



LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN INTIMATE AND INVOLVED PROCESS

By Zainab Syed, Fourth-year Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences student
Honours student in Classics

WHEN MY FAMILY FIRST MOVED TO

Canada from Pakistan, my mother established an important rule: whenever we spoke English at home instead of Urdu, she would fine us twenty-five cents. At six years old, given my lack of income, I found this wildly unfair but at twenty-two, I am immensely grateful for her decision. Language, as almost everyone will tell you, is the door to culture and, thanks to my mother's insistence, the door to my culture and my heritage has always remained open to me. My mother's love for languages was also what stoked my own interest in them, something which she has always encouraged.

In my first year at Dalhousie, I signed up for Ancient Greek as my language requirement. I was planning on studying Psychology, so it wasn't a strictly "useful" course, but I was determined to take it regardless. After my first Ancient Greek class, I immediately changed my entire schedule to one suitable for a Classics student instead. Four years later, I am both horrified and absurdly proud of the confidence I had in my decision. When I started studying Ancient Greek, I expected it to be difficult and frustrating (it was and sometimes still is both of these things). What I didn't expect was the sense of kinship and familiarity I would feel from a language so old and so different from the one I grew up speaking. I remember being particularly frustrated once while trying to render in English what was so clear in Ancient Greek and thinking how much easier it would have been to do so in Urdu. Although the sense of familiarity was what struck me when I first started learning, I fell in love with Ancient Greek for its own sake, for its rich and absurd vocabulary

(I suggest looking up Greek epithets), for its ability to express a moment, and for the small window it opens into the lives of people and societies which are long gone. However, I would never have learned to find the idiosyncrasies of Greek endearing without my professors as they taught me different ways to approach the language.

Ancient Greek is not the only language I've had the opportunity to pursue over the course of my degree, I've also been taking Latin for the past 2 years and had the opportunity to take Sanskrit last year. Latin was a language I had some difficulties with at first, finding it too rigid in comparison to Ancient Greek. Back when my relationship with the language was rather rocky, I once complained about how Latin lacked the flair of Greek. My complaints were promptly overruled by a TA who taught me about Latin word pictures. He showed me how the description of Aeneas and Dido in a cave in the Aeneid was simultaneously a visual representation of their situation due to the sentence structure. My feelings towards the language thawed considerably after that. I've learned that Latin can be flexible and wondrous and strange in the right hands, as is the case with all languages. Not to mention, the way that it allows for a particularly clever (and occasionally crass) kind of wordplay. Being part of an inside joke that is over 1000 years old is a uniquely wonderful experience.

My study of languages has made me a better scholar in every other aspect of my education because learning a language is an intimate and involved process. When you learn a language, you cannot escape a simultaneous education about the people who speak

it, their customs, their fears, the ways in which they express love, and even their prejudices. Last year, I read the speeches of an Athenian orator named Lysias in Ancient Greek. He was a metic, a resident alien, which meant he did not have the rights of a citizen. Lysias wrote a specific speech in response to the murders and seizure of assets of metics by the Thirty Tyrants during the 4th century. In that speech, he wrote at length about the decades his own family had spent in Athens and how they had been model residents all that time. His words, written over a thousand years ago in a language long-dead, sound almost exactly like the response of modern immigrants in the face of rampant xenophobia and our need to present as "model minorities" in order to survive. The word "xenophobia" itself comes from the Ancient Greek word, xenos, which has a number of meanings depending on the context but can be translated most simply as "stranger." As an immigrant, it is hard to express what it felt like to see something that echoed my own experiences so closely in an ancient text. My research interests in Classics are primarily that of Greek conceptions of the "Other" and the experiences of foreigners in Greek city states. A great deal of my work is concerned with language, how it is used as a tool and as a weapon respectively. Although my work is based in antiquity, the lessons I have learned throughout my time studying languages have been relevant in everything I do. I have learned to weigh the meaning of every word I read, hear, speak, or write and it has been an excellent education.