

How Do We Have Confidence In Dealing With Texts Written In Languages To Which We Are Not Native?

Post by “Joshua” of January 1, 2025 at 5:06 PM

We can start by categorizing ancient languages based on three factors;

- The quantity of surviving texts
- The transmission of the language and its script from antiquity to modernity
- The modern languages descended from or influenced by them
- Surviving grammars and lexicons and other commentaries on the language itself written by native speakers

For example, the Linear A script of the ancient Minoan language (which has not yet been deciphered) presents several major challenges to scholars. One challenge is the very small body of surviving texts, only ~1400 inscriptions. Latin, by contrast, is thought to survive in more than half a million inscriptions (to say nothing of the massive corpus of literary works). The number of surviving Linear A inscriptions is then less than 28 hundredths of 1 percent of the number of Latin inscriptions. Linear A is itself an ancestor of Linear B, the script of Mycenaean Greek, the oldest form of Ancient Greek which we know about.

At the other extreme are Classical Latin and Ancient Greek. In both cases, we can rely on the following lines of evidence;

- Large quantities of surviving texts

Literary texts, political and legal documents and decrees, private letters, inscriptions, funeral epitaphs, graffiti, surviving papyrus scrolls, and place names that are still in use after 1500 years

- Alphabets that have been in use continuously since antiquity
- Well studied living descendant languages (although Ancient and Modern Greek are considered sets of dialects of the same evolving language, much like Old, Middle, and Modern English)
- Commentaries on the language written by native speakers from the ancient world
- An unbroken succession of native speakers (Greek) or non-native learners (Latin). There was never any point in time within the last two thousand years when no one living could read Latin.

If I was getting a tattoo in Latin or Greek, and a friend asked me how I could be sure what the text of the tattoo *really* said, this is the kind of information I would present to them.

One final note; we cannot really discuss levels of confidence with regard to an entire language system. There will always be uncertainty around the edges, what with words that only appear once in the entire surviving corpus ([hapax legomenon](#)), a particular morphology of a known word that never appears at all (like the pluperfect of a verb that only survives in the present active infinitive, for example), gaps (lacunae) in surviving texts, and so on.

The point here is that we can be resoundingly confident in the meaning of the word *aqua*, while at the same time being less certain about the etymology of the word *mentula* as used in the erotica poems of Catullus.