

Research Article

Revered and reviled. An outline of the public debate regarding classical language education

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Abstract

The value of classical language education is subject to a fierce dispute, waged continuously and internationally. While some dismiss Classics as useless or elitist, others herald its extraordinary formative value and the many benefits that await pupils. This article aims to give a novel overview of the public debate regarding classical language education, which is defined as follows: the controversy about the instruction of Latin and/or Ancient Greek at the secondary educational level, as it emerges from Western traditional media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The reader is provided with historical insight into this debate that many classicists find themselves in the middle of, as well as with a logical and coherent framework of the various arguments pro and contra. The arguments are embedded in the history of classical language education, classified into categories, analysed and discussed at length. The classification of arguments hinges on the two main lines of criticism towards the study of classical languages, which are inspired by egalitarianism and utilitarianism respectively. As a backdrop to the analysis, we rely on the sociolinguistic theory of language ideology. The general conclusions of this paper are that the value of classical language education is indeed a highly ideologically charged matter, and that the surrounding public debate has known a remarkably high level of continuity.

Keywords: classical language education, public debate, language ideology, educational equity, transfer value

Introduction

Why study classical languages? That perennial question lies at the basis of this contribution. It is also the basis of a dispute that is waged in many classrooms and living rooms, as well as publicly in the media. Passionate pleas why we should or should not study classical languages (hereafter CLs) are published in papers and journals on a regular basis. As former UN ambassador Austin Lashbrook remarked some 50 years ago, '[i]t seems as though men are forever trying to prove or disprove the value of Latin as part of a liberal education' (Lashbrook, 1969, 163).

The constant debate on the value of CL education forms the context in which Classics teachers operate, and therefore it is well-known and often referenced. When reference is made to this debate, either its existence is mentioned in passing as general context, or a specific part of the debate is zoomed in on, such as the outcome of a particular research study or educational project. For instance, research on the impact of studying CLs (e.g., Masciantonio, 1977) can indeed be seen as a response to the criticism that CL education is useless, saying for example that it improves native language ability, just like educational equity

projects (e.g., Holmes-Henderson *et al.*, 2018) can be seen as a response to the criticism that CL education is an elitist affair, saying for example that minority groups perhaps benefit the most from it.

The actual debate itself, however, is seldom viewed in total, as a research topic in its own right, and in a way that transcends a mere listing of arguments. This contribution aims to do just that, and look at the internal logic of the debate in its entirety. Much of what is laid out will probably be familiar to the reader. Rather than in the information on its own, the novelty lies in the way it is assembled, arranged and interpreted. The first author's experience with presenting this material tells that it can be of use and interest to classicists who feel that they are entangled in a jumble of arguments pro and contra they find hard to oversee. The outline of the debate given here provides a framework for situating and evaluating arguments, and adds a historical dimension to the dispute as well.

Delineation of topic and method

The topic of the current article is the public debate regarding CL education. Straightforward as this may seem, a more precise delineation is necessary. Here, the phrase 'public debate' mainly refers to the discussion in traditional media. The definition of public debate as such is a direct consequence of the article's genesis: it stems from an inquiry performed in 2020 into Flemish newspaper articles on CL education from the last few years. This inquiry was

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supplemented by readings of about a century of literature on CLs in other countries, in particular the United Kingdom and the United States. Already in that initial stage, it soon became clear that the same elements returned over and over again, and that the obtained rudimentary analysis of the debate could have wider bearing. From the onset, a key source in this exploration has been *Classics teaching in Europe*, edited by former Euroclassica chairman John Bulwer.

An extensive process of additional research and refinement eventually led to the paper in its present form. The end result is reckoned to be applicable to (Western) Europe and the United States of America as a whole, as sources from various countries within this area have been consulted and incorporated for all of the onward sections. The timeframe has been kept limited to recent and contemporary history. Focus lies on CL education at the secondary level. Unless otherwise indicated, instruction of CLs at the primary and tertiary levels is not taken into account. Neither is this article about shifts and developments within CL courses, larger evolutions in the classical discipline, or the role of classical heritage in society, although pieces of these related themes will inevitably come up along the way. In sum, the topic is delineated as the controversy about the instruction of Latin and/or Ancient Greek at the secondary educational level, as it emerges from Western traditional media in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The objective is to outline said controversy in a coherent historical narrative, and in doing so, to analyse CL education as a social phenomenon. The narrative starts from newspaper articles, opinion pieces and educational documents, and relates what is written there to relevant academic literature. For the analysis, we will make use of the sociolinguistic theory of language ideology. Language ideologies are understood as conceptualisations about languages, speakers, and discursive practices (Irvine, 2012). These conceptualisations are not purely linguistic, but rather social and cultural givens which can have important material effects (Farr and Song, 2011). Woolard (2020, 1) defines them as ‘morally and politically loaded representations of the nature, structure, and use of languages in a social world’. The adoption of a sociolinguistic approach allows us to view the public debate on CL education from a new, theoretical perspective.¹

The method chosen to study and describe the topic of course has its limitations: the picture painted below will undoubtedly be somewhat coloured by the first author’s background and lived experience as a pupil, student, teacher and researcher of CLs in Flanders. In the words of Dahlberg (2006), as researchers ‘we are not these objectivistic scientists that distantly register meanings, ... but immensely involved in the explication of meaning’ (Dahlberg, 2006, 16). Especially in qualitative and historical research, it is therefore essential to reflect on our social identities and personal biases that come with it, and to recognise their role in our research (Janak, 2018). My own self-examination process as main author of this article, which resembled Janak’s (2018) technique of bracketing, yielded the following. Above all, I am a Flemish classicist who believes in the intrinsic value of the study of CLs. My core understanding of the current topic is indebted to the training and instruction I received in teaching and didactics. Moreover, my main research centres around the linguistic and cognitive effects of studying CLs, which is why I feel most tuned in to that part of the debate.

Before finally turning to the public debate itself, a succinct but indispensable historical overview will be given of the state of CL education (section ‘The state of classical language education in Western Europe and the US’). Next, the most prominent arguments pro and contra the study of CLs will be discussed, elucidating the

language ideologies informing them (sections ‘Contra side of the public debate’ and ‘Pro side of the public debate’). The last section contains concluding remarks on these arguments and on the debate as a whole (section ‘Epilogue’).

The state of classical language education in Western Europe and the US

The bloom of Classics and the seeds of doubt

In order to grasp the situation in the 20th and 21st, a preamble on prior centuries is in place. The Humanist scholars played a pivotal role in bringing Classics into blossom as a field of study and instruction. In his insightful essay entitled ‘A Theory of Classical Education’, written for the inaugural volume of the journal published by the then newly-founded British Joint Association of Classical Teachers, Robert Bolgar explains:

The origins of that dominance go back to the days of the Humanists who believed that the ancient literatures provided the best key to a proper understanding of life, and persuaded the world that their belief was right. They pleaded their case to such good effect that the pre-eminence of the classical heritage was accepted not only by the educated, but also by many who never saw the inside of a grammar school. (Bolgar, 1963, 14)

And thus, schooling remained synonymous to CL study throughout the Modern Era. However, the origins of the debate in question stretch back many centuries as well. After the Humanist surge of enthusiasm to return *ad fontes*, there have always been voices doubting and criticising the CL education of the time. A selective overview can be found in Pire (1971, 1–52). He summarises:

Les critiques, les attaques essuyées par les langues anciennes et leur enseignement depuis Montaigne forment une marée si tumultueuse, si puissante qu’il semble impossible de résister à son courant. Devant tant d’accusations, la défense se sent gagnée par un sentiment d’impuissance; que dis-je, par un sentiment de culpabilité: les langues classiques semblent devoir mourir pour la seconde et la dernière fois. (Pire, 1971, 24–25)

[The criticisms, the attacks suffered by the classical languages and their instruction since Montaigne form a tide so tumultuous, so powerful that it seems impossible to resist its current. In face of so many accusations, the defence feels overcome by a feeling of impotence; nay, by a feeling of guilt: it seems the classical languages must die for the second and final time. (Pire, 1971, 24–25)]

Nevertheless, 19th-century educators even went a step further. Within the pedagogy of the 1800s, the socialising function of education was rated highly, and there were strongly normative and prescriptive views of how the nature of a child should be developed and perfected (Depaepe, 1999). When general secondary education as we more or less know it took shape, its aim was *Bildung*:² a Humanistic ideal of general formation which lets the student flourish into a well-mannered and well-thinking human being. The classical languages and literatures were deemed highly suitable to achieve this *Bildung*-ideal, and therefore took centre stage at school (Pfeiffer, 1976). Those were the last palmy days for CLs, because

from the late 19th century onwards, a public debate ensued that reached unseen heights.

