



On Language Teaching

by Antonia Ruppel

‘Anyone can teach Latin, while teaching Greek is hard’. ‘Introductory language courses are easier to teach than intermediate/text-based courses’. These are views that the author of this article has heard voiced in Classics departments on both sides of the Atlantic. They reflect underlying assumptions about language teaching that often have very practical effects on who is assigned what kinds of teaching, and how those instructors approach their task.

This article would like to look at and challenge these assumptions. Given how long ancient languages have been taught in the occident, it is unlikely to say anything profoundly new. Yet given how important good language teaching is to any field whose evidence is mostly text-based, and given that many of those tasked with teaching an ancient language do not have that language as their main interest, but mostly consider it as a means to an end, it may be worth re-examining what we do when we teach those languages. We hope that this article will provide guidance to those new to language teaching, but perhaps also offer some new impulses to those who have long been involved in language instruction as ‘service teaching’, parallel to the teaching that reflects their actual areas of interest. We also hope this article will be challenged by those whose main interest and task is language teaching but who are taking approaches different from the rather analytical one outlined here.

The author’s own experience is mainly with teaching three languages (Latin, Greek and Sanskrit) to speakers of two modern languages (English and German), and so most examples will be taken from these. Nevertheless, the basic thoughts outlined here can be applied just as easily to most other languages. We will start with the basics and look at what language is, and continue with some thoughts on what makes a particular language difficult to learn. This will lead us to some general thoughts on what it means to teach a language, which are followed by a focus on teaching ancient languages.

A language is a way to pass on information. Any natural language is able to pass on any idea that a speaker wants to pass on; yet there are differences in *how* different languages achieve this. Some languages can express some ideas or nuances more succinctly than other ideas and other languages can: German, for example, can and regularly does form compound nouns *ad hoc*; English has simple and continuous verb forms for every tense. When a language can conveniently express certain details, it will do so more frequently. Some languages obligatorily express nuances that are entirely optional in others: in any language that has formal vs familiar forms of address (such as French *vous* and *tu*, German *Sie* and *Du* etc.), speakers are forced to choose one option any time they talk to someone. Between languages, there is a variety of fundamentally

different ways of expressing one and the same concept (such as the roles nouns play in a sentence, or the notion of ‘past’ vs. ‘present’). Most languages have more than one way of expressing what is factually the same thing, again sometimes with different nuances. In many instances, for example, there is little difference between saying ‘I’m going to do it’ and ‘I will do it’. Some languages have words for specific concepts that other languages are missing, leading to the ‘they have a word for it’ type of list so popular on social media. The speakers of those other languages have to describe or paraphrase what they mean: to reuse a well-known example, Germans can simply talk about *Schadenfreude*, while English speakers have to resort to more analytic expressions such as ‘malicious glee’ or ‘pleasure in other people’s discomfort’; and while any traveller will likely have encountered the oddness of unexpected things being other than what one is used to while being abroad, not many have a simple word such as French *dépaysement* to refer to this oddness. Furthermore, words that on the surface refer to one and the same thing can have completely different connotations in different languages, depending on how what they refer to is used in different cultures. Take Dutch *fiets* and English *bike* (in the non-motorised sense): they describe the same man-made object; yet while a Dutch speaker likely thinks of a *fiets* as something every-day, practical, basic and omnipresent, an American may associate a *bike* with

fitness, leisure, perhaps with their childhood experiences or a friend's midlife crisis.

To learn a new language means to learn which of any variety of ways that language uses to express the various concepts its speakers want to convey (be they lexical ones such as words for things and actions, or grammatical ones such as noun case or verbal tense, or the idea of possibility rather than certainty), and also which concepts it chooses to express explicitly and which not (such as the contrast of simple versus ongoing systematically present in English, but not in most other Germanic languages, for example).

