

Chapter 6: *Sum* and *Possum*

Chapter 6 covers the following: how to form the imperfect and future tense of *sum*, how to form the present, imperfect and future of *possum*, and the use of the complementary infinitive. At the end of the lesson, we'll review the vocabulary which you should memorize in this chapter and we'll show you how to prepare for Test 1.

Sum and *esse*. In Chapter 4, you learned the present tense of the irregular verb *sum, esse*. Remember it? Yes, you do. Don't lie to me. You remember it. Alright, lie to me. Tell me you remember it. Well then fine! Here it is again. Let's recite it: *sum, es, est, sumus, estis, sunt*. Coming back now? Don't answer that question.

Since the present went so well, now let's look at the imperfect tense of *sum*. As with the present, the imperfect-tense forms of *esse* are irregular. They are *eram, eras, erat, eramus, eratis, erant*. Notice that all these forms have as a characteristic vowel the letter *a*. This is the same *a* that shows up in the *-ba-* endings of other imperfect verbs. And as with other imperfect verb forms in Latin, the imperfect of the verb "to be" carries the sense of unfinished, repeated, or habitual action in the past, producing the following translations: "I was," "I used to be," "I kept on being"; "you were," "you used to be," "you kept on being", "he, she or it was," ... Pretty obvious. Let's move on.

Now let's look at the future tense of *sum* which is also irregular. Its forms are *ero, eris, erit, erimus, eritis, erunt*. Notice that these forms share a characteristic letter *i* which is also seen in the *-bi-* of other future-tense forms. And notice that they also share the same irregularities. The characterizing *i* disappears in both *-bo* and *ero*, and it changes to *u* in the third person plural *-bunt* and *erunt*. Also, just like other future tense forms, the future of the verb "to be" carries the sense of action subsequent to the present: "I will be," "you will be," "he will be..." ... crazy if we recite all of these forms. Moving on.

All these tenses of *sum* need to be memorized. Not only are they important and show up as such in many Latin passages, but they are the basis of other verb forms to be learned later. Therefore, you must commit these to memory. Let's recite them together: *sum, es, est, sumus, estis, sunt; eram, eras, erat, eramus, eratis, erant; ero, eris, erit, erimus, eritis, erunt*. Say this till you feel the cold hand of death upon your heart.

Now let's look at another verb which is based upon the verb "to be," *possum*. This verb — *possum, posse* — is a compound of *sum, esse*. *Possum* is really *pot-* + *sum*: *pot-* means "able"; *sum* means "I am." Therefore, it literally means "I am able." *Posse* is a combination of *pot-* + *esse*, meaning "to be able."

Here is the present tense of *possum*: *possum, potes, potest, possumus, potestis, possunt*; and the infinitive *posse*. There's one minor irregularity here which is really not an irregularity. When *t* runs into *s* in Latin, very often the *t* will change to an *s* and produce the geminate consonant cluster *ss*. So **pot-sum* will turn into *possum*, **pot-sumus* will turn into *possumus*, **pot-sunt* will turn into *possunt*, and **pot-esse* will contract down to *posse*.

Here's the translation of the present tense of *possum*: "I am able," "you are able," "he/she/it is able," "we are able," and since we're all able, let's just able on. There's an English irregularity that needs to be noted here. English has two ways to say "be able." While we English speakers can say "I am able to do something," we can also say, "I can do it," as in "I can," "you can," "he/she/it can" ... cancan or whatever. "Can" cannot, however, be used with the infinitive. In other words, in English there is no "to can."

"Can" involves another complication you should be aware of. After *possum* Latin expects an infinitive, just like English "able": "I am able to do something." But English "can" does not expect an infinitive, just a simple verb form, "I can do it," not "I can 'to do' it." Therefore, translating *possum* as "can" can lead you to bad places, because from the presence of "can" in English you might expect to have only a simple verb form — "can do" — when in Latin with *possum* you'll have a complementary infinitive — "are able to do." That's why "be able" is a better translation of *possum*, at least for now.

Just like *sum*, *possum* changes tenses. Here is the imperfect tense of *possum*. Let's say these forms together: *poteram*, *poteras*, *poterat*, *poteramus*, *poteratis*, *poterant*. As you can see, it's a simple compound of the prefix *pot-* which means "able" attached onto the imperfect tense forms of the verb "to be." This tense translates the same way all imperfect tenses translate in Latin: "I was able," "I could"; "you were able," "you could"; ... and so on.

Possum also has a future tense which is, as you can see, the expected combination of *pot-* + *ero*. Let's recite this one together also: *potero*, *poteris*, *poterit*, *poterimus*, *poteritis*, *poterunt*. And it translates the way you would expect a future tense verb form to translate: "I will be able," "you will be able," and so on. Notice just as there is no "can to" in English, there is no "will can" either, although I don't know why. "I will can do this" is not unattractive grammatically and would save millions of syllables every day across the English-speaking world.

Finally, let's look at an important grammatical construction: the complementary infinitive. In order to have a complete meaning, *posse* requires an infinitive, called a "complementary" infinitive because it "completes" the meaning of the main verb. Please note, this is not a complimentary infinitive — that means "nice" — and there's nothing nice about these infinitives. Complementary infinitives serve an important function. They complete the meaning of the main verb by answering the question, "to be able *to do what?*"

Not all verbs can take complementary infinitives, only certain ones which require an infinitive to complete their sense. So far in this class we have encountered only two verbs which can take complementary infinitives: *debeo*, "ought," as in "ought to do something"; and *possum*, the verb introduced in this chapter, "to be able to do something." Now that we have this new grammatical category, you should be able to identify the use of the infinitive as complementary if it is completing the sense of *debeo* or *possum*. Later in the class, we'll learn other verbs that can take complementary infinitives.

