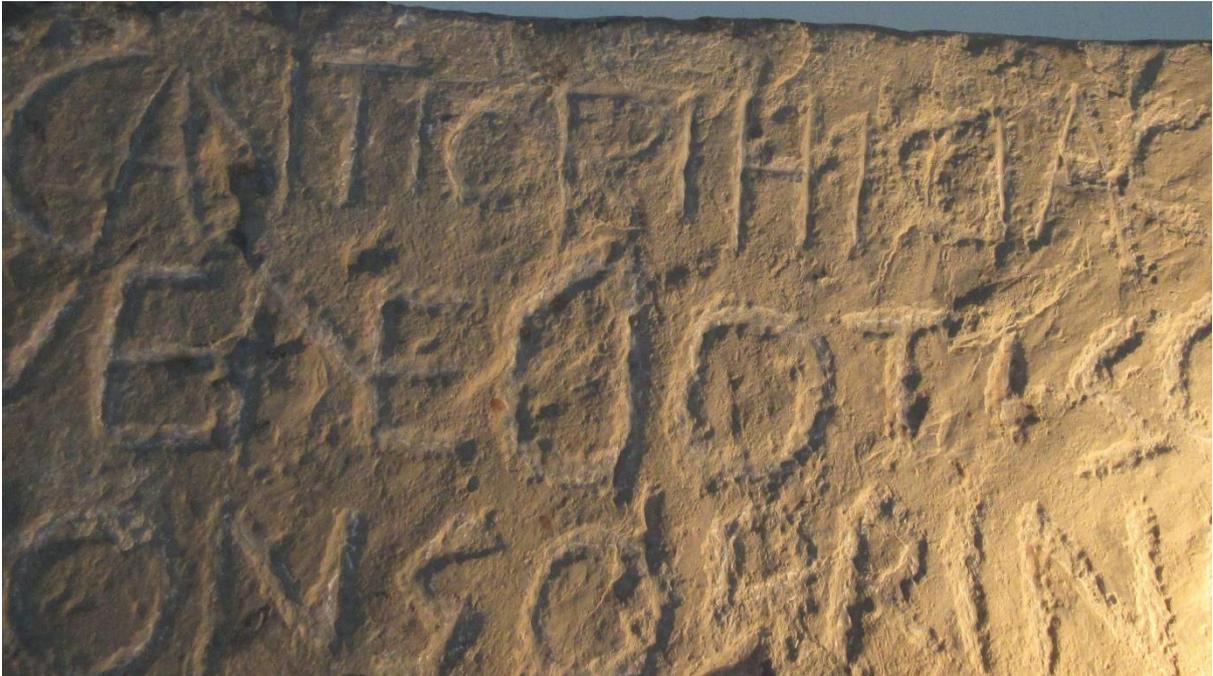# How linguistics can help the historian: part I



Introduction

From the title of this series, at first sight one might think we were just asking 'How can a knowledge of other languages help the historian?' — and of course the answer there would be fairly obvious. Knowing other languages helps not just historians, but other humanities scholars too, because it enables them to read foreign documents in the original. And this can be important, both because there may not be a translation of a particular document into one's own language but also because, even if there is, it puts one into a position of dependency on the translator. And translators, wittingly or unwittingly, may have imposed their own spin on the piece they are translating: they are themselves products of their environment, just like the original writer (and, for that matter, like you the final reader), and so they will inevitably have refracted the sense in some way. In a later instalment we shall look at an example of this refraction in which the translator responsible was a very respectable Cambridge academic who hardly had any intention of being misleading! Yet that is in fact what happened ...

However, a knowledge of other languages is not principally what was meant to be implied by the title of this discussion. The reference is, instead, to the discipline of linguistics: namely for our purposes the science — yes, science, in the normal English sense — that analyses not *what* is expressed in a historical document, but *how* it is expressed; and that, as a result, can frequently cast interesting historical sidelights on the context in which the document was produced. The point is this: whereas composers of documents, ancient or modern, may suppress, spin, or downright corrupt the truth, lying about the subject they are dealing with and giving false information ('fake news'), the fact is that the medium in which they are doing this is always some language or other; and this language, whichever tongue it may happen to be and at whatever epoch, gives out all sorts of signals and clues aside from what is actually being expressed propositionally in its words. Moreover, the less obvious these clues and signals may be, the less likely it is that the composers of the documents will have been aware of building in such signals and clues. Thus the less likely it is that measures will have been taken deliberately to disguise them — and so the more likely it is that, if we analyse the signals and clues correctly, we can gain objective information from them. Indeed, it is fascinating to discover how quite penetrating historical insights can sometimes be finessed out of what seems at first sight to be purely linguistic evidence, which is generally — but wrongly — considered to be as dry as dust. The potential for doing this is not restricted to documents: the clues and signals get woven into the very warp and woof of a language as it is spoken, as well as written. And there are always historical reasons ...