Languages are systematic, which makes them easier to acquire. If I learn first (a) the *word* for an action, then (b) the *notion* that not just I, but also someone else, can carry out that action, and finally (c) the formal *way of expressing* that notion, it is useful if I can apply the same notion and the same way of expressing it to another word: *I sing, he sings* leads seamlessly to *I run, he runs*. Once I have then also realised (consciously or not) that the third-person marker appears as voiceless [s] after voiceless sounds (*sinks*), as voiced [z] after voiced sounds (*sings*), and as [əz] after sibilants (*bisses*), I then am able to express this notion for any full (i.e. non-modal) verb in the English language.

Yet languages change over time, and old systems hang on while new ones are developing: thus languages also are messy. Take the plural of nouns in modern English. The large majority form theirs by adding -s, which again depending on the preceding sound will appear as an unvoiced [s] or a voiced [z] (think of *cats* vs. *dogs*). Again, when an English word ends in a sibilant (represented in writing by any of the letters -s, -sh, -ch, -x or -z), the plural ending appears as [-əz]. Sometimes, but not always, the final sound of the word changes in front of this plural -es, which is also reflected in the spelling: and so *wolf* gives us *wolves*, but *belief* forms a plural *beliefs*. Yet in addition to this most regular method of forming plurals, there are a number of other ways - think *children, oxen, fish, mice*, or loanword plurals such as *cacti* and *oases*. Some of these forms are dropping out altogether (resulting in young humans and young goats both being referred to as *kids*, and (castrated) *oxen* being conflated with (uncastrated) *bulls*); others are regularised

to follow the mainstream way of pluralisation (*fishes*); yet others (so far) have remained exceptional: the plural of mouse seems to still always be just *mice*, never *mouses*. The less prescriptive the environment is that a speaker lives in, the more likely they are to hear talk of *cactuses* and the like. Often, whether a word will change depends on how frequently it is used and on how easy it is to even out its particular irregularity; but some words (or grammatical structures) just hang on unexpectedly and unpredictably.

Learning the grammar of a language thus means learning its systems on the one hand and its irregularities and exceptions on the other. Some languages are more difficult to learn because they have more exceptions; others are challenging because their regular systems are complex in themselves. For example, all languages have the ability to mark nouns for the roles they play in a clause, that is, to express the grammatical category of Case. English mostly does this with prepositions (this is *for her, for you, for the cat*; I see *with my eyes*, he cuts the cake *with a knife* and so on), but uses different forms/endings in pronouns (*he* vs. *him, she* vs. *her*) and marks the difference between subject and object by means of word order: *Bob sees Alice* and *Alice sees Bob* thus do not mean the same thing. Yet in spite of this mix of methods (prepositions, case endings, word order), one might argue English case usage on the whole is fairly straightforward and easier to learn than that of languages that systematically use case endings, but that assign endings depending on formal factors such as what sound a noun stem ends in. The more such *declensions* a language has, the more difficult it is to learn: not only are we required to memorise more than one way of expressing one and the same thing; but the endings used also are in themselves meaningless: the preposition 'out of' has an intrinsic semantic value or meaning; the Latin second-declension ablative singular ending -ō does not. Thus, in this respect, Greek is more difficult to learn than Latin as it has considerably more formal variety within its nominal declensions and Estonian is more difficult to learn than many other languages as it has 14 distinct noun cases.

How difficult a language is to learn also depends on what a student's native language does (or, if they are lucky, their native languages do): learning how to

express an already familiar concept is one thing, learning a new concept is another. Thus Polish speakers will have problems keeping apart German long and short vowels (Polish does not have long vowels), German speakers will have trouble correctly using English simple and progressive verb forms (German verbs just have the simple form), and both German and English speakers will have trouble remembering to mark verbs as atelic or telic, that is to indicate whether an action is seen as open-ended (*be's reading*) or finite (*be's reading this article*), a difference which Polish makes systematically.

