TEACHING THE LANGUAGES OF ASIA. AN INTRODUCTION

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Learning and teaching languages, be they modern or ancient, presents a challenge to most if not all people involved. Beyond the matters of 'simply' learning vocabulary and grammar, students need to acquaint themselves with the culture, history and linguistic 'habits' of a language, that is the categories which it encodes grammatically – such as tense, aspect, evidentiality or politeness – and the ways in which it does so. Adding to this the language's history, literary references and idiomatic expressions that are synchronically no longer explicable, the learner in essence has to discover and internalise what Wittgenstein referred to as the 'mythology […] stored within our language'.[1]

The teacher, by contrast, is already familiar with the different worlds, both of the metalanguage used for instruction and the target language to be explored. They need to find ways of letting the two meet effectively so as to allow their students to shed the restraints of one language and familiarise themselves with the opportunities of the other, thus expanding the 'limits of [their] world', metaphorically speaking.[2] This they need to do in a manner that continuously engages their students, thus maintaining their motivation, and equally challenges them just enough to keep things interesting without demanding the impossible.

There can be no doubt that such an undertaking is never simple. It is made plainly difficult, however, in the context of languages no longer actively spoken. In them, the teacher has neither the advantage nor the intuition of the

[1] 'In unserer Sprache ist eine ganze Mythologie niedergelegt' from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough, 1967, reprinted in: James C. Klagge & Alfred Nordmann (eds) (1993) *Ludwig Wittgenstein. Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*. Cambridge: Hackett, 133.
[2] Playing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's dictum 'Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt' from the *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*, §5.6.

native speaker, but is him- or herself a stranger in a strange land. Equally, they do not have recourse to native speakers with whom to enquire about this question or another; instead they must make do with the information that already exists, usually in texts clearly not composed for language learners to appreciate. Patently, however, these languages still need to be taught, even though, perhaps, they are past their prime as regards their active communicative function.

Our understanding of bygone cultures continues to rely almost exclusively on written documents. Only through them can we begin to understand the past – and thus, we need a working knowledge of the languages they employ, including their 'mythology'. Equally, we can comprehend even modern cultures only with sufficient command of the language or languages they use. The teaching of ancient and modern languages remains, therefore, a fundamental and necessary endeavour and, as the contributions in this volume argue, a worthwhile subject of study and debate.

Such teaching, at the very least for ancient, medieval and pre-modern languages – those, in short, that are no longer routinely spoken for communicative purposes – happens in most circumstances at university level, with the exception perhaps of Latin and, to a lesser extent, Ancient Greek and Biblical Hebrew, which are still sometimes taught in secondary education. At university, their teaching is frequently undertaken by researchers from various sub-disciplines with varying degrees of training in language pedagogy. Equally, of course, not all pedagogically trained teachers of modern languages or indeed native speakers are familiar to the same extent with the history of the language they teach and speak, be that at university or at school.

With these challenges in mind and on the occasion of the *Deutscher Orientalistentag*, which in 2022 took place at the Free University in Berlin, we convened a panel of teachers of modern and ancient languages of Asia for the purpose of fostering exchange between practitioners. Our aim was to talk about some of the theoretical underpinnings of teaching languages which, at least in the Western European context, are less commonly taught. To guide our discussions and foster debate, we posed the following questions:

- Which methodological approaches used in teaching spoken languages could be adapted for use in languages no longer spoken?

- How can we most effectively introduce students familiar with an ancient language to its modern daughter language – and vice versa?
- In what way can we actively use phylogenetic relationships to teach students with knowledge of one language a closely related one?
- How can we use knowledge of Latin or Greek which students retain from school in order to teach them other (ancient) Indo-European languages?
- What is the best way of teaching students languages which differ fundamentally in their structure from the student's mother tongue(s)?
- What technological advances and research projects are there which might be of interest for language teachers?

As the panel was successful and the ensuing discussions lively, it seemed only right that the occasion should give rise to a collected volume of some of the papers presented there, in particular as many if not all of the questions raised above were discussed to one extent or another. The eight papers in this volume, spanning more than 4,000 years in time – from teaching Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs to modern Farsi – and the entirety of Asia – from Japan via China, Tibet, India, Iran, and the Caucasus to its westernmost frontier – thus represent a current account of diverse perspectives and approaches to the teaching of ancient and modern languages of Asia and beyond. In this volume, the two first papers deal with questions of language teaching methodology and technology more broadly, without focussing on any one language; the contributions thereafter are arranged in approximate relative chronology, beginning with antiquity and leading up to our time.

In her paper, Antonia Ruppel uses the experience she gathered designing online Sanskrit courses in various formats to make a series of basic and general suggestions for setting up more such courses in other ancient languages. There are many reasons why one might want to do so; offering a systematic online supplement for a classroom-taught course, bare-bones provision for a course that cannot be taught 'on the books' for lack of student interest in a trad-ac setting or creating a thorough course complete with comprehensive learning environment for an alt-ac setting are just three of these.

