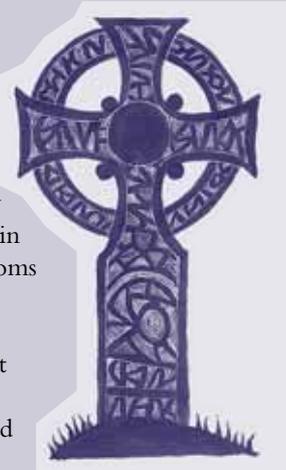


Ancient and Classical Languages

It is impossible to speak English without speaking Greek, as Dr. John Karalas demonstrates in the following paragraph from *The Genesis of Classical Drama*, composed entirely of words of Greek origin.

The prologue, the theme, and the epilogue comprised the trilogy of drama while synthesis, analysis, and synopsis characterised the phraseology of the text. The syntax and phraseology used by scholars, academicians, and philosophers in their rhetoric had many grammatical idioms and idiosyncrasies.

Our intellectual debt to Greek is without question, and even the Romans bowed handsomely to Greek culture. They Latinized a huge number of terms, especially those relating to the refinement of thought, expression, rhetoric, and language generally. A nicely untranslatable example of what linguists call “a rhetorical device” is the word *accismus*, from the Greek *akkismos*, meaning “coyness” or “affectation.” This refers to how we may refuse something in a slightly dramatic way to show that we would really rather like to have it. “Oh, no, I couldn’t



possibly take the last piece, delicious as it was . . . and my favorite dessert of all. No, I simply couldn’t. Well . . .”

The ancient Greeks not only had many ideas and concepts that were quite particular to them and not easily translated into modern terms, but also had a long tradition of uniquely Greek feelings. The Romans, in their turn, gave us town planning, sophisticated techniques of construction, military organization and, in due course, carried by the Christian church on the back of their Empire, the European interlanguage of Vulgar or Medieval Latin. It was this that preserved the linguistic influence of both ancient Greek and Latin in the West to the time of the Renaissance and into this day.

We often forget that other traditions persisted throughout those centuries of the so-called Dark Ages, a time nonetheless of extraordinary cultural vigor and richness. Who thinks of the Visigoths as anything other than barbaric invaders of the Roman Empire? Yet their exquisite art and architecture is a bridge between the classical and the medieval, preserved but overlooked in their ancient kingdoms of northern Spain. One culture in particular that is now reclaiming its rightful place in history is the Celtic tradition, including Gaelic and other Celtic languages.

The Celtic church, at its height around the fifth century A.D., filled the vacuum left by the collapse of Roman rule, sending its missionaries to establish centers of learning all over Europe. It has even been persuasively argued that the Celts “saved civilization.” We shall see from our Gaelic untranslatables just how enduring their world vision was, nourishing a way of life that endured right up to the twentieth century in the farthest fringes of Europe.

Linguistically speaking, at the root of all these great traditions stands the legendary pre-Christian civilization of ancient India, with its profound culture explored and expressed through the medium of Sanskrit, and subsequently distributed all over Europe and Asia Minor. All the Indo-European family of tongues owe their origin to Sanskrit and its civilization. We shall see how some of the highest and deepest mysteries of existence found untranslatable names in this language.



Greek

What Greeks are always keen to tell you – and there are whole teams of academic linguists looking into this claim – is that you can “feel” things in Greek that are unknown in other languages. Greeks have always had feelings and emotions that nobody else has articulated. In *The Untranslatable Self*, a study of Greek-English bilinguals, Alexia Panayiotou concludes that, “(1) certain emotion terms exist only in specific languages and are therefore untranslatable; and (2) there are emotion terms, that, although linguistically translatable, are culturally untranslatable.”

Take “love,” for instance. A simple word that in English can mean almost anything. The Greeks knew better and had at least three words for “love.” Centuries of debate, from Plato onward, have since taken place around the fine distinctions of *agape*, *eros*, and *imeros*, which arguably mean “brotherly love,” “sexual love,” and something entirely untranslatable.

