



Traveling With the Greek Language through Time

Evangelos Panagiotis Kaltsas

Department Of Primary Education University Of Thessaly, Greece

Email: ekaltsas@uth.gr

Article History

Received: April 9, 2021

Revised: June 13, 2021

Accepted: June 15, 2021

Published: June 17, 2021

Abstract

Introduction. A language is the fundamental characteristic of a nation's identity. It can unite the members of an ethnic team and set them apart from the members of other ethnic teams. **Aim.** In this current review, the study presents the evolution of the Greek language from the ancient times, all the way up to today. **Methodology.** The study's material consists of articles related to the topic, found in Greek and International και databases, the Google Scholar, and the Hellenic Academic Libraries (HEAL-Link). **Results.** The Greek language has been used since the third millennia B.C.. During the ancient times, it was the most widely used language in the Mediterranean Sea and South Europe. Until the fifth century B.C., the Greek language was a total of dialects. The Attica Dialect stood out from this dialectical mosaic. Then came the Hellenistic Common, which became the hegemonic language, the lingua franca of the "universe". The Hellenistic Common evolved to the Middle Ages Greek, and later the New Greek (fifth century A.D. - today). Besides, the creation of the New Greek state resulted to the gradual formation of the New Common, which will become the modern New Greek Common, under the effect of the scholar language. **Conclusion.** The Greek language keeps borrowing and assimilating words from other languages today, just like it did in the past, remaining unbroken for forty centuries.

Keywords: Greece; Greek language; History and evolution of language.

1. Introduction

A language is the most important communication code used between humans, and a tool used for exchanging beliefs, ideas and thoughts. It is a fundamental characteristic of a nation's identity. Language is what unites the members of a national group and sets them apart from other groups' members. It also preserves the morals, customs, επιτεύγματα, traditions and history of each nation. One example that proves this is the Greek language (Kopidakis and Katsigianni, 2010).

Given how it functions like a living organism it's only natural for a language to experience a vast number of changes imposed by many factors, like temporals, individual, social, cultural and mainly geographical, through such a long passage of time, not so many and such changes that cause its structure and physiognomy to get altered however (Babiniotis, 2002).

The Greek language has a high position in the history of the Western World. It lists 4.000 years of oral tradition and 3.500 years of written tradition, and still exists. Its vocabulary, its syntax, its literary genres are present in every language (Magoulas, 1997). The Greek language has been used orally since the third B.C. millennia, possibly even earlier. The oldest text written in Greek that has been decrypted is written in Linear B, which is estimated to have been used since 1450 to 1350 B.C., thus making Greek the oldest alive language in the world (Babiniotis, 2002; Than, 2011).

In ancient times the Greek language was the most widespread language in the Mediterranean Sea and South Europe, mainly because of the vast number of colonies created by Greeks in the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea, while in the Alexandrian Era, even by its end, it got to the point of being the language used for trading (Hoffmann and Scherer, 1994).

Greek language is also the language in which many of the fundamental scientific and philosophical texts were written. The New Testament was written in Greek at first and was translated in other languages later.

The **purpose** of this present study is to present the evolution and configuration of the Greek language through the centuries, from the ancient times all the way up to today.

The **study** consists of a review of Greek and international bibliography. The study's material consists of articles related to the topic found in Greek and international databases such as Google Scholar, the Hellenic Academic Libraries Association (HEAL-Link), and with the use of keywords such as Greece, Greek language, history and evolution of language. The exclusion criteria for the articles was the language, except for Greek and English. For the most part, only articles and studies accessible to authors were used.

2. The Birthplace of Greek Language

Greek is the official language of Greece and Cyprus, and one of the 23 official languages of the European Union. It is also the mother tongue of indigenous people in Albania, Bulgaria, Italy, North Macedonia and Turkey, in the form of dialects (Babinotis, 2000). In addition, it is used in Australia, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Russia, and other former U.S.S.R. member states (Christidis, 2001).

Our distant relatives moved from east to west while looking for the Promised Land and ended up in the Balkan Peninsula or Amos Peninsula (Adrados, 2003). All the way throughout this trip, they encountered many other people that they gave a lot to, and took a lot from in terms of language, thus forming their own linguistic idiom, the Greek language (Horrocks, 1997).

In order to achieve the best possible understanding of the Greek language's historic path its study must be done according to its following time periods: a) prehistoric, b) Ancient Dialects Age, c) Hellenistic Common, d) Middle Ages Greek, e) New Greek, και f) Modern Greek, along with their dialects.

