

ARTICLE V.

THE SYSTEM OF THE FOUR CONJUGATIONS IN LATIN,
A CLASSIFICATION OF IDEAS SIGNIFIED BY THEIR
CHARACTERISTIC VOWELS.

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Says a distinguished Orientalist:¹ "A universal antagonism exists between the two classes of vowel-sounds [taken in the continental pronunciation of Europe, of course] *a, o, u*, and *e, i*; of which latter *ä, ö, ü*, are merely a further modification or development. This vowel-antagonism seems to have more particularly prevailed in the ancient and comparatively primitive languages, and is still more or less preserved in its purity in the so-called Tartar languages, and in part also in the Finnish tongues. Where this antagonism exists unimpaird we find two distinct kinds of words—those with *a, o, u*, *y*; the other with *e, i*—often even opposed or correlative to each other in their meanings. Thus, in Mantshoo, "*Ama*" (*father*), "*Eme*" (*mother*); in Turkish, "*Olmak*" (*to become, to be*), "*Olmek*" (*to perish, to die*), "*Durmak*" (*to remain*), "*Durmek*" (*to move on*). Even in our modern languages, such as French, Italian, etc., the difference of these two vowel-classes still appears in part in the peculiar influence they exert on the pronunciation of the guttural letters *c, g*."

The system of vowel-antagonism, running parallel with their harmonization, is treated in full by Mr. Roehrig, in an essay entitled: "Researches in Philosophical and Comparative Philology, chiefly with Reference to the Languages of Central Asia"; which in 1848 received the Volney Prize (for Linguistics) of the Imperial Institute of France, and formed the basis of a Turkish Grammar, published in 1856, as a textbook for the students of the Imperial Oriental School. That

¹ Mr. F. L. O. Roehrig, Member of the Asiatic Societies of France, Germany, etc.

the euphonic interchanges of vowels are so regular in some languages as to evince laws of contrariety and affinity is acknowledged ; but we are ignorant if it has been admitted by any considerable number of scholars that there is ever a vital significance in the employment of one vowel to the exclusion of another. And the idea of such significance, and that the few and evanescent vowel-sounds have preserved in any language their primitive power, while the more numerous and inflexible consonants have not yet established that they ever possessed essential meanings, — such an idea, so novel to our mind, repeatedly recurring, incited us to watch for its evidence in other languages. We therefore here present our observations on the characteristic vowels of the Latin conjugations, and appeal in regard to the fact of vowel-significance to the analogy of the Oriental languages alluded to, in which we think it is clearly exhibited. But it may be objected to the force of such analogy that the preservation of the original significance of letters in a class of languages, one of whose characteristic features is that the root is never obscured, affords no presumption that such significance is preserved in the Aryan family, a distinctive feature of which is the corruption of both root and termination. To this, however, it may be answered that the characteristic vowels of the Latin conjugations seem to have had their origin in neither part of the verb which was liable to phonetic decay, and may therefore be employed in a revival of their primitive power; and that they serve a purpose more important than mere connectives appears, at least in three of the conjugations, from their quantity.

If, then, they *may* possess significance ; and if, further, there is nothing arbitrary in language, so that laws of expression must conform to the laws of thought ; their significance *must* correspond to the ideas of the conjugations which they respectively characterize. But, however specious in itself and from the analogy of other languages, the theory proposed must rely upon an examination of the conjugations themselves, and a correspondence shown between their several ideas and their respective vowels.

Let us, then, very briefly consider the nature and relations of certain vowel-sounds common in nearly all languages. The principal simple vowels are, *a*, *u*, *i*, the two last being extremes, of which the first is the mean. It is also generally acknowledged that *o* is a compound of *a* and *u*, and *e* a compound of *a* and *i*, as is evident in the Sanscrit, in their more frequent long sounds represented by separate characters in Greek; and even in some modern languages, as the French pronunciation of the diphthongs *au* and *ai*, and the English recognition of the relationships of *o* to *u* and *e* to *i* in its pronunciation of *oo* and *ee*. According to this classification, if there is any significance in vowel-sounds, and it shows itself in Latin conjugation, we must believe that the Second (or *e*) conjugation is intermediate in force between the First (or *a*) and Fourth (or *i*) conjugations, and represents a *union* of their ideas, whatever they may be. Now the ideas represented in Latin by the First, Second, and Fourth conjugations seem to have precisely such mutual relations as distinguish the vowels *a*, *e*, and *i*. The First and Third conjugations we conceive to express modifications of the same idea; and it hardly needs to be remarked in passing, that, presenting fewer points of contrast than the other conjugations, their difference is less perceptible and their line of demarkation less easily discerned. What then are these ideas represented in the conjugations? Of course not necessarily perfect images of truth, but reflections from the Roman mind; when first mirrored on their speech we need not now consider; it is enough at present if our portraiture are faithful to their originals. These ideas we apprehend to be as follows: The actions and conditions of the Third conjugations appear to be such as, in every successive minute part, or (indefinitely) in one complete whole conceived of as momentary, spring immediately from, or are immediately connected with, the subject; and this minute activity is well symbolized by the employment of the shortest and lightest, or *no*, connecting vowels between the root, which denotes the act, and the personal termination. In like manner the First

