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Re-establishing Communication Between Linguists and Classicists: A Philologist's Plea

Abstract: As the field of classical studies progresses, scholars are becoming more and more specialized. While this is only to be expected, and is not a problem in and of itself, we need to ensure that language skills remain a cornerstone in our teaching, otherwise we run the risk that unfounded assertions and fashionable dogmas take over the discipline. This article provides several examples where lack of elementary language skills is combined with toxic ideologies; the Grievance Studies Affair should serve as a warning to our field. Linguists and language teachers also need to do more to make the technical side of our subject more accessible; I discuss possible solutions that can help us to improve our students' language skills.

Keywords: 'active method' of language teaching, elitism, Grievance Studies Affair, linguistics, John McWhorter, Hermann Menge, racism, sexism, sight translation, slavery, 'woke religion'

> O dulces comitum ualete coetus,
> longe quos simul a domo profectos
> diuersae uariae uiae reportant.
>
> (Catull. 46.9–11)

> Farewell, o sweet gatherings of companions,
> whom, after we wandered far from home together,
> different roads bring back in different manners.

Thus ends Catullus' forty-sixth poem, in which he celebrates the arrival of spring and travelling to distant lands; and although his friends are going on different journeys, eventually they will all return to the same place and hold a joyful reunion. Perhaps the beginnings of Classics in the modern era could also be described as *dulces comitum coetus*, 'sweet gatherings of companions'. But the days when one scholar could be active in every area of the field are long gone; a steady increase in knowledge has made it inevitable that one individual would not be able to advance several subdisciplines at once. This is normal and to be expected, but with specialization comes fragmentation. Scholars of Classics have embarked on very different routes, and the comparative philologist reconstructing the intricacies of the Indo-European verb system tends to have little interaction with the literary expert

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studying the influence of Virgil on later epic. We have wandered far from home, but will there be a happy reunion?

My little piece is a plea for such a reunion, or at least for an attempt to re-establish contact between the different areas of Classics. Renewed contact is particularly important between literary studies and the field of linguistics and philology. My main reason for saying this is that language skills, once taken for granted, have been in a constant decline among scholars of literature for years, if not decades. Perhaps such a decline of linguistic background skills is less of a problem in art and archaeology, but the student of literature would benefit enormously from fresh engagement with those whose main occupation is language in all its facets.

What I am about to say in this piece may not make me a particularly sweet travel companion, and perhaps even a downright difficult one, but my words are not intended as criticism with the aim of causing needless discomfort. Rather, my goal is renewed dialogue for the sake of advancing Classics as a discipline, but also of making sure that its foundations remain solid. But how much of a problem is there?

1 Problem… what problem?

Having taught Latin, and to a lesser extent also Greek, for more than two decades, the decline in language skills is blatantly obvious to me. The outstanding students of today do still achieve a mastery of Latin and Greek that is as good as that of their predecessors decades ago, but these are the ones who deliberately specialize in the technical disciplines, in linguistics and philology, prose and verse composition, meter, and textual criticism. Many students finish their undergraduate careers without the ability to write a simple story in Latin or Greek. This matters because it means that they are unable to analyze original texts competently; stylistic nuances go unnoticed, and instead they have to rely on translations. Yet however good a translation is, no translation can simultaneously do justice to all aspects of a text, and of course each and every translation is also a product of its own time, overemphasizing some elements of the original and neglecting others.

Not everyone agrees that language skills are in decline. In a recent piece for *BMCR*, Clifford Ando, whom I greatly respect as a scholar and as a person, made a statement that deserves to be quoted in a fuller form (Ando 2022):

> Finally, there was a time when one often read in reviews in Classics remarks of the form, "I wanted to like this book, but then I discovered that the author didn't know Greek." (…) Since something like all authors of books in classical studies once passed qualifying exams in Greek and Latin, I have always been inclined to discount such statements. What they are voicing, it seems to me, is an aesthetic judgment, which, from lack of a relevant apparatus, they put in

