

Johnson

The real reason to study the classics

Discovering ancient civilisations is humbling rather than self-aggrandising

The Economist, April 30th 2020

WHY STUDY classical languages? For a long time the reason was clear: there wasn't much else to read. Medieval Europe read and wrote in Latin, even as its spoken form had changed so much it had become early French and Spanish. During the Renaissance the rediscovery of Greek made it essential for the cultured to know it too. From there, "classics" had momentum: even as people started writing in their vernaculars, they still learned Latin and Greek, until those languages became a mark of education itself. And since education was limited to the upper classes and clergy, they became synonymous with power. In Britain, the classics carry the cachet of the posh schools where they have predominantly been taught. Boris Johnson, the latest Old Etonian prime minister, enjoys showing off with snatches of Greek.

Since overt snobbery has fallen from fashion, though, proponents of the classics have updated their case. Classical languages are good training for the mind, many now argue. Latin and Greek, with their panoply of case-endings, force readers and students to pay attention to the grammatical function of every word in a sentence, incidentally improving their English grammar as well. But is learning Latin or Greek really the best way to achieve that goal? To learn cases you could choose a living language such as Russian or German. The best way to learn English grammar is by studying English grammar.

Nicola Gardini, a professor of literature at Oxford, has no time for the "trains your mind" argument for Latin; the subtitle of his book "Long Live Latin", published last year, is "The Pleasures of a Useless Language". The subject, he insists, is not a "cognitive boot camp". A glorious civilisation was built on the back of Latin. True, Rome's great works can be read in translation, and discovering them in the original takes effort. But, says Mr Gardini, that lets you "enter the world of the ancients, the very opposite of the desire to haul them into the present age".

Mary Norris's father was a fireman, and not taken by the practical arguments for Latin, either; he refused to let his daughter learn it. Instead, Ms Norris, today the chief copy editor for the *New Yorker*, fell in love with Greek, and last year published her own love-letter to it, "Greek to Me". If Mr Gardini's book is about a passion for a language and its authors, hers celebrates Greek culture more broadly, with lashings of ouzo and island-hopping. She has studied both the ancient and the modern tongue, experiencing an unexpected attraction to her female teacher. Greek, she concludes, is "sexy", especially for someone with her logophilic cast of mind. Since ancient Greek has given so many rarefied words to English, Ms Norris gets a small thrill from being asked "*dipsas?*" ("Are you thirsty?") The root that shows up in the English "dipsomaniac" is everyday Greek.

Coulter George's new book, "How Dead Languages Work", is a reminder that Greek and Latin are hardly the only classical languages. A linguist at the University of Virginia, he devotes chapters to Greek, Latin, Old English, Sanskrit, Old Irish and Hebrew. All but Hebrew belong to the Indo-European family, as does English, and Mr George delights in drawing links between them. But he also revels in the quirks that make each unique: Latin's ablative absolutes (like *mutatis mutandis*), Old English's poetic compounds (like *banhus*, "bonehouse", meaning the body), or the rules of "sandhi", by which Sanskrit words change

their sounds based on those adjacent to them. If you are up for a mighty challenge, Old Irish makes Latin look like a lazy stroll.

That Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and such are highly complicated, dripping with grammatical endings in particular, may suggest such languages forced people to develop a greater rigour of thought. It shouldn't. All languages are easy for their speakers. Nor were all ancient languages heavily inflected like Greek or Sanskrit. Classical Chinese is virtually the opposite of a language such as Latin—it is almost entirely monosyllabic and lacks rigid distinctions between parts of speech. Instead of making it easy, this merely presents different challenges.

Mr Gardini gives another reason for studying classical languages: “The story of our lives is just a fraction of all history...life began long before we were born.” This is the very opposite of a practical argument—it is a meditative, even self-effacing one. To learn a language because it was spoken by some brilliant people 2,000 years ago is to celebrate the world; not a way to optimise yourself, but to get over yourself.