

densior ille, hic copiosior: Bilingualism in the Demosthenes-Cicero Syncrises

One of the curious facts about Greek/Roman bilingualism is that despite how widespread it was, it left very little trace on either language. The Romans may have borrowed extensively from Greek literature and culture, but linguistically, they maintained a scrupulous divide between their tongue and that of the conquered Greeks (Hutchinson 2013). And even though Greek knowledge of Latin was considerable (Rochette 1997), they were even more scrupulous in preserving their language's purity from Roman influence (Swain 1996). This is because despite their close contact, each culture considered linguistic purity a matter of prestige (Feeney 2016), and avoided any possible contamination.

Consequently, there is relatively little discussion in Latin about the nature of Greek, and almost no discussion in Greek about the nature of Latin. But in this paper I argue that we can, in fact, recover what Greeks and Romans thought about one another's languages by examining one of the few topics popular with authors in both: comparisons of Demosthenes with Cicero.

Three comparisons of Demosthenes and Cicero are extant, those of [Longinus] in *On the Sublime*, Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives*, and Quintilian in *Institutio Oratoriae*; another, by Caecilius of Caleacte, exists in fragmentary form. As De Jonge (2018) shows, comparisons of Cicero and Demosthenes were able to cross the barrier between Greek and Latin because of the topic's rich symbolic potential: it was not just Demosthenes and Cicero who were being compared, but the cultural and literary abilities of Greek and Latin more broadly.

This paper will demonstrate that there was also a linguistic aspect to this symbolism, and that the language used in these comparisons to describe Demosthenes and Cicero closely echoes ancient comparisons of the linguistic abilities of Greek and Latin (e.g., *Inst.* 12.10.27-39). The syncrises thus provide insight into the way that Latin and Greek were understood in relation to

each other in antiquity, and suggest there was a shared set of assumptions about their relative strengths and weaknesses.

That this sort of linguistic comparison would use Demosthenes and Cicero as its symbols makes sense, since by the early imperial period, they had become the arbiters of *Hellenismos* and *Latinitas*, respectively. Furthermore, for many Roman critics, Cicero was the only Roman who had made Latin the linguistic equal of Greek (e.g., *Suas.* 7.10), making him the ideal figure to challenge Greek linguistic supremacy. But Romans were also frank about the perceived deficiencies of their native tongue in relation to Greek: they considered Greek not just richer in vocabulary, but also swifter in performance, more graceful, precise, and brief. Latin, on the other hand, was strong and weighty, perhaps even harsh, verbose and prone to periphrases.

As my paper will demonstrate, descriptions of Demosthenes and Cicero follow this vocabulary closely. Demosthenes epitomizes the relative brevity and restraint of his native tongue: Quintilian calls him more concentrated (10.1.106: *densior*) and concise than Cicero (12.10.52: *strictior*); to Plutarch his style is contracted (1.3: συνηγμένος); and [Longinus] compares him to single, brief events—a flash of lightning, or a thunderbolt (12.4). He also possesses precision (*Comp. Dem. Cic.* 1.1: ἀκρίβεια), like the point of a sword (*Inst.* 10.1.106: *acumen*), and his gift is in speed (*Subl.* 12.4: τάχος). Cicero, on the other hand, is diffuse (*Subl.* 12.4: χύσις; *Inst.* 10.1.106: *copiosior*), producing, according to [Longinus], a flood or a steadily burning fire of rhetoric. His weapon of choice is mass (*Inst.* 10.1.106: *pondus*), and he rolls on with staying power (*Subl.* 12.4: ἐπίμονος). Quintilian even includes descriptions by the Atticists that show how easily Cicero's style could be given the same sort of negative characteristics imputed to Latin as a whole: the Atticists considered him redundant and excessively repetitive (12.10.12: *redundans, in repetitionum nimium*).

It is clear, then, that when these syncrisis assess the relative abilities of Demosthenes and Cicero, what they are really assessing are the linguistic strengths and weaknesses of Greek and Latin more generally. I conclude that when we consider the syncrisis from this angle, we can see that there were two warring impulses at work in ancient Greek/Latin bilingualism: a presumption of the basic equality between the two languages, but also the assertion of an unbridgeable gap between them that kept Greek in the primary position. The syncrisis thus summarize well the tensions of this bilingual world.

Bibliography

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