> moral terms. Instead of saying, "I don't like the form of this scholarship, or recognize its topic as pertinent to the field as I understand it," they write: "The author of this book is not really, or is not fit to be, a classicist." What one wants from these people, and what BMCR asks them to provide, is a reasoned account of why they find the argument of the book under review to be unsuccessful.
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> On this reading, what "knowing Greek" amounts to is a cultural construct with many different significations, few of which receive substantive articulation and none of which commands universal assent. It's a shorthand about politics, which is to say, it reflects an anxiety about the discipline and its boundaries, and our place and the place of work (and persons?) who discomfit us in respect of those boundaries. And it says something about Classics that this anxiety is expressed as an anxiety about language. One thing, but only one of the things, that we might say about this anxiety-about-language, is that it effects a translation of a political and aesthetic position into a technical one. It's a distraction, and a disguise — a sort of strategic ambiguation.
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> Some years ago I spoke on a panel about graduate education at the SCS. I expressed concern, even ire, on that occasion about the role of sight translation exams as barriers to entry to the profession of Classics. What professional skill does the sight translation exam test? On what occasion after one's qualifying exams will one have to write an article, or prepare a chapter, or write a book, without access to a dictionary? The more serious issue is obviously that "we" use sight translation exams as threshold requirements to join the profession not simply because we don't think about language competency in sophisticated ways. We do so because we have trouble agreeing on other lowest-common-denominator definitions of "Classics" whose competencies we could test. The intolerable price that we undoubtedly pay is the exclusion of many bright and creative minds from the profession.

Clifford Ando is a deeply thoughtful scholar, and elements of what he says here resonate with me; but there are also aspects I disagree with strongly. When I was a student, I heard professors complain about the deplorable lack of language skills in many of my fellow students; I heard them say that the current generation lacked elementary competence and would never be able to rival their forebears. By now I am old enough to have seen the transformation of several of these fellow students, not necessarily into better scholars than they were, but into professors repeating exactly the same lines about the decline in language skills. Strangely enough, one only ever encounters people who think of themselves as the last of the Mohicans, as the last generation of competent classicists, and never people who consider themselves to be part of the first generation that is rubbish. For this reason, but also because I, too, have encountered too many colleagues who say 'person X does not know Latin or Greek' as shorthand for something else, I have a great deal of sympathy for Ando's views.

But while it is a noble thing to wish to see the good in everyone, and to imagine that every classicist is competent in Latin and Greek because they sat elementary qualifying exams at some point, it is an undeniable fact that there are people who publish in the field and who do not know Latin and Greek. And by 'not knowing

Latin and Greek', I do not mean minute stylistic nuances or obscure points of diachronic morphology, but basic, elementary facts of morphology and syntax. Less than three weeks before Ando's piece appeared, I published a book review, also in *BMCR* (de Melo 2022), in which I sadly had to point out that the sheer number of basic grammar mistakes in this work made it a deeply problematic teaching tool. I am happy to write off a mistake here or there as slips that can happen to anyone; but when the errors pile up like this, they are, unfortunately, an indication of linguistic incompetence, even if the author happens to be a tenured professor who at some point must have sat elementary qualifying exams. I do not wish to single out the author of this book, as this situation is becoming more and more common. Denying this is not being generous and open-minded; denying this is deliberately closing one's eyes to a new reality.

My second point of disagreement concerns the value of sight translation. Again, I do not disagree entirely: it is of course correct that no established scholar will ever need to write an article or a book without access to a dictionary or similar tools. But arguing that for this reason sight translation is not a good way to assess students is missing the point. Language study is not simply one discipline among many, it is a foundational subject, the cornerstone, of most subdisciplines in Classics. That, of course, is to be expected in a field which is based on the study of texts; and in that sense, Classics is no different from subjects like French or Arabic: even if we are not required to communicate in Latin or Greek, unlike our counterparts in modern languages, we are working on texts, whether we study Neo-Platonic philosophy or the history of slavery, and reading texts requires a decent knowledge of the languages they are written in. That does not mean that language has to be the be-all and end-all of everything for everyone, but basic competence is a must, and that competence can be assessed easily and straightforwardly through translation exams. By all means, we should let students sit such exams with a dictionary; I would be the last person to argue against the use of dictionaries in exams, and I would not want students to mess up because they do not know one word and then misinterpret everything. But given the foundational status of language for our discipline, some test of linguistic competence is perfectly sensible, be it sight translation or, if that is not palatable, essay writing in Latin or Greek (I have a feeling that if given the choice, most students would prefer sight translation). Classics is not that special, and if our colleagues in French or Arabic do not decry language tests as elitist, then neither should we. Like Ando, I want to see many creative minds in Classics; but let us not set up a false dichotomy between language skills and creativity. At the end of the day, creativity on its own is not enough; creativity must have something to work with, and in the case of Classics that something is texts, and reading texts requires language skills.