conjugation is essentially active; but it represents actions and conditions which, though often capable of division, are always considered as in their *unbroken totality* springing from or connected with the subject, and hence are viewed less intimately with it. The Second conjugation expresses actions and conditions which either *excite other* actions and conditions, or *are themselves excited by* others, so that there is always presented a passive subject. The Fourth conjugation is still more passive in its meaning, since with it the object affected by an action is always the point of view for regarding it, and objectivity is solely presented. In a word, the ideas of the First (or Third) and Fourth conjugations are found to be respectively active and passive, represented by their peculiar vowels *a* and *i*; and the idea of the Second conjugation is found to be a union of both active and passive, represented by the correspondent *e*. Let us see whether an examination of the verbs will reveal the characters ascribed. And first, it is obvious that the proportion of verbs belonging to the several conjugations (the verbs of the First and Third conjugations being three times as many as those of the Second and Fourth) and the variations of the conjugations of certain verbs in different tenses (but one sixth of the verbs of the Second and Fourth adhering to those forms throughout), are consistent with such characters; for while comparatively few ideas admit the passive element of the Second and Fourth conjugations, fewer still contain it with such prominence as to require expression in the non-descriptive (complete) tenses. The particular phases of these variations will be viewed in their appropriate places.

We now proceed to examine the conjugations: and first, the so-called Third conjugation. In this a general active character is indicated by its primality; by its almost universal use in the non-descriptive tenses of the Second conjugation; and by its very frequent employment in those tenses of the First and Fourth conjugations; while the strict adherence of its own verbs to their peculiar forms accords with the special active character, which we suppose it to have afterward

assumed. But more particularly : this special active character is exhibited in the numerous class of *Inceptives*, which, describing the beginning, or successive beginnings, of conditions (or actions), assume the form of the Third conjugation, and are limited in their use to the descriptive tenses. It may also be seen in the smaller class of *Intensives*, denoting vehement action of an eager agent; their tendency to pass in the complete tenses into the Fourth conjugation (constituting the most prominent exceptions to the regularity of the Third conjugation) will be explained below. To illustrate still further the peculiar character conceived to inhere universally in this conjugation, a few examples only need be given, and these will require no explanation : *facere, ferre, dicere, currere, fluere, hiscere, vivere, esse, etc., etc.*

Next let us examine the First conjugation. It has been described as essentially active, but moreover as denoting actions and conditions which, though often capable of division, are always viewed in their integrity, and therefore less intimately with the subject. This character is not inconsistent with its general adherence to its proper forms, admitting no change except to the generic and primitive Third. And we think it is precisely exhibited by *Frequentatives*, which affixing the vowel *a* to roots denoting a completed act, indicate a repetition of that act, and express in one view their total. A comparison of this class with *Intensives* illustrates the difference of their conjugations ; the former presenting to view the sum of repeated energies, the latter describing the several exertions of the eager agent. A similar comparison may be made between the small class of *Diminutives*, which possess the character of the First conjugation, denoting an action viewed as a whole, though made up of feeble efforts, and the class of *Inceptives*, referring to successive parts themselves. A few special examples are appended, which may likewise be compared with their correlatives given under the Third conjugation : *aedificare, portare, clamare, ambulare, manare, hiare, etc., etc.*

We pass to those conjugations which possess a passive ele-

ment: we first will consider the Fourth conjugation; which, according to our theory, presents the object affected by an action as the point of view, and its objectivity as the matter of contemplation. Although many of its verbs admit a change in the non-descriptive tenses into the generic Third, yet it includes also many verbs whose ideas are properly expressed in all the tenses by its peculiar forms.

This passivity may be either in the grammatical subject or object. Examples of verbs in which it is manifest in the subject are: *audire, sentire, scire, dormire, servire, sortire*, (or *sortiri*) — in which the Fates dispose — *ire, venire*, (compare *ventum est*, etc.). Examples of classes of words are the verbs denoting involuntary human actions, such as *to sob, kiccough, cough, cry, itch, stammer, swallow*, etc.; also the verbs denoting the cries of brutes; of *the horse, ox, dog, lion, hog, hen, cock, chick, raven*, etc. But if instead of referring to the passive “animal” (neuter gender) as uttering the cry, a description of the noise is given, which may even be an imitation by a human voice, the verb is always of the First conjugation; as, *gracillare* (to cluck as a hen), *pupillare* (to cry like a peacock), etc. We believe no other conjugation is primarily employed to express the cries or noises of brutes; and it is not to be wondered at if lexicographers have not always remarked the difference of these two.

