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Greek and Latin Roots: Differences in Morphological Awareness in J.K.Rowling's Writing

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Abstract

Whether or not having read *Harry Potter* affects a person's knowledge of Latin and Greek roots is an interesting question and one worth researching. Through the literature review, resources on morphological awareness, incidental language learning, and Latin and Greek roots' effectiveness in the classroom were used to answer this very question. Cedarville University faculty, staff, and students answered a survey that had them guess the meaning of various Latin and Greek roots that appear in *Harry Potter*. From this, it was concluded that the hypothesis is correct: the *Harry Potter* readers performed better on the survey; although, there are many factors to consider, such as the demographics of respondents. It was also concluded that *Harry Potter* would also be a good vessel to teach morphology in school.

Keywords: morphological awareness, incidental vocabulary learning, *Harry Potter*, reading literacy

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Introduction

Books have a certain lasting quality that lingers long after a person grows out of childhood. Whether a child's favorite story was *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff or *Red Fish, Blue Fish* by Dr. Seuss, these books shape one's childhood and stay with him or her. The *Harry Potter* books by J.K. Rowling are no exception to this and are the introduction to the magical worlds that many fantasy readers have grown to love. Even when one reads these books later in life, they are still very influential; they transcend a good read and become an unforgettable experience. One of the most compelling elements of J.K. Rowling's writings is her mastery of language. To create the unique world of *Harry Potter*, Rowling pulled from her classical background that manifested itself in heavy Greek and Latin overtones, overtones that lend a certain credibility and nuance to the world she created. For example, the spell "expelliarmus," which flings the opponent's wand away, comes from the combination of "expel" and "arm," which refers to a weapon. When child, teenager, or adult first reads this word, how aware are they of the roots of these words? If aware of the Latin or Greek background, did the reader merely pick up the meaning through context clues? Based on the result of the spell, does the reader grasp what the different parts of the spell's word mean better than someone who has not read the *Harry Potter* books? Through researching the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary by developing knowledge of Greek and Latin roots, specifically demonstrated by the *Harry Potter* series, and a comparative study between those who have read *Harry Potter* and those who have not, this study will show that those who have read *Harry Potter* have a better understanding of such etymological roots than those who have not.

Literature Review

To treat this subject, various directions of research needed to be pulled together. This included researching the permeation of Greek and Latin in the English language, emphasizing vocabulary education and its effectiveness, understanding incidental vocabulary acquisition in first language, and studying the morphological development in learning vocabulary. In addition, it was researched how J.K. Rowling used Latin and Greek in the *Harry Potter* books, the perceived effect of the books on readers, and how *Harry Potter* is being used in the classroom, specifically to teach vocabulary and literacy. It is discussed here the use of explicitly teaching Latin and Greek roots in the classroom as well as how educators have incorporated *Harry Potter* into their curricula and its effectiveness and possible effect on research. These have been organized by the specific topic. While such a study has not yet been conducted, these sources informed the hypothesis, research, and results.

Latin and Greek Roots and their permeation in English language

According to *A History of English* by Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, over half of the English language is derived from Latin, with some borrowings being direct without an intermediary, such as French (2002, p. 10). Needless to say, Greek and Latin are a part of everyday life. The story of how these morphemes appear in the English language is told in *The Greek and Latin Roots of English* by Tamara Green (2015). Green first shows how the roots fit into the English language and where they are likely to appear as affixes. She then categorizes the Latin and Greek roots by the field in which they pertain, for example, psychology or health. This was a helpful resource in double-checking the roots that have reportedly influenced Harry Potter spells, mentioned in fan-made lists. Green's book distinguished fact from fiction from fan-speculation in the realm of etymology. The official Harry Potter website "Pottermore" weighs in

on the issue with the article “Why Latin was so Important to the Harry Potter Books”(n.d.). It asserts “Latin is very much alive in all the books, adding its rich descriptiveness and magisterial tone to spells, names, places and more.”

Harry Potter and the Literacy Lessons

Renfro (2016) actually uses Green’s book mentioned above to find out where Rowling’s spells originated in an enlightening *Business Insider* article which details the Latin and Greek inspiration for the more popular *Harry Potter* spells. Ellen (2016), an alleged *Harry Potter* enthusiast from Hubpages who claims to have a Master’s degree in classical literature, takes the research a bit further and looks at the Greek/Latin inspirations for names as well as spells. Even without citation confirming her opinion, Ellen’s comments are still compelling in that she obviously finds value in *Harry Potter*, which is what a Dempster, Oliver, Sunderland, and Thistlethwaite (2016) study ultimately concerns. This research by Dempster et al. (2016) found that most readers of the book series found it beneficial towards their literacy and vocabulary. While there was no follow up to the Dempster et al. study to confirm this conclusion, Driscoll, Stebick and Nichols, and Nilsen and Nilsen (2006) would certainly agree, based on their findings in their own research.

