

Early Movement Towards Modern Greek

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The evidence of the preceding sections makes it clear that the Greek language underwent considerable development and change from the time Greek speakers first entered the Balkans in the 2nd millennium BC up through the Hellenistic era. However, it is important to realize that languages are like living organisms, in that they continually change and evolve; thus, Greek did not stop at the form it assumed in the Hellenistic period but rather continued to develop. Moreover, also as is the case with living organisms, the form taken by a language at any period can be viewed as a function of the form it had in previous stages acted on by normal processes of change, in this case, processes of language change such as sound change, analogy, and reanalysis. In this way, it is generally possible to see the seeds of future directions of development present in any synchronic stage of a language, often manifesting themselves as synchronic variation in the realization of a sound or a morpheme, in the meaning of word, and the like, and thus as competition between an innovative variant and an older variant. Change, in a sense then, comes about through the resolution of this competition, often, but importantly not always, in the direction of the innovative form.

As far as Greek is concerned, many of the significant differences between Ancient Greek and Modern Greek have their origins in innovations that emerged first in ancient times and competed with older forms, but were not fully generalized until a later stage in the development of the language. In this way, the variation — the new pronunciations, words, and constructions that arise but are not widely adopted until later — can often represent a foreshadowing of trends that determine the later form of the language.

In isolated instances, it is possible to see innovations in very early stages of Greek that have been maintained into Modern Greek. However, the mere occurrence of an innovation in earlier Greek does not necessarily qualify it as the beginning of modern-like characteristics early on. For instance, whereas the verb φιλέω in Homeric Greek of the 8th century BC regularly had the meaning ‘love’ (of various types, e.g. directed at friends, children, gods, etc.), by the time of Aeschylus in the 5th century BC it had acquired the additional, competing meaning ‘kiss’. This latter meaning is the only one which persists into Modern Greek; however, in the Hellenistic period, both meanings ‘love’ and ‘kiss’ were still available. Thus, we should not characterize this pre-Classical change as a modernism early in the ancient language, because it had occurred and had been established in the range of meanings for this verb already in ancient times, and moreover, the ultimate resolution of the competition was post-Koine. Thus, it was simply a semantic shift, an unsurprising one at that since kissing is one way to show love, that took place earlier in Greek rather than later, and thus formed part of the inheritance from (later) Classical Greek into the Koine (and beyond).

Similarly, on occasion developments can be observed that are not much more than brief “experiments”, so to speak, that do not take hold and certainly show no extension and spread beyond their original locus. For instance, as early as the 5th to 4th century BC, Attic Greek showed ὀλίωζ for ὀλίγοζ ‘few’, in which there was a loss of medial < γ > (phonetically [g] in most dialects of Ancient Greek) that is reminiscent of the much later developments that gave Modern Greek λεζ ‘you say’ from an ancient starting point λέγεις. The specific change involved and its lexically restricted nature (medial < γ > is not regularly lost in all words at any stage of the language) are similar at the two stages, but most likely the developments are unrelated and show no direct connection to one another because of the great chronological difference between the appearance of ὀλίωζ and the emergence of λεζ, as well as the

difference in lexical items affected by the change. On the other hand, it can be argued that the loss of medial < γ > in this word points to the availability of a fricative pronunciation in ancient times in at least some dialects (as opposed to the more widespread stop pronunciation), a pronunciation which is, admittedly, a modern-like feature.

The developments that are most crucial, therefore, for understanding the beginnings of Modern Greek, are not the isolated ones, however intriguing they may be, but rather the systematic changes that one begins to see as Greek moves into and through the Hellenistic era. It is important to keep movement into Koine Greek in mind, however, for not all systematic changes evident in various stages of Ancient Greek are relevant for understanding Modern Greek. For example, the Doric dialect of Laconian in the 4th century BC systematically begins to show < σ >, presumably representing a phonetic [s], where other dialects had a voiceless aspirated stop pronunciation for < θ >, as in *σῶς* for *θεός* ‘god’ (e.g. Attic [tʰeós]) or *ἔστηκε* for *ἔθηκε* ‘he set up’, and as with the sporadic Attic fricative pronunciation of < γ >, this could suggest an early — yet more systematic — fricative pronunciation of theta, perhaps therefore as a starting point for the ultimate modern pronunciation as [θ].¹ However, since Laconian was not a major dialect source of input into the Koine, this development, even though systematic, is unlikely to be the starting point for the later Koine and modern pronunciation of theta.

