

Learning Greek and Latin Will Be Key to Renewing the West

Last week, [various headlines](#) proclaimed that there's a "cut-off age" of 17 or 18 if you want to learn a new language.

The headlines were generated by a new study published by MIT researchers, and based on analysis of a grammar quiz they gave to 670,000 people. The researchers found that people "remain very skilled at learning the grammar of a new language... up to the age of 17 or 18." But they also found that "it is nearly impossible for people to achieve proficiency similar to that of a native speaker unless they start learning a language by the age of 10."

The findings are probably not that surprising to most of us. It's been drilled into our heads that "kids' brains are like sponges," and thus, that learning a new language should be reserved to them. Many of us monolingual adults often daydream about learning another language. But when the desire periodically arises, it is usually quashed by a mantra that's been programmed into us: it's too difficult to learn a language as an adult.

However, the study didn't actually confirm this mantra. It found that "after the age of 18 people *will still learn quickly* but may not achieve the same proficiency of native speakers." (my emphasis)

While it's certainly true that adults can't learn languages as quickly as children, it's not necessarily the herculean effort it's made out to be—at least from the neurological perspective. Adults actually do have some advantages over children when it comes to learning languages, especially in the area of vocabulary. In addition, there is [evidence](#) that

the mental effort of learning a language slows cognitive decline and can delay the onset of dementia.

I have a personal interest in adults not being deterred from learning new languages for a couple of reasons.

One, I think that adults learning languages is part of the process for making up for our mediocre educations. For centuries, the mark of an educated person in the West was knowledge of other languages. In the 17th and 18th centuries, for instance, the sole requirement for entrance into Harvard was being able to translate Latin authors and decline nouns and verbs in Greek. Today, however, many of us take four years of a language in high school and can barely remember basic vocabulary by the time we exit college. This is a shame, because there's [good reason to believe](#) that learning a language plays a crucial role in forming our critical thinking skills.

Second, I think that a return to learning Greek and Latin will be key to the renewal of Western Civilization.

There is growing energy behind the idea of rediscovering those great works of the past which were produced by the classical culture that formed the West. But language is inseparable from culture and thought, and to truly recover the classical mind will most likely require the hard work of recovering the languages that formed that mind. We have the past one hundred years as evidence that trying to get people to read the "Great Books" in stodgy translations doesn't really work.

A return to classical languages [has always been a catalyst of intellectual innovation](#) in the West, and I suspect it will be so again. The great educational reforms of Charlemagne—which pulled the West out of the Dark Ages—were founded above all else on the improvement of instruction in Latin grammar. It was the translation of Aristotle into Latin that produced the

greatest scholarship of the Middle Ages. It was the revival of interest in Latin and Greek classics that led to the Renaissance.

[As even atheists admit](#), there is no such thing as Western Civilization without Christianity. And so, a renewal of the West will necessarily involve a renewal of a fragmented Christianity—something that is implicitly an ecumenical project. But rather than devoting all of our energies to debating an ever-increasing list of supposed dogmatic, liturgical, and hermeneutical differences, perhaps the most effective ecumenical program, as some have proposed, is for Christians to engage in a mutual rediscovery of the common tradition of the first millennium, i.e., the Patristic Age, and to together read the works of the Church Fathers who wrote in the time of the undivided Church.

I think the seeds for the East-West schism in Christianity were in some ways sown when children in the Western Roman Empire stopped learning Greek in the years following Rome's Golden Age. The lack of shared languages played a role in creating a theological and cultural rupture in the Christian world that eventually, over the course of several centuries, led to the formal schism popularly dated as occurring in 1054 A.D. I believe that a healing of this schism must not only involve creatively rediscovering the Latin and Greek Fathers, but rediscovering the language in which they thought and wrote. Pope Benedict XVI especially [reminds us](#) of the perennial role of Greek in the Christian faith:

“There is deep meaning in the fact that only the Greek language became the privileged language of Christianity, that it still is and will always remain so, because it is the language of the New Testament. In a sense, the Hellenic element, the ways of Hellenic thought, were sanctioned by this. One cannot renounce Hellenism without at the same time touching the Holy Scriptures.”

A renewal of Greek and Latin education—and thus, a renewal of the West—must eventually make its presence felt in the school curriculum, so that Greek and Latin are taught beginning at those ages when the students' minds are “like sponges”. But as the Latin saying goes, *Nemo dat quod non habet*—“No one gives what he doesn't have.” We must first create teachers of Latin and Greek before we are able to create more students of Latin and Greek. And doing that will require that adults first take upon themselves the challenge and discipline of learning these ancient languages.

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