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# ENGINEERS vs. LATIN

## ALUM-NIGH WINS VERDICT OVER ALUM-KNEE

By VERBUM SAP

### EDITOR'S NOTE

Why the '21 graduate who wrote this outburst chose such a *nom de plume* is a mystery. Verbum sap, so he tells us, is not so sappy as it sounds; it's the first part of a Latin proverb meaning "a word to the wise is sufficient."

"Give 'em some Latin" whispered the campaign manager hoarsely.

Andrew Jackson, the wheel horse of democracy, was making a speech that seemed to fall flat on an audience expecting great things of a candidate for president. Clearly something must be done. The hero of New Orleans—so the story goes—threw himself into the breach.

"E pluribus unum," he shouted. "Habeus corpus. O tempora, o mores. De bonis non. Obiter dicta." The crowd cheered wildly. That county was safe for democracy.

The classical-or-practical-education battle has raged fiercely since Andrew Jackson's day, and the proponents of Latin and Greek seem pretty well routed, particularly in the technical schools. Greek letters survive in math and on fraternity badges, and Dr. Waddell called his book on bridges *De Pontibus* because it was the first chance he'd had to use any Latin since he studied it in prep school. Latin is dead as a door nail, so far as most engineers are concerned.

But some expressions survive to make trouble. Murdered and abused they give speech a dullness and flatness like yesterday's near beer.

### THIS DATA HOCUS-POCUS

When Rome was in the throes of the community fund campaigns and Iulius Caesar, Mark Cicero, and other prominent citizens orated unsparingly for the cause, the watchword on the posters and in the speeches was *Da, Da*. Appropriately enough that's the major utterance of an infant trouble maker in the funny papers, for it's the imperative form of the Latin verb *do* and means "give." Go a little further in the study of that useful Latin verb and you find the past participle "datum," the equivalent of English "given." So a datum is anything that's given. Sea level datum means that sea level elevation is given to start with.

Funny people, those Romans. They didn't hit on adding an *s* to a word to describe more than one of a thing. Nothing so easy as that. They had various endings to show the plural, but the most common for words ending in *um* was *a*. One stadium was *stadium*, but for two stadiums the word became *stadia*. Datum became *data*.

Data, then, means "things given."

Who would suspect the engineers of being the biggest charity crowd in the world? They must be though, for they're always talking about data. Data this and data that. They collect data, they assemble data, they publish data.

This is a free country, and any engineer is entitled to as many data as he can get. There are three vigorous kicks, however, that I should like to register.

Kick No. 1. Using a Latin word when better English words are available is just so much hocus-pocus. The engineer doesn't need a jargon to impress and mystify people. English words will do a better job of conveying the thought because they can be used with discrimination. There are dozens to choose from. The subject discussed is usually the best guide. A few samples are information, values, readings, variations, statistics, figures, results, prices, fluctuations. Take your choice.

Kick No. 2. The technical world is divided into two hostile camps: the ones who know that data is a plural word and are careful to say "these data," "data are," and "fewer data," and the multitude whose language is full of "this data," "data is," and "less data." Worst of all, the "data are" crowd, like the people that have discovered the difference between who and whom, are inclined to be condescending and self-conscious in their superiority.

Kick No. 3. They don't even pronounce the word the same way. "Day-tah" finds favor with those who like the sound of long *a*; the broad *a* form which the Romans probably used, "dah-tah," is popular with many, particularly with those who would scorn any knowledge of Latin and who don't know that the word is plural.

My slogan is "Down with data in engineering speech and literature."

### THIS VERSUS BUSINESS

Versus is Latin for against, and its abbreviation, *vs.*, is pretty handy when the clerk of courts comes to enter a suit of someone against someone else. Even the use of *vs.* by engineers can't be entirely condemned, because the engineers are every bit as smart as the lawyers. Like every good thing, however, it's liable to be overdone, particularly in the drawing of graphs. "Speed versus horsepower," "output versus input," "grades versus study," and their companions make me wish sometimes that analytical geometry—or Latin—had never been invented.

The good old English word "against" is ready to relieve some of the monotony. And how much better are a few descriptive, though somewhat longer, expressions such as "related to," "with reference to," and "compared with."

Versus is a good word, but, like a willing horse, it shouldn't be worked to death.

### HIC! HIC! ALUMNI

The worst thing an institution of higher learning can have, according to some critics of modern youth, is a host of loyal former students, though how any going educational concern can escape such a fate is a mystery.

The accusations that grads and former students are responsible for much of the alleged flame of

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modern youth are not much worse, however, than the names that are applied to us.

From various conversations to which I have listened with a critical ear, from careful perusal of many fraternity news letters, and from occasional questionings I am led to opine that the word *alumnus* never appears on the consciousness of the average campus youth, male or female. It is not to defend or condemn that I write these words, merely to enlighten. Ever heard of *alumna*? It is probably all right in chemistry. But to be called an *alumina* is a bitter dose for anyone who ever trod a college campus. The graduate knows he's getting old when he hears himself called that.

*Alma mater*, so lovingly referred to in song and sentimental story, is Latin for "foster mother," and a foster son—graduate or former student—is an *alumnus*. According to the peculiar habit of Latin words, making a feminine from a masculine noun is done by changing the *us* ending to *a*. That makes a female graduate or former student an *alumna*.

So far so good. It's the plurals that cause most of the trouble. Here they are, in easy tabular form, just like a set of values for *x*.

	Masculine	Feminine
Singular	<i>alumnus</i>	<i>alumna</i>
Plural	<i>alumni</i>	<i>alumnae</i>

The next difficulty about this word is its pronunciation. If English had a suitable expression I'd say let's throw *alumnus* overboard—most of us are thrown overboard—and stick to English. Next best is to say the Latin word with an approved English twist. On that basis *alumni* is a-lum-nigh, and *alumnae* becomes a-lum-knee.

ENVOI

This outburst is doubtless vain, so far as results go. The next time I receive a letter from my fraternity I shall probably find us graduates referred to as the *alumnae*. A brother may introduce me as an *alumni* of Ohio State. I expect to hear *dah-tah* and *versus* in engineering speeches the rest of my life. But I shall have the satisfaction of having expressed myself in favor of English instead of Latin wherever possible, and of advocating the proper form of Latin words if they have to be used.