Title
In the shadows of culture: Semi-volitional body language in Greco-Roman literature

Short description
This research project offers, for the first time, a full, complete, and updated examination of a specific category of aspects of non-verbal communication: semi-volitional body language, as this is indicated in ancient texts and literary contexts, which represent a system of beliefs and values about human physiology and culture in Greek and Roman antiquity. Using cross-disciplinary, multi-themed, and intercultural discourse analysis and examining the full corpus of ancient Greek and Roman literature, including both verse genres (epic, drama, epigram, satire, and other kinds of poetry such as lyric and iambic) and prose genres (oratory, historiography, biography, medicine, and philosophical treatises or authors) from Homer to the 5th century AD, this research project examines a wide range of references to eight categories of semi-volitional body language: sneezing; spitting; coughing and hiccupping (both respiratory reactions); burping; vomiting; farting; defecating; and, finally, urinating.

Some of these bodily functions (such as sneezing) have received the interest of classicists, as well as scholars who are working on their intercultural folklore dimensions, but there are still aspects that are less known and largely under-researched (e.g. the homosexual dimension of sneezing). Further research will advance our knowledge about these aspects of semi-volitional non-verbal language and their cultural dimension, i.e. how they are perceived by people in a given era, geographical place, and cultural system. In this study, these features of semi-volitional body language are examined in relation to the “cultural context” of the varied historical, ethnic/civic, and cultural contexts of Greco-Roman antiquity from Homer to the 5th century AD. The notion of “cultural context”, as used in this research project, refers to socioeconomics, legality, religion, athletics, theatre and other contexts of performance, morality, aesthetics, emotions, issues of the history of medicine, ancient gastronomy, and literary conventions and authorial purposes.

The wealth of information that is incorporated in the extant ancient texts, and the importance of this kind of information for the purposes of reconstructing as clearly and precisely as possible an image of the cultural workings of ancient Greek and Roman communities make the main research output of this project – a monograph – a compelling and timely addition to classical (and also interdisciplinary and intercultural) scholarship on non-verbal communication in general and body language in particular. Through this study, we can learn a lot about the physical stature of the Greeks and Romans, the literary and political purposes of the authors of texts where references to semi-voluntary body language are incorporated (many of these references are considered political allegories, i.e. allusive ways to refer to politicians and comment on their practices and mores), the socio-economic situation of past societies, aspects of religion and religiousness, performance, the enterprises of arousing emotions, with the list of insights into culture even contributing to a more complete and precise picture of the history of medicine and ancient gastronomy, two aspects of the cultural identity of individuals and groups of people that are getting more and more attention of scholars across disciplines.