Driscoll (2013) shows the variety of ways that educators use *Harry Potter* in the classroom. While these different methods vary in execution and overall purpose, Driscoll addresses how they can encourage a love of reading in a student, encouraging him or her to read more, and in turn building vocabulary. Another part of vocabulary building is morphological awareness, which Stebick and Nichols (2014) show through a study that took place in rural Pennsylvania. Teachers taught Latin and Greek roots through the invented words in *Harry Potter*, and Stebick and Nichols report that this “fosters independent word learning” (p. 40)

rather than looking at words as a whole. These studies show an increase in awareness of base words, root words, and prefixes brought about by studying *Harry Potter*. Nilsen and Nilsen (2006) conclude that students must be in charge of figuring out unknown words on their own after being taught the roots, in order to really reap the benefits of this style of teaching. This study examined this specifically by showing the Latin root used, the *Harry Potter* word application, and then an English word in which the root is used. This allegedly connects, according to Nilsen and Nilsen, the roots in the student's brain on multiple levels. *Harry Potter* is not, of course, the only avenue educators use to teach Latin and Greek roots, but the research mentioned above shows its particular effectiveness of education, and also linguistics, through educational disciplines and methods.

Latin and Greek Roots used in education

Rasinski, Padak, and Newton (2011, 2017) conducted two studies which both showed positive correlation between literacy level, the ability to read, and vocabulary level. Rasinski et al. (2017) demonstrated that the more a student read, the better his or her vocabulary high morphological awareness. In the "Roots of Comprehension," his 2017 study shows that when a student learns the individual Greek and Latin words, they began to see these as units with meaning as opposed to strings of letters. "The Latin-Greek Connection" claims that "children learn morphemes as they learn language," (Rasinkski et al., p.133). as opposed to words as a whole. This is also justified in *Child Language: Acquisition and Development* by Saxton (2010), who has agreed that explicit morphological instruction is helpful in areas of vocabulary acquisition and spelling. Larsen and Nippold (2007) in "Morphological Analysis" also finds that high literacy level and morphological skills correlated positively. That being said, vocabulary not explicitly taught by utilizing *Harry Potter* is another facet to be considered, and incidental

vocabulary acquisition may give some insight. In an encouraging study by Pacheco and Goodwin (2013), they asserted that clear morphological instruction can give students an important tool to figure out unknown words. The more morphemes one knows, the better word comprehension one usually has. Pacheco and Goodwin (2013) use a sample of middle school students in their study of morpheme instruction, showing that even morphological instruction at that age is valid and helpful. The morphemes that are exposed through Harry Potter to readers at that age would hopefully still be accessible years later.

Incidental vocabulary learning and first language learning

Rieder of the University of Vienna defines incidental vocabulary acquisition as the “learning of vocabulary as the by-product of any activity not explicitly geared to vocabulary learning” (Implicit and Explicit Learning, pg 24. n.d.). While studies in incidental vocabulary learning are typically done in second language learning, there is research being done for first languages as well. According to Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987), children pick up word meaning from context, which may also extend to Rowling’s spell lexicon. In Joseph and Nation’s (2018) very technical study, he tracks the eye movements of children when reading unfamiliar texts and then gives them vocabulary tests. He finds that high frequency words in revealing contexts were more easily grasped by the children. In another study, Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker, and[Schneider (2013) find that while incidental language acquisition occurs when reading, listening is found to be a better medium for acquisition. The age range in the study also fits the population of people who are first typically exposed to Harry Potter books, that is middle to high school.

From the questions and answers posed from these sources and the linguists’ research, this study hopes to see how well readers of Harry Potter incidentally learned the Latin and Greek

roots and whether it has affected their vocabulary growth later in life. Based on findings, having read Harry Potter should directly correlate to better performance on a Greek and Latin root survey.

Method

To gather data on the knowledge of Latin and Greek roots within a population, it was decided to do a survey of the students, faculty, and staff of Cedarville University. From the research done about the Latin and Greek inspirations of Harry Potter spells and names, thirteen of them were chosen (refer to Appendix), varying in difficulty. Measuring difficulty using the frequency with which they appear in the books as well as how common they seem to appear in English and how obvious the transfer from Latin root to English word was. One root was thrown out logistically. The survey participants had to supply the meaning of the root words in short answer responses. The participants were encouraged to write the first thing that came to their minds to avoid looking up the meaning online. In order to understand the respondents' reading habits, questions were asked as to whether or not they had read the books, how many times, and if they had experienced the *Harry Potter* world in any other way, such as movies or audio books.

