

The semantic nuances of *kudos* in the context of ancient literature

ILONA CHRUSCIAK

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse the evolution of the meaning of the word *kudos* by comparing its original use in ancient Greek literature, including the works of Homer, Hesiod, Pindar and Bacchylides, with its contemporary use in English. The study will examine whether the Greek word κῦδος, which is most often translated as “glory”, “fame”, or “recognition gained on the battlefield or in competition”, actually retains its original complex meaning. The term *kudos* was adopted in English in the 18th century in academic circles and has since been used in everyday life and popular culture. The article seeks to address the question of whether the contemporary use of the term *kudos*, typically denoting praise or congratulations for an achievement, has retained its original connotations or undergone a substantial change in meaning.

Keywords

kudos, Greek literature, semantics, Homer, glory

Semantyczne niuanse słowa *kudos* w kontekście literatury starożytnej

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest analiza ewolucji rozumienia słowa *kudos* poprzez porównanie jego pierwotnego znaczenia w literaturze starożytnej Grecji (m. in. w dziełach Homera, Hezjoda, Pindara, Bakchylidesa) z jego współczesnym użyciem w języku angielskim. Badanie pokaże, czy greckie słowo κῦδος, tłumaczone najczęściej jako „chwała”, „sława” czy „uznanie zdobyte na polu bitwy lub w rywalizacji”, w rzeczywistości oddaje jego pierwotne złożone znaczenie. W języku angielskim słowo *kudos* weszło do użycia w niemal niezmienionej formie w XVIII wieku (w środowisku akademickim) i z powodzeniem funkcjonuje do dzisiaj w życiu codziennym i w kulturze popularnej. Artykuł próbuje odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy współczesne użycie terminu *kudos*, oznaczającego zazwyczaj pochwałę lub gratulacje za osiągnięcie, zachowało swoje pierwotne konotacje, czy też uległo znacznej zmianie znaczenia.

Słowa kluczowe

kudos, literatura grecka, semantyka, Homer, sława

1. Introduction

It is a common phenomenon that within any given language, there exists a set of words that appear to be synonymous. These terms are used interchangeably on a daily basis without much consideration for their etymology or the nuances of their meanings. In the field of English lexicology, a particular word merits attention due to its distinctive phonetic characteristics. This word, *kudos*, is often employed to describe concepts related to fame and glory. The question arises as to whether the word *kudos* may be considered synonymous with “fame” in its modern interpretation. Alternatively, should it be used in contexts other than “glory”?

2. The etymology of the word *kudos*

The most recent etymological dictionary of the Greek language, compiled by Robert Beekes, asserts that the term *kudos* can be translated as “fame, honor, glory, renown” and is derived from the Indo-European root *keud-s-, signifying “miraculous power” (Beekes 2010: 796). Etymologically, the word κῦδος (*kūdos*) is also related to Old Church Slavonic “čudo” and Serbo-Croatian “čùdo”.¹ Should we accept this translation, a link will be established with a Slavic group of words related to sorcery. A slightly older dictionary by Chantraine offers an alternative definition of *kudos* as “force magique, rayonnement de la force”. Chantraine (1968: 595) further states that *kudos* is bestowed upon a warrior by a deity. Consulting the most comprehensive Greek-English dictionary reveals that the Greek word *kudos* can be translated as “glory, renown” (LSJ), but as further discussion will show, it is not so obvious, and the full meaning of *kudos* in its original Greek sense cannot be conveyed so simply with a single word.

Determining the precise meaning of the word *kudos*, as it was originally used, can be a challenging task. In order to comprehend the original meaning of *kudos*, a detailed contextual analysis of the oldest surviving Greek literary monuments must be carried out. It is not the intention of the present author to conduct this analysis, as it has already been carried out in a satisfactory manner by earlier researchers. Instead, the focus will be on deriving conclusions that are aligned with the extant contemporary knowledge of the oldest Greek literature.

¹ There are several alternative interpretations of the etymology. As with the Greek word *kyma*, the term *kudos* is derived from the root “ku.ai.çu”, which signifies “to swell, increase, prosper, achieve power and prosperity” (W. Prellwitz 1905²: 249, quoted in Griendl 1938: 30). Alternatively, Meyer’s hypothesis suggests an etymology derived from the Greek word *kyein*, signifying “be pregnant” or “to swell” (L. Meyer 1901: 277, quoted in Griendl 1938: 30).

3. Examples of usage in the oldest Greek literature

As is evident in the corpus of archaic Greek literature, the word *kudos* is employed in both lyric and epic poetry. In the context of epic poetry, the term *kudos* is first attested in the works of Homer. The term is mentioned 69 times in the *Iliad* and 9 times in the *Odyssey*.² In Homer, *kudos* is most often found in formulas, i.e. in the established phrases from which the oral singer composes his song. The following formulas are repeated: (Zeus) *kudos edoken* ("Zeus bestowed fame"),³ (Zeus) *kudos orekse* ("Zeus granted fame"),⁴ (Zeus) *kudos opazei* ("Zeus sends *kudos*").⁵ These formulas demonstrate that it is the gods who bestow *kudos* on heroes. The hero is not able to gain *kudos* for himself. Despite the existence of phrases referring to "gaining" or "acquiring" of *kudos*, such as *kudos aresthai* ("to gain *kudos*")⁶ and *kudos aroio* ("to acquire *kudos*"),⁷ it is important to note that these occurrences are said to always happen according to the will of the gods, i.e. Zeus allows Hector to gain *kudos* by driving the Achaeans back to their ships (*Il.* 18.293). Homer's heroes most often gain *kudos* during times of warfare.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to establish the ancient understanding of the term *kudos* prior to further analysis. This is a distinct form of fame, which will be addressed in greater depth subsequently in this article. Translators of Greek literature most often translate *kudos* as "glory" or "fame", but as will be

² *Kudos* is also mentioned 4 times in Hesiod's works, and once in the *Homeric Hymn*. In the context of lyric poetry, the word *kudos* appears a total of twenty-one times: twice in the works of Solon, once in those of Theognis, once in the oeuvre of Alcaeus, twice in the works of Simonides, three times in the works of Bacchylides, and twelve times in the odes of Pindar. This list has been compiled according to Griendl (1938: 31).