Calendrical confusion

46] SEPTEMBER NINTH MONTH. [1897·

THE SUN.
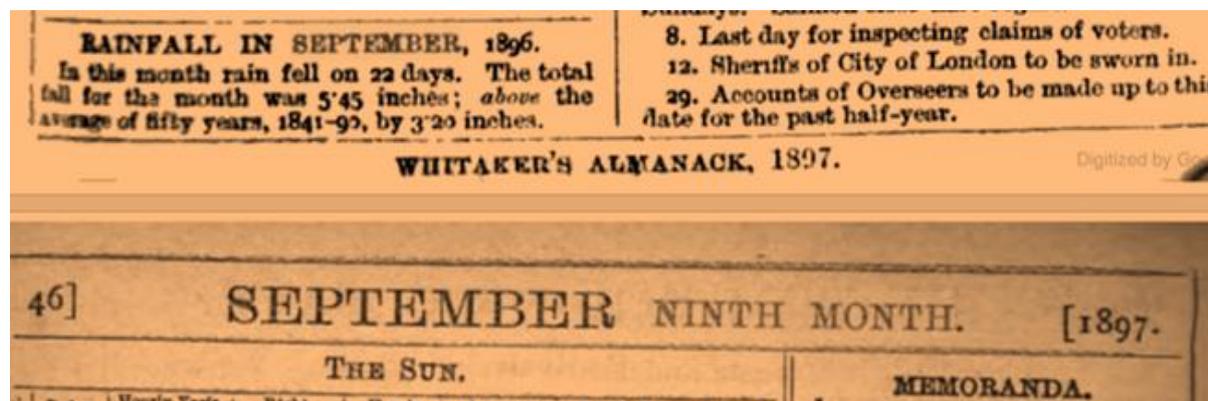
MEMORANDA.

… so here is an example: it is probably fairly common knowledge that the months of July and August bear those names in commemoration of two Roman emperors, namely the Caesars Julius and Augustus. That much is, as it were, explicit in the names, and was done for deliberate effect; as such, it was not something that went on to be lost track of by the speakers. But have you ever been puzzled by the names of the subsequent months of the year? September, October, November, December are the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth months; but surely the element 'sept-' normally means seven (as in septuplets), 'oct-' (as in octogenarian) means eight, 'nov-' (as in novena) means nine, and 'dec-' (as in decimal) means ten? What has happened here? Each of the months has been displaced by two slots from its original place in the sequence; and this can only have happened if the people using the names had by that stage ceased to be consciously aware of the original numerical meanings embedded in them. Now, it is often thought that the displacement was collateral damage caused by the two Emperors' months' having being shoe-horned into the summer. Actually, that is not how it happened: instead, the displacement occurred in the year 153 BC when the months of January and February were moved from the end of the year to the beginning; the subsequent glorification of the two emperors consisted simply in the renaming — as July and August — of two

months that already existed, so no further disruption was caused at that stage. But the point for our purposes is this: when the reorganisation of 153 BC took place, it left a trace in what we can think of as the archaeological record of the language. As we have seen, the months were wrenched away from their etymologies — that is, from the original meanings of their names (seventh, eighth, ninth etc.) — at a time when people no longer thought of them in terms of those meanings. Thus they didn't bother to rename September to December so as to bring them back into line with their etymologies. This meant that, even if we had had no direct record of what had taken place, we would still have been able to work out fairly accurately what the original situation had been, by using those etymologies. And this piece of linguistic archaeology is arguably as concrete a piece of evidence of an event — namely the reorganisation of the calendar — as any artefact that one might dig up can be of a physical event, such as a fire.

In that example, only one language was involved, namely Latin (the English month-names being simply borrowings of the Latin ones, long after the changes). The linguistic archaeology gains an added dimension when two or more languages are involved from the start; we shall look at some instances of that in the next instalment. In the meantime, many thanks for reading — and do get in touch with the author (A.Harvey@ria.ie), at the Royal Irish Academy's Dictionary of Celtic Latin project. We are still busy drafting, in spite of the lockdown!