

Greek Without Greeks: Competing Notions of Authenticity in the Pronunciation of Classical Languages

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Language is traditionally (and correctly) considered our greatest tool, far more important than antibiotics, or the printing press, or, even, the wheel. Any successful multi-person task requires a matrix of communication. Our ability to converse with each other has allowed civilization to develop.

But what happens when a language isn't necessary for communication anymore? That is the strange case posed by classical languages, tongues that have largely outgrown their practical utility and become mere linguistic curiosities. These languages, such as Latin and Ancient Greek, which commanded immense power in their heyday of classical antiquity, are now confined to dusty academia, surviving on the charity of the linguist, the classicist, and the scholar.

You may think of these languages as fossilized, fixed. Latin won't change, and neither will Greek (not explicitly "Ancient" Greek, anyway). But for languages that are supposed to be static, there's a surprising amount of variation in how people pronounce them. Investigating these tiny differences reveals a surprising depth to why and how different populations select a pronunciation system as their preferred method of reading a classical language aloud.

Classical languages are held by many to express the pinnacle of civilization, the "glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome."¹ Others take it further: these are the languages of scripture, God's vehicles for communicating his divine word. When viewed in this light, it should become apparent that correct pronunciation is even more of a concern for many classical language learners than it is for someone learning a "practical" modern language like Spanish or Korean. Mispronounce your Spanish and your

coworkers may snicker behind your back; mispronounce your Latin and you could summon Satan himself. This essay, then, explores that curiously intense ideological aspect of classical phonologies, and asks what we make of their competing claims of authority, authenticity, and the divine.

Greek

For most of history, the Greek language and the Greek people were inseparable, for obvious reasons. Greeks spoke the language natively, so they knew the language best; the pure sound of Greek, then, was the contemporary pronunciation of the language by its people. But as the Renaissance reached its peak, scholars began reevaluating the language of Plato and Aristotle, now from a scientific point of view. European philologists, working from codices carried to the West by scholars fleeing Constantinople, deduced that the Greek of their own day was a permutation of that of Homer and Hesiod. Certain clues, such as faulty rhymes and discrepancies in morphology and spelling, revealed the language must have been pronounced very differently in the centuries immediately preceding and following the coming of Christ. The exact details of the sound of this language were difficult to determine, but some scholars—eminent linguists like Antonio de Nebrija, Girolamo Aleandro, and Aldus Manutius—felt up to the challenge.² Building upon their analyses, Erasmus of Rotterdam published his own reconstruction of Ancient Greek phonology in 1528, in an odd tome titled *De Recta Latini Graecique Pronuntiatione* (“On the Rectification of Greek and Latin Pronunciation”).³ In this bizarre dialogue, Erasmus uses the characters of a lion and a bear to elucidate the specifics of what he thinks is a more historically informed pronunciation of Ancient Greek and Latin. Despite its arcane format, the book proved immensely popular in the West, and his system of pronouncing Greek, commonly called the Erasmian

pronunciation, came to replace contemporary Greek as the standard in Western pedagogy. (His Latin suggestions were less warmly received.)

This largely remains the state of things today. Students in the West who begin the study of the Greek New Testament are almost always taught the Erasmian pronunciation; those who study older texts like the *Iliad* or Plato's *Dialogues* are usually taught from textbooks that use a slight revision of the Erasmian system based on newer linguistic research.⁴ But Greece itself has remained entirely immune to these developments. The Greeks read Homer and Plato and St. Paul the same way they read their modern poets: all with one pronunciation, their native pronunciation of modern Greek. In their minds, the Greek language is a diachronic whole; unlike Latin, Greek never died, and millions still speak it as their mother tongue. And the Eastern Orthodox Church conducts its Greek liturgy with a normal modern pronunciation of the language—anything else would in their eyes be artificial and incorrect.⁴