One of the key aspects here, Ruppel argues, is to be clear on what one means by ‘language course’. What are the elements needed for good teaching, here especially for good ancient-language teaching, that I need to put in place for my students to be most likely to succeed? Also, what do I mean by ‘teaching a language’? Is my goal to let students read a very specific corpus or to access a wide variety of texts, possibly in variant forms of a language? Is my ultimate goal to have them read a core language freely, or, for a side language, to know which resources are available to let them decipher texts with the help of a grammar and a dictionary? What kind of student am I trying to reach? What prior knowledge can I likely expect in my target audience and thus make use of in the resources one provides? What resources do I have available to spend, and where can I intelligently save resources (be those time or money) by involving students who might benefit from the work and thought that goes into creating e.g. handouts, slides or electronic flash cards?

Also, as Ruppel suggests, having answered the questions of ‘what precisely are my goals?’ and ‘what do I need to reach those goals?’ is the best basis for selecting the right ones among the by now very numerous service providers (for flash cards, video production, website design and hosting, etc.).

Todd Krause, Hans C. Boas and Danny Law also discuss the internet as the locus of teaching, but from a different vantage point, where it does not just replace the traditional classroom, but the textbook as well. In the context of teaching ancient languages, which pose a distinct challenge as there are no native speakers to engage with in conversation when compared to their modern counterparts, the University of Texas at Austin’s Linguistics Research Center has developed the Early Indo-European Online (EIEOL) collection. This online resource offers educational lessons that immerse students in early languages through original, unaltered texts. With more than 20,000 monthly users, EIEOL is a widely-used platform and includes 18 languages such as Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Old Church Slavonic, along with lesser-studied languages like Hittite, Classical Armenian, Avestan and Tocharian.

Each language series within EIEOL features extensively annotated excerpts from ancient texts, supplemented with modules that explain the relevant grammar and cultural contexts. Adopting such a text-centric method and combining it with a user-definable interface allows learners of various skill levels to engage directly with the languages, reducing the need for

extensive preliminary grammatical knowledge and making the learning process more accessible. It supports a flexible theoretical framework that can adapt to various teaching approaches, descriptions of ancient grammatical structures, and purposes of language learning.

This approach is particularly beneficial for languages with a complex historical grammatical evolution or those lacking consensus in scholarly description, such as Tocharian. EIEOL accommodates not only Indo-European languages but is also expanding to include early Mesoamerican, Semitic, and Sino-Tibetan languages, demonstrating its versatility and broad applicability. As a result, EIEOL stands out as a comprehensive and adaptable educational platform for exploring a diverse array of ancient languages.

Turning to the pedagogy of individual languages, Maiken Mosleth King considers the challenges of teaching the Middle Egyptian language and Egyptian hieroglyphs, focussing particularly on adult anglophone learners beyond the traditional university. The absence of native speakers, the vast number of hieroglyphic signs to be learnt, the challenge of reconstructing pronunciation, and the scarcity of accessible intermediate learning tools like readers and textbooks are only some of the hurdles learners have to overcome.

Since, as with most ancient languages, developing reading proficiency is the main goal, Mosleth King advocates a pedagogical approach emphasising vocabulary as the cornerstone of learning, including recognising variant spellings. Her method involves reading words, sentences, and increasingly complex paragraphs to aid vocabulary memorisation, thereby building learner confidence. Grammar and syntax are gradually introduced within the context of practice sentences.

She goes on to highlight the importance of digitising ancient Egyptian texts using modern hieroglyphic fonts, which allows for the creation of standardised, legible practice texts for intermediate learners. This digitisation facilitates the use of pedagogical aids such as inserting spaces between words and adding signs omitted by ancient scribes.

To provide learners with the tools and context necessary to achieve reading competence in Middle Egyptian, she finally argues, the newly gained understanding of vocabulary and grammar must be further enhanced by

embedding it in a discussion of the broader semantic and cultural meanings of the ancient texts.

This contextualisation is imperative not only for Middle Egyptian, but also for other, particularly ancient languages, especially when groups of learners come to this language from diverse backgrounds and with particular interests. In his contribution, Robin Meyer contrasts the teaching of ancient languages at university level with approaches taken in secondary schools. While the latter typically offer a limited set of languages, such as Latin and Greek, they extensively incorporate material on the literature, culture and history associated with these languages – thus giving the learner a more comprehensive introduction than many university language courses do.

Meyer's paper advocates for a more contextualised approach to teaching less-commonly studied languages at the university level, too, arguing that this provides essential insights into the language and helps students from diverse academic backgrounds – such as theology, history and linguistics – and with varying skills and expectations to develop a similar holistic understanding of the newly learned language. He discusses the case of Classical Armenian as an example to illustrate this point. Without additional courses on Armenian history, literature, religion and culture, addressing the varied interests of students becomes challenging unless such context is integrated directly into the language learning process.

The paper therefore suggests that textbooks for such less-commonly studied languages should be conceived to reflect the composition of each likely interest group, thus including cultural, historical, literary and linguistic elements in balanced proportions and with the target audience in mind. The primary focus, however, should always remain on language acquisition. The proposed solution is to seamlessly integrate historical and cultural information within grammatical exercises and readings, as well as to include regular excursus on relevant topics, ensuring that these elements enhance rather than detract from the language learning experience.

