



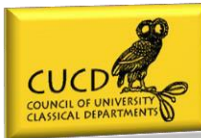
The Place of Languages in Classical Study and Research: discussion

By Abigail Buglass, Rhiannon Easterbrook, and Cressida Ryan.

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Introduction: Abigail Buglass



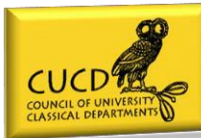
The following two pieces offer quite different perspectives on the seemingly perennial discussion surrounding the emphasis to be placed on languages, both modern and ancient, within the broader classical syllabus. The recent announcement of the Latin Excellence Programme (announced after the following pieces were written), which will see Latin introduced into forty state schools that do not currently teach it has again revived the debates, discussions, and flare-ups surrounding the place of Latin within a classical education and indeed within a UK education more broadly (for further information see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-more-students-to-learn-ancient-and-modern-languages>). The more specialised question of how much focus should be afforded to ancient languages within a classical syllabus and to what extent those creating scholarship should be familiar with and even expert in modern languages is also a vexed one. After all perspectives on these questions relate and overlap with considerations of school education, socio-economic background, ability to travel, personal economic circumstances (those working second jobs alongside a PhD might be less available to take up Spanish on top of their French, Greek, and Latin), and many other social issues. At the same time, expecting scholarship to exist only in English in the hopes of greater accessibility plainly favours an anglophone audience.

Cressida Ryan's discussion of linguistic study and potential areas for progress here explores not only the various stumbling blocks faced by language teaching for current undergraduates but also crucially considers the linguistic backgrounds of our students before they arrive at university. Rhiannon Easterbrook ponders the debates which lately flared up on the Liverpool Classicists' email list to consider the inherently and necessarily collaborative nature of our work as academics, even when one might not suppose it to be a team effort. New perspectives will always emerge, as proved by the lengthy and occasionally heated discussion on languages on the aforementioned mailing list (accessible here under the heading 'In support of publication in many languages' <https://listserv.liv.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa?A2=2104&L=CLASSICISTS&P=21526542>) and we hope to contribute something to the inevitably ongoing dialogue here on the Bulletin.

Perspective 1: Rhiannon Easterbrook

In a 1992 comedy about the Welsh 'Rebecca' riots of the 1840s against exorbitant tolls, *Rebecca's Daughters*, an English captain is disgusted to learn the deficiencies of the Welsh language.¹ There to subdue and transport to Australia the aggrieved and surprisingly transvestite populace, this dragoon makes a failed attempt to parley with the locals who refuse to submit to English law as they strive to "possess the

¹ My thanks to Abigail Buglass for her edits to this piece, which helped clarify my thinking.



gates of their enemies”. “What sort of language doesn’t have a word for ‘court martial!’” he complains.² The implication is that only languages with a certain history have need of such terms. While researching this essay, I discovered that there is in fact a Welsh phrase for court martial – “ymladd llys” – which just goes to show that even languages that many find obscure can adopt the concepts of colonisers. It is also a reminder of my failure to acquire the tongue of my grandparents’ kitchen in preference for languages that I believed would add greater value to my career.³ One theme that ran through the Liverpool List debate was heritage. Perhaps this is hardly surprising in an examination of the role of languages; not only do they shape our professional identities and the traditions that help form them, but they also, of course, link us in the most profound ways to family, community, and nation, and those ties will customarily evoke strong feelings. For me, the discussion stoked the sense I frequently have that I am always letting someone or something down, whether that is my forebears, my personal career ambitions, or my ideals for a truly inclusive approach to creating and sharing knowledge. However, all of these pressures speak once again to the question of what make us as researchers and people. Surely, we are all made by those who went before us, those around us, and those yet to come.

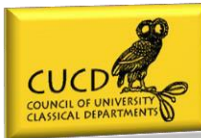
As academics, we know that scholarship is a collaborative process. Discussants made more than one reference to the importance of editors in ensuring the accessibility and also plurality of scholarship, whether through the choices they make in terms of whom and what they include or by tidying up the idioms used by authors writing in their second or third language. The efforts of those editors who are expansive in their choices are undoubtedly critical to the continued vitality of scholarship, but could such practices open up ways into thinking more broadly about the human dimension of knowledge production?