From fundament to Fremdkörper in the 20th century

In Western Europe and the US, the study of Latin and – to a lesser extent – Ancient Greek had been the fundament of the educational system for many centuries (e.g., Wachter, 2008, 135). In the 20th century, the state of CL education underwent serious changes. There is seldom a single causal explanation for historical evolutions, nor do they run an identical course everywhere. Likewise, the decline of secondary-level CL instruction was due to a concurrence of factors, which played out differently in different regions and countries. Here we will briefly state six influential factors, being well aware that their importance, timing and even order varies across Europe and the US. This summary is necessarily generalising, and the number of examples is limited.

For a start, there was the wave of criticism from progressive men who had grievances about their classical education. As already mentioned in the previous subsection, critiques of CL education are of all time. Yet it was not until the late 19th, early 20th century that these managed to thoroughly disrupt the *status quo*. In the United States, this dispute is known as the Battle of the Classics (Adler, 2020). In Victorian England as well, schoolmasters and university lecturers revolted against the way school establishments had been run, and attacked the special status which CLs enjoyed.

Bolgar (1963) analyses an exemplary article by Cambridge classicist Henry Sidgwick written in this context. One of the main propositions of Sidgwick and associates was that Latin and Greek as they were being taught back then, with heavy emphasis on perfecting translation and composition, but little room for literary appreciation and study of the ancient cultures,³ did not serve the needs of society. They called for a wider curriculum, in which mathematics and science would hold an equally important position. Inadvertently, their criticisms had much farther-reaching consequences: ‘The educational reformers of the late 19th century gave Latin a bad name, and we late in the 20th still have to struggle against the views they popularised: that Latin is dreary, that it is useless, that it is remote.’ (Bolgar, 1963, 11)

As far as the public image of CL education is concerned, the tone was set for the decades to follow. A second factor in close connection to the first, is the scientific progress at this same juncture in time. The natural sciences made great strides forward, making significant discoveries back-to-back, which shaped and adjusted humanity’s outlook on the world. The ancient literatures were not the exceptional source of knowledge anymore that they had been for the Humanists as well as in later centuries; people now became more orientated towards the exact sciences. The *auctoritas* of the classical writers took a severe blow around this point, and with it the rationale to study CLs.

Another punch was thrown on behalf of educational psychology; this is the third factor. Part of the pedagogical philosophy of *Bildung* is the doctrine of formal discipline (Paulsen, 1965). The premises of formal discipline are that the incidental teaching of a complex and demanding subject like a CL serves the general objective of cultivating all-round mental faculties, and that such transfer of learning occurs automatically. The famous American educational psychologist Edward Thorndike discredited this doctrine. From the empirical investigations he conducted in the 1920s (Broyler *et al.*, 1927; Thorndike, 1924a, 1924b), he concluded that the effect of one’s high school study program on cognitive ability was negligible. To current methodological standards Thorndike’s research is

questionable (as also pointed out by Gutacker, 1979, 10; Haag, 1995, 251; Ortner *et al.*, 2008, 190), but at the time his findings were revolutionary, and did not pass unheeded. Their impact was felt in the United States and far beyond (Haag and Stern, 2000; Sparks *et al.*, 1995).

Under the influence of factors one to three, CL education no longer held out the prospects of gaining world knowledge and sharpening your wits as it used to do before. Of course, proficiency in at least Latin was a prerequisite for attending university, but that too would change. This brings us to our fourth factor, namely the disappearance of institutional protection. The United States and the United Kingdom are two clear examples of countries where the alteration of higher education policy has had a direct impact on CL education. By the late 20s, Latin ceased to be a compulsory testing area on American college entrance exams;⁴ the rise of mass education and the scientific rivalry accompanying the Cold War then brought enrolment in Latin to its lowest point by the late 60s (Sparks *et al.*, 1995, 165). In Great Britain, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge decided to drop Latin as a matriculation requirement in 1960 (e.g., Paul, 2013, 145). The aftermath of Oxbridge’s decision led to profound reform of the classical subjects (Forrest, 2003; Morwood, 2003). Similar events happened in other European countries,⁵ with fewer pupils and class hours for CLs as a logical consequence.

Institutional protection has not vanished completely in all countries, however. Several German universities still demand a *Latinum* (a certificate obtained after passing the state exam in Latin) for certain study fields and levels, as well as a *Graecum* (ditto for Ancient Greek) for study options like Classics, ancient history, classical archaeology and philosophy (Glücklich, 2006). This also goes for Switzerland (Schweizerische Maturitätskommission, 2009). The University of Zürich, for instance, has only in recent years relaxed its requirements for prior knowledge of Latin (Universität Zürich, 2022). Austria requires prospective students of about 40 university degrees, even in less directly related domains like law and medicine, to have successfully taken their final examinations in Latin (Reitermayer, 2006).

Simultaneously with the opening-up of higher education, a fifth factor was set in motion: the invention of the modern secondary school. In stark contrast with the 19th century model which revolved around CLs in the name of *Bildung*, new models of general secondary education were being proposed devoid of Latin or Greek. This modern type of education was presented as a viable alternative to a classical education, and was thought to offer an equivalent, if not better preparation for a pupil’s further career. As Townsley (1985) eloquently phrased it: ‘the First and Second World Wars ejected Latin from its exalted seat of predominance and respect, replacing it with modern languages which provided the immediate practicality so urgently needed during those times of international upheaval’ (Townsley, 1985, 4). The CL-free study options soon gained popularity.

In the second half of the 20th century, a sixth factor emerged in the form of innovative pedagogical theory. Led by the spirit of the 60s and 70s and by contemporary insights from developmental psychology, pedagogical theory of the time prescribed a more comprehensive approach to schooling (Depaepe, 1999; Ellis *et al.*, 1991). It highlighted the need to bolster not just cognitive abilities, but all sorts of competences, including emotional and motorial ones. Moreover, education was supposed to serve the development of all individuals; therefore, it should not act as a mechanism to exclude anyone. Rather, it ought to be communal for as many pupils as possible, regardless of their background or capability.

Latin and Greek, which were notoriously difficult to master to the expected degree of accuracy, and which had functioned as a selection instrument for the intellectually most able pupils (Bolgar, 1963, 24), did not fit in this scheme. Though once the fundament of all Western non-vocational education, the study of CLs had become a *Fremdkörper* within in the educational system – more than ever a relic from days long gone.

Between tradition and opposition in the 21st century

Where does that leave us, two decades into the 21st century? The legacy of the two previous centuries is still tangible. Therefore, CL education finds itself in an ambiguous position, hovering between a strong tradition and strong opposition.

[Es] dürfte kaum ein Schulfach geben, das die Geister so scheidet, bei dem so leidenschaftlich diskutiert wird, bei dem ein Standpunkt *sine ira et studio*, d.h. sachlich, kaum möglich erscheint. (Haag, 2001, 31)

[There must hardly be another school subject which is so controversial, which is so passionately discussed, about which a stance *sine ira et studio*, i.e. objective, seems hardly possible. (Haag, 2001, 31)]

On the one hand, despite the disruptive factors just discussed, the instruction of Latin and Greek has persisted, and they are not rarely encountered on the timetables of secondary schools (as is also the conclusion of Skurzak, 2013). It is safe to say that in several European countries, among which Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy and The Netherlands, CLs – all things considered – continue to take up a relatively large portion of the available school curriculum (Facq et al., 2006; Glücklich, 2006; Korn, 2020; Laes, 2019; Perra, 2006; Reitermayer, 2006; Tijsseling, 2006). Some governments even formulate obligations or recommendations regarding the provision of CLs (Turpin, 2020): for example, Latin and/or Greek can be mandatory for pupils in academically oriented streams, such as the *gymnasia* and *licei classici*.

