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Standard Modern Greek: The Present State

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Abstract

In the present paper I explore some of the most important aspects of Modern Greek. In the first part I briefly present the preparatory work that has been done in this field in recent years (i.e. reference books, grammars, dictionaries). Special attention is given to the forthcoming Dictionary of Current Greek of the Academy of Athens. In the second part, I refer to the stereotype of decline in the Modern Greek language, the Englishisms of Modern Greek, and the new developments for the teaching of Greek as a second and foreign language.

1. The speakers of the Greek language

It is estimated that the Greek language is currently spoken by approximately 15 million people, one third of whom reside overseas, mainly in countries of Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and for a relatively small number of native speakers in Africa. The tendency formed in America is known: Second and especially third generation speakers of Greek are alienated from their parents' and grandparents' mother tongue, and as a result many of them merely conceive the distant echo of their Greek surname in its known abbreviated form (*Pappas* for *Pappadopoulos*). Again, this paper is not the proper place to discuss the measures that the Greek State should take to strengthen the ties with the diaspora. Keeping contact with their home-country is a major prerequisite for speakers of Greek to keep up with the living and constantly changing language; otherwise one is restricted to the use of a sterilized language of past decades, which leads not infrequently to linguistic insecurity and "schizoglossia" with all its consequences. However, the first and foremost danger for Modern Greek in the 21st century is the shrinkage of the ratio of its speakers, given the low birthrate, unless appropriate measures are taken promptly.

2. Reference books: infrastructure

Standard Modern Greek has been studied systematically in the last 40 years at all levels of analysis, as indicated by the abundance of relevant books and studies. Many new researchers, having excelled in their studies abroad, have utilized modern theoretical approaches, interpreting thus various phenomena at a purely synchronic level and in comparison to other European languages.

The teaching of Greek as a second or foreign language is really booming, and this is attributed to the existing learning needs of economic immigrants and of other non-native speakers who have poured into Greece to form an impressively high percentage, approaching 15%, of the population.

The Centre for the Greek Language and the Institute for Modern Greek Studies (Manolis Triandafyllidis Foundation), both based in Thessaloniki, as well as the Institute for Language and Speech Processing (ILSP), have boosted the promotion and propagation of the Greek language. ILSP effectively promotes language technology with very important works of infrastructure.

Grammars and dictionaries form part of these fundamental works of infrastructure. I will briefly refer to the most significant ones:

2.1 Grammars

Significant in a lot of ways is the grammar of the Modern Greek language by D. Holton, P. Mackridge & I. Philippaki-Warbuton, *Greek. A Comprehensive Grammar of the Modern Language*, London, 1997 (*Γραμματική της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας*, translated in Greek by V. Spyropoulos, Athens, 1999, Patakis Publications). Its originality lies in its emphasis on syntax, as the relevant unit takes up more than half of the book.

The *Γραμματική της Νέας Ελληνικής. Δομολειτουργική - Επικοινωνιακή (A Grammar of Modern Greek: a Structural-Functional - Communicative Approach)* by Ch. Clairis & G. Babiniotis, in cooperation with: A. Mozer, Aik. Bakakou-Orfanou & St. Skopeteas, Athens, 2005: Ellinika Grammata Publications, which started being published in issues in 1996, is based on the holistic approach to language, without narrow-minded distinctions between morphology, syntax and communication.

2.2 Dictionaries

The establishment of the Demotic as the official language in education (1976) and in public services (1977) led to an explosion in lexicographic production. The *Νέο ελληνικό λεξικό της σύγχρονης δημοτικής γλώσσας, γραπτής και προφορικής (New Greek Dictionary of the Contemporary Demotic, Written and Oral)* by Emm. Kriaras, Athens, 1995 (approximately 55,000 entries) initiates the modern lexicographical practice for Modern Greek. The following two dictionaries boosted Modern Greek lexicography with the innovative lexicographical practices they employed.

The *Λεξικό της νέας ελληνικής γλώσσας (Dictionary of Modern Greek Language)* by G. Babiniotis, Athens 1998 (2nd ed. 2002, 3rd ed. 2008) presents an analytical categorization of meanings, rich added comments on the proper use of words, detailed etymologies and an excellent typographical appearance.

