

Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics

What Linguists are Good for

Version 1.0

December 2005

Joshua T. Katz

Princeton University

Abstract: Linguists are good for a lot. This is a personal account of why departments of Classics should embrace them (us).

© Joshua T. Katz. jtkatz@princeton.edu

This paper, completed in March 2005, is currently under review, along with the written versions of the other five papers presented at same panel (see the opening footnote).

The Danish linguist Otto Jespersen (1860-1943) devoted his long and productive life largely to explaining English grammar to native speakers and to finding better ways of teaching languages.* Despite his scholarly interest in the dizzying delights of linguistic forms as such, he railed against the tendency of many pedagogues to present foreign languages as though they were elaborate systems of nearly impenetrable code: “But what shall we say,” he asks in his once-influential work *How to Teach a Foreign Language*, “when, in a German reader, to the question *Wo seid ihr?* we find the answer, *Wir sind nicht hier!*”¹ One story he tells in this enjoyable and irreverent book made a particular impression on me even when I was child—I discussed it in my college applications—and I think of it every time I teach beginning Greek or Latin since, as all Classicists know all too well, most of the textbooks we use would earn from Jespersen nothing but sneers. It goes like this: “[A] Swedish dialectologist who was on a tour to investigate how extensively the strong form *dog* (died) was in use, asked a peasant: do you people here say ‘jag dog’ or ‘jag döde’ [i.e., ‘I died’]? The peasant was not a grammarian; he answered sensibly: well, when we are dead we generally do not say anything.”² This tale has always struck a dissonant chord in me: on the one hand, I am pretty sure there is an answer to the dialectologist’s query and I want to know what it is; but on the other, it is sobering to realize that even good linguists may be blindsided by failing to consider, in their structuralist enthusiasm, that since language exists in the first place for communication, there is probable pragmatic oddity in expressing ‘I died’ in any language.

So this is enough to show, I suppose, that linguists are a funny bunch, but are we really stranger than historians, literary critics, and philosophers, not to mention epigraphers, numismatists, queer theorists, and self-styled public intellectuals? I don’t believe that we are, and what I would like to do in this short paper is explain some of our (or at least my) quirks and present as nuanced a case as I can, based on my own experience in a range of elementary and

* This is a lightly revised version of the talk I delivered at the 136th Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association (Boston, MA) in January 2005, where it was the first of six presentations in the panel “Using Linguistic Evidence to Enrich the Teaching of Classical Languages and Cultures.” Since what I have to say is personal and anecdotal, I have left in many markers of the original oral style. My thanks go to Mark Southern, who organized the panel; my fellow panelists, all of whose papers are likewise collected here; the members of the lively audience; and Brent Vine, who read and commented helpfully on a draft of this paper.

¹ Thus, Otto Jespersen, *How to Teach a Foreign Language*, tr. Sophia Yhlen-Olsen Bertelsen (London 1904) 13 (in the original Danish edition, of which the English translation is also a revision: *Sprogundervisning* [Copenhagen 1901] 12).

² Thus, Jespersen (above, n.1) 112 n.1 (~ *Sprogundervisning*, 102 n.1); the sentence to which this is a footnote reads, “Just think of the many thousands of boys and girls who time and again recite: *mourir, mourant, mort, je meurs, je mourus*, and then ask how many of them, yes even of their teachers, ever happen to think that the last form in reality is impossible (at all events in conversations in this life).”

advanced classes, for the important role linguistics should play in the curriculum of any department of Classical (and, indeed, all) languages and cultures. This is, I hasten to add, not an example of the personal voice in Classical scholarship, but that's only because what I have to say is not scholarship; it certainly is the personal voice, but I hope some will heed it anyway.

I have to begin by saying up-front that I have been very lucky: a linguist by training and a comparative philologist at heart, I became a Classicist largely through professional good fortune, namely being offered a job by Princeton's Department of Classics while I was still a graduate student in linguistics at Harvard. When I was hired in the spring of 1998, very much on a trial basis, I was not immediately replacing anyone: my predecessor, Brent Vine, had left for California in 1995 after only four years and there had been a five-year gap between the departure in 1986 for Switzerland of his predecessor, George E. Dunkel, and Vine's arrival.³ Both Dunkel and Vine are first-class scholars and teachers, and yet it was perfectly clear to me in those early months that the majority of my very intelligent and very genial colleagues were not convinced that a linguist was a necessary person to have around, much less a good thing. So, wishing of course to hold on to my new-found livelihood, I made it my business to show them two things: first, that linguistics is not an arcane "niche discipline," but rather a vibrant subject of great interest to many, many undergraduates and graduate students; and second, that a good linguist is at least as willing to teach "normal" classes as the historian, literary critic, and philosopher, and at least as capable of teaching them well. Versatility is worth a very great deal, and in my view not much less so in a large research setting than at a small college; and if there's one thing linguists are, it's versatile, so we would do well to advertise this fact. I can't think that I've ever met a Classical linguist who wasn't interested in both Greek and Latin, whereas many of our colleagues tend quickly to become entrenched in the one or the other, not to mention then further be inspired to teach classes only in poetry or only in prose. I also can't think that I've ever met a Classical linguist who didn't know a number of other interesting languages that intersect in one way or another with Greek and Latin (I think, for example, of Hebrew and Hittite, of Etruscan and Old Persian), and it would be hubristic, not to say simply wrong, for our more traditionally Classics-centric colleagues to think that students don't, or even shouldn't, want to know about the languages and cultures—the art, the literature, the battle tactics—of other peoples in and around the ancient Mediterranean. On the contrary, if you tell students who are reading Herodotus—even in translation in a big lecture course—that you can teach them about Darius and Psammetichus *from the other side*—that is to say, the non-Greek side—they will say, "Wow, that's really cool!" and a great many of them will, I promise, seek you out in office hours and probably sign up for your courses. Furthermore, if there are any Classical linguists out there who