On the other hand, the general public opinion gravitates towards a negative appraisal. The place of CLs in the curriculum is no longer commonly seen as self-evident (e.g., Caerols, 2013 on perceptions in Spain). School reforms have pushed CL programs in tight corners, and enrolment numbers keep on dwindling (Bulwer, 2018). Since the 20th century, the pedagogical antipodes of CLs have

always been the exact sciences. In the past few years this contrast was further intensified, since the economic demand for more technically-schooled employees occasioned heavy promotion of STEM studies (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), and not without effect.⁶

The narrative is not quite complete yet, however. Besides the discourse of CLs slowly losing terrain but holding their own in spite of it all, that dominates publications by classicists (e.g., Bulwer, 2006a; Lister, 2008; Morwood, 2003), there are signs that Classics is finding a new elan. A tendency has become perceptible towards renewed appreciation of CLs by policymakers. The French-speaking Community of Belgium has been working on an Excellency Pact which, among other things, will make initiation in Latin a compulsory part of a *truncus communis* in secondary education (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2023). In 2021, the British Department for Education announced a £4 million Latin Excellence Programme to bring back Latin to state-maintained schools (Department for Education, 2021). There are also several successful projects running in Europe and the United States which employ Latin instruction as a social catalyst.⁷

It is unclear what all of this means for the future of CL education. Could another Greco-Roman renaissance possibly be in the making? Will pupil enrolment plummet to an all-time low? Will CL education more or less carry on as it is? Or will new functions for CLs complement current educational functions as language ideologies develop into the 21st century? The pacts, programs and projects of the previous paragraph are very diverse qua content, target group and finality, and by no means a return to the CL instruction of yore. Both the stimulation and denunciation of CL education are driven by an underlying language ideology. Let us therefore take an in-depth look at the arguments that are used pro and contra. Figure 1 shows the categories in which they can be subsumed.

Contra side of the public debate

A two-fronted offensive

As the mixed picture of the historical overview shows, there is plenty of room for debate. Is the study of CLs for everyone or for the happy few? What is the purpose of devoting oneself to ancient languages that are no longer spoken? Can cultural expressions that are thousands of years old still be relevant today? Especially since the post-war period, an international public debate regarding CL

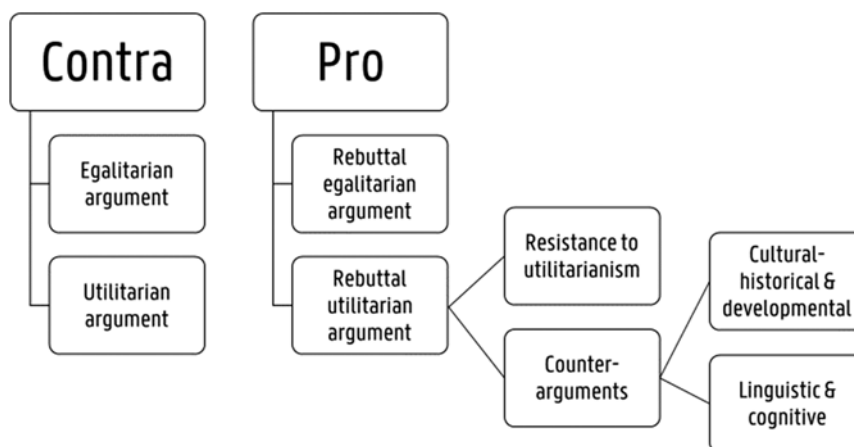


Figure 1. Classification of arguments pro and contra CL education.

education has manifested itself. On the contra side, its role and value are openly and continuously questioned from two main angles: egalitarianism and utilitarianism. In sections ‘The egalitarian argument’ and ‘The utilitarian argument’, we will discuss for each of the two contra-arguments what the criticism entails, with which elements in the reality of CL education past and present it can be connected, and how it can be understood from a language ideology perspective. These three components will partly be intertwined.

Note straight away how these two lines of opposition imply a different outlook on CL education. Insofar as CL education is seen as a time-honoured tradition, it enjoys a certain prestige which is interpreted negatively by egalitarianists as being elitist and exclusionary. Insofar as CL education is seen as a curiosity in the modern world, it is vulnerable to the utilitarian criticism that CLs are useless and irrelevant today. One of the two can be more prevalent than the other in certain countries. In Flanders for instance, the utilitarian argument dominates the public debate (Spelmans, 2010), whereas in the United Kingdom for instance, the egalitarian argument is of relatively greater significance (e.g., Foster and Wise, 2022; Lanvers, 2017). Concerns can change over time as well, which appears to have happened in the United States: in the 20th century, many efforts were directed at invalidating utilitarian criticism (Vereeck *et al.*, in press), whereas in the 21st century, equality issues are much more in the foreground (notably also in academia, cf. de Melo, 2023; Libatique and McHardy, 2023). It is not impossible either to combine the two contra arguments in one critique, as done by Merry and Boterman (2020).

The egalitarian argument

The general idea behind the egalitarian argument is that CL education is not inclusive. This implies that the connection between participation in CL education and certain demographic characteristics is denounced, but not necessarily that the intrinsic value of studying CLs is denied. Alternatively, this contra-argument could also be termed the accessibility argument. The suggested solutions for unequal access range from a turnaround in teaching method to complete abolition of CL education. The egalitarian argument is arguably more complex than the utilitarian argument that schooling should have practical use, in the sense that it touches on fundamental societal and educational issues which transcend CL education as such. Moreover, there are different kinds of egalitarian thinking, with different visions on where, when and between which groups equality should be achieved (Hirtt *et al.*, 2007). Likewise, we can discern multiple variants of the egalitarian argument against the study of CLs.

The oldest kind of egalitarianism is concerned with socio-economic class. Classics and CL education are perceived as elitist. In regions with a long history of instructing Latin and Ancient Greek, this perception is obviously rooted in a historical reality: for centuries, Latin has been the *lingua franca* of the higher classes, and later, CL education continued to be a feature of class distinction. Up to the early 20th century, CLs marked the dividing line between schooling of high and low stature (Herrlitz *et al.*, 1993; Sawert, 2018). When in the 20th century CL-free alternatives arose within general secondary education, the choice for the classical or modern type usually coincided with the social background of the pupil (Gerhards *et al.*, 2019). Does this still hold true today? Research studies from various countries indicate that to a certain extent it does indeed (e.g., Boone, 2011; Gerhards *et al.*, 2021; Hunt and Holmes-Henderson, 2021; Merry and Boterman, 2020). Hunt and

Holmes-Henderson (2021) describe the inequality of access to CL study as ‘Classics poverty’.

This accessibility issue extends beyond socio-economic class alone. It is known that social and ethnic background tend to co-vary (Bracke, 2023; Schleicher, 2019; Stevens and Dworkin, 2019). Concerns about the inclusion and representation of diverse ethnic groups in CL education have been expressed since at least the 70s (Barnes, 2018; Nesbitt, 1979). Nowadays social egalitarianism is widened to encompass as many aspects of human identity as possible, with particular focus on gender and ethnicity. Like nearly all areas of society, the study of CLs has not escaped the critical gaze of our time (see also de Melo, 2023 on Classics at university in particular). On account of its past, the classical discipline is charged with racism and sexism: it is pre-eminently a discipline of old White men, so it seems, going from the chiefly high-born men that make up the classical writers, to the elite White male scholars who later read and studied them (Butterfield, 2020).