But this leads us to an inevitable question: if there is a crisis in language competence, why do people fail to see it, or pretend not to see it so that they will not have to do anything about it?

2 Sacrificing language competence on the altar of ideology

Unfortunately, language competence is all too often sacrificed on the altar of ideology. This ideology can come in an obvious, extreme form, but also in more subtle, yet equally pernicious guises. Sadly, I had to witness the extreme form of this in 2020, while I was a member of the Classics Faculty Board at Oxford; in that period, the faculty came under attack by a group of 'open letter' writers, who took their inspiration from a connected group at Cambridge, which in turn had links to US institutions. This extreme form alleges, without any real evidence, that the subject of Classics is intrinsically toxic, that it is harmful to ethnic minorities, the working classes, and students who are lesbian, gay, or transsexual; these claims are levelled especially against the technical disciplines, such as the study of language, meter, or textual criticism. I have dealt with this topic elsewhere (de Melo 2023a and b) and do not wish to repeat my arguments here. However, I would like to add two comments. First, what surprised me more than the sudden rise of this 'woke religion' (to use the term coined by McWhorter 2021) was how quickly faculties and departments in the US and Britain buckled under it; the sheer reluctance of some tenured, senior colleagues to speak up was as much of a shock to me as what — from my perspective — looks like the opportunistic co-option of such tenets by others whose careers had stalled and who saw this as an opportunity to advance them again. And second, it is my hope that colleagues in continental Europe will not laugh off the situation in the Anglosphere as something that could not happen elsewhere; when I observed its rise in the US, I was naive enough to believe that the UK would be immune to it — alas, how wrong I was!

The more subtly insidious forms of ideology assert that the study of language is no more and no less important than the study of other areas of Classics, and that therefore it should not be given a special place in Classics education. The first part of this assertion is of course not wrong, and I am not hubristic enough to believe that what I do is more important than what an ancient historian does. However, the second part of the assertion is misguided, and is, in fact, a wrong conclusion. Language study is a foundational subject; not everybody needs to take it to the highest

levels, but without some language training, the ancient historian will struggle to assess sources competently.

The end result is the gradual displacement of language studies by other concerns, concerns which in and of themselves are not wrong, but which can easily go in the wrong direction when not underpinned by serious philological work. Two Plautine examples should suffice.

In 2021, Gellar-Goad published a companion volume to Plautus' *Curculio*; I reviewed this book for *Exemplaria Classica* (de Melo 2021b). Several aspects of the book are commendable: chapters 5–7, on stagecraft, metatheatre, and the famous speech of the *choragus* (ll. 462–486), are overall thoughtful and intelligent. On the other hand, the treatment of music, song, and dance is unsatisfactory because the discussion of meter is so cursory as to be unhelpful. Most translations by Gellar-Goad are tone-deaf, using slang and coarse language regardless of whether Plautus was being colloquial or solemn. And scholarly issues such as the transmission of the text are not even touched upon. Instead, there is a certain obsession with issues of race and slavery. Slavery is of course pertinent to the plot, since one of the main characters is a slave-girl who turns out to be free-born, but the way Gellar-Goad deals with the issue does little to help his readers understand the play. The comparison of Roman farms to 'concentration camps', built as the result of '(toxic) masculinity' (p. 61), is simply inappropriate and offensive; and as for Gellar-Goad's notion that the slave-girl might feel forced to pretend being in love with the young man she ends up marrying, this may well chime with his ideas of gender and oppression, but does not tally with l. 673, where she insists that she is keen to marry him even after she has become free and has the freedom to turn him down. I was reminded of the last lines of a poem by Christian Morgenstern, *Die unmögliche Tatsache*: 'weil […] nicht sein kann, was nicht sein darf' ('what may not happen, cannot be'). The issue of race, on the other hand, should be irrelevant to the *Curculio*; it would make sense to discuss it in a companion volume to the *Poenulus*, but here it feels shoehorned in, as the topic *du jour*, and with ideas that are, quite frankly, bizarre: we are told that the Romans were 'diverse' (p. 1), that they were not white (pp. 66–67), that they had curly hair (again pp. 66–67). It feels as if Gellar-Goad had a diversity quota to fill, and as if he as a white man had to apologize for his existence or at the very least for being a Classicist. Throughout the book, one gets the impression that he is more interested in social activism than in scholarly pursuits. This saddens me, as I have seen enough of Gellar-Goad's work to know that he has so much more to contribute.