This passivity in the subject is also strikingly seen in the class of *Desideratives*, which are all of the Fourth conjugation (compare the Greek *Optative* with its connecting vowel *ι*). And it may be seen in a remarkable manner in the verb *fi* (peculiarly, and it almost seems deliberately, changed from *fuo*) used as the passive of *facio*, which, if it be not of the Fourth conjugation, is at least formed after its analogy, as is proved by the quantity of its first vowel. Not only is the passivity of this formation evinced by its use instead of the regular passive in the descriptive tenses, but at the same time by its association with the regular passive of the other tenses; and it can even be pursued into the compounds of *facio*, in which, if the primitive meaning is retained, the

passive is formed in *fit*, but regularly if a new idea is produced.

But secondly, the passivity denoted by verbs of the Fourth conjugation may be in the grammatical object. Such verbs are few, and the passive notion with them not so prominent; but we think it is none the less real. Inspect them closely, and, unless my judgment is led captive by my imagination, the mind is involuntarily drawn by their very meaning to the object-side, and contemplates the action from that point of view. By the verbs *impedio* and *irretio* my mind is itself ensnared, and gazes through the meshes *from the inside*. From beneath the hand which polishes the brass (*polio*) the *gleaming surface* continually flashes upon my mental vision. By the verb *redimio* my eyes are fixed upon the *encircled brow*; nor do they glance at the ministering hands. When I hear the condemnation of the judicial *punitio*, I find my feelings of sympathy or satisfaction are with him who suffers punishment. And disposed by the sad *sepelio*, my sorrowing thoughts enshroud the buried dead.

Such is the character which we conceive to pervade the Fourth conjugation. And if it is sometimes difficult to delineate delicate and fitting shades of thought, yet we think none of its verbs preclude this notion, and there are many which would be illumined by it.

It remains to examine the Second conjugation. And first, the character ascribed, namely a union of the active and passive elements, is consistent with its limitation to the descriptive tenses; for since in the complete tenses less precision is employed in the description of the act, the more general active notion prevails in them over the specific passive, and assumes the appropriate form of the Third conjugation. This twofold character may appear either in the grammatical subject or object. And first, in the subject it is clearly revealed in the extensive class of verbs denoting conditions; as, *aceo*, *caleo*, *clareo*, *jaceo*, etc., etc. These verbs expressly describe passive objects quickened into active subjectivity. To these may be added the peculiar verbs *audeo*, *gaudeo*,

and *soleo*, which to their strongly passive notion (prevailing entirely in the complete tenses) add so much activity as to require the form of the Second conjugation in the descriptive tenses. To them may be added also some *Intransitives*, in which the active idea is more prominent; as, *doleo, maereo, pareo*, etc. Finally, to this division belong some *Transitive* verbs; as, *video, habeo, teneo, timeo, studeo*, etc. But secondly, the union of the active and passive ideas may be visible in the grammatical object: for example, with the verbs *terreo, doceo, moneo, mulceo, suadeo, urgeo*, etc. And it appears in a remarkable manner with the Impersonal verbs of feeling: *miseret, poenitet, pudet, taedet, piget*, etc., construed with the Accusative of the Agents; all of which in their simple forms are of the Second conjugation.

This twofold character, we think, extends through all the verbs of the Second conjugation; but if there are a very few in which it is not obvious, it may be ultimately revealed by a better knowledge of their original meaning. Among such verbs perhaps are *mordeo* and *tondeo*, both of which, if not first spoken of brutes, are at least "animal" actions, and may therefore possess sufficient passiveness to produce by a union with their active force the form of the Second conjugation in the descriptive tenses. Indeed, there may be a few verbs in this, as also in all the conjugations, in which the vowel apparently used as a connective belonged to the original root, and the particular forms presented in them are the result of euphonic rather than significant laws.

Of course there are ideas which may be viewed differently under different circumstances, and the conjugation will vary accordingly. This we will briefly illustrate. *Desideratives* seem to exhibit the passiveness which we have thought inheres in the Fourth conjugation. But if the desire is considered as moving to action it is expressed in the form of the Second conjugation; as, *avere, studere*, desires which impel to pursuit. And if we overlook the passiveness of the soul, and consider only the co-operation towards the realization of the wish, or the vehemence of the desire, we may employ *cupere*,

though in the more indefinite complete tenses the proper passive character of the last reappears in the form of the Fourth conjugation. The tendency of *Intensives* to pass in the complete tenses into the Fourth conjugation may be explained in a similar manner; for to their hasty glances the subject is more obviously affected by the intenseness of his action than the object.