2.1. Prehistoric Period of the Greek Language

During this time period Early Greek, in other words the oral common language that gave us the known dialects of the Ancient Dialects Age, is formed. It covers the period from 4000 B.C. to 2000 B.C., approximately (Papanastasiou, 2007).

2.2. Ancient Dialects Age

This era covers the time period between the dividing of the Early Greek until the formation of the Hellenistic Common. The changes that took place during this period are a lot and very depending on location, leading to dialectic division (Christidis, 2005). The first written Greek texts, estimated to have been written in the thirteenth century B.C., are from this era. They were discovered in the palace centers of the Mycenaean civilization (Myokines, Knossos, Thebes, Pylos) and are written in linear B, a syllabic writing system borrowed from the older Eastern Mediterranean civilizations, and since the eight century B.C. the Phoenician Alphabet had been used, customized to match the specific features of the Greek Language (Kakridis, 2012).

2.3. Hellenistic Common

The Hellenistic Common (fourth/third century B.C. – fourth/fifth century A.D.) is characterized from the backing out of the Ancient Dialects and the spread of Greek to Eastern Mediterranean civilizations that use other languages (Papanastasiou, 2007).

The changes are a lot and important. By the third century B.C., the Greek language is a total of dialects. Inside this total, the Attic Dialect of the city-state of Athens stood out since the Classic years (fifth century B.C.), because of its hegemonic role (Christidis, 1999). The hegemony and rule of Macedonia followed, originally over the older city-states and later, after Alexander's conquests, over the entire East all the way to India (Chatzopoulos, 2018). As such the Hellenistic Common followed, which became the hegemonic language, the lingua franca of the "universe". This Greek linguistic Hegemony caused the transformation of the indigenous population into bilingual communities, alongside their linguistic Hellenization, and the decline of the Greek Dialects (Pantelidis, 2007).

2.4. Middle Ages Greek

The Hellenistic Common evolved into the Middle Ages Greek and later the New Greek (fifth century A.D. - today). In addition, the decline of the Greek World and the Roman Conquest caused a movement of linguistic "cleaning" since the beginning of the first century A.D., which dominated the history of the Greek language since the second half of the twentieth century A.D. known as "Atticism" (Andriotis, 1974). According to it, the Hellenistic Common was just a declined version of the Attica Dialect. As such, it enforced an imitation of the Classic Attica Dialect, which conflicted with the dominant language of the time (Tonnet, 1995). The Byzantine Era is, for the most part, the era of the linguistic "cleaning" (Marangou, 2018).

The Hellenistic Common had the tendency to divide to dialects that are more new. The unification factor of the Central Byzantine Rule worked against these tendencies however (Browning, 1995). Wherever and whenever this factor weakened new dialects that form since the end of the first millennia came up, and later take their final forms during the Turkish Occupation (Papanastasiou, 2007).

2.5. New Greek

The boundaries between New Greek and Middle Ages Greek are located between are located among the last Byzantine years. During this time period - and the Turkish Occupation time period – an equally vast dialectic differentiation can be seen (Browning, 1995).

Despite all this, the Greek language managed to maintain its continuity throughout its historical path. It did not get divided creating a variety of new languages. The unifying factors were always strong, like cultural and political unity that was maintained or enforced by the Byzantine Empire, or a sense of identity created by the feeling of contrast with the Muslims, the Slavs and the Latins of the West (Glykatzi-Arveler, 1999).

Conversations about the creation of a national language, a big characteristic of the pre - 1821 Greek Revolution period, are closely connected with the long established "bilingualism" and linguistic debates had larger ideological, social and political content (Christidis, 2001).

The beginnings of these debates date to the years of the New Greek Enlightenment. The main demotic language (vernacular) supporters were Regas Ferreos (1757-1798), Gregory Constandas (1758-1844), John Vilaras (1771-1823), Dionysios Solomos (1798-1857) and others (Dimaras (2002)). In addition, Adamandios Corais (1748-1833) believed that the "idiom of the people" had been damaged and suggested the "middle path" for the formation of the new language, in spite of being an enthusiastic supporter of the vernacular himself. The Classical View on the other hand, with Neofytos Ducas (1760-1845), Panagiotis Cordikas (1762-1827) and other supporters, wished for a return to Ancient Greek, the only "pure" form of the Greek language (Malafanti, 2017).

