Breaking the Language Barrier

Word Study

This document aims to explain the process and uses of a detailed word study for non-language students. It outlines the use, process, and benefits of word studies and suggests potential class activities. The focus of the document is on Greek and Latin but the same methods are applicable to other languages. Further work, however, might be necessary to find or create the online dictionary and word count resources for other languages.

Use

The purposes of the word study activity are manifold.

* Students need to read the text closely.
* Illustrates that cultural ideas can be contained in vocabulary.
* Allows students to fully explore a word or concept and discover potential multiple meanings.
* Students must analyze context and subtext, thus gaining more from the text and going beyond what translations can easily communicate.

Set-up

No technical setup is required for doing this activity, all required tools/services are freely available on <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

Process

The process described below is specifically for a situation where a user is starting with an English word and searching for Greek or Latin words that are translated as that word. It is also possible to start with a Greek or Latin word and search for instances of it throughout the corpus in order to compare the contexts. That case is dealt with separately in the included presentation that illustrates the following steps.[[1]](#footnote-0)

1. Choose a word.
2. Search for word in Perseus using the search box at the top right of the Perseus home page.
3. In the results, browse through the list of instances of the word and select one to view that text.
4. Open the Greek or Latin of the text where the word appears.
5. Locate the Greek/Latin word that translates to the English word.
6. Look up the dictionary meanings of the Greek/Latin word.
   1. Note how the definitions correspond to the starting English word.
7. Read and note the context in which the word appears.
   1. Note if other words frequently appear near the word.
8. Repeat from step 3 for several different Greek/Latin words to find words with shades of meaning beyond the starting English word.

Benefits

When completing a word study, students engage with the text more closely. Their task is to discover for themselves how meanings of words can change, or how there are differences in cultural concepts behind words. To do this they must think critically about the context of words, both within the surrounding text but also within time and location. A word study illustrates how layers of meaning can become lost in translation and give non-language students access to that meaning.

Suggestions

Below are some potential word study assignments. They could stand on their own as subjects for papers, supplement in-class activities, or be pieces of larger class projects.

* Study a specific word over time that changed meaning or took on a specific meaning.
  + Example: Have students investigate the instances of a Greek/Latin word over time and across multiple genres of texts. Students should be able to discuss the definitions of the word, where it appears, and how its use changed over time. They should also consider how the word has been translated into English and how the other definitions of the word might impact the meaning or interpretation put forth in translation.
* Study the “true meanings” of Greek/Latin words
  + Example: Have students investigate concepts like ‘love,’ ‘virtue,’ ‘pollution,’ etc. in order for them to find multiple words in Greek/Latin that translate to their original English concept. Students should research the definitions of those Greek/Latin words to discover the shades of meaning and differences between them while also noting the contexts in which the Greek/Latin words are or are not used.
* Build a profile of an ancient figure, real or mythological
  + Example: Have students search the corpus for the name of a person. Students should locate descriptive words about that person and identify the Greek/Latin that those words are translated from. Then students should research those Greek/Latin words in order to understand the meaning of those descriptions and any subtext they may carry. Students could also track a mythological figure through time to see if the descriptions of that character change and discuss if and how the age impacts the portrayal.

1. <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1bquLOC5mGW57C-ADTo5WhpNK_6crlZgqb6u-se7PWdU> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)