³ Dunkel, who succeeded Samuel D. Atkins (primarily an Indologist, but holder at the time of his retirement of the Andrew Fleming West Chair in Classics), rose from Assistant (1978-1984) to (tenured) Associate Professor before leaving in 1986 for Switzerland, where he has ever since been Ordinarius für Vergleichende Indogermanische Sprachwissenschaft at the Universität Zürich. Vine was Assistant Professor of Classics at Princeton from 1991 to 1994 (before that he had been Assistant Professor at Yale, where I was an undergraduate and took his course on Greek dialects) and (tenured) Associate Professor in 1994-95, during which year he was, however, also on leave; he is now Professor of Classics at UCLA, where he served for many years as Head of the Program in Indo-European Studies. I overlapped for one term (Spring 1998) with Miles C. Beckwith, who taught Classical linguistics and Sanskrit as a part-time Lecturer between 1995 and 1998.

have no interest in the actual texts from which the primers they slave over are actually derived, that's just sad, and much as I want more rather than fewer linguists in Classics departments, I don't think there's much of a future for such folk and I can't even say that I'm very sorry about that. Anyhow, to get back to my story, while I have certainly taught courses at Princeton—well-enrolled courses, even—with such titles as “Greek Dialects” and “Historical/Comparative Grammar of Latin,” I have also had the opportunity to introduce students—many hundreds of them—to Greek and Latin literature, Old Irish, Hittite, the history of English, writing systems of the world, Ancient Egyptian history and literature, Sanskrit, general linguistics, and a whole lot more. No one is indispensable, but I like to think that I have demonstrated at Princeton that what linguists are good for is bringing a high level of interest, engagement, and competence to an especially wide range of subjects that bright students really do want to learn something about.

Is this what universities generally think about linguists? No, of course not. To most administrators and to all too many of our own colleagues, linguists are covered in 19th-century dust, which is, as we all know, a far dustier dust, being tainted with old methodology, than what Classical archaeologists encounter in the Roman Forum. Or, alternatively, we are interested in so-called modern linguistic techniques, but these have the stench of social science, which some of our colleagues think smells less good than the Roman sewers' humanities. Either way, we linguists are narrowly focused misfits with a humorless eye for grammar and no interest in, much less imagination for, wider cultural questions. Such is our stereotype, but I have never met a good linguist who fit the bill (certainly none of my teachers did⁴), and all of us must do what we can to combat it, in our scholarship and, even more important, in our teaching. Linguistics is a broad, vibrant, and result-driven discipline, not the *recherché* domain of fuddy-duddies, and it really shouldn't be very difficult to persuade our students and colleagues that this is so.

Classics is a heavily “theorized” subject these days, and everyone knows that the people who don't practice theory are fuddy-duddies. Well, I'm perfectly happy to say—since it can only help us if I do and since it is also plainly true—that linguists are not just versatile, but also theoretical. Linguistics is a discipline that owes its rise and continued existence to theory, and the undeniable results that linguistic practitioners achieve spring from our strong adherence to theoretical principles, and not just any old theoretical principles, but ones that actually work. All reputable linguists share certain core beliefs about language—how it functions and how it changes—and what matters more than our differences is what binds us, and that is an allegiance to a way of doing things—call it theory—*not* because we like the social implications, *not* because we are shopping around for a way of life and will tomorrow move on to something else, *not* for any reason, really, other than that what we do makes sense and has stood the test of time. For example, like all historical and comparative linguists, I rely in my work above all on the so-called Comparative Method, which remains, after nearly two centuries, the most powerful and most consistently validated theory of language ever put forth.⁵ The only way one could not call

⁴ This seems a good place to thank my main teachers in Classical and Indo-European historical and comparative linguistics: D. Ellis Evans, Stanley Insler, Stephanie W. Jamison, Jay H. Jasanoff, H. Craig Melchert, Anna Morpurgo Davies, John H. W. Penney, James R. Russell, P. Oktor Skjærvø, Brent Vine, and Calvert Watkins. No one has ever had better teachers, and if this list of humane and influential scholars does not move you, then you are unlikely ever to believe that linguists are good for anything.

⁵ In short, the theory of the Comparative Method holds that: (1) certain pervasive similarities among languages are explicable only by postulating a common ancestral tongue from

what I do theory is to say that theory has to be modern, that is to say, have been formulated within the past X years, where X is a very low number. And that, frankly, would be very silly. Theories surely have two purposes: to make people think and, ideally, to do good. The Comparative Method does clear good—and it makes people think at least as much now, I would argue, as it did in the dusty 19th century.⁶ It is hardly an accident that one and the same man, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), is responsible for the single greatest theoretical achievement in historical and comparative linguistics, the foundations of the Laryngeal Theory (which was an abstraction when Saussure formulated it, 36 years before Bedřich Hrozný's decipherment of Hittite in 1915),⁷ while at the same time being still today lionized as a pioneer in structuralism, perhaps the paradigmatic “theory” as the term is conventionally understood in literary and other cultural studies.⁸

which these languages sprang; and (2) the changes that have taken place in these languages are fundamentally regular. The classic exposition remains A. Meillet, *La Méthode comparative en linguistique historique* (Oslo 1925), which exists also in a rather awkward English translation, *The Comparative Method in Historical Linguistics*, tr. Gordon B. Ford (Paris 1967). An extended treatment of the implications for Classical and other literatures is Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York 1995), which not incidentally won the APA's Charles J. Goodwin Award of Merit in 1998; for a brief account of why Classicists should care, see my paper “The Indo-European Context,” in John Miles Foley, ed., *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Malden, MA 2005) 20-30.