Besides, the New Greek state's creation resulted to the new Common's gradual formation, later turning it into the modern New Greek Common under the scholar language's influence. Already between 1825 - 1840 a new vernacular common is being formed, based on the Peloponnesian Dialect. In written texts, administration and education the Ancient-like language, also known as the "katharevousa" is still dominant, in different versions. The cracks are multiplying however, especially in the literature field where the vernacular is gradually becoming more dominant (Kordatos, 1974). During the nineteenth century's last decade, other than the work of John Psyharis (1854-1929), the work of Emanuel Roidis (1836-1904) and the literature work of the New Athenian School, with Kostis Palamas (1859-1943) as its main exponent were very important in cementing demotism (Stavridi-Patrikiou, 2001).

In the beginning of the twentieth century demotism was supported by the work of λογίων such as Alexander Palis (1851-1935), Argyris Eftaliotis (1849-1923), Penelope Delta (1897-1941), and others, the creation of clubs (National Language, 1905 & Student Companionship, 1910) and the publication of magazines (Noumas, 1903-1931). Main figures of this time period are Alexander Delmouzos (1880-1956), Emanuel Triantafilidis (1883-1959) and Dimitris Glinos (1882-1943) (Stavridi-Patrikiou, 2001).

Besides, with the 1911 constitutional provision the language in which and Greek legislation texts institution are written was set as the official language of the state. In 1929, in the context of the educational reform, there is the establishment of the demotic language in primary schools among other things. In addition, the 1964 reform were a new attempt on systematic the demotic language's introduction in education. This reform was among those abolished by the 1967 military dictatorship. The solution to this linguistic issue came in 1976, when the demotic was legally recognized as the official language of the state (Giannouloupoulou, 2001).

Therefore, by finding its «Ithaca» with the prevalence of the demotism, most people would expect the Greek language's trip through time to complete its circle.

2.6. Modern Greek Language

Modern Greek however continues its course, accepting influence from other languages, having knowledge of its needs and incorporating these influences accordingly, maintaining and differentiating whatever is deemed necessary (Giannouloupoulou, 2001).

We must not forget however that all the languages in the world change as time passes, just like every aspect of the world and the human life. Every language has had different phases throughout its history, and each phase is independent and self-existent, meaning it has laws and rules of its own that only apply to it specifically, not any of the previous or following fazes (Fliatouras and Gavriilidou, 2019). As such, changes in language have regularity, which can be seen in every description level, namely phonology, grammar, pension and semantics. Linguistic change is inevitable, it takes place gradually and isn't controlled by any external, organized or individual, interventions (Nikiforidou, 2001).

Today the Greek language is borrowing words, mainly from English, without excluding other languages like French, Italian, and others. Specifically in the context of European Union member countries there is no doubt that, English plays a hegemonic linguistic role. The English hegemony is based on political and economic hegemony and nowadays-economic hegemony has a global character (Tonnet, 1995).

The European Union's decision to make the national languages of its member countries its official languages however was a grand expression of its commitment to preserve and develop the European cultural and linguistic variety. (https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-languages_el). Regarding the linguistic policy in the inside of the country, the special New Greek identity must be preserved through the reveal of both its historical and specific features and its unity with the other languages (Christidis, 2001).

Besides, we must not forget that borrowed words do not «damage» a language. A written language, that's being taught in schools, that has a state of its own, literature of its own, isn't in danger of losing the people who use it. Languages that got extinct in the past, in other words lost the people who used them and were transported to another more powerful language, and the ones that are in danger today, have few people practicing them and no supporting «mechanisms» such as schools, dictionaries, grammar and state (Kriaras, 1983).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to mention the fact that today the Greek language adapts words from mainly western languages and assimilates them to its own morphology just as it did in the past with other languages, thus remaining unbroken for forty centuries.

In addition, as communities develop new needs that languages respond to accordingly are created. As such, our mother tongue may be threatened by many factors but remains an inseparable part of our life, and it's our duty to keep it alive.