In his contribution, Dirk Schmidt discusses quite a different pedagogical challenge, namely a scenario when a 'classical' language has not given way to its modern successor, but is retained as the formal or literary register – as is the case for Tibetan.

Learning Tibetan today is closely intertwined with the academic discipline of Tibetan Studies and Tibetology, and thus with their particular historical legacies and established practices. Schmidt reviews these existing methods and proposes an innovative approach for learning and translating Middle Tibetan, also known as 'Classical' Tibetan, emphasising a comprehensive, collaborative and community-focused strategy, which draws on applied linguistics, second language acquisition and translation studies.

In particular, he discusses the potential benefits of learning Modern Tibetan first, arguing that such an approach makes sense not only since the differences between the two varieties are not staggering, but also because it offers significant advantages for both academics and the Tibetan-speaking communities. These communities, he argues, possess crucial perspectives on textual interpretations, rooted in their living traditions, which are invaluable for authentic translations.

His key objective is to shift from viewing texts merely as sources for extracting translations to engaging with translation as a social practice that is constructive, inclusive and reciprocal. This approach aims to create a more interactive and beneficial relationship between translators and the broader Tibetan community, which would enhance both the understanding and appreciation of Tibetan texts.

A similar question of the relationship between older and modern forms of the same language arises for Vance Schaefer, whose contribution discusses how relevant elements of Classical Japanese can best be integrated in second-language acquisition. Classical Japanese elements significantly influence Modern Japanese, making both passive and active knowledge of the classical form necessary for speakers and learners of Japanese as an Additional Language (JAL). Schaefer promotes a proactive approach to incorporating Classical Japanese into JAL education. After outlining the characteristics, forms and applications of Classical Japanese within modern usage, he proposes a pedagogical framework with clear, attractive and measurable learning outcomes for students.

His teaching strategy includes Classical Japanese in its modern context through integrating extensive reading of learner-appropriate texts into contemporary Japanese courses, combined with a variety of support activities. These activities utilise a flipped or blended learning format and include

explicit instruction, focus-on-form exercises, and instances of the grammar-translation method. Schaefer's approach further leverages the cultural appeal of Japanese popular media by incorporating elements such as haiku, manga and anime, enhancing student engagement and motivation.

He argues that by exposing JAL learners to Classical Japanese in this way, students may be more inclined to pursue dedicated Classical Japanese courses at the appropriate time. This could increase enrolment in such courses and open doors for students to explore aspects of Japanese literature, history and culture in a more detailed manner.

In Maryam Pakzadian's contribution, historical languages no longer play a role in language education; instead, she proposes a particular framework – Pedagogical Construction Grammar – from which to approach the teaching of Farsi. Focussing on complex predicates, semantically light verbs combined with nominal, adjectival, prepositional and other phrases, she emphasises the importance of conceiving of these collocations as 'constructions', that is form–meaning pairs whose meanings transcend that of their individual components.

In her paper, Pakzadian highlights the usefulness of the notion of construction, both in pedagogical terms as well as regarding its descriptive accuracy; she illustrates these advantages at the example of peculiar grammatical behaviour of these complex predicates, which at times exhibit the same properties as single lexical items (e.g. in agent formation), at other times those of phrases (e.g. in auxiliary or clitic positioning).

After her discussion of the linguistic properties of complex predicates from a construction grammar perspective, Pakzadian proposes concrete pedagogical means, including exercises and elements of a lesson plan, with which to introduce this complex topic to learners of Farsi, thereby illustrating the importance of the research pedagogy interface.

In the final contribution to this volume, Emine Çakır and Hiroe Kaji turn from language teaching to language teachers and their role and treatment in a university setting. Their paper briefly outlines the story behind the teacher-led Language Teachers' Committee workshops that started in 2015 as an informal occasion for teachers of less-commonly taught languages at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (AMES) at the University of Oxford to find

out more about how colleagues teach their specific target language. Over time, they turned into a key means of Continuous Professional Development, allowing colleagues to share best practice and scholarship. This forum and the exchange opportunities that it provides proved particularly relevant at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when language teachers needed to adapt their methods and resources to a new setting essentially over night.

Next to the workshops themselves, Çakır and Kaji discuss questions of institutional politics and the value attributed to language teachers by the Faculty as a whole and their researcher colleagues individually. Detailing the process of engagement and discussion with the university administration, they review the 25-year-long process of raising the profile and the recognition of language teachers at the Faculty and the challenges involved therein. At the same time, they highlight the importance of this trifecta – due recognition and fair treatment, a reflective support structure, and opportunities for professional development – for the individual and institutional wellbeing of language teachers, especially at university level.

In most arts and humanities environments within traditional academia, the fact that language knowledge is the necessary basis of almost all our other work often leads to the erroneous assumption that language teaching is ‘basic’, i.e. that anyone in the field can teach these languages. We hope that this volume contributes to the demonstration that a lot of varied thought goes into teaching them *well*.