

SYMPOSIUM IN HONOR OF BRIAN MACWHINNEY

We were recruited into Brian's orbit by a plenary talk he gave at triple AL in Dallas in 2013. It was devoted to what Brian perceived as an under-appreciated opportunity for using the emerging computer assisted language learning tools for conducting experiments and collecting outcome data- what he termed e-call.

The reason that I was in the audience is that a few years earlier we had developed an online environment for reading Latin and classical Greek that had achieved so much popularity that people were beginning to try to use it to learn the languages, something that it had not really been designed for. So we began to attend some of the SLA conferences to see what sort of things we should be adding to make it more pedagogically effective. We were, however, soon disabused of any hope that we could find any easy answers. It was dismaying to discover how little consensus there was about the relative advantages of different methods. At the same conference at which Brian spoke, I happened to be explaining our quest to Jan Hulstijn, whom I discovered was something of a crypto-classicist- after a moment he looked at me quizzically and asked "And have you found anything of use?"

In fact we had recently concluded that we were going to have to do our own research because most of the published literature was based on studies with too few subjects to look simultaneously at different learning methods and different individual learner characteristics. Such a plan did not seem entirely unrealistic because one of us had been consulting to the pharmaceutical industry on research design for several decades while our principal sponsor had developed software for searching medical literature that by the end of the last century had become a world standard, in use from Japan to the Institute Pasteur.

So Brian's appeal for e-call fell upon most receptive ears. I approached Brian after his talk, and he at once began to recite either Caesar or Virgil, I cannot now remember which but it was definitely Latin. Using a classical language for SLA research obviously has both special advantages and special limitations, and we were delighted to see that we had found someone who could help us appreciate both.

Our initial enthusiasm was soon tempered by difficulties of securing funding and sufficiently well-annotated classical resources, but both problems have recently been significantly reduced.

Thanks to the generosity of our initial sponsor, Mark Nelson, we have been able to expand our original platform from a browser extension to Firefox, to similar extensions on Chrome and Safari, while also proving the same functionality through a set of javascript libraries that can be embedded in any website, eliminating the need for using browser extensions on that website. Most recently we have added support for mobile devices, both Android and I-OS, a crucial part of our conversion from a reading to a learning platform. All these features are now available in a beta release with the official release scheduled for this Fall.

We have also been fortunate in securing access to several major resources- The Packard Humanities Institute is providing access to their concordance of all of Latin literature while the University of Liege has provided 1.6 million words of Latin that have been lemmatized and morphologically analyzed. We also have access to the Ancient Greek and Latin treebanks with their dependency syntax diagrams from the Perseus Project and two new wordnets of Greek and Latin from the Zampolli Institute in Pisa and the University of Exeter.

Over the next year we will be trying to prioritize both the user characteristics and the learning methods that we wish to begin comparing initially and prototyping the learning games and proficiency assessments that we will start with. We would hope to begin collecting data in the fall of 2020, and never stop, with endless replication providing a data accumulation that permits finer and finer relationships among user characteristics and learning methods to emerge.

The reason I am imposing on your attention here is the hope that there are some in this very select audience who might have suggestions about which comparisons we should start with- either with respect to individual differences or learning methods or both. Ultimately we hope to be able to make comparisons across large numbers of methods and individual differences, but we have to start somewhere, and while we have a rather large inventory of plausible candidates at this point, we are not entirely confident of our priorities. And indeed, a major consideration in prioritization has to be the areas of greatest interest in the SLA and CALL fields at the moment. So Your input would be most welcome.