References

- Adrados, F. R. (2003). *History of the greek language (from the beginning to the present day)*. Translation: A. V. Lecumberri. Edited by: Ga anastasiou and C. Charalampakis. Papadimas: Athens.
- Andriotis, N. (1974). *The greek language in post-classical times*. In *the history of the greek nation*. 5th vols.: Athens Publishing House: Athens.
- Babiniotis, G. (2000). *Greek language: Past - present - future*. Gutenberg Publications: Athens.
- Babiniotis, G. (2002). *Concise history of the greek language*. Fifth Edition edn: Athens:
- Browning, R. (1995). *The Greek language, medieval and modern*. Papadima Publications: Athens: DN.
- Chatzopoulos, M. B. (2018). *Recent research in the ancient macedonian dialect: Consolidation and new perspectives*. In to: Giannakis, G. K. *Studies in ancient greek dialects: From central greece to the black sea*. Walter De Gruyter.
- Christidis, A. F. (1999). *The formation of the greek language*. In: Kopidakis, M. Z. *History of the greek language*. Greek Literary and Historical Archive: Athens.
- Christidis, A. F. (2001). The new greek language and its history. In A.-F. Christidis (ed.), *encyclopedic guide for language*. Available: https://www.greeklanguage.gr/greekLang/studies/guide/thema_d1/index.html
- Christidis, A. F. (2005). *History of the ancient greek language*. Archeology and archeology in secondary education I. Thessaloniki: Institute of modern greek studies manolis triantaphyllides foundation.
- Dimaras, K. T. (2002). *Modern greek enlightenment*. Hermes: Athens.
- Fliatouras, A. and Gavriilidou, Z. (2019). Language change and teaching: Hate or love relationship? In g. C. Tsigras, e. Naxidou & d. Stratigopoulos (ed.), *andri kosmos*. Honorary volume to professor konstantinos k. Hatzopoulos. 723-34. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340777855_Glossike_allage_kai_didaskalia_Schese_misous_e_a_gapes
- Giannouloupoulou, G. (2001). The modern greek language after bilingualism. In a.-f. Christidis (ed.), *encyclopedic guide for language*. Available: https://www.greeklanguage.gr/greekLang/studies/guide/thema_d3/index.html
- Glykatzi-Arveler, E. (1999). *History of the greek language*. Greek Literary and Historical Archive: Athens.
- Hoffmann, O. and Scherer, A. (1994). *History of the greek language. First volume*. Translation: H. P. Symeonidis. Kyriakidis Bros: Thessaloniki.
- Horrocks, G. (1997). *Greek: A history of the language and its speakers (longman linguistics library)*. Wesley Publishing Company: Addison. https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/eu-languages_el
- Kakridis, F. (2012). *Ancient greek literature*. Center for Educational Research and Institute of Modern Greek Studies: Athens.
- Kopidakis, Z. M. and Katsigianni, A. (2010). *History of the greek language*. National Bank Educational Foundation: Athens.
- Kordatos, G. (1974). *Populism and literacy: A sociological study of the language issue*. Boukoumani: Athens.
- Kriaras, E. (1983). *Our current language*. Malliaris Publications – Education: Thessaloniki.
- Magoulas, G. (1997). *Ancient greek dialects*. In *greece: The history and culture of the greek nation until today. First volume*. Papyrus larus britannica. Papyrus: Athens.
- Malafanti, K. D. (2017). The language issue during the Modern Greek enlightenment. Available: http://www.pee.gr/wpcontent/uploads/praktika_synedrion_files/e22_3_04/malafantis.htm
- Marangou, M. (2018). The course of the Greek language over the centuries. Available: https://www.alfavita.gr/epistimi/246899_i-poreia-tis-ellinikis-glossas-ana-toys-aiones
- Nikiforidou, K. (2001). Language change. In a.-f. Christidis (ed.), *encyclopedic guide for language*. Available: https://www.greeklanguage.gr/greekLang/studies/guide/thema_a6/index.html
- Pantelidis, N. (2007). Creation of the hellenistic common. Available: https://www.greeklanguage.gr/greekLang/studies/history/thema_14/index.html
- Papanastasiou, G. (2007). Linguistic change: The historical evolution of the greek language. In a.-f. Christidis (ed.), *encyclopedic guide for language*. Available: https://www.greeklanguage.gr/greekLang/studies/history/thema_13/index.html
- Stavridi-Patrikiou, R. (2001). The language issue. In A.-F. Christidis (Ed.), *Encyclopedic Guide for Language*. Available: https://www.greeklanguage.gr/greekLang/studies/guide/thema_d2/index.html
- Than, K. (2011). Ancient tablet. Found : Oldest readable writing in europe. National geographic society. March 30, 2011. Available: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/110330-oldest-writing-europe-tablet-greece-science-mycenae-greek>
- Tonnet, H. (1995). *History of the Modern Greek language: Its formation*. Translation: M. Karamanou, P. Lialiatsis. Papadimas: Athens.