But there is plenty more that the Greeks had words for. What about forgotten stirrings like *thymos*, meaning, “spiritedness”? Certainly we could all do with a bit more of that. If we can’t muster up *thymos*, would a little *orge* suffice instead, or is that too severe a prospect? And who among us can honestly say we have recently been feeling *thambos*? Perhaps we have simply been overcome by *anomia*, or overwhelmed by a sense of *kaos* and *aporia*.

As if ancient Greek feelings were not enough, modern Greeks complicate matters even more with a range of unique and untranslatable Hellenic states of mind and emotion, from *meraki* to *derti*, included to show that you just can’t keep a good Greek’s feelings down.

eidolon [ay-doh-lon] (noun)

This term in Greek thought, meaning something like “image of a person” or “empty shadow” was what descended into

Hades after death as a shade or ghost. It did not indicate survival of an “immortal soul” in the sense that Western thought later arrived at. As we see from Homer’s epic *The Odyssey* and other accounts of visiting Hades, the departed were literally “shadows of their former selves.” The Greeks believed that two vital elements of the human being were lost at death, and one was *thymos*, a particularly difficult word to translate, but we’ll have a shot at it below. The other was the life principle or something like consciousness, known as *psyche*. At death, this became a mere *eidolon*. The idea of *eidolon* explained for the Greeks why we sometimes see dead people in dreams or in dreamlike states. It has continued its meaning in the modern word “idol” with the same suggestion of “hollow image.”



thymos [thye-mos] (noun)

This is the hardest of Greek words to translate, as we have no real equivalent in modern thought. Having said that, it has been argued that we should draw more on this quality in modern life in order to restore more “spiritedness” and shake us from our bourgeois contentment. The Greeks understood *thymos* to be the most active, willed element

of the human being, situated somewhere around the diaphragm. It is easy to understand how early intuition arrived at this conclusion, as the ancient Chinese also found the *dan tien* or “energy center” in the same region of the body. At death, according to the Greeks, *thymos* simply vanished along with the *psyche*, leaving the *eidolon* or “empty shadow.” Plato described *thymos* as that element of our nature where we feel pride, indignation, or shame, and it is through the *thymos* that we sacrifice ourselves for some cause, entirely against our own physical well-being. As political theorist Thomas G. Dineen writes, encouraging us to more *thymos*: “The person who swims into rough seas to rescue a stranger; the soldier who storms an enemy machine gun nest to save his mates; the fireman or policeman who risks his life to help those in peril – these people are living thymotically.” I daresay it was out of an overactive *thymos* that arose the dubious quality denoted by the Greek *hubris*, which persuades a person that he can get away with almost anything he wants.

In biblical Greek, *thymos* is used to refer to the anger of God, mostly in the book of Revelation, where God’s wrath is at its peak, both apoplectic and apocalyptic. In other biblical contexts we find divine anger more often given as the Greek word *orge*, a colder, more judgmental kind of disapproval that delivers its punishments without any cosmic fireworks.

aporia [ap-aw-ree-ah] (adjective)

Derived from *a-poros*, “no way through,” this term refers to the feeling you get in almost any situation where you are at a loss, unable to work through a problem, cross a place, or reach a person. Indeed, this rather despairing state of mind has been described in its extreme form as “being radically at a loss before the world we inhabit.” Anyone trying to drive through an unfamiliar city will have this feeling.

thambos [tham-bos] (noun)

Faced with nature in all its various aspects and moods, from its exquisite calmness to its most terrible extremes of violence,

from its spectacular immensity to its tiniest and most detailed beauty, what are we to feel? Fear? Or joy? A sense of homage, awe, or respect? Whatever our feelings, they will be a curious blend of all these, and the Greeks had a word for it. *Thambos* summarizes all those mingled emotions that go with being struck dumb, literally “immobilized,” by something way beyond one’s understanding.