³ All translations of quotations are attributed to the author of the article, unless otherwise stated.

⁴ Hom. *Il.* 1.279, 8.216, 11.300, 12.437, 13.303, 18.456, 19.414, 19.204.

⁵ Hom. *Il.* 5.33, 5.225, 5.260, 11.79, 12.174, 15.596, 15.602, 22.57.

⁶ Hom. *Il.* 8.141, 12.255, 14.358, 15.327, 16.730, 17.566, 21.570, *Od.* 3.57, 15.320, 19.161.

⁷ Hom. *Il.* 12.407, 17.287, 17.419, 20.502, 21.543, 21.596, *Od.* 22.253.

⁸ Hom. *Il.* 4.95, 9.303, 10.307.

shown in this paper, such a simplification does not do justice to the nuances of the original. Researchers have drawn parallels between *kudos* and *kleos*, a word which also signifies fame, albeit of a different nature. It is important to note that these two terms cannot be used interchangeably. *Kleos* signifies enduring fame, whereas *kudos* is limited in duration, lasting for a brief period.⁹ The death of the hero marks the ultimate conclusion of his *kudos*. However, it should be noted that duration is not the only relevant factor. As demonstrated by Margalit Finkelberg (2007), *kleos* is inextricably linked to the act of speaking, and to the creation of a narrative about an individual, even in the form of mere gossip. In contrast, the term *kudos* is associated with an action that, whilst it is related to the deities, is nevertheless the result of the efforts of a specific person. The prevailing belief is that the gods bestow their favour upon a person, thus ensuring the success of the action undertaken and the effort put into it. Conversely, defeat and failure are perceived as a manifestation of the gods' displeasure.

In Homer, the expression *kudos* is frequently (a total of 17 times)¹⁰ accompanied by the epithet *mega*, signifying "great *kudos*". *Kudos* is a sign of divine favour, visible to mortals through specific signs, such as thunder or lightning (*Il.* 8.130–140, 15.488). The following heroes are the most likely to gain *kudos*: Hector, Achilles, Diomedes, Odysseus and Patroclus. Heroes can also ask the gods for *kudos*, as shown by Achilles asking Zeus to bestow *kudos* upon Patroclus (*Il.* 16.241). The heroes gain *kudos*, but it benefits the entire assembly, the army, the city and the king, too (*Il.* 4.415, 13.676). Therefore, *kudos* gained by a hero can affect the whole community.

⁹ For more on the relationship between *kudos* and *kleos*, see: Griendl 1938; Redfield 1994; Pucci 1997; Finkelberg 2007; Scodel 2008; Martin 2011; Race 2014.

¹⁰ Hom. *Il.* 8.176, 8.237, 9.303, 9.669, 10.87, 10.544, 10.555, 11.511, 14.42, 22.18, 22.57, 22.217, 22.393, 22.435. *Od.* 3.79, 3.202, 12.184.

4. Translation possibilities and suggestions

A thorough investigation into the usage of the term *kudos* and its derivatives, including adjectives such as *kudalimos* and *kudros* and verbs including *kudaino* and *kudiao*, was conducted by Max Griendl (1938). The work is meticulously detailed, divided into two sections. The first is an examination of linguistic research, in which the author analyses six Greek words describing fame, examining their origin, usage, synonyms and various meanings. The second section is an analysis of the historical development of the Greek concept of fame. Griendl proposes the hypothesis that the meaning of *kudos* has undergone a certain kind of evolution. Initially, the word had a purely sensual connotation and signified that a hero endowed with *kudos* was “brave, strong, dignified”; he was someone endowed with external splendour. The term’s original connotation bore no resemblance to the concept of moral dignity (Griendl 1938: 36). Subsequent interpretations of *kudos* tend towards the translation “famous, glorious, brilliant”. The researcher elucidates this transition by invoking a mode of thinking that was characteristic of the ancient Greeks, wherein beauty was synonymous with goodness. This notion posited that that which is beautiful and majestic must also be good, admirable, and renowned (Griendl 1938: 32). Within the framework of this interpretation, the transition from beauty to fame is considered to be a relatively brief one. This tendency is particularly evident in the multitude of examples pertaining to warfare and battle, where *kudos* is widely regarded as the pinnacle of achievement in combat. Griendl explains: “The deity does not bestow glory, which obliges one to be a role model (κλέος), but rather the ability to perform an act, from which glory then arises, which is without sempiternity” (Griendl 1938: 41).