The question, then, is what exactly the “correct” pronunciation of the classics should be. An American or French student reading Homer or Hesiod may not care how a native Greek speaker would read those same texts, which raises the question of whether Greek people alone have the authority to determine what constitutes authentic Greek. Such power seems destined to become decentralized. For example, the Greek Orthodox community does not question how their liturgy should sound: the Church has already determined that it must be read in the modern pronunciation. It is not at all clear, however, that Catholic and Protestant communities would want to emulate their Orthodox brethren in pronouncing Biblical Greek in its modern form. These branches of the Christian tradition may feel sufficiently divorced from the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy that they can establish their own authoritative methods of pronunciation. Recent years have seen a surge of interest in accurately reconstructing first century Koine Greek phonology, which is just what the apostles of the early Church would have sounded like.⁵ Does it make more

sense for Catholics to follow in the footsteps of the modern Greek community and speak modern Greek, or to return to the origins of the Church and imitate the speech of the apostles and evangelists?

Latin

Latin has its own set of ideological complications, some similar to those of Greek, but others different. After Rome fell, the people of Europe continued to use Latin as a *lingua franca* across the continent. The language evolved (or devolved, if you will) into the early forms of the Romance languages we know today. Latin texts never stopped being read, but each nation read these texts similarly to how they read literature written in their new mother tongues. The French pronounced Latin words as if they followed the conventions governing French words, and the Italians did the same. All European languages followed their native pronunciation rules when pronouncing Latin. While in previous eras, there were many such accepted methods of Latin pronunciation, today there are really only two. The first and more commonly taught is the “Classical pronunciation,” a historical reconstruction of the speech of Cicero and the Golden Age of Rome. That is a short window of time, dating from about 100 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. The other accepted method is that advocated by the Catholic Church. Unlike the Classical pronunciation, this “Ecclesiastical” pronunciation can’t be dated to a specific point in time. Rather, it is a recently codified modification of the regional Italian pronunciation that developed over the centuries.

At first glance, then, it may seem like there’s little room for controversy. Those interested in the ancient Roman authors will learn the Classical pronunciation and those interested in the later Christian authors will learn the Ecclesiastical pronunciation. Those interested in both can theoretically use the one for the one type of literature and the other for the other type.

But even a moment's reflection will reveal problems with this neat division. The first difficulty is that there's overlap between the ancient Roman world and the later Christian one. Constantine is said to have converted to Christianity at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E. His sons (those he didn't choose to murder) jointly succeeded him as co-emperors and signed the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 C.E., making Christianity the official state religion. The Fall of Rome is conventionally dated to 476 C.E., which gives an odd century or century-and-a-half of time where the classical world and the Christian world are one and the same.

So, what do we do with authors who were both Roman and Christian, such as Augustine? We would normally think of Augustine first as a Christian writer; all of his most important works were masterpieces of theology extolling the necessity of redemption in Christ. And yet, Augustine wrote on varied subjects, traveling all over the known world to document matters scientific, political, and historical. Augustine is a particularly good example for us, as he actually recorded regional variation in the Latin accents of North Africa. Should we read his writings on Roman matters in the Classical pronunciation and his writings on religious matters in the Ecclesiastical? There's a certain logic to that approach, but it feels unsatisfactory and needlessly artificial. We never split other authors in two: T. S. Eliot was an Anglo-American poet, but we don't read some of his poems with a British accent and others with an American one. Such an activity would be worse than pointless: it would actually remove us from the immediacy of the text.

One way to try to resolve this problem is to make a sharp division between the Roman world and Christian Europe, reading works composed before the switch with the Classical method and works after the switch with the Ecclesiastical. We could give the exact date of that turning point as the fall of Rome in 476 C.E., for instance; anyone born after that date is living and writing in "Christian Europe," not pagan Rome. Besides the obvious artificiality of this

approach, there is a major conceptual problem here that should not be ignored. That is the purpose of the Ecclesiastical pronunciation in the first place: it is the official Catholic method of conducting the Latin Mass, singing Gregorian chant, and reading from the Vulgate translation of the Bible. When Pius X issued his *motu proprio Tra le sollecitudini* in 1913, he was only concerned with setting a standard for speaking Latin within the Roman Catholic Church, not with dictating how students read Vergil or how scientists name a new species of butterfly.⁶ The Ecclesiastical pronunciation is merely a standardized form of the regional Italian pronunciation of Latin. It was never used as a standard for a “Christian Europe,” except perhaps in the realm of music and opera.