A further illustration may be seen in the verbs *fervēre* and *fervēre* (to boil), the former having reference to the condition of the fluid as *heated* to boiling, the latter to its intense activity; and the verbs *bullire* and *bullāre* (to bubble), the former describing the proper passive character of the lifeless liquid, the latter the aggregate appearance of the active surface.

This concludes our examination of the conjugations; in which it has been essayed to show that the ideas classified in the First (or Third) and Fourth conjugations are respectively active and passive, represented by their characteristic vowels; and in the Second conjugation a combination of these ideas, represented by the correspondent *e*. But not only is this view of actions and conditions observed in the system of Latin conjugation; it is also recognized in other languages, and in Latin in other forms of expression.

It is recognized in the distinction of voices, Active, Passive and Middle, in the Latin Deponents, in many of which the subject is not (as is usual in the Greek Middle) the receiver of his own, but another's influence; for example, *morior*, *expergiscor*, etc. Indeed, many *Deponents* of the First and Third conjugations seem to be only a variety of expression instead of the Second conjugation (compare *moror* with *maneo*, and *conspicor* with *video*); although many others seem to assume this form in order to preserve the active and passive elements in greater distinctness, the one being expressed in the conjugation, the other in a deponent form. While on the other hand *Deponents* of the Second and Fourth conjugations appear sometimes to present more obviously their proper passive meaning; as, *punior* and *sortior* (vari-

eties of expression instead of *punio* and *sortio*); at other times to express a *double* passiveness; for example, *polliceor* seems to take the form of the Second conjugation (like *spondeo* and *voveo*) to represent the subject as *induced* to make the promise, and the form of the Passive voice (like *ἑπισηχέομαι*) to express the reflexiveness of the obligation. Moreover, such a view of actions and conditions is recognized in the frequent use of Impersonals in the Passive voice in Latin, with which the agents are represented as instruments; and in the extensive use of the Dative of the (objective) agent with Passive participles.

Finally, this form of expressing actions and conditions has to some extent its counterpart in other languages. To this branch of proof, however, as our theory must mainly rely upon an examination of the Latin verbs themselves, we will cast but a rapid glance. Corresponding to the peculiar character ascribed to the Second and Fourth conjugations is the Greek construction of verbs with the Causal Genitive; for example, the "Genitive of the Sensible and Mental Object," in which "the *object* of sensation, thought, or emotion is regarded as its exciting *cause*."

Accordingly the use of this Genitive with verbs of hearing, expressing the passiveness of him who hears, corresponds to the use of *audio* in Latin in the Fourth conjugation; while the more frequent, and even common, exchange of the Genitive for the Accusative in Greek with verbs of sight, corresponds to the greater activity of the subject denoted in Latin by the conjugation of *video*.

And perhaps there is even in English a striking analogy of the passive element of some Latin verbs in the verbal prefix *be* (originally *by*), indicating nearness to the object; which, being spoken before the action, in many transitive verbs sends the mind, as it were, to the other side, where it may view it *coming upon* the object. Compare the English *become* with the Latin *fit*; *behold* with *tueor*; *befall* with *evenio*; and the transitives *smear* and *besmear* with *lino* and *lineo*. If this be the correct explanation of the English

prefix, its sameness with the preposition *by* answers to the use of the sign of the locative case in Latin, *i*, by verbs of the Second and Fourth conjugations to denote the passivity of nouns in construction with them.

We have now gone through with the principal arguments necessary to prove that the system of the four conjugations in Latin is a classification of ideas signified by their characteristic vowels. We have seen that such use of vowels is analogous to their use in other languages ; and that the particular signification proposed is accordant with their natural relations ; that the classification of ideas described is rational, and observed in other ways, not only in common with other languages, but also peculiarly in Latin ; and that it is satisfactory, suiting readily a large majority of verbs in their accepted meanings, possible in the remainder, and elucidating all. Much more could be said in explanation, illustration, and corroborative proof ; but we may rest the theory upon the arguments adduced ; satisfied that if they do not establish the proposition for which they are advanced, they at least furnish remarkable phenomena for him to account for in some other way who denies the correctness of this explanation.

If then there be in any language a significance of vowels, does it not appear in Latin conjugation ; and in the manner herein described ? And is not the system of Latin conjugations, which has hitherto strangely been considered arbitrary, a classification of ideas both radical and clear ?