

# Was St Patrick a non-native speaker of Latin?

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## Who was St Patrick?

It is almost impossible to say anything with certainty about the life of St Patrick. It is, however, generally agreed that he was born in Britain either at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, most likely in a fortified town towards the western end of Hadrian's Wall. He was kidnapped and enslaved by Irish pirates as a teenager and subsequently spent several years in captivity on Irish soil. He later escaped and after an undetermined period of time returned to Ireland as a Christian missionary. He probably devoted the rest of his life to his mission and never left Ireland.



## Why are his writings interesting?

St Patrick's Latin has often been overlooked because historically considered inelegant, unidiomatic, and even incorrect. Yet, the current interest for Latin contact and variation makes St Patrick's works, the *Confessio* and the *Epistola ad milites Corotici*, very attractive. They are indeed unique examples of Latin written in late antiquity outside the Latin-speaking area. A long-standing problem in relation to this is whether St Patrick was a bilingual speaker with imperfect command of Latin. This is an issue which may benefit from a new approach.

## Episode IV – A New Hope

Attempts to look for evidence of bilingualism in St Patrick's Latin have so far consisted of highlighting supposedly unidiomatic expressions and sometimes making them go back to Old Irish or even



Welsh. However, because it is not clear what St Patrick's native language was (whether this be a Celtic language or Latin), this method can only be cause of confusion. The solution to this may instead be to try and search for typical mistakes or unconventional uses of a language learner.

## Case-study: *ut*

Because St Patrick had at least some familiarity with Latin, syntactic mistakes seem more likely than morphological ones. *ut*-clauses make for an excellent case-study for two main reasons:

1. *ut* has such a wide range of functions that it may have easily been problematic for a non-native speaker of Latin;
2. *ut* is one of the most used words in the two texts, thus providing a considerable amount of material to work on.

The table below categorises the various uses of *ut* in the two texts authored by St Patrick according to whether it appears as a conjunction or as an adverb. Where it is used as a conjunction, it further specifies which tense and mood it is accompanied by.

Confessio	<i>ut</i> as adverb		5
	<i>ut</i> -clause	indicative	(4 present, 1 imperfect, 1 perfect)
		subjunctive	58 (21 present, 37 imperfect)
		infinitive	3 (all present)
		participle	1 (present)
Epistola	omitted verb		1
	<i>ut</i> as adverb		1
	<i>ut</i> -clause	subjunctive	10 (8 present, 2 imperfect)

## Correct uses

Unsurprisingly, *ut* is for the great majority of cases used to introduce purpose and result clauses (both noun and adverb). Most of the instances in which an *ut*-clause is used,

it is done so correctly, and the sequence of tenses is also respected. *ut* is always used correctly as an adverb.

## Noteworthy 'mistakes'

There are a number of, if not unique, at least unusual, uses of *ut* which are worth mentioning. The three *ut*-clauses built with the present infinitive are especially puzzling. Let us take a look at two of them:

1. *Quia haec est retributio nostra, ut post correptionem vel agnitionem Dei exaltare et confiteri mirabilia eius coram omni natione quae est sub omni caelo.* (*Confessio* 3)
2. *Sed Deum auctorem habeo, qui novit omnia etiam antequam fiant, ut me pauperculum pupillum ideo tamen responsum divinum creber admonere.* (*Confessio* 35)

There are several possible explanations for this set of mistakes, but unfortunately there is no universal explanation for all three *ut*-clauses, since they all have different functions. While for the second sentence above the accidental omission of a final consonant that would have made the present infinitive into an imperfect subjunctive seems likely, this possibility has to be excluded for the first sentence. Similarly, a calque of the Greek result clause is unlikely, since neither of the sentences above seem indeed result clauses, while it may be a possibility for the third sentence not shown above. And again, while a biblical quote seems likely for some sentences, it is unlikely for others.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the uses of *ut* in St Patrick's Latin can only be considered as a preliminary survey. The results are unfortunately not clear-cut enough for us to be able to say anything with certainty. Indeed, a few inconsistent 'mistakes' or uses which may reflect the turning of Latin into the Romance languages do not allow us to draw definitive conclusions. Yet, numerous further investigations remain to be carried out. The hope is that this study will, however, contribute to revive interest for St Patrick's language by introducing a new way to approach it.