kaos [kah-os] (noun)

This resonant word has come down to us via Latin as “chaos,” but this represents only one aspect of its original meaning. In Greek mythology, as recorded by Hesiod, creation in the form of three gods arose out of the void known as *Kaos*, which was itself a primordial godhead. Therefore, the term *kaos* meant a universe where there was nothing formed – a state of yawning nothingness, empty and hollow. The name comes from the Greek verb stem *kha-* meaning “to yawn” or “gape.”

meraki [may-rah-kee] (adjective)

This is a word that modern Greeks often use to describe doing something with soul, creativity, or love – when you put “something of yourself” into what you’re doing, whatever it may be. *Meraki* is often used to describe cooking or preparing a meal, but it can also mean arranging a room, choosing decorations, or setting an elegant table.

derti [der-tee] (adjective)

This is a troubled state of mind, maybe the result of some deep unhappiness that has to be conquered. Rather than rest in this pain, the Greek reaction is to try to burn your way out of it by throwing yourself passionately into life again.

kefi [key-fee] (adjective)

A word that says you’re happy and just want to have a good time, enjoy good company over a good meal, drink, dance, and be merry. It’s not a million miles removed from the Czech idea of *pohoda*.

Latin



Modern English has recourse to a whole lot of Latin terms and phrases that reveal the hugely significant inheritance of that language over the centuries, in rhetoric, philosophy, education, science, and law. Here are just a few: *a posteriori*, *a priori*, *ad hoc*, *cum laude*, *ex equo*, *honoris causa*, *mortis causa*, *rigor mortis*, *sancta sanctorum*, *vade retro*, *quid pro quo*, *curriculum vitae*, *alma mater*. Then we find another layer of phrases and terms corrupted or abbreviated from Latin, some no longer even recognizable. For example, *volle nolle* gave us “willy nilly,” *QED* is short for *quod erat demonstrandum*, meaning literally, “it was to be proved,” “to ad lib” comes from *ad libitum*, meaning, “as desired,” *incognito* from “as unknown,” *pro tem*, *A.M.*, *P.M.*, *versus*, *via*, *viz*, *et cetera*, *et cetera*. We’re speaking Latin all the time without knowing it!

However, we must delve into shadier reaches where meanings are not so obvious. And it becomes clear as we look further into their social habits that the Romans did nothing by halves.

gravitas [*grav-ee-tas*] (noun)

English borrowed this word from Latin, meaning “heaviness” – thus our word “gravity” – but gave it a fine meaning of someone who comes across with solemn or serious bearing. He who has *gravitas* is usually a teacher or public figure – and I say “he” with calculated trepidation as it is not a word commonly applied to women, however serious they may be. “Bush had to feign *gravitas*, Gore *veritas*,” said Jake Tapper in a quip about the American 2000 presidential election.

bacchanalia [*bak-a-nay-lee-ah*] (noun)

If you are going to celebrate the festival of the god of wine, *Bachus*, there is surely only one way to do it – and that is by drinking a lot. In ancient times, *Bacchanalia* were celebrated in lower Italy by women only, probably as fertility rites. They

were at first secret, and held three times a year. Later they were introduced to Rome and men were admitted, upon which, as may be imagined, the general tenor declined. They became so popular that they became almost weekly events. Needless to say, the purple-stained mouths of revelers were also looking to celebrate the fertility aspect of such gatherings, and it seems the *Bacchanalia* became even more uninhibited than Carnival week in Rio. In 186 B.C. their appalling reputation led the Senate to issue an edict prohibiting unlicensed (literally) *Bacchanalia* throughout Italy.

accidia [*ak-see-dee-ah*] (noun)

This is a terrible state of spiritual torpor and sadness where one feels no desire or strength to act. It is sometimes written as *accidie*.

gynaecium [*gye-nee-see-um*] (noun)