The second example is a book on Plautus' *Epidicus*, published by Tracy in 2021. Her work is intended as a teaching tool: Lindsay's text is accompanied by a brief introduction, explanatory notes, and a prose translation. I reviewed this book for

BMCR (de Melo 2022, mentioned above). Many of the problems we saw in Gellar-Goad's work apply to hers as well. The introduction is problematic insofar as it focuses almost exclusively on the oppression of women and slaves. Of course, these are topics worthy of discussion and reassessment, but an introductory textbook on comedy should also tell us what makes a comedy a comedy: what was considered funny in Plautus' times, and which of the jokes still work, and which ones do not? And if we are talking about oppression, there is a fundamental question that is not addressed at all: to what extent does a Plautine play reflect reality, and to what extent is it a deliberate, humoristic, distorted exaggeration? A fair answer to that question would require nuance, but nuance would go against the grain of this type of book; outrage and anger seems to be all that is aimed for. Perhaps it is little surprise, then, that no effort has gone into the language notes, which are full of the most elementary mistakes: in l. 515, *sis* 'if you will' (< *si uis*) is parsed as the present subjunctive of *esse*, and in l. 552, it is claimed that the passive participle of *censere* is the non-existent *censitum*; it would be easy to expand this list. Some of the errors also reveal the author's personal biases: in l. 217, the colourless *illam* is rendered as 'that chick', creating an opportunity to complain about Plautus' sexism elsewhere; and in l. 711, *malum* 'damn' is absurdly treated as a term of address for a slave, artificially adding to the list of injustices committed against the oppressed.

Perhaps we should not be surprised when US Americans or Canadians writing about Roman comedy bring up topics that have more to do with current politics in their home countries than with the ancient world; after all, North American universities have become heavily politicized spaces, with the sad consequence that all too often tenure and career advancement are not simply dependent on academic achievement, but on holding the 'right kind' of political views. And perhaps what these academics are saying is not even always problematic. To be sure, much of it is dubious, for example the naive view that men (at least if they are white, 'cis-gender', and heterosexual) are the source of all evil, while women are unequivocally among the oppressed (even if they were wealthy enough to own slaves). That said, some of their opinions are of course correct, for example when they state that slavery was often cruel; but that is also obvious, and the constant preaching to the choir does get a bit tedious.

Am I complaining simply because these academics are not writing the books I would have written? Well, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that I believe that the sheer number of elementary grammar mistakes in a book like Tracy's is unacceptable, and that I, or many undergraduate students for that matter, could have done better on that front. But also no, in the sense that I do not mind if people want to talk about the many difficult, problematic, and cruel aspects of the ancient world. I would say, though, that their book titles should give some indication of what they are doing. I

asked for review copies of Gellar-Goad and Tracy because I was interested in scholarly approaches to these plays, not in their ideas of social justice.

For me, the real problem arises when social justice doctrine replaces the technical elements of scholarship; when authors are either not willing or not competent to tackle language and metre; and when publishers publish their books anyway, out of their own incompetence or out of fear that they might get cancelled if they refuse to publish a work that espouses the dogmas of the day. The real problem arises when authors talk about issues with a moral dimension and when we, the readers, know the conclusion in advance; because that means that the conclusion is either banal ('slavery was bad' — surely we can all agree on that), or based on 'social justice' dogmas where only one conclusion is allowed ('men bad, women good').

At this point I should at least mention the 'grievance studies affair', which is not directly related to Classics, but is highly relevant to the future of the field (fairly neutral discussion in Mounk 2018). Three writers, Peter Boghossian and James A. Lindsay from the US and Helen Pluckrose from the UK, created an elaborate hoax that consisted in sending fake articles to academic journals in various humanities subjects between 2017 and 2018. What the articles had in common was that they all had the 'right kind' of conclusions, the sort of answers that chimed with the 'social justice' prejudices of the individual disciplines. So even though the submissions were deliberately grotesque and exaggerated, quite a few of them found approval: of the twenty-one submissions, four were published (but retracted after the discovery of the hoax); three were accepted (but then not published after the discovery of the hoax); a further four were sent back for revision; and one was still under review when the hoax was uncovered. Nine papers were rejected. One may well be surprised that any of the papers got accepted, given how absurd they were: perhaps the best-known, published as Wilson (2018) in *Gender, Place & Culture*, had the title 'Human reactions to rape culture and queer performativity at urban dog parks in Portland, Oregon'; it argued that dog parks and nightclubs were 'rape-condoning spaces' and that men should be trained like dogs to improve their behavior. When the hoax was uncovered, political commentators on both the right and the left of the political spectrum interpreted its significance in ways that fit their preconceived notions. Conservative pundits jumped to the conclusion that academia is corrupt, useless, and no longer fit for purpose; but while I acknowledge that the fact that any of these papers got accepted is a problem in and of itself, we should not lose sight of another fact, namely that for example none of the sociology journals accepted the bogus submissions. Left-leaning academics preferred to brush off the entire episode, claiming that it did not say anything of value since there were no control groups (e.g. Hughes and Aldous 2018), or that the three writers were simply ignorant of how peer review worked; that strikes me as just as disingenuous as the