Readers may be familiar with the #ThanksForTyping social media movement and conference of 2019, along with this year’s edited volume of the same name, which has centred on the hidden labour of women in publishing.⁴ Many examples were of

² Although the original text is by the great Dylan Thomas (1948), this specific exchange doesn’t appear in my copy, so I assume it is an innovation for the film version.

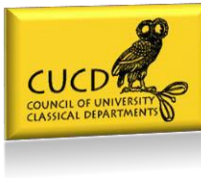
³ This line of thought would never have come about had I not read Mathura Umachandran’s *Eidolon* piece ‘Fragile, Handle with Care: On White Classicists’ (2015), which, while focused on experiences of racism that I will never have, did provoke me to reflect upon my heritage, in addition to many other important points.

⁴ Julia Dresvina (ed.) *Thanks for Typing: Remembering Forgotten Women in History*, Bloomsbury (2021).



the wives and mothers of well-known male scholars whose typing-up of the latter's manuscripts appears to have included more intellectual input than might have initially been assumed. This is but one example of the often-overlooked complexities of the co-creation of scholarship. Similarly, editors are among many contributors to a piece of research. Our work emerges into the world, not merely because of our own, individual efforts, but as the result of peer reviewers, archivists, librarians, critical friends, amanuenses, interlocutors, and many others.

So, if it takes a village to write an article, and perhaps a reasonably sized town a monograph, then we should reconsider whatever special place might be accorded to multilingualism. I don't mean to suggest that language skills are not to be prized – absolutely they should be! However, complete and self-sufficient intellectual mastery is always an illusion, and we shouldn't pretend languages are a special case. Just as we might prize the attainment of intellectual mastery, brilliance is another ideal to which academia clings, much to its own detriment. The “research superstar” is a status to which many of us have attempted to ascend, eschewing any suggestion of chinks in our cerebral armour. However, the problem with brilliance is that it dazzles, and we miss the ingredients of someone's success, not only in terms of our intellectual “village” but with respect to numerous other realities of living in the world with a brain and body. Everyone has flashes of inspiration and insight, but not everyone has the time and energy simply to learn every new language they might need to on top of everything else. This could be because of caring responsibilities or the stress of all kinds of disadvantages; it could be because, like me, they are working outside of academia but are doing their best to stay within it; or it could be because they have a chronic illness or learning difference. The idea of brilliance rarely admits specific learning disabilities but there are plenty of researchers who have them but are no less competent for having them. However, they can make some activities – including learning languages – more laborious. And so, what do we do if we want to spare ourselves the burden of accruing more and more languages? One suggestion is to adopt a lingua franca of Latin or Ancient Greek, which at least wouldn't privilege a specific modern language and culture. However, Classics, forever fretting over its place among Ancient World Studies, Comparative Literature, History, Philosophy, and Archaeology, to name a few disciplines with which it is in both dialogue and competition, needs more than ever to speak across disciplinary boundaries. Producing work in ancient languages is unlikely to achieve this aim.



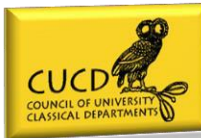
An alternative that was raised is using software to translate texts, so that it doesn't matter what language the original is published in. However, using machine translation resources as they currently stand should not be viewed as independent from other forms of translation that we might associate with learning languages. Even professionals use automation from time to time and will then check the product against their knowledge. In my view, this is cause for hope. Nevertheless, sceptics may note that something is always lost in translation, and so it is important to have sufficient knowledge of the source language in order to compensate for any inaccuracies. I agree – at least with the first part. Translation is always provisional, and so is analysis. All we can do is try. What the embrace of machine translation does not swerve is the question, once again, of collaboration and community, where the other actors are human *and* digital. I am not equipped here to assess what these tools do to or for humanistic intellectual traditions, let alone our understanding of cognition, but I do wish to highlight that the ethical and practical questions they raise should make us think deeply about what on earth it is that we are doing in academia.