This has come down to us as a Latin word, but the Greeks thought of it first as *gunaikeion*, so we must give them the credit, too. The original term comes from the Greek *gune*, “a woman” – and thus our word gynaecology – and referred to the inner quarters of a house reserved for women, a practice

continued by the Romans in their house design. In that sense, the Greek word is still used for the area of a Greek orthodox church where the women congregate separately from men during services. These days in feminist literature, *gynaecium* has come to mean the social areas that were traditional domains of women rather than men and has acquired a negative ring of containment and separation rather than the original warmer associations of privacy and protection.

temulentia [tem-uh-lent-ee-ah] (noun)

An advanced apoplectic state of drunkenness, perhaps induced during *Bacchanalia*.

vomitorium [vom-ee-tah-ree-um] (noun)

This word always evokes Hollywood depictions of Roman meals, with Charles Laughton and accompanying cast reclining on couches, eating too much. It is the thoughtfully provided place where the Roman guest went to throw up in order to return to the table and indulge even longer. Nowadays it might be useful if pubs reintroduced the idea.

in flagrante [in flag-rant-ay] (idiom)

This word literally means “while the thing is blazing,” but basically means that you are caught in the act of whatever you are doing. When a person is arrested *in flagrante delicto* the only evidence that is needed to convict him or her is to prove that fact. When someone is caught *in flagrante seducto* they have been caught with their pants down.

realia [ray-ah-lee-ah] (noun)

The word *realia* has its origins in Latin, but not the language spoken by the classical Romans, rather the medieval language of education, science, and philosophy. *Realia* means “real things,” as opposed to words, which are neither “things” nor “real.” Therefore it refers to objects and so requires the teacher or educator to put genuine articles or examples of things in front of a pupil, rather than simply to refer to them by using terms of vocabulary.

qualia [kwah-lee-ah] (noun)

This word’s meaning could not be more opposed to *realia*. In philosophical jargon, *qualia* are those experiences that we cannot possibly describe in words, such as seeing a specific color. Whatever science says about colors being no more than reflected wavelengths in the light spectrum, try declaring that about a sunset or a red-light district and see the looks you get. Red is red is red, and therefore falls into the category of so-called *qualia*.

sub rosa [sub roh-zah] (idiom)

Literally, “under the rose,” a lovely phrase with a long history. It is supposed to come from the gift of a rose, recorded in Greek myth, which Cupid made to the god of silence in return for keeping quiet about his mother Venus’s many amours. Over time this gave rise to the practice of hanging a rose at meetings to indicate confidentiality, thus *sub rosa*, under the rose. The rose became a feature of the central boss of vaulted chambers as, for instance, a monastic chapter room where the community met, and was also placed over the confessional. In private houses, too, from Roman times onward, a decorative rose in the plasterwork of a dining-room ceiling indicated an assurance to guests of their host’s discretion.



dulia [doo-lee-ah] (noun)

A Latin word again derived from the Greek *douleia*, meaning “service,” which identifies the particular reverence and honor paid to angels and saints. This seems to be a theological distinction made in order to rebut the Reformation charge of worshipping saints as gods, as the Church struggled to distinguish between “worship” (*latria*) and “veneration” (*dulia*).

Sanskrit

In 1786, Sir William Jones, a British philologist and student of Ancient Indian, said the following about the Sanskrit language in an address to the Asiatic Society of Calcutta:

The Sanskrit language is more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity than could possibly have been produced by accident. So strong, indeed, that no philosopher could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists.

