

**Paper Delivered at annual CAAS Meeting 2005**  
**“Latin Karaoke”**  
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Teachers of beginning languages have long appreciated the value of employing various mnemonic devices to help students remember new grammar. Modern foreign language teachers frequently set grammar to the tune of popular songs as an aid to memory. Thanks to an excellent German teacher, I still hum the “Blue Danube Waltz” to help me remember which German prepositions take the dative case. Teachers of beginning Latin have also used this trick. You may be familiar with LeaAnn Osburn’s *Learning Latin Through Song*, a booklet containing songs about Latin grammar set to familiar tunes. For example, she has set the present indicative personal endings to the tune of “The Alphabet Song.” In my presentation today, I will explain how I came up with the concept of Latin Karaoke and how it fits into my own pedagogical aims and teaching philosophy. Further, I will briefly explain the technical details involved in making this project a reality and anecdotal evidence of the success of this pedagogical technique as well as some potential pitfalls. Time permitting, you will have the opportunity to participate in singing Latin Karaoke!

Last year, I taught beginning Latin at Gustavus Adolphus, a small liberal arts college in south-central Minnesota, known for its flourishing music and arts program. An unusually high percentage of students either sing in vocal ensembles or play musical instruments (and many do both). At last, I thought, I would have a group of students whose musical talents would prove fertile ground for exploring the mnemonic force of Latin grammar set to music. And I was not disappointed. Not only did my students ask me for more songs and cheerfully sing them, but some even composed songs themselves. I used Osburn’s booklet for many of the songs I taught

the students in class. As a consequence, I also realized a few of the shortcomings of Osburn's text: there is no musical notation provided, so a fair amount of trial and error is necessary to figure out how exactly the words of her songs fit the music.

While I had some gifted vocalists among my students who were willing to sing out the arrangements, musical accompaniment, I thought, would also help considerably. When one of my students composed a song to the tune of the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann" to help his fellow students remember passive endings, he brought in a CD with the Beach Boys' song. However, the recording contained the original lyrics, making it a little awkward to fit the new words to the song. With these difficulties in mind, I stumbled upon a solution: Latin karaoke. The music is stripped of its original lyrics and there are also cues as to when to sing each word of the new song. Besides, for those of us who are less musically gifted than my former students, no one is supposed to sound good when they sing karaoke.

Before I continue further and explain the technical details of this project, let me explain how the use of Latin Karaoke fit into my pedagogical goals. As you have already surmised, I maintain that memorization of forms -- that is, declension and conjugation endings -- is an important aspect of a student's mastery of Latin. This premise comes from my own teaching experience. I have taught Latin from textbooks which employ either the inductive method (e.g., the *Oxford Latin Course*) or the deductive method (e.g., *Wheelock*). The approach that works best for me, and has proven most successful over the many years that I have taught Latin, is a combination of both the inductive and the deductive method. When I introduce new grammar, say, for example, ablative of description, I explain what it is, how to translate, and provide multiple examples, in Latin, of precisely those constructions, so as to provide practice in translation. Then, frequently, I will ask the student to compose their own examples in Latin,

providing illustrations or mentioning characters famous in either Roman history or contemporary events to spark their creativity and interest. And I have my students memorize not only vocabulary relevant to their readings, but also the endings of nouns and adjectives in each declension, as well as the endings of verbs in all of the possible tenses, moods, and voices. All of this memorization, although necessary, can get a little tedious, so anything you can introduce to make the load lighter or more fun, the better. For example, at Gustavus, I would have what I called a “grammar rodeo” every Friday (the class met five days a week). No animals were harmed, or even involved in this competition, but the premise of “an event” got the students enthused for what was really a *certamen* -- the opportunity to compete against one another in teams and to demonstrate their acquisition of grammar and vocabulary.

Of course, as we all know, reading Latin fluently is the goal of Latin pedagogy, rather than the recitation of forms or the use of complicated names to describe grammatical constructions. I maintain, however, that a thoroughly inductive approach to the study of Latin only works in a context in which a student is completely immersed in Latin [something which our next speaker will address!].

In terms of the technical aspect of this project, in case you are interested in replicating the use of Latin karaoke in your own classroom, I have provided some details on the handout. **The first step is to strip the original lyrics from the song.** There are several ways of going about this. The simplest solution is to purchase a karaoke CD, in which the lead vocals have already been removed. (There are also various Internet sources for karaoke versions of these songs, such as RealRhapsody, where you pay a subscription fee as well as a fee for each song which you burn onto a CD. This is the source I used for the song which you will hear during the demonstration

portion of this presentation.) Using “golden oldies” or familiar, traditional tunes is a definite advantage here, as you are more likely to find these readily available as karaoke CDs.

But, let’s say you can’t find the karaoke version of the song you want. To strip lead vocals from the instrumentals, you can use the plug-in for WinAmp, which attenuates the vocals so they are less audible. You can also use free, downloadable software, such as RazorLame, which will strip lyrics from the song.

**The second step is to insert the new lyrics of the song as karaoke text.** You will need to use another type of software, such as the KaraFun Editor (also free!). This part gets a little tedious as you have to cue the lyrics to the music precisely.

Choice of songs: I used Osburn’s lyrics, which, I suspect were set to the tune of songs she considered familiar to a wide audience (Alphabet Song, Ode to Joy, Pink Panther, Pirates of Penzance, etc.) Of course you run the risk that kids may not be familiar with the originals (bands that I listened to as a teenager are now certainly regarded as “oldies”, or even “retro” by current students), so you may need to play the original recording for them. Technical phobia? -- enlist the help of someone who is savvy in such matters. I, for one, am indebted to my partner, Scott Diamond, for his assistance on this project.

How successful is the use of song as a mnemonic device, and by extension, the use of karaoke in the Latin classroom? I am afraid that the only evidence I have is anecdotal, as I’ve only used this technique for a year. But I can tell you that my students at Gustavus could successfully sight-read Horace in Latin, at the end of a year of Latin with me, during which I used the *Oxford Latin Course* in combination with my various pedagogical techniques. And they enjoyed it. I’ll leave you with just one story. One of my Latin students, Kerry, was (and, as far as I know, still is) a quarterback on the Gustavus football team. During a grammar rodeo one

Friday, there was a close tie between the two teams. Kerry carried his team by singing, from memory, the song containing the first, second, and third declension endings set to the tune of Frere Jacques.

But, now is the moment you've all been waiting for -- the opportunity to sing Latin karaoke!!!