As far as the current situation is concerned, the debate around CL education is often entangled with broader debates about education and equality. What kind of schools offer CLs in the first place depends on how education in general is organised. In some countries, school types marked by CL instruction are criticised for maintaining social imparity (e.g., Merry and Boterman, 2020 on Dutch *gymnasia*). Even if these are accessible to all pupils in theory, for a variety of reasons they may not be so in practice: sociological research from Europe and the United States has shown that even though democratised education operates on egalitarian assumptions and aims to be merit-based, the actual participation and outcomes tell a different story (e.g., Domina *et al.*, 2017; Hirtt *et al.*, 2007). Ironically, in the UK, opposition against CLs has led to their removal from most state school curricula, cordoning them off to the private school sector – the very situation the Latin Excellence Programme is now seeking to reverse.

Aside from the socio-economic and identity variants of the argument at hand, another variant stems from an intellectual egalitarianism. The pedagogy of CL education has been frowned upon as well. It must be noted that sometimes the study of CLs is intentionally presented as highbrow.⁸ ‘Several countries hint that Latin is continued in some schools to give them an appearance of high standards of learning and discipline which is attractive to some parents. ... It is even possible that a country may see nothing wrong with an elitist education.’ (Bulwer, 2006b, 9). Historically, there was a link between CL education and the selection of an intellectual upper class too. This link lives on in the collective memory to this day. Some CL programs might deliberately appeal to it and seek to preserve CLs’ function as a selection instrument, while other deliberately do not. Either way it is a persistent conception (Van Damme, 2021, 179).

According to some, the traditional teaching paradigm, sprung from the grammar-translation method, is to blame for the systemic inequality (summary of such critical views in Hunt, 2022, 175–176). Suspending a more detailed definition, grammar-translation consists of ‘presentation and study of grammar rules, which are then practised through translation exercises’ (Richards and Rodgers, 2014, 6–7). This method lays a heavy tax on pupils’ declarative memories, and for this reason it is accused of being inherently exclusionary:

Since the goal is accuracy, students with good memories who maintain those exceptionally high standards validate the teacher’s practices. Teachers, then, have more control over the direction of their program. In the highest-level classes,

students fulfil the teacher's goal of producing students who meet the high levels of accuracy that has been valued for so long. Such a practice is self-fulfilling, however, since little attention is given to the students without good enough memories to live up to the gold standard of accuracy and excellence. This is exclusivity. (Piantaggini, 2020, 94)

How can the egalitarian argument be understood from a language ideology perspective? Two principles seem to underpin and explain the egalitarian argument, first and foremost the hierarchisation of language. Jaspers (2009) captures this hierarchisation in a prestige binary, distinguishing between 'prestige multilingualism', e.g. learning the dominant Western languages in school, and 'plebeian multilingualism', e.g. speaking a different language at home than at school because of a migrant background. The second principle is the importance of equal access to education in the prestige languages for all, no matter your socio-economic status, declarative memory capacity, gender, ethnicity, or whatever aspect of your identity.

Knowledge and instruction of CLs are regarded as a textbook example of prestige multilingualism. A classical education constitutes symbolic capital in the sense of Bourdieu (1992). Latin and Ancient Greek have long functioned as a cultural code of belonging for the social and intellectual elite, as both a hallmark and tool of privilege (Bracke, 2023). As recent as 2019, an attitude research study in Germany among parents of secondary school pupils found that the majority of these parents rated a person with knowledge of Latin higher on *Allgemeinbildung*, being culturally well-educated, and having high status, than a person with knowledge of French (Gerhards et al., 2019).

Yet it could be argued that a view on the study of CLs as prestigious multilingualism is gradually becoming ever more anachronistic. Increasingly, the opposite side of the binary comes into play as well: marginalised groups have found their way to Classics and used it to offer resistance and develop their own identities, so that we may speak of a democratic turn (Bracke, 2023). In fact, the prestige binary is problematised altogether by the ambiguous position in which CLs find themselves in the 21st century. The egalitarian argument is only tenable insofar as CL education is a solid and well-respected tradition. Realistically speaking, how much prestige do Latin and Greek really have left?

The utilitarian argument

This slightly provocative question leads us seamlessly into the second argument on the contra side of the public debate, known as the utilitarian argument. The gist of it is that CLs are not useful in present-day society, or at least not useful enough to justify the time spent on them; that they are 'onerosi ed inutili' [onerous and useless], to quote Caerols (2013, 322). In this respect it is remarkable how little the objections made today differ from those made half a century or a century ago, as the following two random examples illustrate.

In a French essay that was published in the early 70s, Adrien Cart (1971, 175–77) conveys a vivid impression of a customary critique of Latin. It runs somewhat as follows: seeing that Latin is a dead language which virtually no one speaks and but few can read, the benefits reaped in adult life of having learned Latin as a pupil are limited to the dubious joys of deciphering stone inscriptions, quickly grasping legal and administrative terms, and understanding the labels on pharmacists' phials and in botanical gardens; surely those many laborious hours spent on Latin are only worth their

while for the fools who dream of becoming a teacher in language, literature, history or philosophy. If we go back another 50 years in time, we find Wier's delightfully witty account of American college life in the early 20s, of which we will quote the introductory paragraph for the purpose of illustration as well as enjoyment:

If the value of Latin and Greek were determined by the regard in which the average student claims to hold them, they would have no plea for inclusion in the curriculum of the up-to-date school. For they belong to that definite class of studies considered by the modernist not only useless but to a degree pernicious, in that it delays the pursuit of more important things. Therefore, the student, when he sets out for college, leaves them behind him with little regret; and if he thinks of them further it is with that kindly tolerance that one may well feel for useless things that are over and done. (Wier, 1921, 326)

The utilitarian argument fits in with a broader evolution towards a more instrumental vision on education, which Wier in the quote above refers to as 'modernism'.⁹ Throughout the 20th and 21st century, for reasons sketched out in the section of this article devoted to the state of classical language education, the 19th century ideal of *Bildung* was gradually being abandoned in favour of *Ausbildung*, 'professional training' (Masschelein and Simons, 2012; Tippelt, 2009). Public expectations of education shifted from providing the young mind with a general formation, to equipping youth with measurable assets for their future and preparing them to become capable citizens in modern society. Nowadays traditional subjects such as Latin and Greek are under pressure, and have to give way to more modern forms of schooling like project-based learning and cross-subject clusters, above all STEM.

This instrumental vision is apparent in the current educational policy of the European Union. As mentioned above, because of the need for technical and engineering profiles in the labour market, STEM is being actively promoted in secondary education. The European government issues guidelines, which local STEM platforms implement in collaboration with partner foundations (Secretariat of the EU STEM Coalition, 2023). This development aligns with utilitarianist opposition to the study of CLs. In the public debate, the utilitarian argument that CLs are of no use and occupy precious time in the curriculum is often followed by praise of STEM studies, which are put forward as a quintessentially useful and contemporary area of study – the sensible alternative, as it were.

Another aspect of the EU's educational policy revealing an instrumental vision on education, is the formulation of 'key competences'. The European as well as national and regional governments have defined sets of key competences, of which mastery is to be expected of a youngster having graduated from secondary school. These 'include knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed by all for personal fulfilment and development, employability, social inclusion and active citizenship' (Council of the European Union, 2018). At first glance, the instruction of ancient languages seems hard to reconcile with the goal to impart 21st century key competences. In the section below on counterarguments related to the utilitarian argument, however, it will be argued that CL education might have quite some common ground with this pedagogic project after all.

The ideology behind the utilitarian argument can be summarised with the next series of inequalities: science is more important than language, and modern languages are more relevant than classical ones. What we have here is also – like with the

egalitarian argument – a hierarchisation, but based on the widely-endorsed principle of direct usability. In this hierarchy, CLs are decidedly situated at the lowest end. The suggestion that CL study could serve as a preparation for modern language study is usually dismissed by critics as an inefficient trajectory. Thus, CLs are forced to compete directly with the sciences as well as with modern foreign languages, in both cases occupying the position of the underdog.