Sanskrit certainly has entered English almost in an untranslated form because Western thought and spirituality has embraced the meanings as well as the words. Here is a selection of Sanskrit words that you might find almost familiar.

guru [goo-roo] (noun)

Guru in the modern Hindi and Punjabi languages now means “teacher,” but it comes from the Sanskrit word *guruh*, which means “weighty,” or “heavy,” rather like the Latin word *gravitas*. It traditionally refers to a teacher or guide, especially in spiritual and philosophical matters. Now commonly used in the West, and we have our own less weighty version in “fitness guru.”

nirvana [neer-vah-nah] (noun)

In Buddhism, this is a state of perfect happiness. It is the ineffable ultimate where one has attained disinterested wisdom and compassion. A transcendent state where there is no suffering, desire, or sense of self and the subject is released from the effects of karma. It represents the final

goal in Buddhism. Originally from the Sanskrit *nirva*, “be extinguished,” *nis*, “out,” and *va*, “to blow.”

yoga [yoh-gah] (noun)

Meaning “union,” it refers to the union of the mind, body, and spirit. This is a Hindu spiritual and ascetic discipline that includes breath control, simple meditation, and the adoption of specific body postures widely practiced for relaxation.

mantra [man-trah] (noun)

Generally known as a combination of syllables for meditation or affirmations often found on *mani* wheels, one of the oldest and best known mantras is the *om mane padme hum* of yogic chanting. But *mantra* also has a deeper and more powerful



meaning. *Man-* means “mental,” or “in mind,” and *-tra* stands for “a tool.” So the word represents a verbal instrument for mental imagery, a non-linguistic expression of the mind.

kamasutra [kah-mah-soo-trah] (noun)

Made popular by numerous Western books, marital therapists, and psychologists, this is a Sanskrit treatise setting out rules for sexual, sensuous, and sensual love and marriage in accordance with Hindu law.

Gaelic

Gaelic is an ancient Celtic tongue with an oral tradition that spans almost two thousand years and reflects a crofting lifestyle that remained virtually unchanged in all that time.

Sadly, much of this Scottish tradition was cruelly suppressed toward the end of the nineteenth century. Schoolchildren were chastised for speaking Gaelic, which was condemned as a pagan tongue. Old men and women were mocked for their charms, hymns, and incantations. Dance and song were banned. Musicians were forced to burn or hide their fiddles. The spirit of the *ceilidh* was broken.

Had it not been for the passionate enthusiasm of Alexander Carmichael, a wandering exciseman whose job took him around the Highlands and islands, practically all of the old lore would have been lost forever. His inspiring collection of Gaelic oral folklore, the *Carmina Gadelica*, was first published in 1900 and captures the spirit of a remarkable language and community aligned with nature and a culture almost unimaginably remote from that of the English and other Europeans.

He particularly captures the true depth of traditional meaning of the spirit of *ceilidh* in the following account:

In a crofting community, the people work in unison in the field during the day, and discuss together in the house at night. This meeting is called *ceilidh* – a word that throbs the heart of the Highlander wherever he be. The *ceilidh* is a literary entertainment where stories and tales, poems and ballads are rehearsed and recited, and songs are sung, conundrums are put, proverbs are quoted, and many other literary matters are related and discussed. Let me briefly describe the *ceilidh* as I have seen it.

What follows is a touching and warm description of a village gathering in the storyteller's home, around the light of the peat fire in the middle of the floor. The people sit around, few hands being idle, as a woman spins, a man plaits a basket, and a girl cards, her wool. Others sew, embroider, or twist laths to hold down thatch. When the news of the day and the moods of the weather are dealt with, the storyteller is asked to perform. A tale can last an evening, or many, and when it is at last done, the audience sits and discusses the merits and demerits of the characters, before moving on to other entertainments.

Much has disappeared with those times, but the *ceilidh* still preserves its delightful character of being a gathering of the whole community, young and old, enjoying themselves together in a spontaneous way.