The Institute of Modern Greek Studies (Manolis Triandafyllidis Foundation) published the *Λεξικό της κοινής νεοελληνικής (Dictionary of Modern Greek Language)* Thessaloniki 1998, covering up some of the gaps and weaknesses of various commercial dictionaries. For the first time, the phonetic transcription of all entries is cited, based on the International Phonetic Alphabet, and short and meaningful etymological information is provided. This dictionary is also available in electronic form on the Internet node of the Centre for the Greek Language: www.komvos.edu.gr.

The famous Greek to English dictionary (*A Modern Greek – English Dictionary*) which was prepared by D. Georgacas, is being published by the Centre for the Greek Language. The first volume containing the letter *A* was published in 2005. As soon as the full work is finished, this dictionary is expected to become the “national dictionary of Modern Greek”, as has been justly characterized.

2.2.1 *The new dictionary of the Academy of Athens*

In June 2003, the Academy of Athens, in a plenary session, decided unanimously to publish a *Χρηστικό Λεξικό της Νεοελληνικής (Dictionary of Current Greek, DCG)*. The Advisory Committee consists of the following members: *Konstantinos Despotopoulos, Nikolaos Matsaniotis, Grigorios Skalkeas, Nikolaos Konomis, Spyros Iakovidis, Athanassios Kambylis and Vassileios Petrakos*. The General Secretary of the Academy of Athens, Prof. N. Matsaniotis is the academic director for the project and the author of this paper the scientific coordinator.¹ The ILSP, with the personal interest of its Director, Professor of the National Technical University of Athens, George Carayannis, donated free of charge the special software “Επί λέξει” (word for word), which was developed by himself and the ILSP Electronic Lexicography and Language Resources Department and which was in turn adapted to meet the lexicographical needs of the Academy of Athens.

The new *Dictionary of Current Greek* reflects the dynamics of the twentieth and the beginnings of the twenty-first century Modern Greek language.

The most important innovations of this dictionary can be summarized in: (a) the way the entries have been compiled; (b) the re-examination of spelling and the acceptance of double spelling; (c) the systematic use of style and pragmatic markers (d) the restriction of the meanings incorporated for every entry to the absolutely essential; (e) the careful recording of the combination possibilities of words; (f) the treatment of stereotypes or idiomatic expressions and steady lexicological combinations on a totally new basis at the end of each entry; (g) the brief and verified etymological information. One of the most substantial innovations of the *Dictionary of Current Greek* is that all the large and demanding entries, as well as a number of small ones, are drafted by two different compilers, and their final form comes as a result of multiple reviews.

2.2.1.1 *Entries*

It is estimated that 60-70,000 entries belong to the nucleus of Modern Greek, the same number that appears to apply for English, French and German. The lemmatization of 70,000 or so entries is pursued, which will be presented in two volumes. The most widely used entries of standard Modern Greek (about 30,000) contain more examples, mainly for educational purposes. In the DCG a broad spectrum of scientific fields (a total of 142) is covered.

2.2.1.2 *Spelling*

As a rule, the spelling of entries is determined according to criteria of usage, which are based not on intuitive assessments, but on statistical evidence from various databases. Spelling is a conventional system which is formed totally arbitrarily in quite a few cases. When common practice imposes a specific spelling representation for a word, it is utopian for one to attempt its change even when the scientific arguments used are generally accepted or even unquestionable. The etymological criterion is often used by certain contemporary lexicographers, who, as is made evident, reach a dead-end. Every effort to impose “correct” spelling using etymological criteria, as in *αγόρι, γαρύφαλλο, γλύκισμα, ρωδάκινο, τσηρώτο* is pointless, since people write: *αγόρι, γαρίφαλο, γλύκισμα, ροδάκινο, τσιρότο*.

In the DCG double spelling is presented for the first time, without regulating tendencies: e.g. *αβγό* and *αυγό, εταιρεία* and *εταιρία*.

¹ For a detailed presentation of the dictionary see Ch. Charalambakis, 2009.