Pro side of the public debate

A kaleidoscopic counteroffensive

‘Classicists have a duty of care to their subject’, says Classics lecturer David Butterfield (2020). Whereas other subjects survive on their own, the survival of Latin and Greek in secondary education is left to the loving care of people sympathetic to the classical cause. In the face of incessant attacks of egalitarian and/or utilitarian tenor, and the ever-looming threat of complete abolition, they have continued to praise the qualities of CLs even more vigorously and pugnaciously. As such, proponents of classics have created what could be named an apologetic tradition, typically characterised by lamentation about the downfall of their beloved discipline and determination to convince the general public of the value of studying CLs.

It is true that CL education was already contested and defended centuries ago, but since the public debate gained momentum in the 20th century, the number of apologetic writings appears to have grown profusely. In addition to the occasional newspaper column, full-length articles and even entire books are dedicated to the matter. To cite a couple of examples would be an arbitrary choice; to inventory all of these works would be a research endeavour in its own right.

Another significant source for the pro side of the public debate, and in a way part of the apologetic tradition, are educational documents pertaining to CL programs. It is telling that authors of attainment targets for classical subjects tend to specify not just what needs to be learned, but also why it needs to be learned. They do not content themselves with listing the grammatical knowledge that is to be expected from a secondary school pupil, for instance, but hasten to add that study of the Latin / Ancient Greek language system stimulates abstract insight in languages (Maes, 2021). The justifications that are given reveal a lot about policymakers’ ideology regarding language and education. Is Classics about maximising linguistic talent? Is it an instrument in identity building? Is it both, or something else?

There is one thing about which there is consensus: the engagement with classical languages and cultures is enriching and worth striving for. This belief unites those who find themselves on the pro side of the debate, but there are indeed numerous ideologies that can underpin it. Classicists and other enthusiasts have adduced many and varied points in favour of the study of CLs. This argumentative diversity can be connected to the versatility of the classical subjects themselves. In its broadest interpretation, the nature of CL instruction is threefold: language, history, and literature. To these three core aspects may be added a fourth aspect, namely pupils’ general (non-cognitive) development, which is mostly addressed in an indirect manner through the other three. Moreover, there is notable variation between countries in the way CL education is organised, not only in terms of legislation, starting age, duration and intensity, but in terms of content and focus too: it can be more of a linguistic exercise or rather more of a cultural exploration, for instance.¹⁰

To bring some clarity to this kaleidoscopic image, in what follows we will propose a classification that accommodates the myriad of pro-arguments in a logical instead of enumerative fashion. Essentially, all pro arguments can be understood as a direct reaction to either the egalitarian or utilitarian argument against the study of CLs. As Figure 1 indicates, an initial division is therefore imposed depending on which contra-argument is rebutted, egalitarian (section ‘Rebuttal of the egalitarian argument’) or utilitarian. Within the latter category a further division is made, since there are two distinct reactions to the utilitarian argument, albeit they need not automatically exclude one another. The first is to get to the root of the problem, so to speak, and resist utilitarianism itself (section ‘Rebuttal of the utilitarian argument by resisting utilitarianism itself’). The second is to acknowledge the prevailing world view and build a case for CLs within a functionality-oriented world, in other words to offer counterarguments in the strictest sense (section ‘Rebuttal of the utilitarian argument by offering counterarguments’).

Rebuttal of the egalitarian argument

Pertinent or impertinent as the egalitarian argument may be, it cannot be an excuse to abolish CL education; that is probably a good summary of the rebuttal of the egalitarian argument. While it is a logical fallacy to assert that the plain removal of Latin and Greek from the timetables would guarantee a more inclusive school experience, as the egalitarian argument is sometimes used to imply (Bulwer, 2006b, 8), the concrete allegations of non-inclusivity are taken seriously by proponents of CL education as valid criticism. While certain people might seek to uphold the elitist aura surrounding CL education (as hinted by Merry and Boterman, 2020), a demand for change and innovation is ringing out from the contra side as well as from the pro side. In the Netherlands, for example, classical organisations have cast doubt themselves on the concept of so-called categorical *gymnasia*, where all pupils study CLs and which used to be held in very high esteem (OIKOS, 2021).

In the last couple of decades, a lot has been stirring in this respect. However, the effort of CL teachers and researchers towards greater inclusivity is not very conspicuous in the public sphere. Most of it is occurring either in specialist journals or through educational equity projects that are the exception rather than the norm (cf. infra). Although social media have become an important platform for dissemination and interaction, in the traditional media the reaction to the egalitarian argument is not as visible as the accusation of elitism. Nonetheless, let us briefly go over the ways that the egalitarian argument and its variants are rebutted.

Recently, several hands-on CL projects have called social-egalitarianist criticisms into question. Here CLs are being deployed to improve literacy and raise aspirations in deprived areas or with vulnerable groups, both at the primary and the secondary school level. Examples are *Literacy through Latin* in Great Britain (Bracke, 2016), *Ancient Greeks, Young Heroes* in Flanders (Bracke, 2020), *Latinus Pons* in Germany (Kipf, 2010), and *Lingua Latein* in Switzerland (Wesselmann and Walker, 2021), or on a smaller scale, the introduction of a *gymnasium* in the underprivileged neighbourhood of southeast Amsterdam (Vereniging Classici Nederland, 2021). These projects are living proof that Classics can be of value for children and youngsters of all backgrounds.

In regard to the pupils in the average Latin or Greek classroom, there may be societal factors (touched upon in section ‘The egalitarian argument’) as a result of which not all population groups currently partake equally of CL education. Content-wise, however, there is a lot of potential, and a lot has been done as well, to make

the literary and cultural-historical aspects of CL education more inclusive and accessible (e.g., Barnes, 2018; Bracke, 2021; Conley, 2019; Fengler, 2000; Rijser, 2018; Sawyer, 2016). There is much to be said on this topic, but this article is not the right place to delve deeply into CL teaching practices for inclusivity, so the following single paragraph will suffice.

Seeing that the ancient world was vast and pluralistic and witnessed profound cross-cultural influence (Fibiger Bang, 2010; Hall, 2015; Rüpke, 2010), it has a ton of possibilities to offer for intercultural education. Something as simple as paying heed to the geography of the Hellenistic and Roman empires could be a first step in the right direction (as also noted by Sawyer, 2016). The classical discipline itself has evolved, and can no longer be imagined without gender and queer studies (e.g., Budin and Macintosh Turfa, 2016; Churchill, 2006; Corbeill, 2010; Surtees and Dyer, 2020). One of the main opportunities for a CL teacher to cater for a diverse pupil audience and to showcase diversity, is the choice and discussion of texts. To give some examples: famous Latin and Greek authors abound of what we would now consider non-Western origin, documentary texts lend a voice to the lower ranks of society, and widening the scope beyond Antiquity to post-classical literature opens up options for reading women. According to an emergent body of anecdotal evidence, studying CLs can in fact enrich pupils' perception of diversity and help them express more balanced judgements (e.g., Barnes, 2018; Hunt, 2016; Rabinowitz and McHardy, 2014).

That leaves the intellectual variant of the egalitarian argument. The language aspect of CL instruction actually harbours a lot of potential too. First of all, it has been pointed out many a time (e.g., Bell and Wing-Davey, 2018; Hill, 2006; Van Houdt, 2012) that in a CL class starting positions are the same for all pupils, which can seldom be said of native language or modern foreign language classes. In case of the CLs, no one has any prior knowledge worth mentioning, so everyone starts learning from scratch. While some pupils will already be more familiar with Antiquity and classical culture than others depending on the input they receive at home, the Latin and Ancient Greek languages are usually just as new to every beginning pupil.

Furthermore, research suggests that several linguistic and didactic characteristics of the CLs and the traditional grammar-oriented way of teaching them can contribute to the creation of an inclusive learning environment (Ancona, 1982; Ashmore and Madden, 1990; Block et al., 1995; Hill, 2006; Hill et al., 1995): the linguistic make-up of Latin and Greek, together with the focus on written words and the explicit presentation of grammar, make them attractive to weaker language learners and accommodate for the difficulties they typically encounter when learning foreign languages.¹¹ The attentive reader will notice that these findings are diametrically opposed to the claims regarding the grammar-translation method mentioned in the section on the egalitarian argument itself.

