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# Latin Reading Activities to Take Students from Syntax to Story

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When Aeneas receives his new shield in Vergil's *Aeneid* (*Aen.* 8.608ff.), he unknowingly illustrates several important features of reading comprehension. Aeneas is in awe of the shield, but does not understand its depictions. To him, the first picture on the shield is just a wolf and two infants. Most readers of the *Aeneid*, on the other hand, will interpret the picture differently, due to their background knowledge and the reading context. They know "the story of Italy and triumphs of Rome" (*Aen.* 8.626). Moreover, the genre of the *Aeneid* will encourage them to seek meaning behind the depictions. To them, a wolf and twins ("*lupam*" and "*geminos*," *Aen.* 8.631) trigger the story of Remus and Romulus, twin founders of Rome, and this story adds a significant historical layer to their understanding of the shield.

## 1. READING COMPREHENSION: READER, CONTEXT, AND AFFORDANCES IN THE TEXT

The case of Aeneas and his shield illustrates that not every "reader" comes to an object or text with the same background or in a comparable setting. Recent approaches to reading and discourse linguistics draw attention to this personal aspect of comprehension. In these approaches, it is the reader who decides if they have arrived "at a sense and feeling of the text that is personally acceptable" (Stockwell, 10).

In addition, salient elements in the text are not seen as cues that are clear to everyone, but as *affordances* (McCarthy et al., 97; Bartelds 2022). It is typical of affordances that they are meaningful only to people who know how to make use of them. The two infants on Aeneas's shield will only be twins for someone who knows the foundation story of Rome. Reading comprehension, in short, results from an interplay between the text and the knowledge of a reader, and is influenced by the context (McCarthy et al., 87).

Latin classrooms are a specific reading context. Reading goals in this context depend on the curriculum set at the school, state, or national level. Texts, too, may have been chosen by those other than the readers (i.e., students and teachers) themselves. Students often lack the background knowledge to read these Latin literary

texts without problems.<sup>1</sup> The range of affordances the text provides to them can thus be limited to sentence level understanding.

Teachers are readers, too. For them, Latin texts provide a large range of affordances, enabling them to rely on a vast body of implicit knowledge. Their knowledge allows them to automatically draw inferences from all levels of the text.<sup>2</sup> Bartelds, in a forthcoming article, argues that classics teachers may "open their black box of expertise" and make their implicit knowledge and skills explicit. He recommends the pedagogical approach of a Cognitive Apprenticeship, following Collins, Brown, and Newman (1987).

Teachers may use the approach of a Cognitive Apprenticeship to model the affordances they themselves use while reading. Levine and Horton discuss results of intervention studies using this approach (Levine and Horton 2013). Examples of affordances in these studies are symbolic archetypes or the use of ironic language, but there are many possibilities. In general, linguistic and narratological features may work well as affordances for students because these are easily recognizable in a text.

## 2. AFFORDANCES AND THE STRUCTURE OF STORIES

Short Latin stories contain linguistic and narratological affordances to keep track of their underlying structure.<sup>3</sup> Tense usage, narrative pace, and speech representation are examples of affordances to recognize the rise and fall of narrative tension. An eye for these affordances takes students from "syntax to story." It gives them insight into story structures and helps them to keep an overview of the text and to anticipate upcoming events.

The organizational structure of stories and their affordances may be illustrated by means of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe (*Met.* 4.51-166). The story introduces two points of interest in its first lines, the fruit of the mulberry tree (51-53) and the forbidden love between Pyramus and Thisbe (55-80). This orientational phase of the story is characterized by narratorial comment, description, and actual present and past tenses. The unfolding events then culminate in two peaks, the death of Pyramus (105-27) and that of Thisbe (137-63). The unfolding events are presented in past tenses, a summarizing narrative tempo, and they hardly contain direct speech. The peaks, on the

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other hand, have a slower, scenic pace, and contain historical presents and direct speech. The story’s two-fold resolution concerns Thisbe’s two wishes (147-63), including both the mulberry tree and the final resting place (164-66). The resolution phase is characterized by past tenses. The last part has a summarizing pace and shows a return to the present of the narrator with an actual present tense.

### 3. READING ACTIVITIES

Modelling the use of affordances is an instructional method that clearly befits a Cognitive Apprenticeship. In addition, teachers may design activities that gradually encourage students to identify and use affordances by themselves. Students can start with easier texts or use translations. They should be encouraged to physically mark affordances in the text during reading. In this way, the teacher can give feedback and, if necessary, point out further affordances. After reading, students may use the marked affordances to reflect on the content of the whole text.