2.2.1.3 Etymology

Etymological information provided in the DCG is given in brackets, in a highly condensed way, at the end of the entry, and does not exceed (apart from rare cases) two lines of a two-column text. There are thousands of Ancient Greek words with which scholars (mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries) rendered concepts of technological and scientific breakthroughs, mainly from the French, without this being stated in most Modern Greek dictionaries. The word *πολιτισμός* (civilization) may have existed in later years; however its present meaning is attributed to the French *civilisation* (witnessed since 1808). *Αερομαχία* refers to birds in Lucian. The meaning “battle of war aircraft” renders the English *air battle* and *air combat* and the French *combat aérien*. Specifying the date when words or their meanings appeared, opens new horizons in the area of the History of Civilization and Sciences. See *Ασθένεια/νόσος των τρελών αγελάδων* < Engl. mad cow disease, 1988, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, 1987 (σπογγώδης εγκεφαλοπάθεια των βοοειδών), *Βάση δεδομένων* < Engl. database, 1962, *Βιοηθική* < Engl. bioethics, 1971, Fr. bioéthique, 1982.

3. The stereotype of decline in the Modern Greek language

In Greece the prediction of impending calamities for language periodically increases, particularly after the establishment of the demotic as the official language of education in 1976 and as the language of public administration one year later. Some people are talking about a serious problem of ‘linguistic speechlessness’, alalia, alexia, aphasia etc., coming thus to the conclusion that the death of Modern Greek is inevitable. The language of the young people is constantly attacked by doomsayers, whereas the attribution of responsibility to the educational system and to the way languages are taught in schools has clear political and ideological motives.²

3.1 Foreignisms

The influx of foreign words, primarily from American English, which has “infected” the body of the Greek language in the past few years, is considered to be the primary source of the attrition of the Modern Greek language. Since nowadays a lot is said about this stereotype, which also constitutes one of the major arguments for the so-called decline of Modern Greek, I will briefly refer to this controversial issue in comparison to other European languages.

3.1.1 *The influence of the American English on European languages*

Since the end of the Second World War and onwards, the most important source of the influx of foreignisms in Modern Greek, and in most world languages, is British English and especially American English.

The influx of foreignisms should not be seen within the narrow framework of standard Modern Greek. The average cultivated citizen, and even some scholars, attributes the frequent use of English words to the “linguistic negligence”, “carelessness”, “indifference”, “complacency” of native speakers, holds the state responsible and asks for measures in order to minimize the damage. But the situation is not as simple. The strong influence of American English on other languages is a worldwide phenomenon which has the same roots everywhere: the dominance of the

² For details see M. Sifianou, 2001. Sp. Moschonas, 2004. A. Frangoudaki, 1997. A. Georgakopoulou - M. Silk, 2009. P. Mackridge, 2009.

United States of America in economy, high technology, military equipment, politics, science and civilization in general. There is also a series of other reasons that have led to the monocacy of the English language: the influence of television, and the easy access to English and American TV channels, and of pop and rock music, the attendance of thousands of students at English universities or at English-speaking universities, the tourist industry, the presence of multinational companies, as well as the necessity of learning English for professional, scientific, social and other reasons. Another significant reason is the positive outlook of many non-native speakers of English, especially young ones, on the American way of life. The English language has gained a primarily “symbolic” character: it is a symbol of power, progress, technological development, of the modern and the cosmopolitan.

3.1.2 *The utopia of “Hellenizing” foreign words*

If one studies systematically the mechanisms of how languages function and interact, he/she will realize that the phenomenon of borrowing is a lot more complicated than it is thought to be. The Greek language, during its evolution throughout the centuries, has borrowed thousands of words from every nation it has come into contact with. Few people know today that, for example, the words *νίτρο* and *όαση* are Egyptian, *παράδεισος* is Persian, *περιστέρι* and *χρυσάφι* are Semitic, *σπίτι* and *τούρτα* are Latin, *ομπρέλα* is Italian, *λιμάνι* has been re-borrowed from the Turkish word *liman* and so on. The words that have to do with the clothes Modern Greeks wear, from *παπούτσια* and *κάλτσες*, *παντελόνι*, *μπλουζίν*, *φούστα*, *πουκάμισο*, *ζακέτα*, *παλτό*, *γραβάτα* to *κασκόλ* and *καπέλο* are all of foreign origin.

