

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

Post by "Cassius" of January 1, 2025 at 3:02 PM

Sometimes people are tempted to deal with conflicting translations of text by throwing up their hands and concluding that no certainty is possible. While that is definitely the right conclusion in some cases (such as texts which are clearly fragmentary or corrupted) it's not at all always true. Many times there are many texts making a similar point in a the different language, and the general point from many statements becomes so clear that you can be very confident what is being said even when a particular text is somewhat corrupted. At some point also the existence of many translators - especially those who are trained academics who compete against each other for accuracy and fluency - begin to converge on a consensus in which you can have confidence. It's necessary for us to have a reasonable approach on what can be trusted to be true and what cannot. To a large extent this is what "canonics" is all about.

If it were true that we had to be proficient in speaking a language ourselves before we could comment on a text, then no one could ever comment on a language that they did not grow up learning themselves. We're all relying on translators. Even when we take the trouble to learn a language ourselves, we're relying on the compiler's of the dictionaries. The compilers of the dictionaries we use today relied on generations of translators who came before themselves. We're all relying on what is essentially "hearsay" evidence - and that really applies to children learning, as well, because they are learning to use words *as others tell them the words should be used*.

This topic is dealt with in Lucretius and probably other places as well because it is o important. We are always relying to some extent on people more knowledgeable than ourselves.

We therefore need a logical system for approaching language or anything else that we don't already know ourselves. Just like with atoms, which we never see or touch, we have to make logical deductions from what evidence is available to us.

Especially in the case of relying on translations, we have to decide who we trust and who we don't. With translations, it seems to me that the general method is to validate as best we can what we're told by comparing translations against each other and against things we can validate -- perhaps for example against inscriptions where a picture accompanies a word. We never take anything totally on faith, but that means we have to compare translations and observations to see which are consistent and which are not and how everything compares with facts that we can observe ourselves. Ultimately that is as much a test as anything else for what we choose to believe.

I suspect that there's a parallel here with how "code-breakers" unravel encryption - they look for clues in the text and compare the text to experience on frequency of words and the like.

If we can't have some degree of confidence in our conclusions about translations and everything else, then we devolve into radical skeptics.

So I started this thread to discuss whether we can suggest a general approach to deciding what to have confidence in and what not to trust. Obviously the more time we spend trying to learn a language from standard dictionaries, the better off we are likely to be, because we have more points of contact by which we can check a translator's choices against literal text. On the other hand, I gather that it is widely recognized that familiarity with idiomatic terminology means that literal translation can sometimes be laughably off from the real meaning that was intended. Sarcasm and irony and all sorts of literary constructions cause meanings to shift.

Given that we are so heavily reliant on translators and the work of commentators who have come before us, is there any way we can develop a general approach that makes sense and responds to feelings of hopelessness that no conclusions we reach can be reliable?

Post by "Cassius" of January 1, 2025 at 3:25 PM

Here's a search result which gives some of Cicero's approach to translation that we need to keep in mind in reading his renderings of Epicurean material.

1. Literal versus Sense-for-Sense Translation

In *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* (14), Cicero famously contrasts *verbum pro verbo* (word-for-word) translation with his own approach:

Quote

"Nec converti ut interpres, sed ut orator; sentiis isdem et earum formis, tamquam figuris, verbis ad nostram consuetudinem aptis." Translation: "I did not translate as an interpreter but as an orator, preserving the ideas and their forms, as it were, but using language suited to our way of speaking."

Cicero insists that the translator must aim to render the spirit and essence of the text, ensuring that the translation resonates within the linguistic and cultural framework of the target audience. His purpose was not to reproduce the exact wording but to capture the rhetorical force of the original.

2. Adaptation of Greek Philosophical Terms

In *Tusculanae Disputationes* (Book 1), Cicero demonstrates the challenges of translating complex Greek philosophical terms into Latin. For example, he often struggles with terms like *katastematicos* (pleasure as a state of rest) and *kinetikos* (pleasure involving movement). Rather than force awkward direct translations, Cicero invents or adapts Latin terms, such as *voluptas* and *tranquillitas*, to approximate the Greek concepts while making them more accessible to Roman readers.

This principle reflects his belief that the translator should create terminology that aligns with the target language's intellectual and cultural framework.