With these caveats as background, we turn now to some changes that first emerge in the late Classical to early Hellenistic period and do eventually spread and take hold in Greek; they therefore represent the beginnings of Modern Greek.

¹There is some controversy as to when the modern fricative pronunciation of theta, and the ancient voiceless aspirated stops in general, arose, but it is reasonable to assume a dating of at least the late Koine; see Bubeník (1989: 189ff.) for discussion.

On the syntactic and morphosyntactic level, there are several that have already been described in this volume (see the article by G. Horrocks, for instance), including the reduction in the use of the infinitive in subordinate clauses, the development of various periphrastic future-tense constructions involving an auxiliary verb and an infinitive in place of the monolectal future of earlier Greek, a lessening of the use of the Classical perfect, and the replacement of dative case functions by other cases and by prepositional constructions. All of these developments began as innovations that competed with established norms of usage in the Hellenistic era, and thus led to synchronic variation in this period. We illustrate here the nature of this competition using just one of these features, though parallel examples could be found for the others. In the following verse from the New Testament, for instance, the older infinitival subordination is conjoined with innovative finite subjunctive subordination:

θέλω δὲ πάντας ὑμᾶς λαλεῖν γλώσσαις

I-want but all/ACC.PL you/ACC.PL speak/INF in-tongues

μᾶλλον δὲ ἵνα προφητεύητε (1Cor 14.5)

rather but that prophesy/2PL.SUBJUNC

‘I want you all to speak in tongues or rather to prophesy’

(literally: “I want you all to speak in tongues or rather that you prophesy”)

Other examples of incipient modern features in the Hellenistic period can be cited that involve changes at the phonological level (see Teodorsson 1974, 1977, Tonnet 1993)². As noted in other chapters (e.g. by G. Horrocks), there were changes in the vowel system, e.g. <ει>, and much later in the period, post-4th century A.D., also <η

²Most of the examples cited here are taken from Tonnet 1993, especially Chapter IV, and Bubeník 1989, though they are well-known and either these or ones like them are to be found in a number of sources.

>, moving generally towards a high front articulation (phonetically [i]),³ the loss of vowel length leading to merger of <ο > with <ω >, and, a bit later in the period, post-2nd century A.D., the monophthongization of < αι > to [e], all characteristics of Modern Greek. These changes are manifested through misspellings in papyri and inscriptions (e.g. < προσοπον > for πρόσωπον ‘face’; < θελι > for θέλει ‘wants’, < τιν > for < την > ‘the (ACC.FEM.SG)’, < ψυχέ > for < ψυχάι > ‘souls’, but also, with a reverse spelling, < εινα > for ἵνα ‘(so) that’, < αίγραφα > ‘I wrote’ for < έγγραφα >). Similarly, the diphthongs, < ευ > and < ου >, were beginning to be pronounced with a modern-like spirant off-glide, as indicated by reverse spellings such as < ευδομοζ > for ἑβδομος ‘seventh’.

With regard to morphology, there are numerous ways in which Koine Greek anticipates Modern Greek. In most instances, however, the Koine developments have their beginnings in Classical Greek. Thus, what one observes in the Koine is an extension and generalization of the innovation beyond its original locus in Classical Greek, setting the stage of the ultimate generalization and spread of the innovation as seen in the modern language. For example, in Classical Greek the verb εἶμι ‘be’ is inflected as an active verb in the present and imperfect tenses, though the verb takes middle voice forms in the future; early in the post-Classical period, in the 4th century B.C., a middle voice imperfect form occurs, the first person singular ἥμην, and other middle forms occur in later Koine Greek; the movement towards middle inflection for ‘be’, coming first in the imperfect, anticipates the ultimate modern forms which for the most part (excluding third person present, singular and plural forms) show middle (i.e. nonactive) inflection, e.g. ἦμουν ‘I was’ (deriving by sound changes directly from earlier ἥμην), ἦσους ‘you were’, εἶμαι ‘I am’, εἶσσαι ‘you are’ (these last three