Just like with Greek, we are left little better off than where we started. No matter how the issue is analyzed, a large chunk of Latin literature resists simple classification into “Classical” or “Ecclesiastical.” Time, place, intent, and tradition all play a role in determining how to approach these works, but what ultimately happens when these factors contradict each other is difficult to say.

Hebrew

Finally, Hebrew carries its own odd linguistic culture. Its phonology is complex and varied, but only one aspect will be discussed here. This is the *te'amim*, or “trope” markings: a series of cryptic marks dotting the pages of the Hebrew Bible, appearing above and below the letters of the text. No one is sure exactly what their purpose is. Some scholars believe the marks may have belonged to a lost system of punctuation, but Jews today use them as cantillation marks, interpreting each symbol as an instruction on how to modulate the voice when chanting the Bible. Every Jewish community has developed their own methods of chanting the trope marks, and this tradition of chant has become a beloved aspect of Jewish culture.

In the 20th century, however, a French musicologist named Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura claimed to have decoded the original meaning of the trope symbols.⁷ According to her research, the symbols were a form of musical notation, and she worked with musicians to record and publish excerpts from the Bible sung according to her “rediscovered” method. The response to Haïk-Vantoura’s book has been mixed, and the scholarly community is still split as to whether her interpretation of the symbols is correct.^{8, 9} What no one disputes, however, is the incredible beauty of the Hebrew text when sung according to her method. The hymns and laments are of an incredible, slow, sophisticated harmony.

Interestingly, however, while her albums have won her admirers all over the globe, (especially from the Hebrew speakers of the Jewish community, who can understand and appreciate the Hebrew texts underlying the songs,) her work has had no impact on Jewish liturgy whatsoever. Even though her thesis claims to reveal a tradition that is more authentic to the original works from a standpoint of historical fidelity, the Jewish community seems to view historical authenticity as irrelevant to their practice of worship. For them, a received tradition handed down from generation to generation—in this case, their traditional methods of chant—are authentic; a theorized lost tradition that can only be recovered through scholarly research is not authentic. Perhaps their tradition started later, perhaps not: what matters is that they received a tradition. They didn’t “rediscover” one.

What does this mean for Christians, who also view the Hebrew Bible (in its arrangement as the “Old Testament”) to be holy writ? There isn’t much literature on the subject, if any. Traditionally, Christians studying Hebrew have been most concerned with discerning the meaning of individual words and how best to translate these words into other languages. But with the creation of modern Israel and the revival of Hebrew as a living language, this question will inevitably be addressed as more and more people become proficient in Hebrew. Already, in his 1943 letter *Divino afflante Spiritu*, Pius XII urged Catholics to go beyond the

traditional Latin text of the Vulgate Bible and learn to read the Old and New Testaments in their original Hebrew and Greek.⁵ When Catholics heed his instructions and study the Hebrew Bible, they will have to decide the issue of trope; the symbols litter every page and cannot be ignored. It remains to be seen which traditions they will consider the most authentic: the traditional Jewish chants, the reconstructed work of Haik-Vantoura, or some entirely new approach yet to be seen.

Conclusion

This paper raises many questions and offers few solutions. The languages of antiquity may seem dead, but they're not; different groups still utilize these languages and have come to radically different understandings of what constitutes their faithful expression. For some, this issue is rooted in devotion to God; for others, in devotion to historical accuracy. And while this paper touched on surface issues within the three key classical languages of the Western tradition, anxiety over correct pronunciation of such sacred tongues is a worldwide phenomenon. Arabic exists in dozens of dialectical forms, but the Quran is recited in only a limited variety of modes, all conforming to an immutable set of rules of cantillation.¹⁰ In India, the vast majority of Hindu priests do not understand any form of Sanskrit, but they view careful enunciation—not comprehension—of the Vedas as the truest expression of their faith.¹¹ And Confucius in his *Analects* speaks of switching from his native Lu dialect to a classical norm when reciting the *Odes*.¹² The very idea of sacred sound seems hardwired into the human consciousness, even if we all disagree on what exactly that entails.

End Notes

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