⁶ The theory and methods of historical and comparative linguistics have by no means remained static since the 19th century, as Michael Weiss rightly reminds me. Some interesting papers on the Comparative Method are collected in Mark Durie & Malcolm Ross, eds., *The Comparative Method Reviewed: Regularity and Irregularity in Language Change* (New York 1996). Historical syntax, though far from the vanguard of diachronic studies of the older Indo-European languages, has nevertheless been slowly becoming more sophisticated, in large part because of the sea change in the past half-century in our understanding of how syntax works synchronically (a recent collection of papers is Heinrich Hettrich, ed., *Indogermanische Syntax: Fragen und Perspektiven* [Wiesbaden 2002]). Arguably most important has been the careful experimental work of, above all, William Labov on how phonetic change actually takes places and spreads: see, e.g., Labov's *Principles of Linguistic Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA 1994 [*Internal Factors*] and Malden, MA 2001 [*Social Factors*]).

⁷ See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* (Leipzig 1879).

⁸ A footnote is hardly the place to engage in a debate over the meaning of “theory,” but I feel I do need to say a few words about this contentious topic in light of the discussion that ensued after my APA talk, when Eleanor Dickey raised the question whether “theory” might not refer primarily to a set of assumptions not yet demonstrated to be correct. To be sure, this is more or less definition 6. in the ²OED s.v. *theory*¹, but it is not, it seems to me, the way the word is typically used by humanists in academia today. It is probably impossible to come up with a definition that even a substantial minority of scholars would find acceptable, though I doubt that many people would object to the idea that a theory is an abstract, non-commonsensical, and coherent methodological approach to a certain body of data, an intellectual model that has as a necessary, but not sufficient, characteristic that it is “good to think with”; ideally—in my view, but this is more controversial (note, e.g., Lowell Edmunds, “Introduction,” in Phyllis Culham &

In a nutshell, there are three major types of linguistic investigation: synchronic, diachronic, and comparative (representatives of all three perspectives took part in the APA panel and have contributed papers to this issue of XXX), though it ought to go without saying that there are significant overlaps and that many linguists pride themselves on their handiness at straddling these boundaries. A synchronic linguist studies how a particular phenomenon manifests itself at a given point in time (“σὺν χρόνῳ,” as it were); the point can be Boston in January 2005 or Shakespeare’s London or Rome in 43 B.C. or Athens in 403 B.C. or A diachronic, or historical, linguist, by contrast, studies how a particular phenomenon changes over time (διὰ χρόνου); the chronological span might be American English between now and January 2000 (before we knew about *metrosexuals*, whose lifespan remains to be determined, and the word *chad*, which has in the meantime all but died again⁹) or between Homer and Sophocles. And, finally, a comparative linguist studies how the manifestations of one or more phenomena across linguistic time and space relate to one another; depending on what one’s goal is, the languages under consideration can be connected historically (e.g., Greek and Latin and English, all of which, as we know from application of the theory of the Comparative Method, have Proto-Indo-European as their common ancestor) or geographically (e.g., Latin and Etruscan and Punic, all of which were spoken in roughly the same place at the same time, a fact that has had interesting linguistic consequences that experts in bilingualism and other sociolinguistic

Lowell Edmunds, eds., *Classics: A Discipline and Profession in Crisis?* [Lanham, MD 1989] ix-xxviii, at xxi)—it should also produce some sort of results. Generally on (literary) “theory,” see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis 1996) and Jonathan Culler’s elegant *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 1997), as well as Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, & Imre Szeman, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore 2005). On the uses of literary theory in the field of Classics (a more prevalent pursuit in the 1990’s than in the present decade, it seems; compare in general Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* [London 2003]), see the papers in Ralph Hexter & Daniel Selden, eds., *Innovations of Antiquity* (New York 1992), Irene J. F. De Jong & J. P. Sullivan, eds., *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature* (Leiden 1994) (note also the “General Bibliography” on pp. 281-88, which for each of various theories—e.g., narratology and psychoanalytic criticism—gives references first to the theory itself and then to its “classical application”), and S. J. Harrison, ed., *Texts, Ideas, and the Classics: Scholarship, Theory, and Classical Literature* (Oxford 2001). I have learned especially much from the following very different pieces: Simon Goldhill’s bad-boy bagatelle “Who’s Afraid of Literary Theory?,” *JACT Review* 10 (1991) 8-11 (repr. in Susanna Morton Braund, *Latin Literature* [London 2002] 277-87); Denis Feeney’s trenchant “Criticism Ancient and Modern,” in Doreen Innes, Harry Hine, & Christopher Pelling, eds., *Ethics and Rhetoric: Classical Essays for Donald Russell on his Seventy-fifth Birthday* (Oxford 1995) 301-12; and Malcolm Heath’s (overly?) uncompromising *Interpreting Classical Texts* (London 2002). Probably the most brilliant and sobering exercise in the application of “theory” to a Classical text is John Ma, “Black Hunter Variations,” *PCPS* 40 (1994) 49-80.