There are no easy answers, but there are even harder questions. Higher education in the UK and beyond has been under assault, from neoliberal funding and employment regimes and the devaluing of the arts, including new cuts to the funding of creative arts courses, to fabricated culture wars that are tiresome at best and dangerous at worst.⁵ But these issues reflect much wider and perhaps more urgent concerns. At present, the UK executive is determined to criminalise people who rescue drowning refugees and to jail journalists who “damage” the government.⁶ All over the world, racism and xenophobia are on the march, while the climate emergency will force millions from one hostile environment to another.

More and more energy is put into shaping who gets to speak and where they get to do it. What use is a system that lauds singular intellectual mastery in a chaotic and connected world and ever-increasing productivity when we are all so short of resources? Like Rebecca and her daughters, perhaps it is time for us not only to

⁵ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ministers-criticised-vandalism-over-creative-and-london-cuts>.

⁶ <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2021/07/priti-patel-making-it-illegal-uk-rescue-asylum-seekers>.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/20/proposed-secrecy-law-journalism-spying-home-office-public-interest-whistleblowing>.



possess the gates but to destroy them. Collaboration not sequestration is the key: a Classics of many languages and with a commitment to integrity must make visible all the labour that creates it and must reach out across borders and boundaries of every kind. Let our polyglossic agonies ask more, ask for more.

Perspective 2: Cressida Ryan

As a language instructor, I spend all my working day teaching Greek, while maintaining a personal interest in the broader world of Classics, notably Classical Reception. With these two very contrasting hats on, I find I have strong views on some of the issues which are currently coming up in the debates about Latin and Greek. This piece does not address all the issues, and makes necessarily introductory comments about some areas for discussion, but I want to make a case why, as a language instructor, much though I love Latin and Greek and wish more people could and would study them, I do not think they are the be all and end all of Classics, and do not think they need to be compulsory in classical courses.

I am interested in the place of Latin and Greek in the British Higher Education system, but also in the process of learning Latin and Greek, from schools onwards. I also explore the nature of Classics as a discipline, particularly the increase in interdisciplinary work, and Reception Studies. There are many other challenges to do with things such as class, race, or gender, which I don't deal with here (although some are glaringly evident), but I can add another angle to the debate.

1. British degrees

A typical British degree might allow 1/4 to 1/3 of a year for a language. If you're taking both Latin and Greek, therefore, that's as much as 2/3 of your year spent on language study. Your ability to study Classics as a whole discipline is significantly reduced. People sometimes say Classics is like English literature, but you have to translate things first. This feels problematic. Learning Latin and Greek is not just about being able to translate things (witness the increase in immersive modes of teaching, and comprehensible input methods). Nor is Classics just English Literature in a foreign language. This does a disservice to language learning, and to the interdisciplinary nature of our field.



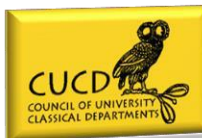
There will be people for whom learning Latin and Greek is a wonderful experience and they are happy to revel in them. There are others for whom one ancient language is plenty, and others for whom this is not their preferred path. Why does someone interested in Classical Art necessarily need to be excellent at Latin, themselves? They might, however, need to know enough (about) Latin to read an inscription, or skim a text in order to find key points for further study, with support of a Latin expert. The University of Nottingham has had excellent linguistic awareness modules such as 'Seeing Through Language', for students who did not take a language. My students there could read an inscription or a coin, and understood the fundamentally interpretative nature of translation. My Latin students did not gain such skills. In terms of usable language skills for Classics purposes, the Seeing Through Language students perhaps gained more.