So much for grammar. To learn a language, one also needs to study its vocabulary and its usage and idioms. The challenge here is that what needs to be memorised is mostly unsystematic. In many languages, words can be built from one another (and thus we can get from the verb *establish* to the noun *establishment*, for example, and, if we choose to, further to the oft-quoted *antidisestablishmentarianism*); and to this limited extent a language's vocabulary may be seen as 'systematic'. Yet given that, as linguists put it, the relation between the *signifier* (the word, or rather: its sound) and the *signified* (the thing the word represents) is arbitrary (see, for example de Saussure 1971, pp. 97ff.), most of a language's basic vocabulary is random and needs to be approached through straightforward memorisation. What will help a student, of course, is if they already know a related language that offers significant vocabulary overlap. (In which case it may help learning about the systematic correspondences between related sounds across languages, leading to inks such as Latin *pater* and English *father* etc.)

Idiom, finally, takes an already unsystematic situation (a language's vocabulary) and makes it even less systematic by using combinations of words with meanings that cannot be predicted solely on the basis of the meanings of the single words involved.

What, then, does all of this mean for language teaching?

Once we understand how, in principle, languages work, we need to consciously realise (1) what it is that is unusual or in any way potentially difficult about the language we are trying to teach, and especially (2) how this language differs from the language (or languages)

that our students have grown up speaking. This means we need to look systematically not just at the language we want to teach, but also at the one(s) we and our students presumably are native speakers of. Speakers without formal linguistic training know all the rules that govern their native language, no matter how complex they may be, and apply them perfectly. Yet all of this happens subconsciously. Native speakers of German do not need to reflect in order to use the correct grammatical gender of a noun; but for most students of German as a foreign language, this is the perhaps biggest obstacle in learning German grammar. Germans do not *need* to know rules such as ‘the words for all alcoholic drinks except beer are grammatically masculine (and beer is neuter)’, and so they *do not* know them. (Anyone interested in a most readable take on this is pointed to Mark Twain’s essay *The Awful German Language*.) English speakers subconsciously know what order adjectives are put in, namely opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose. Yet, as they do not know this consciously, they will likely not be able to explain to a non-native why a ‘great green dragon’ is correct English, but a ‘green great dragon’ is not. This point is made rather well by Figure 1, which shows a tweet of an excerpt from Mark Forsyth’s 2013 *The Elements of Eloquence: How to Turn the Perfect English Phrase*. The reason,

we argue, why that tweet was so popular is that English speakers were amazed that there not only was such a rule, but that their brains had also had subconscious but perfect mastery over it all along.

So, if we want someone to learn a language in a non-native environment (i.e. not as a baby or toddler, hearing the language every day for many years from the people around them), and especially if we want them to get beyond the level of a few conversational phrases, we need to explain the rules of that language to them. And in order to do that, we need to *consciously* know these rules ourselves. (This may seem blatantly obvious to some, but as even first-rate research universities continue to hire speakers of less commonly-taught languages without any linguistic training to teach their native tongue, it apparently does need to be stated explicitly.)

Furthermore, even when we teach another language *using our native language*, it is greatly advantageous to consciously know the rules our own language is governed by. Not only can we then more easily identify instances in which we can show our students that something supposedly new is just like what they do in their own language (e.g. subject-verb agreement, which is more or less the same across Indo-European languages, including English); but even when that isn’t the case, we can at least show them that something is not *categorically* new, but

that they just need to learn a new way of doing a known thing (such as marking case roles on nouns – with e.g. English using word order and prepositions, but Latin and Greek using case endings).

We learn foreign languages by memorising their forms and rules. Language courses aim for us to reach a point where we do not need to consciously apply those rules anymore in order to say something. They want us to be able to *read* a text rather than *translate* it. To employ an old image, we use the rules we learn like ladders; and when we have climbed the ladders, we throw them away.

Anyone who wants to teach a language well either needs to keep those ladders in place right away or, more likely, retrieve them, that is: remind themselves of the language’s rules in their entirety, before they first start teaching. The ‘staying one step ahead of your students’ approach that may be the most practical (let’s face it – universities rarely reward good teaching; they want you to do research (and admin!), and it often is advisable not to spend too much time on teaching preparation) and often quite sufficient in lecture courses that cover a series of relatively self-contained topics – this approach should not be used in language teaching, where knowledge of a whole system, namely the language’s grammar, is required in most lessons. Without that knowledge, we can present new facts to our students, but we cannot explain or properly contextualise them.

