Reading documents in their original language

This guide provides information on teaching and learning resources for students who require language acquisition to read documents in their original language for research.

Rationale for language acquisition

While not mandatory, it is recommended that higher degree by research (HDR) students acquire at least a reading knowledge of one modern “theological” language other than English before they begin their studies. For Biblical Studies students, this language should be German; for Christian Thought students, it should be Latin.

An understanding of these languages is arguably essential for PhD research, and time should be devoted in the student’s first year to learning German or Latin, and possibly other key modern languages, beginning with French. Depending on the nature of the research, other relevant languages include Dutch, Modern Hebrew and Spanish.

For Biblical Studies students, ancient languages such as Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Aramaic, Ugaritic or Akkadian may be relevant. The Library has resources for self-study of all these and more. It is the responsibility of the supervisor in consultation with the student to determine which, if any, of these languages would be useful.

On the potential pitfalls of not reading a text in the original language, theologian James Eslington wrote:

To my mind it would be unthinkable that I could do a PhD on the word ‘righteousness’ in the Pauline corpus, or the structure of Amos, or the role of particular ideas in the Pentateuch, without learning to read Greek or Hebrew: I would be utterly dependent on the interpretation of other scholars in their translation of the text, and would not be able to justify my choice of a particular English translation of the texts in question. I would unwittingly perpetuate errors in their translations. Indeed, I would not even be aware of those errors.

I work in historical theology, and to my mind it is no less unthinkable that I could do a PhD on the role of the organic motif in Bavinck’s (Dutch) work, or Calvin’s (Latin and French) writings on John’s Gospel, or Barth’s (German) Römerbrief, whilst having no knowledge of their original languages. The reasons are the same: someone else has produced a particular interpretation of Bavinck, Calvin and Barth, and by never reading those texts in the original languages I would (unknowingly) import the subtleties of interpretations not my own, whilst being wholly uncritical as a recipient of their interpretations.

I could not ask; has this translator understood Bavinck correctly? Is this English rendering of Barth’s German text accurate, or are there mistranslations at key points? Does this recent translation of Calvin suggest that the translator has been influenced by more recent theological giants, and is rendering Calvin in that light? That is to say nothing of the problems posed by one’s knowledge of a particular writer being restricted to an often limited number of translated sources. What if your entire thesis is contradicted (or confirmed!) by an untranslated source of which you know nothing?

Language learning is no less important for the systematic and historical theologian than for the Biblical Studies scholar, though I fear this point is sometimes lost on theologians within our discipline.1

The list below offers a brief selection of language providers in or near Sydney, and selected online providers. For more information, or to report obsolete URL links, contact Research Support Officer at Rod.Benson@moore.edu.au.

Short courses and apps

- Babbel (UK)  
  https://uk.babbel.com/
- BBC Languages (UK)  
  http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/learn/index.shtml
- Macquarie Ancient Languages School  
- Sydney Language Solutions  
- Centre for Continuing Education (University of Sydney)  
- UNSW Institute of Languages  
  https://www.languages.unsw.edu.au/courses/other-languages/
- Selection of mobile apps  
  https://www.thebalance.com/the-7-best-free-language-learning-apps-1357060

University diploma courses

- Diploma in Language Studies (UNSW)  
  https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/future-students/undergraduate/diplomas/
- Diploma in Languages (University of Newcastle)  
- Diploma in Languages (University of Wollongong)  
- Diploma of Language Studies (University of Sydney)  
- Diploma of Languages  

Language-specific institutions

- Alliance Française de Sydney  
- Dutch lessons in Sydney  
- Goethe Institut (Sydney) – German  
- Theological German  
  http://theologicalgerman.com/
- Hebrew Online Language Academy  
  http://eteacherhebrew.com/
- Instituto Cervantes – Spanish  
  http://sidney.cervantes.es/en/courses_spanish/learn_spanish.htm

Language tutors

- Tutorfinder – “matching students and tutors across Australia”  
- type “foreign language tutors Sydney” (or similar) into a search engine