conservative response. The main lesson that can be learned is, I believe, that humanities subjects can be perfectly rigorous and serious, but that this objectivity is under threat when open-minded academic enquiry co-opts identity politics and political agendas. It is a danger that Classics is currently facing, and if we do not do our best to avert it, it could destroy the subject.

3 Linguists must do better, too

If the preceding sections gave the impression that all the blame lies with literary scholars, and that linguists are paragons of virtue, then the following paragraphs will hopefully rectify that impression. We must do better, too. The way I see it, the biggest problem with classical linguists is that sometimes they are prone to lose their connection to actual texts. This can happen in three ways.

The first issue arises when Indo-European scholars shut themselves off from those working on individual languages and do not take their needs into account. At the University of Leiden, Alexander Lubotsky is overseeing the *Indo-European Etymological Dictionary* project, a project I admire and respect; but at times I cannot help but feel exasperated, too. Perhaps my biggest pet peeve with the project as a whole is that it ignores loanwords. So, for instance, the Latin and Greek etymological dictionaries discuss only those words that are inherited in these languages from the Indo-European proto-language. Of course these are the only words relevant for the reconstruction of Indo-European, but such a procedure makes the dictionaries much less useful for the average classicist than more traditional etymological dictionaries. A student of Latin may well be interested in the fact that *catamitus* 'Ganymede / catamite' comes from the Greek name *Ganymedes*, via Etruscan *catamite*, and that the second meaning arose because Ganymede did more than serve wine. But no such information is available in the dictionaries of the series, and that makes them less appealing to an audience of classicists.

The second way in which linguists create more problems than they solve is when they study language synchronically, but their theories are elaborate without having predictive power. We can see this especially with the study of word order: Devine and Stephens (2006; review: de Melo 2007) is an incredibly detailed examination of Latin word order, based on principles of generative grammar, and in order to understand it fully, one has to have some background in Chomskyan syntax as well as in truth-conditional semantics (a solid understanding of lambda-calculus is taken for granted). Yet in practice the work does not advance our knowledge much: it summarizes the excellent descriptive findings of earlier scholarship and incorporates them into a theoretical framework, but, say, scholars wishing to write

a Latin text would not get anything out of the book that they could not have known beforehand. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the test of a good theoretical framework is whether or not it allows us to make accurate predictions that were not possible before, or whether or not it can make the same predictions as other models, but with a simplified theoretical apparatus. If the words in a passage of Cicero were completely scrambled up, would the theory allow us to recreate the original word order? If we had a Latin text in which all finite verb forms were replaced by infinitives, would a new theory of tense and aspect allow us to predict the correct forms more accurately, or more elegantly (i.e. with less theoretical apparatus), than the previous models? If not, we are dealing with theory for the sake of theory. But theories have the unfortunate tendency to become obsolete more quickly than data.

Finally, linguistically trained classicists can unwittingly create issues when they try to introduce linguistic concepts into their writing, even though these concepts do not fulfill any useful function. Recently, I was asked to assess the work of a colleague; as he is quite junior and not yet tenured, he shall remain anonymous. There is no doubt that this is a bright, talented scholar with a great deal of potential; but the use of fancy linguistic terminology with no deeper purpose is not something I espouse. In one of the presentations I got to see, he mentioned *eggcorns*, a term coined by Geoffrey Pullum; even in linguistic circles, this is not a common expression. An *eggcorn* is the modification of a pre-existing word because it has been misheard or misinterpreted; *eggcorn*, from *acorn*, is itself an example of the phenomenon, as is *old-timers' disease* for *Alzheimer's disease*. This type of popular etymology is interesting and worth studying, but in the context of the presentation, it was mere decoration. Yet to me this kind of decoration felt rather off-putting. A display of learning without real purpose and without deeper study makes linguistics look silly. It is attitudes like these that led a fellow student of mine to complain about linguistics; she said, with Horace (*ars* 139), *parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus*, and sadly, I cannot blame her. So what can we do?