Griendl ultimately interprets the word *kudos* as “fame”, clearly highlighting the differences between *kudos* and *kleos*.¹¹

¹¹ However, Griendl also asserts that *kudos* can mean “success, prosperity, wealth, happiness”. The interpretation of *kudos* in poetry is approached in

However, Émile Benveniste challenges this interpretation, proposing an alternative perspective. He contends that the concept of fame already has its counterpart in Homer's *kleos*. He claims that *kleos* is an older word than *kudos*, with the former already existing in the Vedic language.¹² Furthermore, both words are believed to originate from a common ancestor, the Proto-Indo-European language. Benveniste (1969: 58–59) argues: “In epic terminology, one must be convinced that all the main terms are specific and have no synonyms”. The researcher posits that both terms are defined by disparate types of epithets, and moreover, *kudos* does not form a plural. Benveniste's interpretation of the distinctions between the meanings of *kudos* and *kleos* is undoubtedly accurate; however, it is my opinion that the argument concerning the non-interchangeability of words in epic formulae is not applicable in the current state of knowledge about oral literature. In the context of epic poetry, formulaic expressions may be characterised by the presence of synonymous expressions that bear a similarity in meaning. In some cases, these expressions may even comprise two words or expressions that are equivalent in their semantic content.

The researcher refers to *kudos* as a “talisman of supremacy”, meaning a sign of superiority in battle that is given by god and is a kind of “magical power” (Benveniste 1969: 60). It is the prerogative of god to bestow *kudos* upon a hero, or, conversely, to deprive him of it. It is clear to the heroes who the gods favour at any given moment, just as it is clear that they cannot defeat those to whom gods have been favoured. *Kudos* is a transient condition that can result in either complete victory in battle or in accompaniment of the hero until a certain point in the fight. Sometimes, through misfortune or recklessness, the hero himself puts himself in danger and exposes himself to the enemy's

a somewhat divergent manner. In the context of Hesiod, it is understood to signify the acquisition of wealth through diligent labour. Within the paradigms of Pindar, *kudos* is regarded as the attainment of victory in the domain of athletic competition (Griendl 1938: 43–44).

¹² A comprehensive discussion on the Vedic origins of the formula *kleos aphtiton* can be found in: Floyd (1980), Finkelberg (1986, 2007), Volk (2002).

blows, thus “giving” *kudos* to his opponent (Benveniste 1969: 62). Ultimately, Benveniste proposes understanding *kudos* as “an attribute of a magical nature that ensures the triumph of a warrior or camp”, which he believes may be directly related to its Slavic root, *cudo*, meaning “miracle”: “The wonderful nature of *kudos*, its enormous and immediate effects, and the confusion it sows among enemies all bring it closer to the Slavic “čudo”, making the etymological correspondence fully acceptable” (Benveniste 1969: 68).

In contrast to Griendl, Benveniste’s research does not extend to examples from other genres, primarily focusing on epic poetry. The author does not undertake an examination of the potential for the application of this theory to other literary genres. Leslie Kurke (1998) builds on Benveniste’s thesis in the context of epinikion, developing it in relation to winners of sporting competitions (specifically the crown games: The Olympic Games, the Pythian Games, the Isthmian Games and the Nemean Games). In order to achieve this objective, the researcher has analysed the works of Pindar and Bacchylides and asks whether Benveniste’s theory finds applicability to the epinikion in the 5th century BC. The shift in genre and temporal context facilitates an examination of whether linguistic elements exhibit semantic variation in response to these factors. Kurke (1998: 137) believes that in the epinikion, “the city [is] replacing the Homeric king as beneficiary of the victor’s *kudos*.” In such cases, the winner’s crown functions as the bearer of *kudos* and its visual representation (Kurke 1998: 141). Kurke employs the term “economy of *kudos*” to denote the rituals associated with the winner, defining it as follows: “a circulation of powers and honours whose goal is to achieve a harmonious sharing of this special commodity within the city” (Kurke 1998: 141). A function analogous to that of an Olympic crown, as it refers to the ritual, i.e. functioning as a substitute for the original ritual event, is performed by the statue of the victor and the dedicatory inscriptions (Kurke 1998: 144). Ultimately, some of the athletic victors are heroised, mainly in the case of those winners who

have an excess of *kudos* or who suffered during their lifetime from a lack of the honours they deserved in response to their *kudos* (Kurke 1998: 151). In conclusion, the researcher puts forward the following proposal: “it is not *kudos* that resides within *epinikion*, but rather *epinikion* that functions within the economy of *kudos*” (Kurke 1998: 155).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the word *kudos* is not exclusively employed within the genres of archaic heroic epic and *epinikion*. The term *kudos* has been utilised by authors in subsequent periods. Despite the fairly extensive use of *kudos* in Archaic Greek, it seems that the popularity of the word declined during the Classical period. In the context of extant literary sources, there is evidence for only a limited number of instances of the use of *kudos*: twice by the tragedian Aeschylus (*The Persians* 455, *Seven Against Thebes* 317); once by the comedian Aristophanes (*Knights* 200); three times by Herodotus (*Histories* 4.88.2, 6.77.2, 7.8a.2); and on occasion by Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 2.6.11). In total, there are seven documented instances of its use in the classical era.

