welcome contributions that engage deeply with any of these questions, whether from a traditional philological standpoint, a digital or computational perspective, or at the intersection of all.

Suggested reading

- Adams, J. N. (2013). *Social Variation and the Latin Language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cuzzolin, P. (2014). A short note on the notion of register in Latin: on the interplay between register, diastratic variety, and communicative intention. *Journal of Latin Linguistics*, 13(2): 197–210.
- Eger, S. & Mehler, A. (2016). “On the linearity of semantic change.” In *Proceedings of the 54th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics, Berlin, Germany* (pp. 52–58). Association for Computational Linguistics
- Fruyt, M. (1994). “Typologie des cas de synonymie.” In C. Moussy (ed.), *Les problèmes de la synonymie en latin*, 25–46. Paris: PUPS.
- Haverling, G. (2012). “Literary Late Latin and the Development of the Spoken Language.” In M. Leiwo et al. (eds.), *Variation and Change in Greek and Latin*. Foundation of the Finnish Institute at Athens.
- Herman, J. (2000). *Vulgar Latin* (Translated by Roger Wright). The Pennsylvania State University.
- Langslow, D. R. (2000). *Medical Latin in the Roman Empire*. Oxford University Press.
- Leonhardt, J. (2013). *Latin: Story of a World Language*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Litta, E., Pedonese, G. & Franzini, G. (2023). *latinWordnet-revision v1.5*. Zenodo.
- McGillivray, B. & Kilgariff, A. (2013). “Tools for historical corpus research, and a corpus of Latin”. In P. Bennett, M. Durrell, S. Scheible, R. J. Whitt (Eds.), *New Methods in Historical Corpus Linguistics*. Tübingen: Narr.
- McGillivray, B., & Nowak, K. (2025). “Tracing the semantic change of socio-political terms from Classical to early Medieval Latin with computational methods.” In G. Galdi, S. Aerts, & A. Papini (Eds.), *Varietate delectamur: Multifarious Approaches to Synchronic and Diachronic Variation in Latin*. Brepols.
- Minozzi, S. (2010). The Latin WordNet project. In Anreiter, Peter & Kienpointner, Manfred (Eds.), *Latin linguistics today: Akten des 15. Internationalen Kolloquiums zur Lateinischen*

Linguistik, Innsbruck, 4.-9. April 2009 (pp. 707–716). Innsbruck: Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität Innsbruck.

Powell, J. G. F. (2011). “Legal Latin.” In J. Clackson (ed.), *A Companion to the Latin Language*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Roelli, P. (2014). The Corpus Corporum, a New Open Latin Text Repository and Tool. *Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi (ALMA)*: Bulletin Du Cange (72): 289–304.

Roelli, P. (2021). Latin as the Language of Science and Learning. De Gruyter.

Torrego, E. (2020). “The expression of knowledge in Latin: *cognosco*, *nosco*, *scio*, *nescio* and *ignore*”. In van Gils, L., Kroon, C. & Risselada, R. (Eds). *Lemmata Linguistica Latina, Volume II Clause and Discourse* (pp. 20–47). Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.