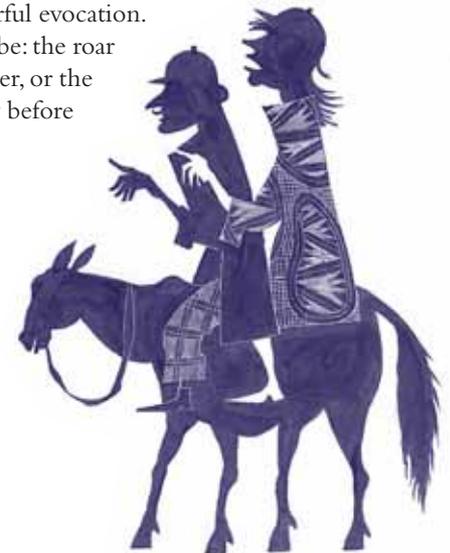
The Celtic language of this age-old tradition is permeated with untranslatables and, as the following examples show, with echoes of beliefs and customs that date back to the fourth or fifth centuries and the time of Saint Columba himself.

brác [brack] (noun)

A deer, but also with wonderful evocation. According to context it can be: the roar of a stag, the curve of an antler, or the curve of a wave immediately before breaking.

bialag [bee-ah-lak] (noun)

A person in front of another on horseback – such a useful word that it had to be included. But what isn't clear is whether this is the person driving or the passenger!



**caim** [*caym*] (noun)

The word means literally “a sanctuary.” It’s an imaginary circle made around the body with the hand. It serves as a ring of protection.

cailleach [*cal-yak*] (noun)

Literally “a woman,” usually an old single woman, or even a nun, but the nearest sense would be “hag.” However, in English this term is now corrupted with associations of witchcraft or supernatural and malign activity. In Celtic mythology, the *cailleach* is considered as the “crone” aspect of the Triple Goddess. In a telling metaphor, the cruel winds of early April, punishing the first green shoots of the year, are seen as the work of a wild *cailleach* or storm goddess who wields her switch against the young plants until finally giving up in disgust and disappearing till another season. Similarly around Halloween, the *cailleach* appears as the winter goddess bringing the first frosts. She is one who needs to be appeased. Traditionally, the first farmer to finish harvesting would make a corn-dolly or *cailleach* from the straw and pass it on to the next and so on until it came to the last farmer. This farmer was obliged to keep an eye on the “old woman” until the next year’s harvest.

craic [*crak*] (noun)

“Where’s the *craic*?” is the cry of any Irish person arriving in a new city. With an original meaning close to something like “chat,” obviously essential to any Irish get-together, the term now means the combination of elements all adding up to a good time – fun, laughter, chatter, music, and warm company. Having the *craic*, or “enjoying yourself,” is central to Irish life, and the phrase *ceoil agus craic*, which means “singing and a good time,” says it all. Those of Irish blood, of course, who do nothing by halves, will insist not just on *craic* but on having “the good *craic*!”

sluagh [*sloo-agh*] (noun)

Literally, “the hosts of the departed.” In Celtic mythology, the spirits of the departed continued the activities that they had most loved in the land of the living, especially hunting and fighting. Tales were told by those who had seen a vision of the hosts battling on a moonlit night or riding through the skies “with hounds on leash and hawks on hand” toward the farthest bournes beyond the seas.

sian [*shee-ahn*] (noun)

Soft and sorrowful music full of enchantment, which can be heard coming from a fairy knoll.

goisear [*gay-ser*] (noun)

This word has entered modern Scottish English as “guiser” and now refers simply to “carol singer.” But in the old tradition, the *goisearan* were present at all the great festivals of the year and were a band of village youth dressed up with masked faces as kings, queens, bishops, and nuns. Making as much noise as possible, they brought blessings to every house in exchange for presents. Traditionally, these offerings were carried off in a lambskin bag known as *uilim* to a barn where the revelers then held a large feast and a dance and invited their girlfriends.

rèiteach [*ray-ti-ok*] (noun)

A gathering when a man would formally ask permission for a woman’s hand in marriage from her father or next of kin. Over the years this event has become a more general “get together,” but the word still retains the meaning of a kind of engagement party. One would say “At the *rèiteach*” or “Are you going to the *rèiteach*?” It is never translated into English, as there is no literal translation.