3. Clarity and Accessibility

In *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (Book 1.1), Cicero justifies his translations of Greek philosophical texts by emphasizing his desire to make these works accessible to Roman audiences:

Quote

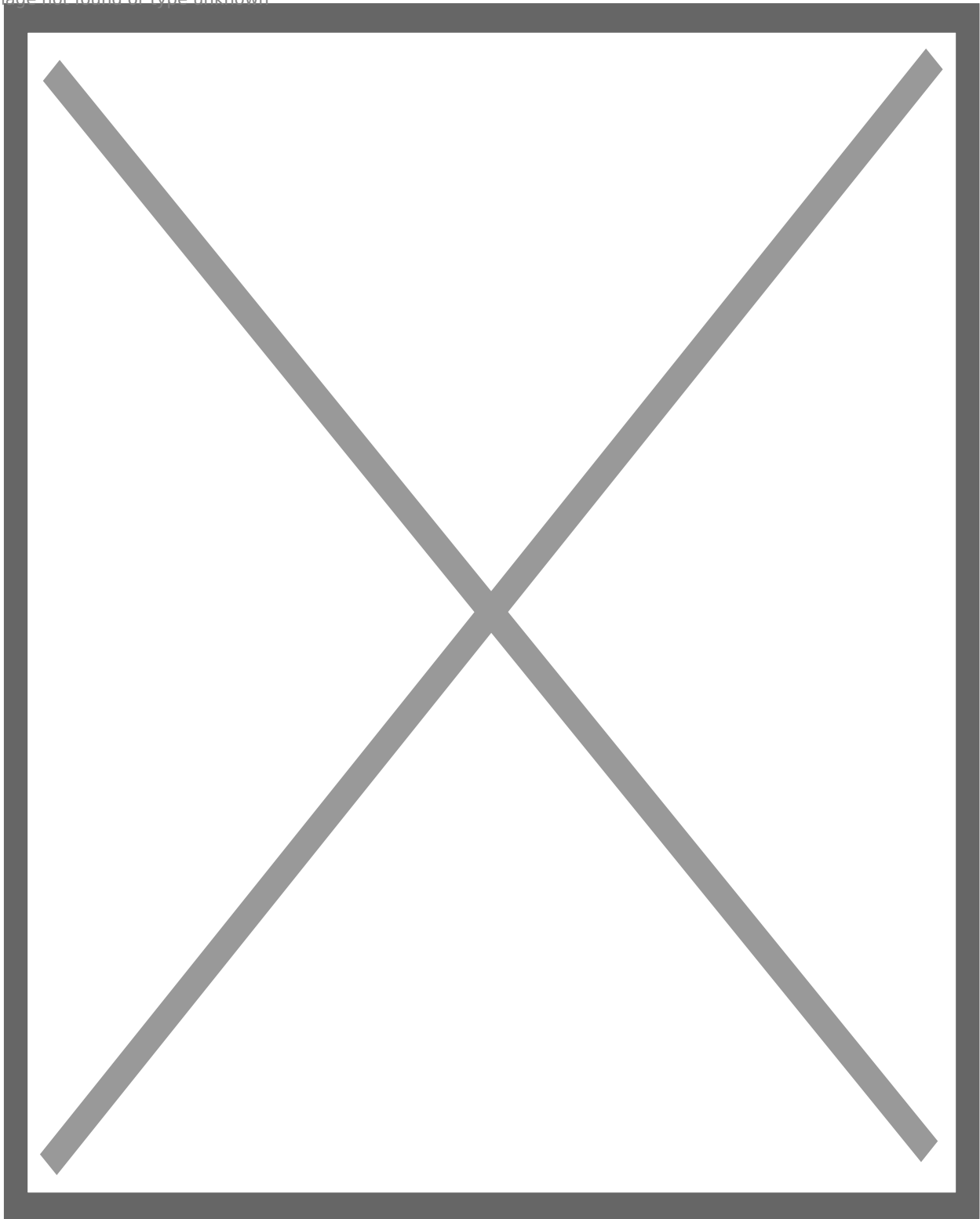
"Graecos libros Latine vertere non ut interpres, sed ut auctor, ut tamquam aliud ex alia re formarem." Translation: "To translate Greek books into Latin, not as an interpreter but as an author, as though creating something new from the original."

Cicero saw translation as an act of creation, wherein the translator becomes a co-author who molds the source material into a new literary and cultural artifact.