In *The Persians* (455), Aeschylus employs the figure of the messenger to convey the message of Xerxes’s defeat to the queen. The king of Persia dispatched his military forces to Salamis with the objective of vanquishing the surviving members of the Greek forces. However, one of the gods sent *kudos* to the Greeks, who unexpectedly won and defeated the Persians. In another play (*Seven Against Thebes* 317), Aeschylus incorporates supplication to the gods into the chorus, imploring them to inflict madness upon the besiegers and thereby ensure the salvation of the inhabitants of Thebes. That is, to send *kudos* to the city’s inhabitants. In both of these passages, there are unambiguous references to Homer. In the context of military engagements, a phenomenon has been observed wherein divine entities appear to favour military forces that, at first glance, appear to be in a disadvantageous position. The comedy writer Aristophanes, in his characteristic manner, mocks the elevated style associated with epics and tragedies, incorporating a pro-

phesy within the oracle's discourse that the deity will confer profound renown upon a sausage vendor who will ascend to authority following his rivalry with Cleon (Aristophanes, *Knights* 200). The historian Herodotus employs the term *kudos* on three occasions. In Herodotus, *kudos* is mentioned in an inscription in the temple of Hera, which describes the glory Mandrocles gained by building a bridge out of boats (Herodotus, *Histories* 4.88.2). The bridge is notable for its role in facilitating King Darius' crossing of the Bosphorus, a significant event that led to the acquisition of a crown and acclaim for Mandrocles, the architect of the bridge. The second passage from Herodotus (*Histories* 6.77.2) details an oracle's prophecy, which foretold a contest between a woman and a man in Argos. Following her triumph, she would expel him from the city and gain *kudos* for herself. In the last passage (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.8a.2), the Persian ruler Xerxes reflects on how he can become worthy of his predecessors, gain *kudos* and land, and take revenge on his enemies. The word *kudos* appears only once in Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 2.6.11), and the author only directly quotes the verse from the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus is referred to as the "kudos of the Achaeans".

In the later Hellenistic period, the term *kudos* reappears ten times in the work *Argonautika* of Apollonius Rhodius (1.205, 1.285, 1.345, 1.350, 1.465, 1.510, 1.1290, 4.205, 4.1025, 4.1745). However, among the numerous usages of the word *kudos*, only on one occasion does it appear in the sense we are familiar with from the archaic and classical periods. The remaining applications pertain to the concept of *kleos*. It appears that, despite Apollonius's employment of conventional epic terminology, the connotation of the term becomes obscured, leading him to utilise *kudos* to denote enduring fame, perceiving *kudos* as a substitute for *kleos*. Only once is *kudos* used in the sense of battle glory granted by Zeus (1.465). Apart from Apollonius, the term *kudos* only appears once more in the works of a Hellenistic author. In Theocritus' *Idyll* 22, the term

kudos is employed to denote eternal fame. The poet speaks of the fame of the Atreides, which was spread thanks to Homer.

At the beginning of our era, *kudos* was utilised primarily by historians and geographers: Plutarch (six times), Pausanias (four times), Lucian of Samosata and Diogenes Laertius. Plutarch employs the term *kudos* on six occasions in his works, yet these instances are mainly comprised of quotations from authors previously referenced, namely Homer, Hesiod and Bacchylides. Nevertheless, two passages in which Plutarch quotes Solon are of particular interest. However, it should be noted that the works of Solon have not survived in their entirety. Indeed, it is only fragments of his works that have survived to the present day, and these are quoted by other authors, such as Plutarch. Solon, a lawgiver and poet, lived at the turn of the 7th and 6th centuries BC. Solon's employment of *kudos* in two distinct instances is consistent with the manner in which the term was utilised during the Archaic period. In the first passage, an appeal is made to god to bestow *kudos* upon the city in its entirety (Plutarch, *Solon* 3.4), while in the second, Solon articulates his aspiration that *kudos* will be bestowed upon the laws he intends to institute in Athens (Plutarch, *Solon* 26.3). All other literature representatives from this period use the term *kudos* to denote enduring renown. This can be seen in the works of Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, 2.20.10, 4.12.4, 8.52.6, 9.38.4), Lucian of Samosata (*Alexander* 48) and Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6.2). The aforementioned authors use *kudos* primarily in the sense of long-lasting glory and fame, i.e. in the sense in which *kleos* was used in the Hellenistic period.

The final known instances of the use of *kudos* in Greek come from Byzantine literature. In the 13th century, the term *kudos* is utilised on three additional occasions by Anna Komnene in her work *Alexiad* (1.3, 1.6, 6.12), in which she lauds the accomplishments of her father, Emperor Alexios I Komnenos. However, Anna Komnene's understanding of *kudos* as lasting fame is unambiguous.

As demonstrated in the preceding analysis, authors of the Classical period commenced the utilisation of the term *kudos* with far less regularity than their archaic counterparts. The authors of epinikia continue to utilise *kudos* to denote victory, albeit no longer in the context of military triumph. Instead, it is employed to refer to sporting victories, which, in addition to individual achievement, also extends to the entire community of the victor. The term *kudos* is employed by authors of other genres in specific contexts, including oracles and votive inscriptions. It is conceivable that the term began to disappear from everyday speech, yet persisted in literary works. It is evident that the utilisation of the term *kudos* in literature has undergone a gradual decline over time. Authors begin to utilise the concept of *kudos* as a form of enduring renown that an individual can attain solely through their own accomplishments, independent of external influences. This transition is manifest in examples from Hellenistic literature and subsequent works.

Despite the continuity of the Greek language, which has survived from ancient times to the present day in the form of Modern Greek, this language has undergone many changes. One such phenomenon was the disappearance of certain words, such as *kudos*. In Modern Greek, neither *kudos* nor its derivatives are employed.¹³

Following a thorough analysis of literary sources from Greek literature, a concise synthesis of extant information regarding *kudos* can be provided. It can be posited that *kudos* is a term related to fame (Gr. *kleos*) and honour (Gr. *time*), yet it evinces significant differences in meaning. The term *kudos* is translated briefly as “fame” or “glory” by translators, while researchers define it in a more elaborate way. The following definitions are proposed by researchers: “pouvoir magique”, “talisman de victoire” (Benveniste 1969: 60); “glory or charismatic splendor” (Scodel

¹³ At this point, I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for bringing this fact to my attention.

