

SYNOPSIS

Development of Greek from Koine to modern Greek,
by Stavros Tsiepas

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Greek from the time the Homeric Poems were written (7th cent. BC) enjoyed a continuous tradition down to the present day. Despite changes, there has been no break like that between Latin and the Romance languages. As R. Browning puts it in his "Medieval and Modern Greek", "*Ancient Greek is not a foreign language to the Greek of today as Anglo-Saxon is to the modern Englishman. The only other language which enjoys comparable continuity of tradition is Chinese*"

The question arises why has all this happened, what explains it?

Briefly, it is explained by the language conservatism that developed throughout the history of the Hellenic world. After the 4th century BC and before the military and political dominance in the Hellenic world of Macedonian Greeks (Philip and Alexander the Great), the Attic of Athens, alone from the other dialects (Doric, Ionian, Aeolic) had already become the *commonly* accepted medium of expression among the Greeks, due to the cultural, economic and intellectual supremacy of Athens in the 5th century. This *expanded* Attic therefore became in the early Hellenistic times (323 BC-1st cent AD) a common "lingua franca" in the Greek world of Alexander the Great's successors (*old Greek world, Egypt, Middle East, Afghanistan till India*). The expanded Koine that developed into the Roman times was now spoken by non native Greeks as well, and started naturally changing the character of the original Attic spoken, a living language. Understandably the grammarians and literary elite of the time reacted and created for the first time during August's time a movement backwards to the roots, the "glorious" times of Attic, since the legacy of 5th century BC was too high to ignore.

The so-called **diglossia** started, therefore, ie the vernacular developing in different ways than the "frozen" literary language of the administration, philosophers and, after the end of 3rd century, the Christian Church /fathers as well. After 313 AD when Christianity became acceptable by the Roman Emperors it was no longer necessary to reach the (*initially minority and often prosecuted Christian masses*) in a simple language (*used by the New Testament*). Christianity at a later stage had to struggle for its acceptance by the world of philosophy and literary intelligentsia and the Church Fathers after the 4th century resorted to Attic again to "defend" the new theological meanings, which were formulated later by the 7 Ecumenical Councils¹.

From the 4th to the 10th century AD side by side to the literary official language (administration of Empire, church etc) we witnessed the first texts with vernacular characteristics and lexical loans from other languages. (Losses suffered: *the vocal quantities, the dative, almost all the third declension, the optative, the infinitive, the old subjunctive, the old perfect, the old future, almost all the participles*). As Henri Tonnet (*Histoire du grec moderne*) emphasised Greek, however, kept alive by compensating for its deficits by new creations that kept intact its expressive capacity (*new subjunctive, new future, new perfect*). Phonetic evolutions had changed the pronunciation of words without disfiguring them².

In the next period, 10th to 15th century, phonological and morphological developments already in place continued, literature prospered mostly in dialects. The learned language of Constantinople due to the Ottoman administrative divisions did not spread, except by emigration to areas outside. Italian Renaissance influenced more directly Venetian Crete and Lusignan Cyprus and important centres outside the Ottoman empire (before some were captured) were Cyprus, Rhodes, Crete, Ionian islands. Grammars, 17th and 18th centuries. Vocabulary influenced by Turkish and Romance languages of the Mediterranean. Literature in the spoken tongue was limited to poetry. No standard of correct usage other than that of the grammarians, which was wholly inappropriate for literature in the vernacular.

From 1821 to today, we had the development of the National language. Diglossia and emphasis on purism in administrative and church use. Yet an important literature developed in the vernacular, side by side to the Katharevousa. In 1976, by law Katharevousa was abolished and Demotic was allowed to be used in press, by the State, Universities etc.

Modern Greek is not an entirely new language from ancient Greek, it is the current form of a language that is not dead, Greek. And in that sense studying modern Greek gives you the assurance that you are faced with the living continuity of ancient Greek.

¹ Latin started at a later stage to be used as widely as Greek, and at any rate for some time only around Italy and the Papacy, while after the first 2-3 centuries of life of the East Roman Empire (330AD-610AD) Greek became dominant there substituting latin in administration as well.

² It is easy to guess **Κωνώπιον**, diminutive formerly attested by Koine **Κώνωψ** "mosquito", behind the modern Greek **κουνούπι**, whereas it would be more difficult to do if the form **κνούπι** of the Greek of North had imposed itself. See Tonnet, *ibid*.