I am not against languages. Nor am I drawing up any linguistic ladder behind me. I am unusual in having both Latin and Greek A-Levels. As a Classicist, however, I have often wished I'd taken History, English, and German instead of Latin, Greek, and Chemistry. I would have developed my linguistic aptitude, learned a language I need for secondary literature, and learned about structuring essays and thinking critically. When a supervisor wrote in my first supervision report (of my Latin) 'sub-prep school standard', I felt like I'd wasted my A-Levels instead. That may have been an unfair report, and of course the grass is always greener on the other side and I may be wrong about what I would have learned from other subjects. What it does show, however, is that there are always gaps, subjects not taken, negative consequences to choices made. The overall sense that Classics requires many skills, which by definition cannot be covered by one person within the British education system, has remained with me.

There are also significant barriers to many people in studying Latin and Greek. I will comment on just a couple.

2. Languages in schools

As a school teacher I had many conversations with parents about whether their child could take Latin. People fought against the idea that a dyslexic student could study Latin. I disagree, and am heartened by the increasing focus on teaching Latin and Greek inclusively. This, however, means a reappraisal of both teaching and assessment methods. New teaching methods are gaining support, not least through the excellent work done by Steve Hunt and Arlene Holmes-Henderson (among



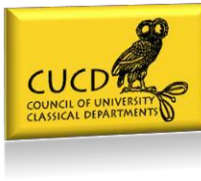
others), in books such as *Forward With Classics*, and in the [Journal of Classics Teaching](#), which Steve edits. Revisiting assessment is more problematic.

The Latin GCSE is supposed to be doable from scratch within two years. Evidence shows that this isn't true. Most students take far longer, which means that those genuinely trying to learn it within that timeframe are disadvantaged. We sell the subject with the excitement of reading original texts, unlike in modern language GCSEs, but this comes at a cost of covering material well above students' linguistic level, which are challenging for teachers to prepare, challenging to assess effectively, and lead to a certain amount of teaching to the test. Latin GCSE results are excellent, but as Rob Coe's paper demonstrates, it's a comparatively hard course to do well in (for whatever reason).⁷ It is not genuinely accessible to all.

There is lots we could do to make learning and assessing ancient languages realistic and manageable. Various groups, notably Classics for All, and CSCP, are doing their best to address the challenges, and I won't pursue the various avenues here. I can say, however, that this requires, in part, a continuing shift from assuming GCSE leads to A-Level, and A-Level underpins undergraduate study. Each level needs to be meaningful in its own right. Such an approach might make undergraduate beginners' languages also seem more natural, and less of a 'catch-up' option. The language of language study also needs careful consideration. We talk about 'having' Latin or Greek, as though it's a collector's item, a badge to be sewn onto our academic gowns, or an achievement to unlock before we move on to the next thing. Language study is necessarily an ongoing process. I still learn more about Greek every week, as I spend more time reading more authors and more scholarship, and teaching more students with different queries. If we can accept that it is always going to be an unfinished process, then perhaps we can accept that it means any level in that process is a start, not an end, with space for people to do as much, or as little, as they want.

What language courses look like at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, needs much more work, in terms of the course design, teaching methods, and aims and objectives. We may then find that the appetite for Latin and Greek grows in a more integrated fashion than current outreach work has yet achieved.

⁷ See <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/opinion-difficult-latin-risks-remaining-a-qualification-for-elite-pupils> for a discussion of this paper, with references, and for the paper itself, <https://f.hubspotusercontent30.net/hubfs/5191137/attachments/SCORE2008report.pdf>.



3. Reception Studies

Much of my research comes under the broad heading of Reception. The language question is particularly sharp here. I was once turned down for a post partly because my French, German, and Italian were not good enough. No, they weren't. I'd concentrated on learning Modern Greek in order to travel to plays, or then retraining in musicology, art history, anthropology, the Enlightenment. I learned more in each term of graduate study than I had in years of undergraduate study, in terms of both content and methodology / approach, but the result was a PhD sufficiently frantic and complicated that my examiners wrote in their report 'this thesis should not have worked'. How much better would such an ambitious project have been if I'd been able to collaborate properly with specialists in each field, rather than leaning heavily on some wonderful individuals to fast-track me to a place where I could pretend to hold my own?