Post by "Don" of January 1, 2025 at 3:40 PM

Great thread. I would add that this doesn't only apply to translations of text from non-English languages. Consider the difficulty people have with reading Shakespeare or even trying to read something in English from the 18th or 19th century. Your point about "familiarity with idiomatic terminology" is applicable there, too. For ancient languages, consider how hard it is to get the jokes in a translated play by Aristophanes or to understand the "oldest joke" - "A dog walks into a bar and says, 'I cannot see a thing. I'll open this one.'"

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[What makes the world's first bar joke funny? No one knows.](#)

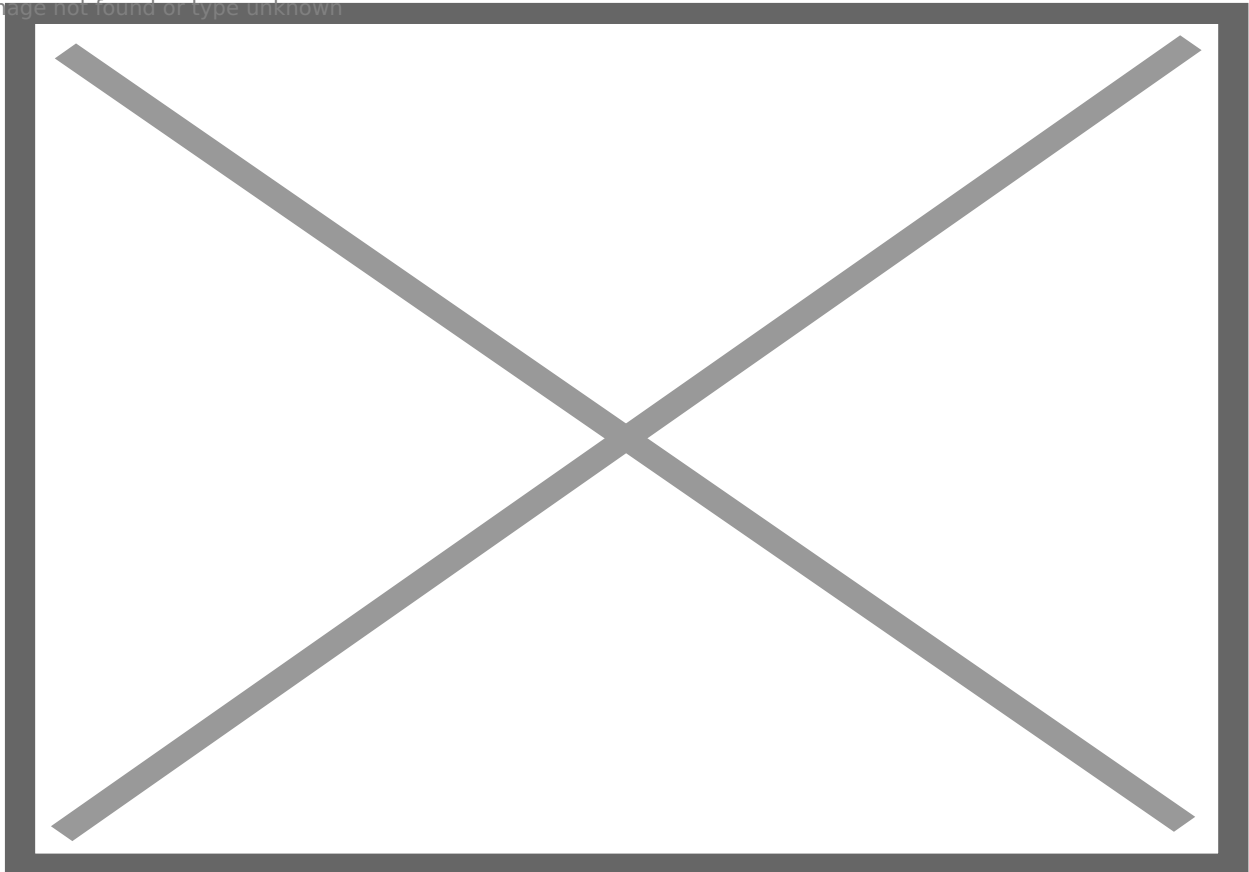
A 4,000-year-old Sumerian proverb about a dog that walks into a tavern has left scholars and thousands of online commenters scratching their heads. The joke's...