⁹ An excellent resource for up-and-coming (and down-and-going) English words is “The Word Spy” (www.wordspy.com). The word *metrosexual*, which hit it big in 2002, did not yet make it into Allan Metcalf’s *Predicting New Words: The Secrets of their Success* (Boston 2002), which has good things to say about *chad* (see Index s.v.) and much else besides.

areas are sorting out in increasingly sophisticated ways¹⁰) or simply in being all human (e.g., Greek and Chinese and Navajo, three languages that look and sound completely unlike one another but whose differences are in fact for the most part only skin-deep, as modern linguistic theory has demonstrated). Notice that it is impossible to be a diachronic or comparative linguist without also being competent at synchronic investigation, for both diachrony and comparison require knowledge of at least two stages, and in order to really know how something has changed from X to Y across time or how something in language X relates to something else in language Y, you first have to understand the synchronic situation in both X and Y.

To sum up my points so far: first, linguists have things to say that are unusually interesting even to students who are just beginning to learn about the Ancient world; second, linguists are generally unusually versatile scholars and teachers; and third, linguists are, contrary to popular belief, unusually devoted to what I don't see why we shouldn't call theory and, furthermore, have real and tangible results to show for their devotion. But, actually, in view of what I stated in the previous paragraph, there's a fourth point to be made as well: not all linguists are the same, any more than a given pair of historians, literary critics, or philosophers would be. And this has an interesting consequence, namely that there is no reason at all why a good-sized department of Classics shouldn't have more than one linguist. To say this is to make people jump out of their seats in amazement, but it's hard to see that this reaction arises out of anything other than prejudice: no one blinks an eye if a department has, say, multiple historians (I belong to one with six), but I am not aware of a single department of Classics in the United States or Canada, with the partial exception of the University of Michigan, that employs more than one linguist of any stripe.¹¹ Nevertheless, if any of my colleagues on the APA panel were to join me at Princeton, the outcome would be a dramatic increase in expertise with no more consequential

¹⁰ The work of J. N. Adams has been especially important: see most recently his *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge 2003), which has much to say about both Latin-Etruscan and Latin-Punic interactions (pp. 159-84 and 200-45, respectively).

¹¹ The Department of Classical Studies at the University of Michigan employs one full-time Indo-Europeanist, Benjamin W. Fortson IV (who is also a member of the Department of Linguistics), but two other members of the faculty, Kweku A. Garbrah and Richard Janko, have done important work on Greek linguistics and Deborah Pennell Ross conducts research on Latin linguistics with an eye to pedagogy. There are a very few other North American institutions that have on the faculty more than one linguist with an active interest in Greek and Latin: at Cornell, Alan J. Nussbaum is in the Department of Classics and Michael Weiss is in the Department of Linguistics; at Harvard, Jay H. Jasanoff is in the Department of Linguistics and Jeremy Rau is a member of both the Department of the Classics (home also to Gregory Nagy, who began his career as a linguist and whose APA paper is likewise included in this collection) and the Department of Linguistics; at UC Berkeley, Andrew Garrett and Gary B. Holland are in the Department of Linguistics; and at UCLA, which houses the United States' only interdepartmental Ph.D.-granting program in Indo-European studies, Raimo Anttila is in the Department of Linguistics and Brent Vine is in the Department of Classics (as now is Calvert Watkins, who became Professor-in-Residence there after retiring from Harvard). Aside from the remarkable case of UCLA (see www.humnet.ucla.edu/pies), the contrast with Continental Europe is stark, where many universities have entire departments of "Vergleichende und Indogermanische Sprachwissenschaft" and the like but where, too, the professional relationships between linguists and Classicists are often shaky.

overlap than one would expect to find between any two “normal” Classicists, be they historians, literary critics, or philosophers. So here’s a promise I make to any chairman: if you do not yet have a linguist in your department and you now hire one, you will not regret it; and if you do already have one, you will not regret being the first to snap up another.

So far, I have been speaking in generalities, but I would now like to turn to a couple of concrete case studies. Let me begin by citing a few well-known facts about a well-known Greek verb, ἔχω, and the Proto-Indo-European root from which it derives, **seǵʰ-*.¹² Students hate ἔχω/ἔχειν: it has a difficult paradigm with peculiarities both phonological (e.g., the future ἔξω has a *spiritus asper*, unlike the base form) and morphological (e.g., there’s also a future στήσω); furthermore, it has a range of meanings, not just ‘have’ and ‘hold’ but also ‘be able to’ and even just plain ‘be’ (cf. Mod. Gk. ἔχει ‘there is’).¹³ While I am in the first place a synchronic linguist in the sense that all linguists are in the first place synchronic linguists (see above), my heart is in history and especially comparison, so I do not feel right discussing how exactly a synchronic linguist would go about answering the questions the word poses. But I can point out that diachronic and comparative linguists have found a great deal to say about its phonological form, morphological makeup, and semantic diversity. For example, the reason for the different breathings in ἔχω and ἔξω has to do with what is known as Grassmann’s Law, the famous phonological rule of dissimilation of aspirates formulated by the mathematician and Indologist Hermann Grassmann in 1863 (on which see the contribution of Rex Wallace):

$$\text{ἔχω} < *ek^h - < *hek^h - < \text{PIE } *seǵ^h - \text{ (dissimilation: } \underline{h} - \underline{k}^h)$$

vs.

$$\text{ἔξω} < *hek-s- < *hek^h-s- < \text{PIE } *seǵ^h-s- \text{ (conditions for dissimilation not met: } h - k).^{14}$$

¹² For the formal details, see, e.g., Henri M. F. M. van de Laar, *Description of the Greek Individual Verbal Systems* (Amsterdam 2000) 155f. and Helmut Rix, *LIV: Lexikon der indogermanischen Verben. Die Wurzeln und ihre Primärstambildungen*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden 2001) 515f.