In order to not keep these thoughts entirely theoretical, and to finally focus specifically on ancient languages, let us look at two examples concerning the language combination probably most relevant to the readers of this article: Latin being taught to native speakers of English.

The largest grammatical unit in language is a sentence. Sentences can consist of just a main clause, several (parallel) main clauses, or of a main clause with clauses subordinated to it. Either ask your students what kinds of sentences they can think of, or write (English) examples of a statement, a question and a direct command on the board and have them identify what each of them does. Go on to asking what kind of further, subordinate, information a sentence might need, aiming to get at *cause/reason through which, condition under which, condition*



Figure 1. | Did you know you knew?

in spite of *whic*h, *aim* and *result*. This, of course, gives you causal, conditional, concessive, final/purpose and result clauses. Talk about the ways in which you can give more information about any particular word in the main clause ('I see the house.' What house? 'I see the house (that) my friend lives in.'). which gets you to the concept of relative clauses. (Depending on what age group you teach, you may also consider introducing the idea of indirect speech here; but this may also be left for later.) Make an overview chart of this, using an English example to elucidate each category. Give a number or some other label to each category and come back to the chart whenever you are introducing how to phrase/construct one of these in Latin. This gives students regular reminders of what they already know (which is good for motivation) and a place to find orientation when they are stuck translating a sentence.

The above is an example of the systematic introduction of a topic that makes reference to what students already know from English. Yet even where parallels to English are missing, the systematic approach helps.

The Latin subjunctive is a source of despair for many students, and a fair number of teachers. There are several reasons for this, relating not just to the subjunctive within Latin, but also to the relationship (or lack thereof) between subjunctive usage in English and Latin.

The Latin subjunctive basically serves for the speaker to distance themselves from a statement. It thus functions to mark (a) an utterance as not a fact but a possibility and (b) a clause as not the main statement, but as subordinate. These two functions overlap. They furthermore appear in many related but different shapes in actual Latin usage – different enough that we need to be able to identify them and keep them apart to translate them correctly, related enough to make this a challenging and fiddly enterprise.

The English subjunctive survives in rudiments only. There are formulaic expressions such as '(God) bless you!', 'Perish the thought!', 'be that as it may' etc.; in addition to these, there are three (relatively) productive subjunctive uses, as listed by should be Huddleston and Pullum (2002:993-1002): (i) the subjunctive mandative construction ('We insist that she be kept informed.')

(ii) as 'complement of a small set of prepositions (*if, unless, lest*, etc.) that can take subjunctive complements' ('Nothing in English has been ridiculed as much as the ambiguous use of words, unless it be the ambiguous use of sentences.'). (iii) the 'exhaustive conditional interrogative' ('Our thanks are due to all our staff, whether they be in the offices, the warehouses, or the branches, for their help during this difficult time.') As Huddleston and Pullum (*ibid*) then outline, there are non-subjunctive alternatives for these expressions, as well as various sources for subjunctive-indicative ambiguity, all of which contribute to the weakening of the English subjunctive.

I dare say that most of our students are unlikely to use any of these on a regular basis (perhaps with the exception of 'Bless you!'). Nevertheless, it is useful for any instructor to know what the English subjunctive looks like and how it is used: there is usually at least one student who will ask about it; and more importantly, we need to know that it *isn't* helpful for our students in order for us to then identify a better way to introduce the Latin subjunctive to them.

If so far you have been teaching your students Latin with reference to what they already know from English, tell them that this time, seeking comparison with English is *not* helpful, and they should prepare to see something new. Then first introduce the subjunctive purely within the context of the other Latin moods: In a nutshell, the indicative is there to *state facts*. The imperative is there to *give commands*. The subjunctive covers the area in between – it is there to *express any kind of potential or possibility*. This leads you straight to the four main clause uses of the subjunctive – potential, optative, hortatory/jussive and deliberative. Again in a nutshell, English uses modal verbs to express these.