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4207-how-do-we-have-confidence-in-dealing-with-texts-written-in-languages-to-which-we/>

Post by “Don” of January 1, 2025 at 4:54 PM

Here's a brief blog post on dynamic vs formal equivalence theories of translation:

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[Dynamic and Formal equivalence: putting translation theory into practice.](#)

How close should you stick to the meaning of the source text in translation?
thattranslationblog.com

Dan McClellan provides his take on translation (and mentions dynamic/formal theories are outdated):

<https://youtu.be/T9qctTS6nLw?si=JZ7PDhchZvfli0IR>

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

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4207-how-do-we-have-confidence-in-dealing-with-texts-written-in-languages-to-which-we/>

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.

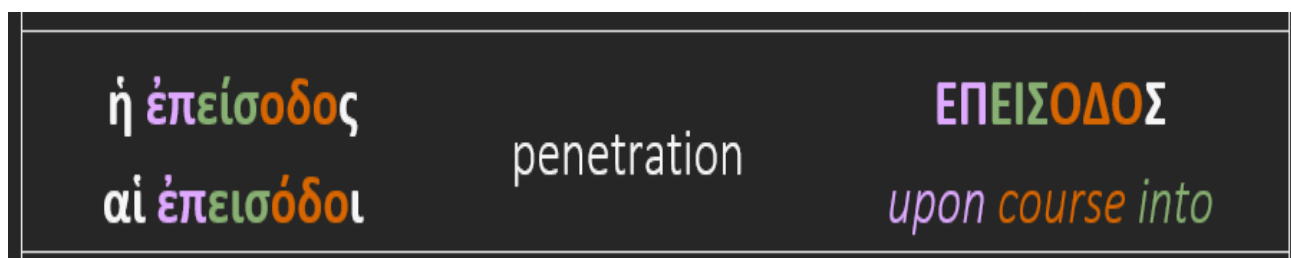
If I was getting a tattoo in Latin or Greek, and a friend asked me how I could be sure what the text of the tattoo *really* said, this is the kind of information I would present to them.

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.

Post by “Bryan” of January 1, 2025 at 5:13 PM

Also, breaking a word down into its morphemes goes far to establishing a general expectation of the word's meaning. For example, today I was looking at the not very common word "Epeisodos," where we get "Episode." But you can see the meaning is along the lines of "upon course into" and in context "penetration" is precisely the idea -- as Epikouros is talking about the penetration of particles into the mind.



Ἐπίκουρος, *Peri Phýseōs*, Book 25, P.Herc. 1056 col. 12 (fr. B 34)

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 1, 2025 at 6:07 PM

Just an fyi -- we have these threads, which may be of interest:

Thread

[Table of Texts With Translation or Corruption Difficulties](#)

Passage and Problem

Alternatives and Suggested Translation

Discussion
Link

VS 35: Bailey translates 35 this way:
"We should not spoil what we have by
desiring what we do not have, but
remember that what we have too was
the gift of fortune."

Norman DeWitt (EAHP page __) "We must
not spoil the enjoyment of the blessings we
have by pining for those we have not but
rather reflect tht these too are among the
things desirable."

[Peter St Andre](#): "Don't ruin the things you
have by wanting what you



Cassius

January 23, 2018 at 6:33 AM

Thread

[Possibilities For Shorthand Rating System For Indicating Reliability Of Texts](#)

I doubt that I will pursue this myself much further, but since I wrote this up as a comment to graphic I thought I would post it separately in case someone thought it was helpful for their own thinking. I'm not at all sure that such a thing would be practical, but thinking about the factors that would go into any such system is probably a good exercise:

I wish we had some shorthand way of indicating a reasonable level of confidence for a particular passage of text. Maybe we ought to create a...



Cassius

September 21, 2024 at 7:01 AM

Post by "Pacatus" of January 2, 2025 at 4:59 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

For ancient languages, consider how hard it is to get the jokes in a translated play by Aristophanes or to understand the "oldest joke" - "A dog walks into a bar and says, 'I cannot see a thing. I'll open this one.'"

Maybe not just ancient languages:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4207-how-do-we-have-confidence-in-dealing-with-texts-written-in-languages-to-which-we/>

"A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes." Ludwig Wittgenstein

I'll let it there - except to say that Wittgenstein was a serious philosopher of language, so I'm not sure if he was joking! 😊