Within other teaching paradigms as well, pupil diversity is the order of the day. Textbooks for CLs have evolved and continue to evolve to be more accessible and appeal to wider audiences (e.g., Paul, 2013 on the *Cambridge Latin Course*). Communicative approaches to CL learning and instruction, which have caught on in the US some years ago and are slowly gaining acceptance in Europe, also often present themselves as a possible route towards greater inclusivity (Hunt, 2021). Teachers who have incorporated elements of active Latin in their lessons report an increase in pupil engagement, motivation and enjoyment, which may in turn lead to a more successful learning experience for a larger number of pupils (e.g., Hunt, 2021; Rasmussen, 2015).

In short, teachers and researchers of CLs have managed to mitigate the egalitarian argument in every respect, by proving that the possibility for greater inclusivity is engrained in the very subjects themselves. Latin and Ancient Greek 'have been rescued from what sometimes seemed a terminal association with elite power, dead White males, imperial and gender exploitation' (Hardwick, 2013, 16). There is reason to speak of a shift in both practice and image: as participation is being widened to historically non-traditional target groups, the CLs are increasingly associated with social critique and liberation movements (Bracke, 2023; Hardwick, 2013). It will be clear from the discussion of the egalitarian argument and its rebuttal that the conceivable interpretations and receptions of classical material are manifold, and that these can be prompted by strongly divergent values and ideologies.

Rebuttal of the utilitarian argument by resisting utilitarianism itself

Now, how is the utilitarian argument rebutted in the public debate? One fashionable reaction amongst the proponents of CL education is to launch a counterattack and question the axioms of the utilitarian approach towards education. By means of *exemplum* we quote John Bulwer:

Parents want to be confident that what their children learn at school will be useful for them in the future. This can lead them to some curious conclusions, as they appear to believe that a lot of material studied at a fairly advanced stage of school will be actually used by the pupils in their future careers. The rapid pace of change in many areas means that almost all of this material will be out of date by the time these pupils enter the world of work. ... Parents and students are still over-intent on the immediate use of a subject to a possible future career, and need convincing that education at the higher level is more than simply training. (Bulwer, 2006b, 9)

To put it differently, the very idea that general secondary education is capable of providing *Ausbildung*, is largely an illusion. Bulwer continues:

Utilitarianism also has its own drawbacks. Its concentration on the greatest good for the greatest number poses problems for minorities and those who have a strong commitment to a particular subject but who cannot be accommodated alongside the greater numbers who opt for the more popular subjects. If a student genuinely does not want to study what everyone else does but opts for something else, his or her wishes are ignored under a utilitarian system which emphasises conformity and coherence. Philosophers argue that utilitarianism can force someone to act in [a] way that compromises their integrity. It could be argued that a strong wish to study Classical languages represents a kind of integrity which our education systems tend to compromise. (Bulwer, 2006b, 9–10)

How precisely his words mirror those of Bolgar a good 40 years earlier:

A boy today cannot choose to study Latin as freely as he would choose German or Geography or Mathematics. He has to reckon with a hostile public opinion, and he has to learn to defend his fancy against critical parents, friends and enquirers. (Bolgar, 1963, 11)

If you look at it from that angle, a utilitarian approach towards education is not in the best interest of the pupil: it restricts their freedom for self-development, and in a rather naïve way at that, considered the speed at which the sciences and the labour market evolve. CLs, on the contrary, embody the timeless ideal of liberal education, of a broad formation which above all benefits the pupil as a human being.¹² In regard to education, the principle of direct usability on which the utilitarian ideology is founded is rejected altogether by this strand of the pro side, in favour of *Bildung*.

Rebuttal of the utilitarian argument by offering counterarguments

Another strategy is to choose pragmatism over idealism, and search for counterarguments within a utilitarian framework. Advocates of CL education who have ventured to ask what roles CLs can fulfil in contemporary education, given that the mainstream vision is highly instrumental, have come up with a plethora of arguments. Here we wish to propose a classification into four overarching categories: the cultural-historical argument, the general-developmental argument, the linguistic argument and the cognitive argument. Figure 2 visualises how these tie in with the four aspects of CL instruction distinguished in section 'A kaleidoscopic counteroffensive'. The cultural-historical argument groups the history and literature aspects. The general-developmental argument speaks for itself. The linguistic and cognitive arguments are both linked to the language aspect.

What all four counterarguments have in common is that they carry an acknowledgement of educational utilitarianism. The goal of this strand of the pro side is to get CLs higher up within the hierarchy of usability. The first two arguments attempt to do so by propagating the *Primärnutzen* or 'primary use' of CLs (section 'The cultural-historical and general-developmental arguments'), the latter two their *Sekundärnutzen* or 'secondary use' (section 'The linguistic and cognitive arguments'). As a note in advance, different individuals and organisations situated on the pro side of the debate do not necessarily agree on the significance of each of these counterarguments, just like they might disagree on the weight that should be attached to each of the instructional aspects. For 20th-century examples in various languages of statements representative of each of these arguments, we refer to Stellwag (1949, 165–68).

The cultural-historical and general-developmental arguments counter the utilitarian argument by stating the merit of CLs in their own right. Granted, they may not be all that useful for daily-life

communication. Their *Primärnutzen* does not lie in the conveyance of practical knowledge, but in the conveyance of culture and of soft skills, which are equally valuable assets.¹³

The cultural-historical argument emphasises the rich historical and literary heritage that pupils are brought into contact with, which first of all is intrinsically worthwhile, and second of all has a special relation to Western society. It is a truism that what we consider to be Western culture can be traced back to Greco-Roman Antiquity and Christianity. Examples of Greek and Roman influences are legion: in law, politics, philosophy, oratory... A sprinkle of pathos is not alien to this argument. Just think of common expressions like 'the cradle of Western civilisation', or the dictum by classical philologist Karl Büchner (1978), 'die lateinische Sprache ist es gewesen, die Europa geschaffen hat' [it was the Latin language that has created Europe].

The cultural-historical branch of argumentation can be pursued further in various directions (Maes, 2021; Spelmans, 2010, 176–179). It can take a purely aesthetic turn, focusing on the quality of classical literature and other cultural expressions, and on the educational profit of engaging with beautiful texts and artefacts. By virtue of their literary and artistic education, Latin and Greek distinguish themselves from other subjects. It can also take an ethic turn: qualitative literature often treats general existential themes, from which we can draw lessons even today. Furthermore, the foreignness of the texts, written in a context wildly remote from that of the 21st-century reader, presumably heightens tolerance towards others. Finally, it can take a sociocultural turn, which is related more to the Greco-Roman inheritance of Western culture. The study of CLs is supposed to foster pupils' awareness of the specific and relative value of Western cultural expressions as well as their reflective attitude towards contemporary norms, values and beliefs.

Typical for the cultural-historical argument is the exceptional status that is assigned to Classical Greece and Rome. The idolisation of Classical Antiquity as the cradle of Western civilisation really blossomed during the Enlightenment (Verbaal, 2021), although its roots go back much further: in Late Antiquity there already was a well-developed sense of what counted as classical literature, and obviously Classical Antiquity had already known a great revival in the Renaissance. It says a lot that there has not been a single point in time, after it was written, that Virgil's *Aeneid* has not been on the curriculum. Even so, the Latin and Greek literary traditions did not break off in the first century AD, but rather continued deep into the Modern Era; on that basis, the opinion has been voiced that CL instruction ought to take later periods into account as well, if it truly wants to lay claim to a cultural-historical argument (e.g., Verbaal, 2021).

Aspect of CL instruction	Counterargument
history	cultural-historical argument
literature	
general (non-cognitive) development	general-developmental argument
language	linguistic argument
	cognitive argument

Figure 2. Classification of counterarguments in relation to aspects of CL instruction.