2008: 7); “the property of having success and going forth as a victor; but it also designates the “glory” of success, prestige, authority, dignity, high rank (Fränkel 1975: 80); “*kudos* is a kind of luster or mana which belongs to the successful [...] a kind of star quality or charisma, an enlargement of the person” (Redfield 1994: 33). In a concise yet comprehensive overview of his reflections on the concept of glory in Homer’s poems, Richard Martin (2011: 316) proposes the translation “success”, in addition to the observations previously cited. In my opinion this translation of *kudos* is one of the most accurate, insofar as it places emphasis on the reference to victory without defining the factors that influence this advantage, whether they be luck, the will of god, or hard work. It can thus be concluded that, in the context of translation, when it is necessary to adhere to the rigours of literary style or a specific genre, the terms “glory” or “fame” will be employed in various languages. However, it is imperative to consider the precise nature of the concept of fame, its connotations, and the implications it entails.

Therefore, I would like to propose that the term *kudos* be understood as a form of success, advantage, or victory. Firstly, it is important to note that *kudos* is subject to a clearly defined temporal limitation; it does not persist for an extended period of time, and it is not sustained beyond the death of the protagonist. It is possible for a hero to accrue *kudos* during battle or athletic competitions. The protagonist is the recipient of *kudos*, yet it is possible for his comrades, friends, family members, or even the whole community to benefit from his *kudos*. It is through the divine endorsement of the gods that a hero is bestowed with *kudos*; without their approval, a hero will not be granted *kudos*. The hero either acquires *kudos* or attains it through their actions. It is important to note that *kudos* cannot be viewed as zero-sum; that is to say, the winner does not take away *kudos* from his opponent. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that two opponents cannot possess *kudos* concurrently (Scodel 2008: 26). It is noteworthy that, in certain instances, heroes may initially receive *kudos*, yet this sub-

sequently shifts to their adversaries (*Il.* 15.644, 22.57). A pertinent illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in the historical context of the Achaeans and the Trojans.

5. The emergence of the word *kudos* in English

The word *kudos* first appeared in English in the late 18th century and is believed to have originated from university slang: „originally used by university men, but now in vogue in society with the sense of fame, praise, honour” (Barrère, Leland 1889: 528). Whitney asserts that the term is derived from classical slang and is considered a humorous expression (Whitney 1895: 3313). This raises the question of how exactly *kudos* entered the English language. It is unfortunate that no extant written sources have been found which document this process. Nevertheless, it is possible to hypothesise on the matter by examining classical education in 18th-century England and the curriculum for teaching ancient Greek.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary states that the word *kudos* was originally written in Greek, indicating that early users of the word were aware of its origin. As an example, the dictionary provides an excerpt from the 1861 novel *Tom Brown at Oxford* (Hughes 1861: 218). An examination of the book reveals that the word *kudos* is written in the Greek alphabet, along with other Greek words that are also present in the original. As the narrative progresses, the reader is invited to observe the protagonist’s endeavours in his pursuit of learning ancient Greek. This enables us to conceptualise the conditions of classical education during that period and to comprehend the motivations that guided young individuals in their pursuit of mastery in the language of Homer. We are presented with a young male, ten years of age, whose father has meticulously devised a remarkable career path for him. In this context, the young man is undertaking an educational endeavour in the Greek language under the mentorship of the local vicar. Subsequently, his father, motivated by his son’s interest,

becomes an additional participant in this educational pursuit. It can be hypothesised that a significant proportion of ambitious families were cognisant of the fact that a knowledge of Latin and Greek was an indispensable prerequisite for progression to higher education and a successful career. During the 18th century, the acquisition of Greek language skills was primarily facilitated through private tutors or educational institutions. Subsequently, students refined their skills during their university years. It was during this period that England experienced a surge of interest in Greek culture, and England, in conjunction with the Netherlands, assumed a leading role in European classical scholarship (Sandys 1908: 1–2). The translation of Homer's works by Pope proved to be a commercial success, generating significant revenues for the translator (Clarke 1945: 124). New translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are being produced, and researchers are writing numerous academic monographs. Academic discussions are attracting significant interest and fostering a growing enthusiasm for antiquity among the intellectual elite. Students are encouraged to read ancient Greek writers in the original, and their discussions on grammar and style extend beyond the confines of the university classroom. It is not uncommon for students to engage with the classics outside of the classroom environment, often assisting one another in their Greek learning (Clarke 1945: 7). The experience of learning Greek was not perceived as a chore by these young men; rather, it was regarded as a source of pure pleasure. These conditions undoubtedly could result in the adoption of specific terminology by students, which then disseminates within the community. Given the strong interest in Homer within academia at the time, it is unsurprising that a word so frequently used in epics would enter common usage. However, the question arises as to how this word was originally translated into English. During the 18th century, students engaged with the Greek language through the medium of Latin, utilising grammars composed in Latin and referring to Es-tienne's Greek-Latin dictionary as

a reference. This was prior to the publication of Greek-English dictionaries. Estienne trans-lates *kudos* as “glory” and provides numerous examples of its usage (Estienne 1822: 484). The three most significant translations of Homer published in the 18th century (Pope, Macpherson, Cowper) also translate *kudos* as “glory” in the majority of cases. Consequently, it can be hypothesised that this constituted the primary signification of the term during that historical period. Concurrently, the study of Homer has been demonstrated to engender a heightened awareness of the utilisation of the term, thereby facilitating a more profound comprehension of its reference to an ephemeral triumph or accomplishment. One can even imagine that, upon the successful unravelling of certain grammatical or translational nuances of Greek, students might have exchanged con-gratulations in a somewhat humorous manner: “*Kudos* to you!”.

