

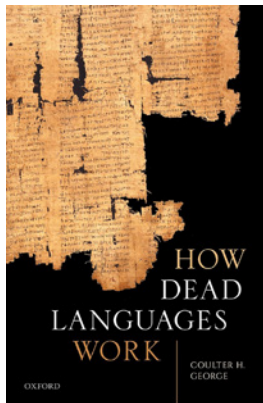
Book Review

How Dead Languages Work

George (C.H.), Pp. i–viii + 224. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Hardback, £21.99. ISBN: 978-0198852827

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‘Very few people have the opportunity to learn these languages, and they can often seem mysterious and inaccessible.’ So the author.

The languages are: Ancient Greek, Latin, Old English, Sanskrit, Old Irish/Welsh, Biblical Hebrew. Are we to suppose that the author is equally competent in all of them? Apart from the languages of his profession (he is a Professor of Classics at the University of Virginia), he says that the Celtic languages (here Irish and Welsh) have a particular attraction for him. So, he is probably competent in at least four of the languages.

Not many other people will be able to read all or most of his book with critical discernment, including this reviewer. The book is not aimed primarily at scholars; even so, it is scholarly in tone and treatment, by no means an easy read, especially for anyone not versed in philology and linguistics. And be prepared to do things with your teeth and mouth in order to create the various sounds that are the basis of a language system, so modern linguistics tells us.

After an Introduction, each of the six chapters (one of them is divided into Old Irish and Old Welsh) of the book follows the same format for each of the languages: ‘first introducing readers to their most distinctive features, then showing how these linguistic traits play out in short excerpts from actual ancient texts’. The features relate to the phonetics, morphology, syntax etc. of the languages. The ‘short excerpts’ can be very short indeed, e.g. a dozen or so words of Thucydides; the same cannot be said of the discussions of the excerpts, some of which can run to pages (see later).

Apart from some general remarks, I shall confine myself to those sections of the book that are more likely to be of interest to Classicists. Let me say that I have very few objections as far as accuracy of content is concerned, and as far as I am competent to judge. The brief account of the aspect of the Greek verb, along with the accompanying example, is as accessible as any others I have read, including much longer ones. The transliterations of the

original Greek had me scratching my head at times, particularly the use of the iota adscript and the letter ‘y’ for upsilon, which at first I took for a *gamma*. It took me some time to sort it out until I noted the explanatory footnote. Good job it was at the foot of the page and not at the end of the book.

However, I do have two rather more serious gripes with the Classics chapters of the book. First, the title of the book. Nowhere in the book is the term ‘dead languages’ explained or justified. It appears at the top of just about every other page, so this can hardly be an oversight. In fact, of the two so-called ‘dead languages’ featured here, one is just Latin by other names (of living languages), the names of the Romance languages, as Roger Wright has laboured to make clear. So are all the other designations and periodisations of Latin: just Latin. The notion of a dead language when applied to Latin is a misnomer. Ditto ‘Ancient Greek’, which is just an earlier form of contemporary Greek: just Greek. The term ‘dead language’, if it is to be retained, should be reserved for an extinct language that dies without issue (O.S.P.). Most of the indigenous languages of the western part of the Roman empire fall into this category by c. 400CE. So with languages of the Greek east to a lesser extent. Greek and Latin emphatically do not belong in this category. The book would have been better titled ‘How Ancient Languages Work’. (Note ‘Work’, not ‘Worked’. If they are really dead one would expect the latter term.) I suppose that ‘dead’ is more resonant with readers than ‘ancient’.

It is questionable too, for the same or similar reasons, whether Old English or Old Irish and Old Welsh should be regarded as dead languages. There is filiation and identification between the old and contemporary forms, as there is between Latin and Romance and Ancient and Modern Greek – so they just evolved into English, Irish and Welsh, all continuums with arbitrary chronological divisions. Of the author’s chosen languages, this leaves only Sanskrit and Biblical Hebrew. Can a case be made too for not regarding these as dead languages? Or are these really dead, i.e. extinct, without issue?

To come now to my second gripe. The Latin that ‘works’ in this book is Classical Standard Latin, the Latin of an educated elite, written for the most part and not a quotidian spoken language. Did the Latin of the majority not ‘work’ too? Of course it did, as the late James Adams has shown throughout most of his career. No mention of it at all is made in this book, though. The same objection may be raised about Ancient Greek. The very fact that it had a standard form, the form depicted in this book, implies that it had a non-standard form or forms as well. (On the other hand, it is unlikely that a prospective learner would be exposed to this kind of Latin or Greek. Even so ...)