The general-developmental argument showcases the broad range of soft skills that pupils acquire by studying a CL. These have been documented by reports of CL programs, academic articles and opinion pieces (e.g., Bracke, 2016; DeVane, 1997; Harrington-Lueker, 1992; Katz *et al.*, 2020; Sussman, 1978; Van Damme, 2021). A strong cultural and historical awareness is one of these skills. Somewhat related are a critical mind, independent judgement,¹⁴ and the capacity to deal with ambiguity. Metacognitive and affective abilities are thought to be honed as well, such as the application of learning strategies, intellectual ambition, discipline, confidence and positive self-image. Personality traits that are associated with CL learning are grit, conscientiousness, self-control, motivation and inquisitiveness.¹⁵ Last but not least, studying a CL is likely to increase appreciation of linguistics, arts and humanities.¹⁶

Interestingly, the tenor of the cultural-historical and general-developmental arguments is perfectly compatible with the European key competences for the 21st century. If we zoom in on the history and literature aspects of Latin and Greek, it is evident they are easily connected with several key competences (Council of the European Union, 2018). The most self-explanatory one of all, is 'cultural awareness and expression'. 'Personal competence', like skills related to personal mental and emotional health, is addressed nowhere more explicitly in the general secondary curriculum than in classes on ancient philosophy, which was after all about the art of living. 'Citizenship competence' is developed through the confrontation with the society of the Greeks and Romans, and the comparison with our own. More specifically, argumentative skill receives ample treatment in classes on rhetoric. So, without having to look hard or interpret in overly creative ways, it soon becomes clear that CL education can significantly contribute to the realisation of the key competences.

The linguistic and cognitive arguments

The remaining two counterarguments are especially fascinating from an ideological perspective. The linguistic and cognitive arguments go along with the utilitarian way of thinking, only to seek to defeat the utilitarian opposition on its own terrain, by asserting that the study of CLs *is* directly useful for something else. In other words, it is not just about Latin and Ancient Greek themselves, but there is a *Sekundärnutzen*. On a linguistic level, this may be called language awareness or proficiency or the like; on a cognitive level, it may be called problem-solving, analytical reasoning or something of that purport. In both academic and everyday speech, these secondary uses are referred to as transfer value.

Some of the most rapidly mentioned reasons to study CLs fall under the category of the linguistic argument or of the cognitive argument (illustrated for example in the research of Smith, 2007 and Taylor *et al.*, 2023). When someone with a favourable disposition towards Latin is asked to advocate for the subject, it is not implausible the advocacy goes like this: Latin enhances mastery of one's native tongue, opens up the realm of scientific terminology, facilitates the acquisition of modern and in particular Romance languages, and teaches you how to study, reason and think. It is a well-known cliché that Latin is the ultimate 'brain gymnastics'.

Although there are national differences and nuances, these common-sense reasons are popular across countries. The German attitude research study, already cited in the section on the egalitarian argument, also found 80% of its participants held the view that Latin is of greater use than any modern language with an eye to logical thinking, command of German, and foreign language aptitude (Gerhards *et al.*, 2019). The linguistic argument in favour

of CL learning is all the more poignant in countries where the official language is considered to be closely connected to its classical predecessor, like in Greece.

The *in se* rather bold claims of linguistic and cognitive benefits are supported by a mountain of anecdotic evidence (see references and quotes in Holmes-Henderson and Kelly, 2022), by people confirming them to be true going on their perceptions of their own experiences with CL education. The arguments are sometimes further backed up with examples of higher achievement by (former) CL pupils – who do indeed tend to outperform their peers on a variety of measures (Bracke and Bradshaw, 2020), from standardised language tests, over medical entrance exams, to success rates and study efficiency in higher education. In the United States, for instance, Latin pupils consistently achieve high scores on the verbal portion of the SAT,¹⁷ a standardised test widely used for college admissions (Cooper *et al.*, 2008; LaFleur, 1981, 1982).

The linguistic and cognitive arguments really are at the heart of the public debate regarding CL education. Official educational documents are often keen to praise the alleged linguistic and cognitive benefits of CL study, and use them as justification for new or existing educational practices. The abovementioned Walloon Excellency Pact, for instance, imposes Latin in order to uplift the command of French (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2023). In France too, Latin is taught with the explicit goal of supporting native language ability (Denis-Laroque, 2006). The Swedish attainment targets for Latin literally include scientific terminology and modern foreign language aptitude (Skolverket, 2023). In Germany there even exists a thriving programme, known under the name of *Latein plus* or *Englisch- und Lateinunterricht in Kooperation* depending on the *Bundesland*, where Latin and English are taught together in parallel for the sake of language-specific and language-general linguistic insight (Thies, 2004; Van Houdt, 2012).

Provided that the study of Latin and Ancient Greek boosts linguistic and cognitive abilities, CL education can add yet more European key competences to their record, namely the 'literacy', 'multilingual' and 'learning to learn' competences (Council of the European Union, 2018). Hence Figure 2 can be expanded with the corresponding European key competences,¹⁸ shown in Figure 3 below.

Epilogue

Some reflections on the value of the arguments discussed

CL education is a controversial topic. Unlike in a fair trial, in a public debate like the one outlined above, the burden of proof lies with the defence. How do they perform? Starting with the issue of accessibility and inclusivity, one could say that CL teachers and researchers have gone beyond a mere refutation of the egalitarian argument and have actually turned the tables in their favour through their rebuttal. As things stand though, CL education in general still has a long way to go if it wants to earn the reputation of open-minded and intercultural education. A great deal more time and effort will be required to inflict lasting changes on the public image of CL education.

In response to the criticism of uselessness, the resistance to utilitarianism sketched above will perhaps resonate with many a classicist. Considering strike power in the debate, however, surely it is not the optimal strategy to reject the utilitarian stance altogether. Due to the immediate confrontation of opposite ideologies, such a reaction to the utilitarian argument is more likely to serve as preaching to the converted than to making any new converts.

What is then the value of the counterarguments? The cultural-historical and general-developmental arguments are powerful, and

Aspect of CL instruction	Counterargument	European key competence
history	cultural-historical argument	cultural awareness and expression
literature		
general development	general-developmental argument	personal, social, and citizenship competence
grammar	linguistic argument	literacy and multilingual competence
	cognitive argument	learning to learn competence

Figure 3. European key competences corresponding to the counterarguments.

arguably the most compelling (Adler, 2020), but they lose strength owing to woolly and esoteric parlance (Van Damme, 2021) and their disconnect from modern psychology (Vereeck *et al.*, *in press*). The linguistic and cognitive arguments have been repeated so many times that they almost have become facts in the minds of those disposed to believe them; for a more sceptical audience, they fail to convince because they are based on perceptions and correlations at best, not on causal empirical evidence. As long as the transfer value of CL education is not submitted to rigorous scientific scrutiny,¹⁹ the linguistic and cognitive arguments amount to little more than an apologetic *topos*.

The crux here remains whether any extraordinary achievements by (former) CL pupils are chiefly explained by the transfer value of CL education, or by preselectivity, i.e. by the innate capacities of pupils who choose to study Latin and/or Ancient Greek. Research so far has not been able to solve this conundrum. There is nonetheless a substantial research literature on the linguistic and general cognitive impact of studying CLs (Vereeck *et al.*, *in press*), which was already alluded to in the introduction. Particularly in the United States, dozens of studies were conducted in the course of the 20th century, with predominantly positive findings regarding CL impact. Despite the large number of studies, they do not seem to have been disseminated very widely. Moreover, due to methodological issues, this body of research has not managed to rule out the preselectivity explanation. Thus, the door is left wide open for sceptics to brush aside the intellectual successes of CL pupils as mere selection bias, to which there is no sound reply on hand.

Finally, the objection has been raised that none of the arguments on the pro side are exclusive to Latin and Greek. Some might indeed apply to other school subjects,²⁰ but it is doubtful whether there is another single subject to which all arguments apply. Maybe the profound entanglement of language and culture is what truly makes Latin and Greek unique, albeit that there are large differences in this regard between teaching paradigms.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

We can conclude that this debate is fully rooted in language ideology. More particularly, it is a matter of perceived prestige and utility. Where on these spectra CLs belong and what the implications are thereof, that's always the question. Whichever

arguments are put in the forefront depends on the image CL education has in that particular time and place. Future research could pay more attention to differences in the debate between countries, or give a more detailed account of one particular region or country.²¹ Other options for future research include studying social media instead of traditional media, or outlining the debate in earlier time periods²² predating the late 19th century.