6. *Kudos*, the verb

In order to comprehend the entry of *kudos* into the English language, it is necessary to examine the first written instance of *kudos* used as a verb. The verb form of *kudos* is not frequently employed. Nevertheless, it is the most archaic form of writing associated with acclaim. The first documented instance of this phenomenon occurred at the close of the 18th century, in 1793. Upon arriving in Oxford, Robert Southey composed a verse piece on the occasion of the installation of the Duke of Portland as chancellor of the university:

For three whole days I heard an old Fur-gown
 Bepraised, that made a Duke a Chancellor;
 Bepraised in prose it was, bepraised in verse;
 Lauded in pious Latin to the skies;
 Kudos'd egregiously in heathen Greek;
 In sapphics sweetly incensed; glorified
 In proud alcaics; in hexameters
 Applauded to the very galleries,

That did applaud again, whose thunder-claps,
 Higher and longer, with redoubled peals,
 Rung when they heard the illustrious furbelow'd
 Heroically in Popean rhyme
 Tee-ti-tum'd, in Miltonic blank bemouth'd;
 Prose, verse, Greek, Latin, English, rhyme and blank,
 Till Eulogy, with all her wealth of words,
 Grew bankrupt, all-too-prodigious of praise,
 And panting Panegyric toil'd in vain,
 O'er-tasked in keeping pace with such desert.¹⁴

This is undoubtedly an exemplification of the author's profound erudition; it is evident that the author possesses not only a comprehensive understanding of classical literature, but also a thorough knowledge of Greek and Latin. In this poem, it appears that the author employs the term *kudos* as a substitute for the English words "bepraised", "applauded" and "glorified", and identifies it precisely in *kudos*. Moreover, he employs the term "to laud", a verb of Latin origin (*lat.* laudo, laudare – "to praise"), in reference to the act of praising an individual in the Latin language.

7. *Oxford English Dictionary*

In this section, an investigation will be conducted into the initial recorded usages of the noun *kudos*. The entry for *kudos* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) will be used as a point of reference. The noun is translated as "glory", "fame" or "renown".¹⁵ The noun *kudos* is uncountable.¹⁶ OED states that the first written mention of the noun *kudos* dates back to 1831

¹⁴ The following citation is made from Haller (1917: 68).

¹⁵ In relation to the matter of *kudos*, I follow the Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford University Press. (n.d.). *Kudos*, n., 1. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7678707983>.

¹⁶ *Kudos* is sometimes erroneously perceived to be a plural form (Further information on this topic can be found in Hensch 1963; Merriam-Webster 1989: 580–581; OED), thus giving rise to the singular form *kudo* (meaning "honourable mention, praise for an achievement").

in *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*: "He obtained kudos immense" (1831: 391). As is evident from a perusal of the periodical, the protagonist gained recognition for his epistles. OED provides a total of 30 examples of the use of *kudos*. The term is predominantly used in newspapers, with a total of 23 instances of its appearance in the corpus. The term is also employed on multiple occasions (a total of seven instances) by writers. Charles Darwin was among the first authors to utilise this term. In one of his letters, he employed *kudos* to express that geologist Charles Lyell, upon reading half of the manuscript of *On the Origin of Species*, had lauded him: "Lyell has read about half of the volume in clean sheets, and gives me very great kudos" (Darwin 1839). In a similar context, also in a letter, Benjamin Disraeli describes that he is highly regarded in "Cecil" (No. 2).¹⁷ In their respective letters, both authors make reference to the acclaim they have received from third parties, not themselves, but from others. This practice finds parallels in ancient literature, wherein the *kudos* are bestowed upon a hero by the gods. Similarly, in this context, the hero's *kudos* originates from a larger group of individuals, representing a community or an audience. Apart from Darwin and Disraeli, *kudos* is used in their works by Gordon F. Newman, J. Creasey, L. Sampson, L. Cody and S. Rushdie. The commonality between these uses of the word *kudos* is that it signifies "recognition" or "praise". The remaining 23 uses of *kudos* can be found in newspapers covering a variety of topics, ranging from economics to lifestyle magazines. The cross-section under consideration spans two entire centuries. Consequently, we may seek to extrapolate certain conclusions and seek parallels with antiquity. As previously stated, it is not possible to award one's own *kudos*. All examples demonstrate that *kudos* are bestowed upon us by others, including readers, audiences, and a broadly

¹⁷ See Table 1, containing all quotations from the OED. The subsequent examples in the text will be referenced by the numbering assigned to them in the table.

defined group or its representative. In this context, the group assumes the role of the ancient deities. As was the case in ancient times, sporting competitions are frequently the site of the acquisition of *kudos* (Nos. 4, 6, 17, 21, 22, 23, 27). It is also possible to gain *kudos* for a publication of a work or the diligent compilation of news (Nos. 7, 8, 9, 14, 24, 30). In certain cases, political or military conflicts can also be a field in which to achieve *kudos* (Nos. 11, 12, 13, 18).