¹³ I note for fun that there is actually a second, etymologically different, verb ἔχω (φέχω) that has the same meaning as its Latin cognate, *uehō*, namely ‘carry’ (< PIE **ueǵʰ-*): though recorded in LSJ, you are unlikely to know it unless you have taken a course in Greek dialects, in which it has a cameo role on account of its appearance in Pamphylian (but the oft-cited form φεχέτω [actually]EXET[and perhaps also FEΨETO in one and the same inscription, Brixhe #3] is not as secure as it is usually made out to be: see Claude Brixhe, *Le Dialecte grec de Pamphylie: documents et grammaire* [Paris 1976] 141 and 183f.) and Cyprian (note the hapax *e-we-xe* [i.e., ἔφεξε] in Masson #245: Olivier Masson, *Les Inscriptions chypriotes syllabiques: recueil critique et commenté*, 2nd ed. [Paris 1983] 262). See, e.g., van de Laar (above, n.12) 157 and Rix (above, n.12) 661f. This (φ)έχω is, of course, connected to the perfectly normal noun (φ)όχος (Hom. ὄχεα) ‘chariot’ (for the initial ο, see the discussion of ablaut below in the text), which is contrasted already in Homer with ὄχος ‘holder’ (*Od.* 5.404, hapax: λιμένες νηῶν ὄχοι ‘harbors holding ships’) from “normal” ἔχω.

¹⁴ For discussion of and secondary literature on this rule, see N. E. Collinge, *The Laws of Indo-European* (Amsterdam 1985) 47-61. A handy account of this and of the material taken up

As for the existence of forms, like σχήσω, that do not have any root vowel, this has its origins in the fascinating morphological phenomenon of vowel gradation known as ablaut (or, sometimes, apophony), which I will briefly take up again below (ablaut also explains why the initial vowel is an *o* in the related adjective ὄχυρός ‘firm, strong’):

ἔξω < *sēḡ^h- (root vowel *e*)

vs.

σ_χῆσω < *s_ōḡ^h- (no root vowel, as also in aorist (ἐ)σ_χον)¹⁵

[Cf. also, e.g., ὄχυρός < *s_ōḡ^h- (root vowel *o*), alongside ἐχυρός].

Finally, the reason for the semantic range, in addition to being traceable within historically attested Greek itself, has partly to do with the force of the Proto-Indo-European root from which the verb comes, *seḡ^h-, which means something like ‘forcibly possess; take/have power (over)’ and also lies behind the all-too-well-known German word *Sieg* ‘victory’¹⁶; it is also, as Alan J. Nussbaum has shown in a striking study, the root of Lat. *seuerus* ‘stern, strict.’¹⁷

I myself have had occasion to cite Grassmann’s Law, ablaut, and the comparative evidence for the root *seḡ^h- in a number of classes over the years, including in first-year Greek, where I think a passing mention or two of such things is a very good thing. That said, I don’t

immediately below in the text is to be found in Michael Meier-Brügger, *Griechische Sprachwissenschaft* (Berlin 1992) I.59.

¹⁵ Note that σχήσω (but not ἔξω) is built secondarily from the aorist stem, which likewise lacks a vowel in the root. This explains why it (but, again, not ἔξω) conventionally has “simple” aspect in Homer, just as aorists do: see Bernhard Mader, *Untersuchungen zum Tempusgebrauch bei Homer (Futurum und Desiderativum)* (Hamburg 1970) 55-144. Still, the picture in Attic is much less clear, as Coulter George points out to me. Impressionable young minds are taught by Hardy Hansen & Gerald M. Quinn’s standard textbook *Greek: An Intensive Course*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York 1992) 504 that “ἔξω has progressive/repeated aspect and is used of an action that lasts; σχήσω has simple aspect,” but Eduard Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik auf der Grundlage von Karl Brugmanns Griechischer Grammatik*, vol. II, ed. Albert Debrunner (Munich 1950) 265f. disputes this, citing a copious body of secondary literature, and Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, rev. Gordon M. Messing (Cambridge, MA 1956) 427f. (§1911), after noting the putative distinction, adds parenthetically, “(But ἔξω usually does duty for σχήσω.)” (428).

¹⁶ Michael Meier[-Brügger], “Ἐχω und seine Bedeutung im Frühgriechischen,” *MH* 33 (1976) 180f. has a nice discussion of the semantics of ἔχω in Mycenaean (*e-ke* [i.e., ἔχει], etc.), in the course of which he points out that the name *Hector* (Ἐκτωρ, Myc. *e-ko-to*) can hardly literally mean something as banal as “Holder, Possessor,” as is often said; see also Brent Vine, *Aeolic ὄρπετον and Deverbative *-etó- in Greek and Indo-European* (Innsbruck 1998) 29-31.