There is no mention either of Medieval Latin or Neo-Latin, a combined period much longer than the Classical period. Latin comes to seem like a much less regular and regulated language in the Medieval period, even though it was Classical Standard Latin that was learned, not Medieval Latin. But as with non-standard forms of the languages, learners will be confined to the standard forms.

We should make a distinction between a dead language and one that is still in use even though it is nobody’s ‘mother tongue’ and has no native speakers (by convention, the defining features of a dead language). Latin is a prime example of such a language.

For Latin is still very much in use: the Vatican; university addresses; prefaces to critical editions and apparatus criticus; Wikipedia in Latin; until recently radio broadcasts; mottos and inscriptions; works of fiction translations, legalise; medical prescriptions and other uses (do you know what the initials QDS and BD stand for?); the use of (spoken) (Classical) Latin in schools to learn Latin (this was the case even after the establishment of national languages). Latin is by far the most active and widespread of the 'dead' languages. Perhaps we should revise our notion of a dead language if it still has so many uses. So what if it is not one that our mother speaks? (In his book *Latin: Story of a World Language*, Jürgen Leonhardt suggests that Latin should be termed a 'fixed language', meaning 'a language in which several core components remain unchangeable, while other parts continue to evolve as in any other normal language').

Modern Greek, a living form of an ancient language, is saturated with the ancient language, the result of a compromise that was the diglossia of the ancient and modern forms of the language. Ancient Greek does not warrant its dead language status. (For all we know this may be true of other languages too. We may have been too hasty in condemning them to death.)

Much of the sections on Ancient Greek and Latin is taken up with the morphology of the languages, as one would expect of inflected languages. Most of the lexicon consists of inflections. The manipulation of the inflected forms is a very large part of how the two languages 'work'. Once one gets to know the functions of the inflections one has grasped the main principle of how the languages work. The difficulty that confronts learners is the number and variety of inflections they have to hold in their head, and the number of similarities between them, combined with a word order that is alien to them and works precisely because of the inflections. It is one thing to point this out, quite another to enable them to cope with it in practice. The author is no more successful than authors of grammar and course books have been and are likely to be in future.¹ Understanding how a language works in principle does not in itself enable one to decode it in practice.

I found the sections on morphology easier to follow than those that deal with the orthography, philology and phonology/phonetics; frankly, I find most of this stuff tedious. However, there is no mention of Greek *-mi* verbs, which are profuse, especially when prefixed, and the devil to tell apart, much more so than the contracted verbs. Nothing is more likely to put a potential learner

off, unless it is the number of verbs with irregular principal parts. Classical Greek may be a standard, but it contains many irregularities that not even the grammarians were able to iron out. The author hints at this in places, but no more than that.

The syntax of the two languages: how words are combined to express given ideas, e.g. purpose, result, cause, condition. No rules for individual constructions are given apart from odd examples of usage *en passant*, so these are highly condensed accounts. The syntax of Greek and Latin usually takes up more than half of a grammar or course book, here a few pages. It is more difficult to understand syntax than morphology, but easier to read than to compose correctly.

The book serves to give the reader who may be interested in learning one of the languages an idea of what it would be like to learn the language. Whether in this case this is an idea that one would want to convey to a prospective reader is another matter. The discussions of the excerpts from texts that illustrate the distinguishing features of the languages are not likely to inspire readers to want to learn the languages. The length and level of detail is excessive and much too taxing, learned and scholarly though it may be. Several closely argued pages on just 12 words of Greek becomes wearisome for this reader. There is a suggestion that the author is aware of this: on p. 54 he says 'People who've made it this far in the book ...' (I was one of them, and for me it was often better to arrive than to travel.)

To conclude: the idea behind the book is novel and to be welcomed; the reality of the execution of the idea, insofar as it may be designed to attract possible learners of the languages, is less successful, in my opinion. I very much doubt that I would have turned out to be a Classicist if this book had been the lure with which to ensnare me. But this is not the only, or even perhaps the main aim of the book. Looked at from this viewpoint, and viewing the book as a captive practitioner of the languages, the book has a great deal to commend it.

Note

¹ But see now an attempt to overcome or circumvent this problem (in Latin verbs at least) in a recent *libellus*: Michael W. Brinkman, 'The path to easy mastery of Latin's conjugations: to identify the mood and tense denoted without memorizing paradigms'. Ann Arbor: Michigan Muse (2023), p. 68, ISBN 9798987487716. (A bold claim indeed!)

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