Table 1. Quotations in OED

No.	DATE	QUOTATION in OED
1	1831	He obtained <i>kudos</i> immense. <i>Fraser's Magazine</i>
2	1841	I am spoken of with great <i>kudos</i> in 'Cecil'. B. Disraeli, <i>Letter in Correspondence with Sister</i>
3	1859	Lyell has read about half of the volume in clean sheets, and gives me very great <i>kudos</i> . C. Darwin in <i>Life & Letters</i>
4	1868	Though Brasenose or any other coxswainless team had come in first, and been presented with the medals and customary oak-chest, they would have received but little <i>kudos</i> from the spectators. <i>Baily's Monthly Magazine</i>
5	1876	A few public-spirited individuals, who, if they gain few <i>kudos</i> for their labors, have the satisfaction of knowing that they are endeavoring to keep matters in a state of progression. <i>Northern Star (Lismore, New South Wales)</i>
6	1889	Our champion was held to have lost no <i>kudos</i> in the encounter. <i>Boy's Own Paper</i>
7	1936	All <i>kudos</i> to Eurich and Wilson for the Current Affairs Test in the magazine for June 29. <i>Time</i>
8	1939	There has not been a book like this. <i>Kudos</i> to the Royal Nonesuch. <i>Mississippi Valley Historical Review</i>
9	1943	<i>Kudos</i> to the New York Times. <i>New York Times</i>
10	1955	The car, maybe the vegetables, and certainly the hope of sharing as an artist in the dubious <i>kudos</i> have all

		been attributed to a tachiste French painter. <i>New Yorker</i>
11	1959	All the <i>kudos</i> goes to the campaign-scarred, ink-stained veteran: none to the new bug in his sissy clean blazer. <i>Spectator</i>
12	1961	This did not win Mr. Eisenhower many <i>kudos</i> in the press. <i>Wall Street Journal</i>
13	1967	He need not seek the political <i>kudos</i> that holders of other offices may hope to gain by public peacemongering. <i>Economist</i>
14	1968	<i>Kudos</i> to Grosset and Dunlap for bringing out this inexpensive edition with full color plates. <i>Hispanic American Historical Review</i>
15	1970	News services buzzed, but George Doodie sought no <i>kudos</i> ; his name was mentioned only once. G. F. Newman, <i>Sir, You Bastard</i>
16	1972	He wanted Roger to take the kicks if this failed but was prepared to give him the <i>kudos</i> if the use of the newspapers succeeded. J. Creasey, <i>Splinter of Glass</i>
17	1972	This below-strength Chelsea side captured the few <i>kudos</i> that were going. <i>Sunday Mirror</i>
18	1972	It seems almost a <i>kudos</i> to have a lady pilot. <i>Homes & Gardens</i>
19	1972	<i>Kudos</i> are expressed to Messrs. Gene Jackson, Joel Anderson, and John Tolford for their aid. <i>Bankers' Magazine</i>
20	1980	Give them the skinny but keep the <i>kudos</i> . 'L. Cody', <i>Dupe</i>
21	1985	Schalk's happiness transcends being chosen as a Bok, rises and skirts the <i>kudos</i> of winning a [rugby] test match. L. Sampson in J. Askin, <i>Style</i>
22	1989	Durham [University] play several counties annually and have a regular supply of talent so perhaps one day earning a Palatinate will carry the same <i>kudos</i> as being awarded a Blue. <i>Independent</i>
23	1989	Heckathorne isn't one to run away with all the <i>kudos</i> . 'I have to give the offensive line a lot of the credit.' <i>St. Petersburg (Florida) Times</i>
24	1990	<i>Kudos</i> to your wonderful magazine. <i>New York Woman</i>

25	1998	The sort of ecstatic niggerization that's landed Warren Beatty and Bulworth <i>kudos</i> from here to The New Yorker is the stock-in-trade of legions of black folks too. <i>Village Voice (New York)</i>
26	1999	He's a man reborn, okay, bravo, <i>kudos</i> to him, what I'm saying here is he owes me. S. Rushdie, <i>Ground beneath her Feet</i>
27	2003	In lineout work the catchers... get the <i>kudos</i> , but the work of the thrower and the lifters is just as important. <i>Irish Times</i>
28	2003	<i>Kudos</i> to the sad-eyed emo boys who have written great songs whenever Dad gave them something to cry about. <i>Time Out New York</i>
29	2006	We were inspired by the Pittsburgh high schoolers...who had grabbed headlines and <i>kudos</i> last fall with their 'girlcott' of insulting t-shirts made by clothier Abercrombie & Fitch. <i>National NOW Times</i>
30	2013	<i>Kudos</i> has to go to the translator...for rendering Tesson's directness and dreaminess with fully supple English – there's never a whiff of translationese. <i>Daily Telegraph</i>

In English, the word *kudos* can be described with both positive and negative epithets. The following positive terms are employed: the term “great kudos” (2, 3) is reminiscent of the Greek concept of “mega kudos”. It is evident that *kudos* can also be expressed in a multitude of ways, including “immense” (1), “many” (12), and the collective term “all the kudos” (7, 11, 23). Negative terms include “little” (4), “dubious” (10) and “few” (5, 17). This observation indicates a divergence from the practices observed in ancient times. In antiquity, it was not possible to earn a small amount of *kudos*. It is evident that *kudos* was a comprehensive system; it could be earned for a moment, but not as a minor part.