³However, in some parts of the Hellenistic Greek world, < η > merges instead with < ε >, an outcome found in modern Pontic dialects of Greek (and thus presumably deriving from the Hellenistic developments). See Bubeník (1989: 217ff.) for some discussion.

showing the effects of some analogical reformatations), etc. Similarly, the Ancient Greek distinction between thematic (“second”) aorist endings and the nonthematic (“α”) endings of the sigmatic (first) aorist, e.g. εἶπ-ον ‘I said’ versus ἔγραψ-α ‘I wrote’, which in the second person singular was not realized categorically even as early as Homeric Greek (εἶπ-αζ ‘you said’ occurs in *Iliad* 1.106, for instance) and occasionally in the first person singular in the Classical period (εἶπ-α ‘I said’), was less robust in the early Koine period, with the α-endings predominating; as with the previous example, in this case too, the trend that was taking hold in the Koine continued through into Modern Greek, where the α-endings are the norm now for all but the second person singular (εἶπες ‘you said’, despite earlier α-forms, and note early 20th century second person plural forms such as εἶπετε reported for some regional dialects by Thumb 1910).

While by no means exhaustive, this listing is representative of the change at all levels of grammar that Greek in the late Classical and early post-Classical period was undergoing, moving it in the direction of its ultimate modern form.

By way of conclusion, three points are essential as one considers the beginnings of the transformation of Greek from its ancient state to its modern state.

First, as important as it is to recognize the extent to which innovations that occurred between Classical Greek and Hellenistic Greek provided the basis from which the modern language developed, it is equally important to note that not all the changes that characterize the difference between Modern Greek and ancient forms of the language have clear starting points in Koine Greek. For instance, while new expressions for the future tense were emerging in the Koine period, the ultimate (though not direct) source of the Modern Greek future with the element θα, namely θέλω with an infinitive, did not gain currency until the late Byzantine and early Medieval period. Similarly, the modern perfect tense consisting of the verb έχω

‘have’ with a remnant of the older infinitive (e.g. ἔχω φιλήσει ‘I have kissed’) did not develop until the Medieval period, though there were some formal predecessors to this, with different functions, in earlier post-Classical Greek. Even the sound structure of Modern Greek was not fixed in the Koine period, for a front rounded [y] (from classical <υ> and <ϋ>, which showed signs of merger with each other in the Koine but with no other vowels) persisted into roughly the 10th century before giving way to an unrounded [i] pronunciation (see Browning 1983, Newton 1972), and the affricates τσ and τζ only developed fully after the Hellenistic era.

Second, as several examples have already indicated, even among those changes which do have their beginnings in the Hellenistic period, many were not fully realized until much later in Greek. The reduction of the use of the infinitive, for instance, was not completed until as late as the 16th century AD (see Joseph 1983, 1978/1990). More generally, the striking structural parallels that Modern Greek shows with various of its Balkan linguistic neighbors, including the absence of an infinitive, emerged and took hold in Medieval Greek under the relative peace of the Ottoman period and the intimate contact that ensued among speakers of Greek, Albanian, Aromanian, and South Slavic.

Finally, as this last point suggests, what the account given here of incipient modern features in late Classical and early post-Classical Greek does not take into consideration is the extent to which language contact was involved in altering the look of Greek, not just through the borrowing of words but also, inasmuch as many speakers had at least limited access to a language other than their native language, by the effects of various degrees of individual and collective bilingualism on all the languages involved. With regard to the late stages of the ancient era of greatest interest here, it must be remembered that the Hellenistic period was a time of the

extension of Greek into a broad geographic region, so that speakers of Greek and speakers of other languages interacted with one another on a regular basis. Consequently, we must recognize the contribution of this contact to the development of the Greek language, even in core Greek-speaking areas. Still, even if language contact provided some of the impetus for the blossoming forth of various linguistic innovations in Greek that began the language on the way to its modern form, the starting points for those innovations — the seeds of these later changes — can generally be found within Greek itself.

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--ditto re Sappho's n-accusative (and note Classical Sokrate-n, anyway, no???)

(koine has pateran, and that is a starting point for the masc sg noms like pateras -- probably here the Classical acc's in -n reflect the same systemic pressures that gave rise later on to pateran, and thus are not a direct harbinger of the later developments but rather a reaction to the same type of patterns

--even when the change is observable on the way to Koine, as with ashmos --> 'silver', it is still an isolated change