I'm now in a Theology Faculty, and collaborative approaches to language work is hotly contested regarding translating the Bible. David Bentley Hart argues that translation by committee leads to a compromise which is dull and serves nobody well.⁸ The SIL workbook on translating the Bible argues that to translate the Bible effectively you need someone skilled in the relevant languages, someone skilled in translation as a discipline, and a trained theologian to help inform the process.⁹ I suggest that Classics could, and should, be looking for ways to make such collaboration a positive process whose results go beyond what the individuals could achieve, and not an awkward compromise of partial understanding.

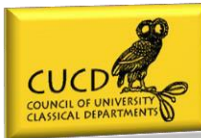
4. Collaboration

Here are some of the modes of interdisciplinary work which might occur:

- a.) One person to retrain in as many disciplines as possible, working hard to cover basics, but never mastering any area, remaining largely limited to facile engagement with the various fields. This is where I have risked leaving myself, and it is neither desirable nor sustainable.
- b.) Individuals carrying out their own small units of work, which are loosely connected through a theme, in a project group, but do not interrelate. This is

⁸ David Bentley. [Main author] Hart, *New Testament*. (Yale University Press, 2017).

⁹ Katharine G. L. Barnwell, *Bible Translation : An Introductory Course in Translation Principles*, Third (Dallas, Texas: SIL International Publications, 2017).



where many 'projects' seem to fit, taking on a science framework without having worked out quite how to adapt that to a Humanities context.

- c.) Individuals working on related pieces of a project puzzle, which will add up to a whole picture. Each piece contributes to a coherent overall picture, rather than a theme acting as an umbrella for more disparate and less closely-related individual enterprises. Some projects fit here.
- d.) People co-writing, blending expertise in a humble and intellectually open way that allows for something greater than their individual perspectives to emerge.

As the recent Imagines conference *[Reception Studies: State of the Discipline and New Directions](#)*, new forms of collaboration are precisely what we do need.

Yes, it would be great if lots of people felt inspired to learn Latin, Greek, or indeed any other language. There are many, many reasons why this is a good thing (and it does not come down to mental discipline). It remains true that Classics needs more than just linguists, and that people interested in Classics may not be linguists. It is also true that being a linguist does not make one a translator, a textual critic, and epigraphist, a papyrologist, or a numismatist. What we could do:

- 1.) Make the Latin and Greek GCSEs genuinely doable within the given structures.
- 2.) Continue to work on supporting Latin and Greek in other ways, so that students can access them at any level.¹⁰
- 3.) Invest in research on effective pedagogy in Latin and Greek, and in developing the resources, training, assessment, and curriculum development which implements this research. This needs to happen at primary, secondary, and tertiary level.
- 4.) Spend time working on what effective collaboration in Classics could actually mean.
- 5.) Improve courses that equip students with the intellectual tools to use languages in their work, without requiring extensive study of that language.
- 6.) Embed teaching of language tools such as machine translation into our course designs.
- 7.) Teach translation as a discipline alongside the languages themselves (see an excellent article in JCT: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of->

¹⁰ A good recent example is the new intermediate certificate in Greek, see the announcement on the Education Blog: <https://cucdeducation.wordpress.com/2021/07/12/an-update-on-the-new-intermediate-certificate-pre-gcse-in-classical-greek/>.



Bulletin 50 (2021) <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/bulletin/>

[classics-teaching/article/teaching-translation-theory-and-practice/1C79E321368587285264F5806EFFE65D](https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/bulletin/classics-teaching/article/teaching-translation-theory-and-practice/1C79E321368587285264F5806EFFE65D)).

Languages, both ancient and modern, form an important part of the Classics landscape. That landscape continues to broaden, however, in terms of participants, secondary materials, and areas of study. The position of languages needs to change with the discipline, which means changing how, why, where, and when they are taught, and how the subject area handles collaborative study to ensure neither depth nor breadth of engagement is compromised.