One thing is certain anyway: the public debate on the role and value of CL education is going round in circles. Very little has changed over time, as demonstrated by multiple quotes in this article. The final word is for the author of *Max Havelaar*, best known under his *nom de plume* Multatuli, who in 1873 penned an aphorism not any less apt at the time of writing in 2023, exactly one and a half centuries later:

Het komt me voor, dat de telkens hernieuwde strijd over het nut der klassieken bij het onderwijs slecht gevoerd wordt. De wederzijdse argumenten geven meer blijk van voor- en tegeningenomenheid, dan van onpartijdig onderzoek en zaakkennis. (Multatuli, 1873, no. 1105)

[It appears to me, that the continually renewed fight about the usefulness of Classics in education is waged poorly. The arguments on both sides mostly reflect biases pro and contra, rather than impartial research and expertise. (Multatuli, 1873, no. 1105)]

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Notes

1 Vice versa, it may be noted that looking at CLs opens up uncultivated terrain for sociolinguistics. In its roughly 60 years of existence, the field of language ideology has proven to be a fertile one, with contributions from various scientific backgrounds (Irvine, 2012). However, it has invariably brought forth research concentrating on modern language varieties (e.g., Milroy, 2001), whereas Latin and Ancient Greek have largely been overlooked.

2 The pair *Bildung* vs. *Ausbildung* was originally coined by the German scholar Wilhelm Von Humboldt (1767–1835).

3 Words of similar tenor are found in the report of the Classical Investigation launched by the American Classical League (Advisory Committee, 1924). Among other things, the goal of this investigation was ‘to make recommendations as to how Latin could be taught more effectively to achieve the claims made for it’ (Douglass and Kittelson, 1935, 27). The final report, dating from 1924, stressed the value of culture and general language study in any Latin course (Lucasse, 1929).

4 Certain colleges were even earlier to admit freshmen who had never taken Latin (cf. Wier, 1921).

5 For the Netherlands, see Verhoeven, 1997, 2–3. In Belgium, secondary school certificates were declared partially polyvalent in 1956 and completely omnivalent in 1964 (e.g., Grootaers, 1998). In Italy, the Codignola law of 1969 made it possible for all secondary education graduates to continue their studies at university (e.g., Aloï, 2010).

6 A note on Flanders specifically: as STEM programs attracted ever more pupils (Departement Onderwijs and Vorming, 2021), it was felt that this was often at the expense of CL programs. STEM became seen as a competitor of CLs, vying for pupil enrolment (e.g., Duyck *et al.*, 2017; Laes, 2016).

7 In German-speaking regions for instance, we have *Latinus Pons* in Germany (Kipf, 2010), and *Lingua Latein* in Switzerland (Wesselmann and Walker, 2021). An American example is *Aequora* (Butterworth, 2017).

8 To be sure, Latin and Ancient Greek are not the only gatekeepers. Such intellectual elitism is also found outside the context of CL education: many secondary schools award prizes for the best pupils in any subject, and universities grant their excellent students distinctions and honours programmes.

9 This term takes on a specific meaning in the historical context of the Battle of the Classics: ‘Traditionalists in the Battle of the Classics hoped to retain the classical languages ... as the pedagogical core of higher education in the US. Their opponents, who were often called “modernists”, by contrast, aimed to end curricular prescription and the dominance of Latin and [A]ncient Greek in the American colleges.’ (Adler, 2020, 6)

10 This variation in content is reflected in the variety of names referring to the relevant school subjects: ‘Classics’, ‘classical civilisation’, ‘classical languages’ (e.g., Dutch *klassieke talen*), ‘classical literature’ (e.g., French *lettres classiques*), ‘ancient philology’ (e.g., German *Altphilologie*), ‘Latin and general language studies’ (e.g., Swedish *Latin med allmän språkkunskap*), *et cetera*.

11 At least three linguistic characteristics can be identified that meet the needs of weaker language learners who tend to perform poorly in modern language classes. The first one is grapheme-phoneme correspondence: letters customarily produce one sound when pronounced orally, which make spelling and pronunciation less troublesome to process. The second one is inflection, since it clarifies syntactic and semantic relations. Unlike in English (or French, Dutch, Spanish, Italian...), one does not rely exclusively on word order to obtain meaning; rather, decoding a sentence requires diligent inspection of every word and its components. Breaking down words into morphemes and relying on inflections to find out the function of a constituent enforces understanding of the mechanics of language. The third one has to do with vocabulary. Latin specifically has got a relatively small lexicon and uses few idioms (Hill *et al.*, 1995, 49), which simplifies the task of learning vocabulary.

If one moves on to teaching method, besides the fact that low incidence classes in which all pupils take off at the same point in the learning curve are a

better fit for pupils who experience severe foreign language learning difficulties, there are two more relevant characteristics. Firstly, the focal point lies on written rather than spoken language, which appeals to learners with poor auditory ability who cannot easily discern the sounds of spoken language. Moreover, the approach is usually multisensory, meaning that sentences can simultaneously be seen and heard when the teacher reads them aloud. Weaker language learners typically fall short in phonological coding (Sparks and Ganschow, 1993), so that in an oral message they fail to distinguish different words from each other. Secondly, grammar tends to be presented explicitly, which is convenient for those who struggle to build internal rules on the implicit basis of contact with authentic language material, another typical obstacle for weaker language learners. A slower, incremental way of language instruction is conducive to the language acquisition of these pupils.

12 In Flanders, the old name for general secondary education, which is used in colloquial speech to this day, is *humaniora*, ‘that which makes you more human’.

13 As far as the *Primärnutzen* is concerned, there is a notable difference between the situation in the 20th and 21st centuries and the situation in previous centuries. For as long as Latin was a customary language of science and international communication, its instruction was defensible with an eye to Latin literacy in itself. By the 20th century, the Latin literacy argument *stricto sensu* had gone out of fashion for obvious reasons, and was completely superseded by the cultural-historical and general-developmental approaches towards reading Latin presented in this subsection.

14 See Crump 2008 for how CL education in the Netherlands ought to be more committed to cultivating independent judgement.

15 In March 2023, however, the IZA Institute of Labor Economics, an independent economic research institute, released a report of an Italian study on personality traits with a rather surprising conclusion. The report states that CL study does not affect conscientiousness and openness, but does increase neuroticism and self-reported unhappiness (Brunello *et al.*, 2023). This finding circulated both in the traditional media and on social media for a while, despite the research being methodologically flawed. As McDaniel (2023) aptly analyses, the authors overstepped the actual scope of their research and drew a too far-reaching conclusion with respect to their limited data on *licei classici* and *licei scientifici*.

16 Testimonies of (former) CL pupils often state that they find learning Latin/Greek fun, and choose to study it for the fun (see also Butterworth, 2017; Katz *et al.*, 2020; Taylor *et al.*, 2023). Pleasure might not be an argument for the preservation of a school subject *per se*, but at the very least this observation deserved a note.

17 Conversely, CL programs have been designed with the express purpose of coaching pupils for the SAT (Holmes and Keffer, 1995).

18 The discussion of CL education and key competences in this article is of a theoretical nature. For case studies in Italy and Spain, see Canfarotta *et al.*, 2022.

19 Under the auspices of Research Foundation – Flanders, such innovative research on the transfer effects of CL learning is currently being performed at Ghent University by PhD students Alexandra Vereeck and Cathy Hauspie. The empirical findings can be expected in the following years.

20 Proposals exist in abundance for other school subjects that ought to replace CLs. We have chosen not to elaborate this point, seeing how this would necessitate a discussion of to what extent the classical subjects live up to the arguments *pro*, which surpasses the scope of the current article.

21 For Flanders, there has previously been Spelmans (2010), who took a more philosophical approach.

22 Steps have been taken in that direction by Pire (1971) and Drago (2008).

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