In addition, an analysis of the position of the word *kudos* in a sentence can be conducted. Its position within the sentence is indicative of its function; it is most often found in the middle of

a sentence (16 times), but also frequently appears at the very beginning of a sentence (9 times). In such cases, it is generally the most significant topic of the statement, with the speaker placing particular emphasis on its importance and dedicating the entirety of their discourse to it. It is noteworthy that *kudos* is present in only four instances at the end of a sentence.

Can an analysis of the above examples show us a change in the meaning of *kudos*? The important question is whether the meaning of a word or phrase changes when it is transferred from one genre to another, or when it is viewed from a different historical perspective. In order to respond to this question, it is evident that the corpus cited is inadequate in scope and depth, thus precluding the drawing of sweeping conclusions about the use of a single word over a period of almost two centuries, although *Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* states:

In this earliest use, the word referred to the prestige or renown one gained by having accomplished something noteworthy. The word became more popular than one might have expected for a bit of university slang. By the 1920s it had developed a second sense, "praise given for some accomplishment" – a reasonable extension of the original use. (*Merriam-Webster* 1989: 580)

Moreover, it is plausible to hypothesise that magazines played a pivotal role in popularising the word during the 20th century: "*Time* magazine is frequently credited with the popularizing of this second sense, but it probably did not originate with *Time* editors" (*Merriam-Webster* 1989: 580).

OED enables us to examine the context in which the word in question is used. The authors of the dictionary have asserted that they have endeavoured to collate the most representative examples from written sources. This corpus is of significant value in providing an excellent overview of the use of the word over time. However, there is a lack of access to less official sources and spoken sources.

8. English language corpora

The expansion of research to encompass spoken sources and informal texts will facilitate the utilisation of additional tools. English language corpora can be referenced in this context. The British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English are notable examples of large-scale linguistic resources. It is evident that both corpora contain millions of instances of individual English words. It is not possible to review all uses of the word *kudos*; however, it is possible to present certain statistical data. It is therefore feasible to determine the frequency of the word *kudos* in both British and American English. In addition, an investigation can be conducted into the types of texts in which the word *kudos* appears most frequently, and a comparison can be made of its frequency of use with that of other words.

A corpus-based analysis of the British National Corpus reveals that the word *kudos* occurs 57 times, whereas the Corpus of Contemporary American English shows 2,760 instances of the same word. It is evident that *kudos* is present in 2,215 out of a total of 485,202 texts that have been documented in COCA. This figure corresponds to a frequency of 0.5 per cent. It is evident that the majority of instances of the appearance of *kudos* are in online blogs and on the Internet in general. Subsequent to this, newspapers and magazines are considered, followed by spoken language and television programmes. Fiction and academic works are considered to be of the least importance.

It is observable that the use of *kudos* is significantly more prevalent in American English. As was the case in its early days, it is derived from slang. Currently, it appears most often in informal texts, such as internet posts. Concurrently, although the utilisation of *kudos* originated at university among students acquainted with the Greek language, it is not currently employed in academic texts. Consequently, its utilisation persists in being informal, more frequently spoken than written.

9. Conclusions

The word *kudos* is a fascinating example of a word that disappears in one language but reappears and revives in another. It is notable that *kudos* has been translated directly from Greek into English, with no alteration to the original form, apart from the transliteration from the Greek alphabet to the Latin alphabet. The word *kudos* could therefore have entered common oral usage in the second half of the 18th century, initially as a humorous and highly selected form. It may be posited that the term was employed as a synonym for “glory”, “praise”. It subsequently appeared in written form in English literature in the early 19th century.

It can also be hypothesised that the early users of *kudos*, due to their superior knowledge of Greek, were more cognisant of the true meaning of the word and interpreted it in accordance with its original meaning as used by Homer. After all: “The *Iliad* was the universal text-book for schoolboys; it was the companion of statesmen and to critics the acknowledged model of an epic. Homer was the ‘prince of poets’, [...]. The reputation of the *Iliad* has probably never stood higher than in eighteenth century” (Clarke 1945: 123–124). This superior knowledge and awareness of ancient Greek may have guided the boys in their selection of this specific word for renown, as opposed to other terms associated with fame, such as *kleos*, *time*, or *doksa*.

In contemporary English, the term *kudos* is understood to signify “praise” or “appreciation”. However, it must be noted that this is not a simple synonym for “praise”, as it is employed under certain specific conditions. A notable distinction between *kudos* and its synonyms is the rarity with which individuals bestow *kudos* upon themselves. This kind of praise is defined as commendation bestowed by others, signifying the utmost admiration and respect for achievements. Collective admiration is frequently expressed through this medium. Frequently, it is also a form of admiration that is gained as a result of some kind of competitive situation involving other parties. This phenomenon,

reminiscent of ancient times, suggests that admiration is transient and often ephemeral, existing only in the moment of its articulation. However, when addressing a specific individual, the term will be rendered as “bravo to you”.

In consideration of the analysis outlined above, it can be concluded that *kudos* is not merely another synonym for “praise” or “glory”, “admiration”, “fame”, “accolade” – which are, incidentally, other synonyms for “renown” derived from an ancient language (*lat. gloria, admiratio, fama, acollo*). This could, however, be a subject to be explored in greater detail in a separate article.

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Ilona Chruściak
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-0192-936X
University of Gdańsk
Institute of Classical and Slavonic Studies
Wita Stwosza 55
80-308 Gdańsk
Poland
ilona.chrusciak@ug.edu.pl