3.1 Applying linguistic insights to grammar teaching

It never ceases to amaze me how little linguistic research trickles down into actual language teaching. Here would be a golden opportunity to apply our theoretical insights in order to help students to learn the ancient languages more quickly, but it is consistently missed. When one of the traditional works used to teach Latin prose composition to German students, Hermann Menge's *Repetitorium der lateinischen Syntax und Stilistik*, was 'updated', the authors of this revised version stated that they had taken linguistic research of the past decades into account (Menge,

Burkard, and Schauer 2000: xii–xv and xviii–xxii), but in practice it is only lip service that is paid to these noble ideals. The ablative (2000, 464–541), for instance, is divided into three broad categories, the ablative proper, the locative, and the instrumental. Each of these three categories then has further subcategories; the instrumental even has an '*ablativus militaris*' as a subcategory! I have some sympathy for the three broad categories; after all, the various ablative endings in the different Latin declension classes continue morphs of three distinct Indo-European cases, the ablative, the locative, and the instrumental, and in Sanskrit these are still separate cases with separate functions. However, the morphological merger in Latin was not accompanied by phonological attrition, so it presupposes an earlier functional merger, with the ablative becoming little more than the case for adjuncts. Their precise meaning is dependent on the lexical meaning of the words involved and the precise syntactic constellations; in a sentence such as *Caesar omnibus copiis in Galliam peruenit*, 'Caesar arrived in Gaul with all his troops', *omnibus copiis* is a 'military' ablative simply because the noun refers to military troops accompanying a military leader. We should be teaching students such basic facts instead of asking them to think what precise subcategory a specific instance of the ablative belongs to, an undertaking which brings to mind a phrase containing angels and the head of a pin, and which makes Aulus Gellius look like a well-adjusted member of society rather than a pedant's pedant.

The treatment of *cum*-clauses is equally frustrating (2000, 840–863, divided over several sections). Even the most modern school grammars still tell us that *cum* is combined with the indicative whenever it means 'when', and with the subjunctive when it means 'because' or 'even though'; students then have to learn terms like *cum temporale*, *cum causale*, *cum concessivum*, but no one tells them how one and the same word can mean 'because' or 'even though', and most of them do not dare to ask. Again a linguistic angle would simplify matters. Students could be taught that *cum* really only means 'when', but if an author wants to tell the reader that the logical link between subordinate and main clauses goes beyond the purely temporal, the subjunctive is used. The precise logical link is left vague, hence interpretations (rather than meanings) along the lines of 'because' or 'even though'. None of these further interpretations ever became grammaticalized, unlike in English and German, where *while* / *Weile* can still function as a noun, but also as a subordinator with different meanings: English *while* can still have a temporal meaning, but it can also mark a contrast, whereas German *weil* does not have temporal interpretations any longer and must be taken as causal.

I firmly believe that grammar teaching in schools and universities could turn from painful drudgery to interesting or even exciting opportunity if linguistic

insights were taken on board as a matter of routine. However, in most universities we are a far cry from this ideal situation.

3.2 The 'active method': a useful tool, not a panacea

Long gone are the days when most Classics lectures were delivered in Latin. However, in their stead we now have societies promoting spoken Latin and Greek. Although many such organizations are currently springing up, the phenomenon is by no means new; as an undergraduate in the late 90's, I attended some workshops held by such societies. What is new, however, is the changing demographic: the workshops I attended were predominantly organized and attended by older academics and retired school teachers, while today organizers and participants are most commonly graduate and undergraduate students.

The proponents of the 'active method' make many valid points. There are four basic language skills that we assess when admitting foreign students whose native language is not English: listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. For the classical languages, on the other hand, university courses exclusively focus on the last two, and sometimes in fact only on reading. However, it is argued that the four skills are not independent of each other. While we value reading skills the highest, since we learn Latin and Greek mostly in order to analyze ancient texts, such reading skills are said to improve in a more natural way and much faster when students also learn the other three skills. Thus, time spent on the active method is not to be regarded as a distraction and will lead to greater competence in the traditional skills in the long run.