The uses of the subjunctive in subordinate clauses are much more varied, of course, but they continue in the same semantic vein as their main-clause cousins: they mark clauses as not being statements of fact. In subordinate clauses, that may mean the same thing as in main clauses – expressing potential or possibility – or it may mean simply that a clause is marked as subordinate rather than main. Having introduced these two notions, we can then flesh them out by

introducing, one by one, the individual subordinate clauses that employ subjunctives: *ut*-clauses (consecutive and purpose), subjunctive *cum* clauses, subjunctive relative clauses, conditional clauses, indirect questions and indirect commands.

Unless you are teaching a review class for advanced students, this obviously is not something you would discuss in one session. But to make sure that students (a) aren't overwhelmed by a seemingly endless succession of new subjunctive uses, and (b) manage to keep the ones they already know well apart, an overview handout is the best way forward. Depending on how (and whom) you teach, print one out or have your students make one on a full A4/letter-size page. Begin by introducing the basic function of the subjunctive relative to indicative and imperative; put the concept of 'not matter-of fact' or 'distance from statement' (or however you prefer to phrase such a nutshell) in the middle, have two categories for Main and Subordinate Clauses, respectively, and in those list the common labels for the various individual usages. Leave space for notes on each usage. Whenever the textbook you use introduces a new subjunctive usage, come back to this handout and fill in another field with a brief definition and an example. Some usages will need secondary handouts of their own with plenty of space for more details (e.g. conditional clauses, sequence of tenses); yet whatever else you provide, one overall road-map to the subjunctive will make the subjunctive much less daunting while it is *being* introduced, and much less confusing once all its facets *have been* introduced.

Using a similar approach for whatever other topics – participle or infinitive usage, functions of the ablative, prepositions – will provide students with context and will help them understand what and with what goal they are learning. It will give them not just a better idea of their progress, but also a perspective on the finiteness of what they yet need to learn. A collection of such overview sheets can serve as a student-made reference grammar.

Such a fairly analytical approach can be used to teach the grammar of any language; yet when it comes to teaching modern languages, many teachers will prefer a learning-by-doing (or in this case: learning-by-speaking) approach as much

as possible. This makes sense as one of the main goals of learning a modern language likely is to speak it, and native speakers, whose level of language mastery all other language learners aspire to, have also learnt their language by listening and speaking rather than by studying a grammar book.

Yet ancient-language learning has a different goal. No matter your approach to using the ‘natural’ method of teaching spoken or ‘living’ Latin or Greek, the main reason for learning those languages is to read the texts written in them, and for the main part, those texts are highly literary, polished and artful. To be able to not just make sense of, but to actually appreciate them, one needs to have sound knowledge of the grammar that their authors had mastered and were then playing with – arguably the kind of knowledge that spoken language classes or meetups cannot provide. Those latter are indeed enormously enjoyable, and the active knowledge of the language basics that many students acquire

through them is an excellent addition to the more passive knowledge that is the result of traditional Latin or Greek classes. But that is what they should be: an addition, just as the kind of oratorical training authors like Cicero or Ovid received was an addition to the language skills they acquired in the ‘natural’ way as children.

The aim of the above has been to give those about to embark on ancient-language teaching some background on both language and the teaching of it, first by introducing some theory behind what we do as language teachers, and then by offering some practical applications of these theoretical thoughts. While every teacher has their own individual preferences, we hope that many will find some elements here that they will make part of their teaching style; perhaps this will also apply to some more seasoned teachers. Many Classicists will disagree with many of the things said here; the article’s second aim is to cause more explicit discussion of things we take for

granted in language teaching. And maybe at some point new instructors will no more be faced with the ‘well-isn’t-it-obvious’ attitude that ‘*anyone* can teach *Latin!*’

Dr Antonia Ruppel, antonia.ruppel@gmail.com

Bibliography

- Forsyth, M. (2013). *The Elements of Eloquence: How to Turn the Perfect English Phrase*. London: Icon Books.
- Huddleston, R., and Pullum, G. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Saussure, F. (1916, repr. 1971). *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot.
- Twain, M. (1880). *A Tramp Abroad. Appendix D: The Awful German Language*. Hartford: American Publishing Company.