¹⁷ See Alan J. Nussbaum, “Severe Problems,” in Jay Jasanoff, H. Craig Melchert, & Lisi Oliver, eds., *Mír curad: Studies in Honor of Calvert Watkins* (Innsbruck 1998) 521-38, who also comments on the discrepancy between ὄχυρός and ἐχυρός.

want anyone to come away from this paper with the impression that I believe that detailed discussion of linguistic phenomena is a necessary component of beginning language classes, which as we all know linguists are frequently asked to teach: clearly it is not, and something we as linguists have to be mindful of as we demonstrate our versatility in the course of teaching a range of subjects is the simple fact that not every course is actually about linguistics and that it would be silly for every Classics class to consider the same sort or amount of linguistic material. One really good trick in a non-specialist class, like beginning Greek or Latin, is to give students just a little taste—an *amuse-bouche*—of things they could learn more about in another class, perhaps one offered by you in the very next semester. Maybe ἔχων is too dull a word for me to use to make this point, so consider instead that linguists are good for talking about the two meanings of the Latin noun *testis*, the relationship between the Greek god *Hermes* and *herms*, and the development of the notion of and very word *paradise*.¹⁸ I have talked about each of these matters in more than one undergraduate course, too, but whether I have, for example, stressed the background of *paradise* in Persian language and culture or stressed the word's etymological connection with Gk. τεῖχος and Lat. *figūra* and Eng. *dough* or stressed its evident semantic shift—which one I have concentrated on, and for how long, has depended on whether I was teaching Xenophon or Avestan or English etymology or elementary Greek.

I close with one of my favorite linguistic games, one that (people are usually surprised to hear) has also proved particularly popular with classes of both intermediate undergraduates and graduate students. This exercise I owe to one of my own great teachers, Calvert Watkins, and it in turn is based on an insight from 1964 of another great Indo-Europeanist, Bernhard Forssman¹⁹: show a group of students verses 151-53 of the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* and ask them to “correct” verse 152. In Thomas W. Allen’s standard *Oxford Classical Text* (1912), the passage is printed as follows:

σπάργανον ἄμφ’ ὤμοις εἰλυμένος ἤύτε τέκνον
νήπιον ἐν παλάμησι περ’ ἰγνύσι λαῖφος ἀθύρων
κέϊτο, χέλυν ἐρατὴν ἐπ’ ἀριστερὰ χειρὸς ἔέργων.

151 ἠλυμένος M 152 περιγνύσι MO : περ’ ἰγ. x ed. pr. : παρ’ ἰγ. p

Since there does not at first sight appear to be anything the matter, the students flounder about for a bit, but after a while someone hits on the textual problem, perhaps once one asks them what is the oddest word in the passage; and once this happens, it is possible to talk about it and all sorts of linguistic consequences for a long time (I have twice spent over two hours doing this and I’m pretty sure neither class got bored). The oddest word is of course ἰγνύσι, which it can safely be assumed no student will ever otherwise have seen and which the LSJ cites as the dative plural of an otherwise very rare noun ἰγνύς, itself a variant, according to the dictionary, of the somewhat more common ἰγνύα, which goes back to something like *ἐν-γνύη, literally “in-

¹⁸ See on these points respectively Joshua T. Katz, “Testimonia ritus Italici: Male Genitalia, Solemn Declarations, and a New Latin Sound Law,” *HSCP* 98 (1998) 183-217; Michael Janda, *Elysion: Entstehung und Entwicklung der griechischen Religion* (forthcoming); and (for a very brief sketch) *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston 2000) s.v. *paradise*.

¹⁹ See Bernhard Forssman, “περ’ ἰγνύσι hy. Merc. 152,” *KZ* 79 (1964) 28-31.

knee” and is defined as ‘the hollow at the back of the knee.’²⁰ Once the locus of the difficulty was made clear—the only place in these three lines, be it noted, where there is any real activity in the apparatus of Allen’s *OCT*—the groups of students to whom I posed the problem quickly noted two things that made them uneasy, one morpho-phonological, the other semantic: for one thing, nowhere else in Archaic epic, or in most genres a student is likely to have read, is the final iota of the preposition *περί* elidable²¹; and for another, are we really supposed to imagine that baby Hermes twists his swaddling clothes and baby blanket about his shoulders and the *backs* of his legs? Anyhow, given that the unusual form *ἰγνύσι* begins with an iota that seems anyway to be uncharacteristically missing from the end of the word that immediately precedes it, students pretty quickly come up with the idea that *περ’ ἰγνύσι* should be emended very subtly to “*περὶ γνύσι*.”