To a large extent I agree with the proponents of the active method. I can attest first hand that being able to speak an ancient language is hugely motivating; the average Classics student dreads being asked by a student of modern languages to 'say something in Latin or Greek' and has a nagging sense of inadequacy about his or her language skills. Being able to hold a basic conversation in Latin or Greek gives students a feeling of achievement and a certain drive.

That said, some misgivings remain, and our enthusiasm should be tempered with a dose of realism. First of all, what does 'natural' actually mean in the context of second-language acquisition? Second-language acquisition differs from first-language acquisition in many important respects: for example, the amount of exposure to a second language is much more limited; and even more importantly, after the critical period for first-language acquisition is gone, motor skills are more difficult to acquire, and memorization requires greater input. This means that pronunciation needs to be taught explicitly, that paradigms have to be learned from books, and that syntactic rules need explanation. The active method can help students to

improve and deepen their skills, but it would be naive to think that progress could be made solely by relying on classroom dialogues in ancient languages. A further problem with the concept of 'naturalness' is that we do not have any genuine spoken Latin or Greek from antiquity. In every language with a written form, the spoken variety is marked by shorter and less complex sentences as well as other divergences. However, that kind of Latin and Greek is lost to us, and while the comedy dialogues of Menander or Terence preserve some features of spoken language, they are of course highly artificial. The closest we can come to real spoken Latin from antiquity are the transcripts of Church councils, but even those have been redacted to eliminate false starts and anacolutha. Students learning spoken Latin and Greek should be aware that their endeavors are extremely artificial. And finally, while I strongly believe that skills in speaking and listening can improve our reading abilities, the transfer is nevertheless somewhat limited: the Latin and Greek texts we have are for the most part highly literary, so that even a native speaker in antiquity would have required some study in order to process them properly, and they span many centuries, during which the language changed considerably, which further limits the possibility of skill transfer.

3.3 More language outreach and training for beginners

Universities these days are heavily involved in outreach activities. Lecturers regularly go to schools where Classics is not taught as a subject and talk about their specific areas of expertise. This is a very welcome development and advertises the subject to pupils who would not otherwise get a chance to hear about it. I feel greatly honored to have been invited to quite a few schools for such talks. But it is my hope that language will be given a much more prominent place in such outreach activities. It is not enough to talk about literature and culture; school children should also learn about language in all its facets. In my experience, such talks are generally met with great interest, whether they are on the reconstruction of Indo-European or on the evidence for how Greek and Latin were pronounced.

Yet however valuable such in-person talks are, they inevitably reach only a limited audience. That is why some of our outreach needs to go online. The most successful online outreach resource is now *Antigone Journal* (https://antigonejournal.com/), which publishes articles on every field within Classics. I strongly encourage my linguistics colleagues to write for *Antigone*; such articles often find a wide readership: a piece I did on grammatical gender (de Melo 2021a) got more than 25,000 views within a year, a number which compares favorably with the perhaps dozen views my articles in print journals tend to get.

And finally, universities need to take into account the changing demographics of their students. Oxford and Cambridge have done so in an exemplary way, providing *ab initio* language classes. Such classes are, in effect, an acknowledgment that more and more students who want to study Classics come from schools where Latin and Greek were not taught, but also that language training is a necessity for anyone who wants to become an expert in the field and not feel like an imposter. It is my hope that other universities will follow suit rather than choose the route of abolishing language requirements.

4 Final thoughts

Classics is at a crossroads; its future as an academic discipline is not as certain as I would like it to be. One of the biggest threats to the subject is a decline in linguistic competence, not because students today are less talented than they used to be, but because practitioners of the subject are sidelining language teaching, often for ideological reasons.

The first step to resolving this problem is acknowledging its existence. Different fields within Classics need to start engaging with each other again. Scholars of literature need to put their area of research on a firmer footing by learning more about language and linguistics. And linguists need to make their work more accessible to others instead of living in a bubble.

A paper about the past of the subject can always rely on previous research and biographical resources. The future is of necessity less certain. But therein lies a chance: the past cannot be changed, but the future is what we make of it. That is why my paper is not just a description of the current situation, but also includes a plea. I do not have the certainty of Catullus' *reportant* in the indicative, but I do wish, in the subjunctive, that there may be a *reportent*. May we engage with each other again and start learning from one another afresh.

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