Fig. 1: Arc of Tension in Ovid’s Pyramus and Thisbe (*Met.* 4.51-166)

Section	Speech, Pace, and Tenses
51-53	
55-64	P T
63-70	S P T
71-80	S S S P T
81-92	S S S P T T T
93-104	P P T T T
105-115	S S S P P T
115-127	S S S P P T T T
128-136	P P T T T
137-146	S S S P P T T T
147-154	S S S P P T
155-163	S S S P P T
164	P T
165-166	

An example activity, suitable for Pyramus and Thisbe, is the analysis and ensuing visualization of the *Narrative Arc of Tension* in a story (see Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Students analyze (predetermined) parts of the story according to three parameters: narrative pace (P), tenses (T), and representations of speech (S). They mark the outcome of their analysis by filling in specific numbers of cells in a table: the combination of a slower pace, historical presents, and direct speech results in the maximum number of cells, creating a literal peak on the activity sheet. Figure 1 shows the resulting table for Ovid’s Pyramus and Thisbe, including the resulting visualization of its “Arc of Tension.” In a practice round,

the text of Pyramus and Thisbe in the Visual Latin Reading Library (VLRL), which was adapted from Ovid and Bocaccio’s *De Mulieribus Claris*, could be used.<sup>5</sup> Its pattern is the same as that of Ovid’s text (see Fig. 2) and could function as a reading aid for the original.

Fig. 2: Arc of Tension in the Adaptation of Pyramus and Thisbe in the Visual Latin Reading Library (VLRL)

Section	Speech, Pace, and Tenses
51-53	
Amor ardens (55-64)	P T
Rima in pariete (63-70)	S P T
“Invide paries!” (71-80)	S S S P T
Consilium eorum (81-92)	S S P T T T
Thisbe leaenae occurrit (93-104)	P P T T T
Pyramus credit Thisbem mortuum esse (105-115)	S S S P P T
Pyramus mori constituit (115-127)	S S S P P T T T
Thisbe Pyramum quaerit (128-136)	P P T T T
Thisbe amatam sub moro cognovit (137-146)	S S S P P T T T
Thisbe mori constituit (147-154)	S S S P P T
Thisbes preces (155-163)	S S S P P T
Duo in urna una (164-166)	P T

Marinda van Dorst, a Dutch classics teacher, has used this activity for several Ovidian episodes and was kind enough to share her thoughts with me. In her experience, the activity helps to teach students narratological concepts in a meaningful way. Her students could easily recognize narrative pace and tense usage in the text, but had some trouble identifying indirect speech. Van Dorst and her students liked the “hands on” and activating character of the activity.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Latin students seem to be caught in a Catch-22. They must unravel the complex structure of sentences to comprehend Latin texts, while text comprehension is an important tool to unravel these sentences (e.g., Boyd 2018, Luger 2020).<sup>6</sup> Due to their struggle at the sentence level, students cannot really understand, experience, or enjoy Latin narrative texts.

One way out of this situation is to change the type and difficulty of the texts.<sup>7</sup> In this contribution, I hope to have presented a second (additional) way: teachers may present themselves explicitly in their own capacity of readers in a Cognitive Apprenticeship. As teachers we may take students from syntax to story by showing them affordances in stories that help us to immerse ourselves in exciting story worlds. This approach creates a partnership in the classroom between teacher and student and makes the text a field of exploration rather than a challenging wall of text.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Carlon's contribution in this issue for a more elaborate analysis.

<sup>2</sup>See Duke (2011) for an overview of reading activities of good readers.

<sup>3</sup>The structure is based on the narrative structure of socio-linguist William Labov. See Van Gils and Kroon (2018) for a more elaborate discussion and references.

<sup>4</sup>See <https://tinyurl.com/ArcofTension> for activity sheets that can be used for this exercise. The activity was initially designed for episodes in Livy (Adema 2015).

<sup>5</sup>See Gruber-Miller's contribution in this issue. To access the VLRL resources for the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, see <https://sites.google.com/cornellcollege.edu/visual-latin-reading-library/pyramus-and-thisbe-embedded-reading>.

<sup>6</sup>See Adema (2019) for further references.

<sup>7</sup>See Carlon's contribution to this issue.

<sup>8</sup>I would like to thank the reviewers and the editors of *The Classical Outlook* for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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