Since Suggate et al. (2013) find that audio may be a better medium through which vocabulary can be acquired, which would be interesting see how those who have somehow heard the *Harry Potter* content performed. The survey also asked for demographic information, such as their major and status at the university. The survey went out via Google forms to the campus, ultimately generating 309 replies. Once the replies arrived, the data was analyzed and the number of correct answers was tabulated and from the correct answers, statistics regarding how many had read the books and how many had not were obtained. Through simple calculations to find

percentages, it was clear how many of the incorrect answers were from readers and how many were not.

Data

Of the 309 people who took the survey, 77% were students while 23% were faculty or staff. Because faculty and staff were included, the data for the average age of first time *Harry Potter* readers was slightly skewed, with some older participants first reading it at age 30 and beyond. Thus, instead, the average for students was calculated, since they were a majority. The average age was found to be 10-15, which is late elementary to early high school.

Juniors in college had the most representation among the year levels of the respondents, with nursing majors and linguistics majors providing the strongest representation by major. 145 (47%) responded that they had not read *Harry Potter*, while 164 (53%) responded that they had read *Harry Potter*. This margin was close enough to the other studies for comparison. Out of the entire dataset, of the participants who had not actually read the books, 241 (78%) reported having some exposure to *Harry Potter*, whether that medium was film, audiobooks, the Universal theme park, or Youtube videos. Of the 164 who had read the books, 87 (53%) reported having read at least one of the books more than once.

Of the twelve Latin roots, participants who had to guess the meanings of every root had more *Harry Potter* readers guess correctly than non-*Harry Potter* readers (See Table 1.) The word with the largest margin between readers and non-readers was “levo” with a 54 correct answer difference, and the smallest margin was “accerso” with a 2 correct answer difference in the two groups.

Interpretation of Data

Based on the results of the survey, more Harry Potter readers correctly guessed or knew the meanings of the roots than those who had not read Harry Potter, which suggests that the hypothesis that Harry Potter readers would have a better understanding of the roots seems to be correct. However, the difference between the two was not consistent by a huge margin. Some participants who had read the book multiple times and had exposure to other sources of Harry Potter content were incorrect in their answers. Other factors at play were the nature of their major, other interests, and educational background. One participant admitted to having taken Latin in high school, explaining his almost perfect score on the test without having read Harry Potter. Another factor at play is the slightly higher percentage of linguistics majors and nursing majors who took the survey, which could have slightly skewed the data. For the roots “patronum” and “lumen,” answers were accepted that were technically correct, but meanings had nothing to do with how they were used in the context of Harry Potter. For example, “lumos” is a spell in Harry Potter which causes a bright flash of light. It is inspired by the Latin root of “lumen” on which the participants were tested. “Lumen” means light, but it also means “an opening,” which is the meaning of “lumen” in medical terms when referring to a hole in a vessel. While this demonstrates an understanding of the root, it may not inherently come from the participants’ experience with Harry Potter.

Overall, the results are encouraging to confirm the hypothesis, but it is recognized that many factors contributed to both correct answers as well as incorrect answers. One of the reasons for incorrect answers may be false cognates. For example, “nox” means “night,” which the survey asked participants to define. Many participants guessed “obnoxious,” seeing “nox” within the word; however, the “nox” in “obnoxious” does not come from the Latin root meaning

“night.” While it comes from Latin, it is the Latin word “noxa,” which means “harmful,” which is also found in the word “noxious.” Situations like this happened frequently in the survey.

Another instance was for the root “incendo,” and means “to set fire.”. One recurring guess was “incentive” which rather comes from the Latin “incentivum” which means “something that incites.” In the studies by Driscoll (2013), Stebick and Nichols (2014), Nilsen (2006), and others who studied teaching roots in the classroom, the issue of these false cognates was not mentioned. The studies did emphasize the power of teaching context clue strategies, is covered also in Pacheco and Goodwin’s study (2013); children must be taught more than one strategy for figuring out unknown words.

Limitations

One of question that should have been asked on the survey was whether or not the respondents have studied Latin and Greek roots in an academic setting. Many students on campus have taken Greek classes, and some students have a background of studying the language in middle school and high school, as some schools offer Latin as a class. If the questionnaire had asked the students’ own background with the Latin and Greek roots, a fuller picture of the reason respondents answers correctly or incorrectly would be apparent. Another question that could have asked the respondents was whether or not he or she spoke a foreign language, as many of the Latin and Greek roots appear in language such as French and Spanish. This, too, would have given a bigger picture of the data.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is believed that there is correlation between whether or not someone has read the *Harry Potter* series and whether or not they know the meaning of certain Latin and Greek roots. As noted in Dempster et al.’s study (2016), *Harry Potter* is very important in

people's lives, both emotionally and academically, and the linguistic impact of the series can be clearly seen in the language skills of its readers. Based on the data that was collected, the studies that used Harry Potter to teach the Latin roots can be justified; the *Harry Potter* books are brilliant vessels to teach English morphemes that originated in Latin. This study also is an example of incidental vocabulary acquisition, but not simply with English words. Readers are picking up much more than just new vocabulary words; they are acquiring morphemes which helps them build new words. The books we read have a greater impact on the readers than one may believe.