But what, then, is this “*γνύσι*”? There’s an old saw—often attributed to Voltaire, though there is no evidence that he actually said it—that linguistics is the science in which consonants count for little and vowels for nothing.²² Applied to linguistics as practiced today, this would be a deeply unfair characterization, and yet it is true that vowels often seem to have a now-you-see-them-now-you-don’t quality to them. But one of the main reasons for this is the phenomenon of ablaut, mentioned before, which explains why, for example, the vowels make all the difference in the English paradigm *sing* ~ *sang* ~ *sung* and why there is an epsilon in *ἔχω*, an omicron in *ὄχυρός*, and no vowel at all at the beginning of *σχίσω*. There are scholars who spend their lives trying to unravel the details behind the system of ablaut in the Indo-European languages, and obviously I must present a highly simplistic picture here. But I have found that the procedure of discovery involved in correcting this line in the *Hymn to Hermes*—in effect, replicating in the classroom a result that Forssman published in a specialist journal more than forty years ago and that may finally now be accepted by Classicists, thanks to its codification in M. L. West’s 2003 *Loeb* edition of the hymns (see below)—is an excellent way to demonstrate to students in a hands-on way how just a basic understanding of how language works can have textual consequences: for it is immediately apparent that Hermes is running the blanket over his knees, that *-σι* is the ending of the dative plural, and that this leaves *γνυ-*, which looks for all the

²⁰ The LSJ entry reads as follows: “*ἰγνύα*, Ion. *ἰγνύη*, ἡ, *the part behind the thigh and knee, ham*, κατ’ ἰγνύην βεβλημένος Il. 13.212; [...].—From a nom. *ἰγνύς*, ὄσος, ἡ, we find dat. pl. *ἰγνύσι* *h.Merc.* 152 [...].” For the etymology, see, e.g., Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: histoire des mots*, new ed. (Paris 1999) s.v. *ἰγνύη*.

²¹ Plenty of dialects regularly have the monosyllabic form *πέρ*, but *περί* is never elided in Homer and, outside Pindar, only very rarely in any form of literary Greek (see LSJ s.v. *G*, where the only epic examples are the case under discussion and the compound verb *περίαχε* ‘resounded’ in Hes. *Th.* 678, on which see M. L. West, *Hesiod: Theogony* [Oxford 1966] 83). Theocritus’ μακρὴν δὲ περ’ ἰγνύησιν ἔλιξε / κέρκον (*Id.* 25.242f.) ‘and he [sc. the lion] curled his long tail περ’ ἰγνύησιν,’ in which “[t]he elision of *περί* is remarkable” (A. S. F. Gow, *Theocritus*, 2nd ed. [Cambridge 1952] II.468; note that LSJ s.v. *ἰγνύη* cites the passage with the preposition “*παρ’*”), is presumably somehow based on the verse in the hymn (compare Gow and especially Forssman [above, n.19] 30 n.3).

²² See now Anatoly Liberman, *Word Origins ... and How We Know them: Etymology for Everyone* (New York 2005) 180, with 282 n.8.

world like the Greek word for ‘knee,’ the *u*-stem γόνυ, minus the root vowel. It would take a fair amount of controversial fine print, inappropriate in a paper of this kind, to try to give a proper reckoning of the ablaut pattern of the word for ‘knee’ in pre-Greek—for one thing, there has probably been some restructuring of its accentual/ablaut class from acrostatic to proterokinetic—but it is clear that at some level the paradigm has **ḡonu-* with an *o*, as in Gk. γόνυ; **ḡenu-* with an *e*, the form that then gets generalized in Latin, witness the cognate word *genū*; and also **ḡ_nu-* with nothing at all.²³ This last form, **ḡnu-*, wins out in English and the other Germanic languages, witness (with Grimm’s Law) *knee* (OE *c_nēow*), and is also found in the Greek adverb γ_νύξ ‘to the knee(s)’ and the second half of the Greek compound ἰγ_νύη, in addition, as we now see, to being preserved still further, and just barely, in a hitherto misunderstood relic dative plural form, γ_νυσί (for this rather than “γ_νύσι” is the expected accentuation), in a Homeric hymn.²⁴ Nor is the pattern **ḡ(ó/é/∅)n-u-* isolated: students quickly see that the *u*-stem δόρυ ‘wood; spear’ has the same basic shape as γόνυ, and the form without the root vowel is found in Eng. *tree* (OE *t_rēow*), which naturally likewise shows the effect of Grimm’s Law, and also in the Greek word δ_ρῦς ‘tree, oak,’ which has spawned its own paradigm²⁵ (and from the starting point **d(ó/é/∅)r-u-* ‘tree,’ it is easy to segue into a discussion of both paradigmatic analogy and semantic change).²⁶

²³ For a good and bibliographically rich account of the work on Proto-Indo-European ablaut classes in general and the case of words like ‘knee’ in particular, see Michael Meier-Brügger, *Indo-European Linguistics*, tr. Charles Gertmenian (Berlin 2003) 201-18, esp. 208 (usually cited in the original German edition: *Indogermanische Sprachwissenschaft*, 8th ed. [Berlin 2002] 203-20, esp. 210f.); there is also an exemplary technical treatment in Georges-Jean Pinault, “Sur les thèmes indo-européens en *-u-: dérivation et étymologie,” in Eva Tichy, Dagmar S. Wodtke, & Britta Irslinger, eds., *Indogermanisches Nomen: Derivation, Flexion und Ablaut. Akten der Arbeitstagung der Indogermanischen Gesellschaft/Society for Indo-European Studies/Société des Études Indo-Européennes, Freiburg, 19. bis 22. September 2001* (Bremen 2003) 153-88. The Greek forms of γόνυ and δόρυ are discussed most fully by Francisco Javier Martínez García, *Los nombres en -υ del griego* (Frankfurt am Main 1996) 20-39, 57-70, and *passim*.