Safeguarding the “clarity” and “purity” of language has metaphysical dimensions with clear ideological motives.³ The mechanisms and functions of borrowing are thus misjudged, as well as the nature and significance of cultural contacts between people. This is the reason why each attempt by state or private bodies to expel foreign words from many languages has been failing for centuries now.

3.1.3 *The Englishisms of Modern Greek*

The influence of British and American English on Standard Modern Greek has taken on new dimensions. Many words and expressions with high statistical frequency such as *okay*, *hallo*, *bye-bye*, *sorry*, *party*, *happy birthday to you* etc. have already been incorporated into the Modern Greek vocabulary. Similar developments have taken place in other languages. First of all, over the past thirty years, use of the English language has widely expanded in Greece with the establishment of English Language Institutes which teach it, even in the most faraway Greek places. It is now also a compulsory course in primary schools. As some linguists have pointed out, the exclusive promotion of influential languages contributes to the perpetuation of linguistic inequality. So, the Greek State systematically promotes English learning while, on the other hand, its intervention is sought in order for Englishisms to be confined.

Loan translations⁴ are an indication of the extent and depth of permeation especially of English, not only in Modern Greek but in all European languages. Some indicative cases of loan translations and internationalisms which have not been noticed so far are the following: *ανοιχτό πανεπιστήμιο* < open university, *αυτοεκπλήρωση* < self-fulfilment.

³ R. Delveroudi - Sp. Moschonas, 1997.

⁴ See the study “Loan translations in Modern Greek from European languages” in the vol.: Charalambakis, 2001a, and the characteristic table, pp. 332-338.

4. The position of Modern Greek in the context of a United Europe

A great challenge for the future of Greek, as well as for the less spoken and taught languages, is undeniably the forming of a new reality in the United Europe. The danger is already visible, and it will become greater with EU's further extension, not just for a two-speed Europe but also for a Europe of "strong" and "weak" languages. It is estimated that in Europe 70-80 languages are spoken, half of which belong to the European Union. It is difficult to foresee the form that the dormant language conflicts will take, some of which have already come to the surface, once the proposal for restriction of the formal languages of the United Europe comes up, with the establishment of only English, French, German, Spanish and maybe even Italian as 'working languages'.

What can be said with certainty is that the European Union of 2009 is not prepared linguistically for the Europe of the 21st century, not even for the next decade.

5. The future of the less widespread languages

The question of whether the less spoken languages of the European Union are in danger of vanishing must not concern us seriously, since the definite prevalence of only one language English in this case, is utopian. The contradiction that the member-states are facing is that, on the one hand, they have to defend their official languages and, on the other, they must promote the teaching of foreign languages in their countries.

The linguistic problems of the future can be dealt with only through the systematic teaching and cultivation of the mother-tongue at school and the intensive learning of at least two foreign languages as early as possible. In addition, it is essential that motives are given for the learning of one of the less widespread languages of Europe. The model of receptive plurilingualism is certainly the most appropriate way for the native speakers of the less widespread languages to come out of the margins, for the language barriers to be abandoned or at least restricted, and for the consciousness of tomorrow's Europe to be strengthened. For more efficient foreign language teaching, the common vocabulary in European countries which comes from Ancient Greek and Latin must be exploited, a proposal which has been made by non-Greek researchers as well.

6. Conclusion

Coming to a conclusion, we could say that the future of the Greek language is not expected to be either favourable or bleak. Personally, I do not share at all the pessimistic voices of purists and doomsayers. The future of a language which has shown during the brilliant and long evolutionary course of at least 3,500 years of recorded history that it can endure the most unfavourable circumstances and proceed with youthful vigour, impressive liveliness and expressive completeness, will depend to a large extent on the kind of educational and linguistic policy pursued by the State, as well as (or even more so) by the speakers of the language themselves.

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