And speaking of learning other words, let's look at a new set of vocabulary.

The first word, *liber, libri*, m., means “book.” It’s a second-declension masculine noun. We encountered this word before in Chapter 3 where it was used as an example of a base that ends in *-r-* and contracts. It may help you to remember our word “library” which does not have an *e* between the *b* and the *r*. However, this derivative won’t help you if you come from those parts of the country where the word is pronounced “liberary.” On an interesting etymological side note, the Latin word *liber* originally meant “the inside layer of the bark of a tree,” because early Romans apparently scratched letters on that surface. The word “write,” in fact, in many Indo-European languages means “to scratch” as you would if you were going to write on the bark of a tree. Besides our verb “write,” this also includes the Latin verb *scribo* and the Greek verb *grapho*. So I guess that makes tree bark an early version of “scratch paper.”

The next word is *tyrannus, tyranni*, m., meaning “tyrant” or “absolute ruler.” It’s a second-declension masculine noun and it’s not originally a Latin word. The Romans borrowed it from the Greeks. But it’s not a Greek word originally either. The Greeks probably borrowed it from a language in Asia Minor, perhaps Lydian, but the exact source is unknown.

The next word is *vitium, vitii*, n., meaning “fault” or “crime,” a second-declension neuter noun. Be careful not to confuse this word with the word we have already encountered which looks much like it: *vita, vitae*, f., first declension, which means “life.” Look at the difference between the bases. The base that means “life” is *vit-*; the base that means “crime” is *viti-*. If it helps, remember the derivatives *vitalize* meaning “enliven,” and *vitiate* meaning “corrupt.” What would be the nominative plural of the word *vitium*? Remember, it’s neuter. That’s right: *vitia*. And what would be the ablative plural? That’s right: *vitiis*.

Next comes an adjective, *Graecus, -a, -um*, meaning “Greek.” It’s a first/second-declension adjective. Often this word is used as a substantive, *Graecus, Graeci*, m., meaning “a Greek man.” If you pluralize it, it becomes “the Greek people.”

The next word is another adjective, *perpetuus, -a, -um*, meaning “perpetual, uninterrupted, continuous.” It’s another first/second-declension adjective.

Here’s another adjective: *vester, vestra, vestrum*, meaning “your” or “yours,” that is, “belonging to you (plural).” It’s a first/second-declension adjective. As you can see from its second form *vestra*, this adjective contracts. The base is *vestr-*. Remember, as we noted when we studied this adjective’s close relative *noster*, the endings on adjectives are merely directional. That is, they point the adjective toward the noun it agrees with. The point is, the ending on *vester* agrees with the noun it goes with in number, gender and case. So, while *vester* always denotes a plural concept, it doesn’t always have a plural ending. So for example, if you have a noun/adjective cluster like *vestra poena*, *vestra* still means “belonging to you (plural),” but its ending is singular because *poena* is singular. The important lesson to remember here is that adjective endings are directional. They only point the adjective toward the noun it agrees with.

The next word, *-que*, a conjunction meaning “and” and practically interchangeable with *et*, involves a simple concept, but one that may seem very odd to you. Just like *-ne* which we learned earlier introduces a question, *-que* is an enclitic. Its purpose is to signal that the word “and” should come in front of the word which has *-que* attached to its end. So *animi sapientiaque*

means “courage and wisdom.” And as far as we can tell, it’s virtually interchangeable with *animi et sapientia*. The Romans just had two ways of saying “and.” And the *-que*’s could just keep coming. So the Romans could say *animi sapientiaque officiumque* meaning “courage and wisdom and duty.” Let’s move on *-que*.

The next word is *sed*. It means “but.” It’s a conjunction. It’s simple. It’s just “but.”

The next word, *ubi*, means “when” or “where.” It introduces a question or clause relating to the time and location of something. In other words, when the Romans said *ubi*, they wanted to know both where and when something was happening. Practical as it might be, this sort of four-dimensional thinking is foreign to English. When you encounter *ubi*, you’ll have to decide whether “when” or “where” is the better translation in the particular context you’re reading.

The correlative of *ubi*, it’s pair word, is *ibi*. *Ibi* answers the question *ubi* is asking. *Ubi? Ibi!* “Where?” “There!”

The next word, *insidiae, insidiarum, f.*, means “ambush,” “plot,” “treachery.” It’s a first-declension noun that exists only in the plural. That means no Latin author ever says *insidia* (singular). They always say *insidiae* (plural). Its literal meaning hints at why this is true and gives a glimpse of the paranoia that drove the Romans to greatness and world conquest. The word *insidiae* is a compound of the prefix *in-* meaning “in,” and the base *sid-* meaning “sit.” So it means “sit-ins,” but in a very different sense from our word. To the Romans, “sit-ins” meant the enemy sitting in holes waiting to jump out and grab you and take away your things. So the only thing you can do is get to them first! And that means conquering the world. So it was really their fault we had to kill them.

And finally a verb, *tolero, tolerare*, meaning “bear” or “endure.” It’s a first-conjugation verb.

And that’s it. That’s the end of the presentation for Chapter 6. For the next class meeting, please bring in a copy of the practice and review sentences for Chapter 6 on page 29 of Wheelock’s text.

When we’ve finished all the work for Chapter 6, you’ll take Test 1. Go to the on-line materials for this chapter to see an example of that test — with answers! That sample test is at the end of the web page. Here’s the link.

Valete, discipuli! Studete!