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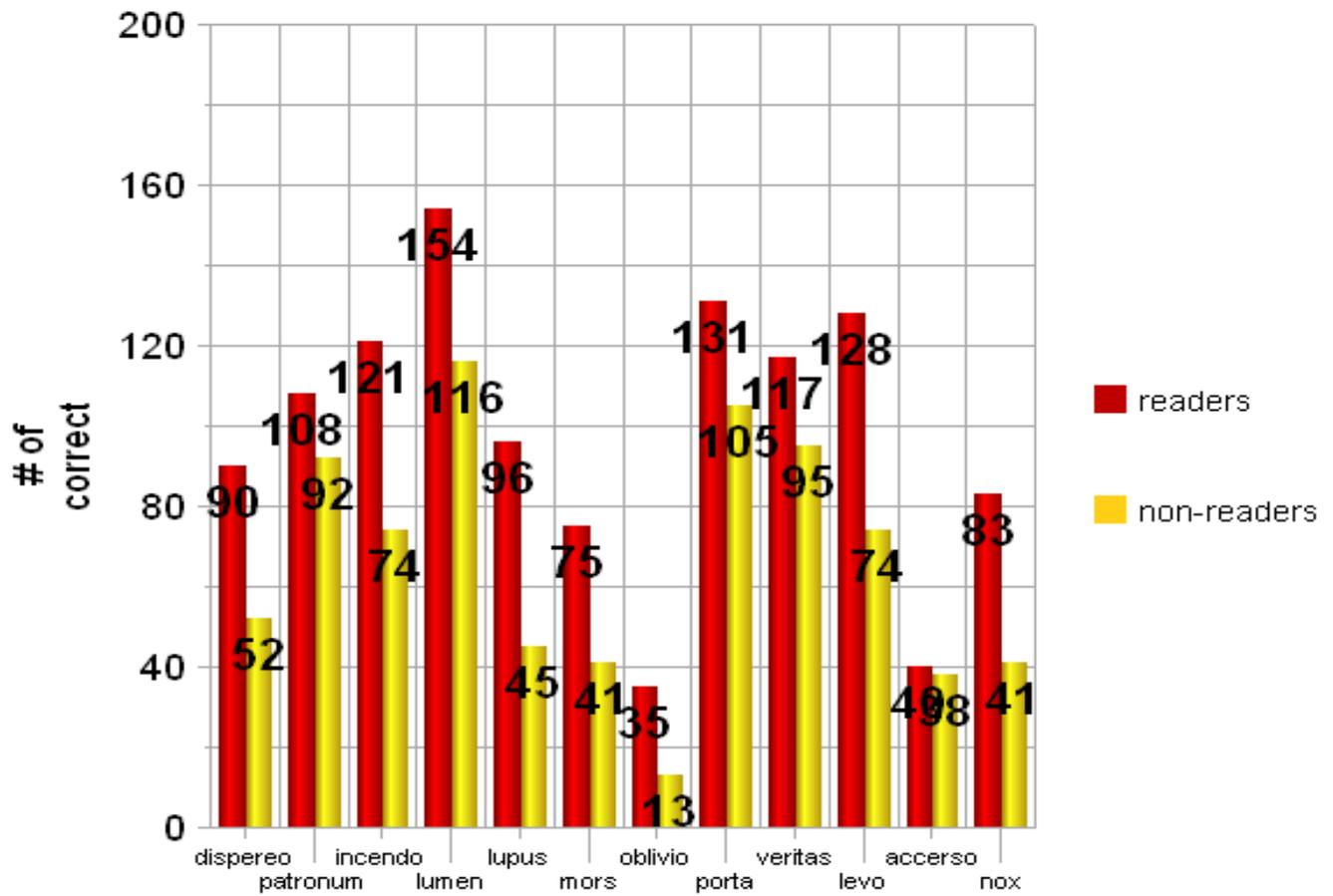
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Table 1:



Appendix:

Dispereo: meaning - "I am destroyed, perish, go completely to ruin, am lost or undone"

Patronum: meaning - "father, protection, patron"

Incendo: meaning - "I set on fire, burn, kindle"

Lumen: meaning - light (but also accepting "an opening")

Lupus: meaning – wolf

Mors: meaning – death

Oblivio: meaning – forget

Porta: meaning – gate or carry

Veritas: meaning – truth

Levo: meaning – "I lift up, I raise"

Accerso: meaning – to get, to obtain

Nox: meaning – night