²⁴ On such ∅-grade forms, with special emphasis on the formation of the Homeric adverb πρόχ_νυ ‘to the knee(s); utterly,’ see Alan J. Nussbaum, *Head and Horn in Indo-European* (Berlin 1986) 267-74 and *passim*; see also Ana Vegas Sansalvador, “La glosa de Hesiquio γυθίσσων· διορύσσων,” in Jürgen Habisreiter, Robert Plath, & Sabine Ziegler, eds., *Gering und doch von Herzen: 25 indogermanistische Beiträge Bernhard Forssman zum 65. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden 1999) 287-94, esp. 288-90.

²⁵ Watkins (above, n.5) 161 n.7 notes that περὶ δρυσί_ν appears in the same metrical slot in *Il.* 14.398 as the recovered περὶ γ_νυσί in the hymn: it may well be a relic of the paradigm of δόρυ rather than in the first place a form of δ_ρῦς (compare Martínez García [above, n.23] 57 and 61f.).

²⁶ Michael Janda, *Über “Stock und Stein”* (Dettelbach 1997) 141-58 provides a nice survey of the ablaut pattern of γόνυ and δόρυ and their congeners in and outside Greek. An *e*-grade form **der-* (cf. **ḡen-*) underlies the first part of δένδρεον ‘tree’ if this has indeed undergone dissimilation from **δέρ-δρε(φ)ον*, as is often assumed (Klaus Strunk, “Griechisch

The bottom line is that learning via linguistic theory why and how to make a tiny textual change in the verse in question, which amounts to little more than the erasure of an apostrophe, while not affecting the meaning in any significant way, nevertheless allows students to see and appreciate in one small detail a world of knowledge and insight that many are eager to find out much more about and claim for themselves. And this is, of course, one of the many worlds where that consummate philologist, M. L. West, feels at home, which is why he has now rightly printed and translated verses 151-53 of the *Hymn to Hermes* as follows²⁷:

σπάργανον ἄμφ' ὤμοις εἰλυμένος ἤύτε τέκνον
νῆπιον ἐν παλάησι περὶ γυνυσὶ λαῖφος ἀθύρων,
κεῖτο, χέλυς ἑρατὴν ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ χειρὸς ἔέργων.

152 περὶ γυνυσὶ Forssman: περιγυνύσι M, περ' ἰγνύσι f, παρ' ἰγνύσι p

With his swaddling clothes wrapped round his shoulders, he lay like a baby,
toying with the sheet round his knees, keeping his lovely lyre on his left hand.

I have chosen this apparently uninteresting example because it is in fact interesting in remarkably many ways that are easy for professionals to explain and students to grasp—and because, as I have repeatedly discovered, there is much to be said for a strong “bottom-up” case for linguistics: smart students respond especially well to subjects that defy their expectations, ones that go from being duller than dull to positively gripping in one fell swoop.

There are many other case studies I could have discussed from my own teaching, including what linguists have to say about the textually messy beginning of the *Twelve Tables*,

δένδρεον und Zugehöriges,” in Wojciech Smoczyński, ed., *Kuryłowicz Memorial Volume* [Cracow 1995] I.357-63 is appropriately cautious), but something like *δέμ-δρε(φ)ον, literally “house-tree,” is perhaps more likely (see Janda, 148-50, as well as Strunk). Also like *ḡ(ó/é/Ø)n-u- and *d(ó/é/Ø)r-u- are *s(ó/é/Ø)n-u- ‘back,’ *s(ó/é/Ø)r-u- ‘booty’ (see Calvert Watkins, “Varia I: 1. A Hittite-Celtic Etymology,” *Ériu* 27 [1976] 116-19), perhaps *k̄(ó/é/Ø)r-u- ‘horn’ (compare Nussbaum [above, n.24] 14f., with reference to W. Cowgill), and—best of all—*h₂(ó/é/Ø)ḡ-u- ‘lifetime,’ the source of, among other things, the Greek negative particle οὐ (!). (Still further forms in the same class are discussed by Pinault [above, n.23], with detailed references.) On οὐ, see Warren Cowgill’s magnificent paper “Greek *ou* and Armenian *oč*,” *Language* 36 (1960) 347-50, which gives an especially instructive classroom example of semantic change and the art of etymology. Although justly admired in the secondary literature (see, e.g., a forthcoming paper by Charles de Lamberterie), it should be noted that Andrew L. Sihler effectively rejects Cowgill’s derivation in his standard English-language handbook *New Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin* (New York 1995) 45f. and 120 on the grounds that *h₂o should yield Gk. α rather than ο. But Sihler is wrong: *h₂o does in fact yield Gk. ο, as Michael Weiss forcefully notes in his review in *AJP* 117 (1996) 670-75, at 671f. (compare also, e.g., Watkins [above, n.5] 16, with n.5, on the equation between Gk. ὄγμος and Skt. *ájma-*, both of which mean ‘path (*vel sim.*)’ and derive from PIE *h₂óḡ-mo-).

²⁷ Thus, M. L. West, *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer* (Cambridge, MA 2003) 124f.

why an octopus suddenly appears in line 524 of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and how a class can get turned on by, yes, South Picene sight translation. It should go without saying that I will always be glad to receive general inquiries from and engage in nitty-gritty shoptalk with anyone who reads this essay and would like to know more. In short, linguists are so very good for so very many things, and it will be a happy day when every department of Classics has vibrant faculty in the not-at-all moribund subject of linguistics, people who can say and teach the words "*mortuus/a sum*" and "τέθηκα"—and laugh about it, for it is not true.