TYPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MODERN GREEK

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Greek is one of the more intensely-studied languages in the world, with regard to its history, structure, and social setting, but despite this special place that Greek holds in the pantheon of human languages, the modern form of the language has played a relatively minor role in linguistic studies aimed at developing a general typology of natural language, i.e. the development of a taxonomy of characteristics and their various combinations that help to delimit the range of what it means to talk about a "possible human language". Moreover, the relative neglect of Modern Greek in this regard comes in spite of the fact that there is much that the language can offer to typological studies.

Although it is perhaps beside the point, it is worth considering the causes for this neglect. There are several reasons for this situation, none of them particularly compelling and all of them unfortunate from the point of view of the Neo-Hellenist. First, we have to recognize the overwhelming presence of Ancient Greek, as an historical "800-pound gorilla" overshadowing Modern Greek for many linguists. Interestingly, there is linguistic evidence that reveals this attitude about the relationship between Ancient and Modern Greek. While it is true that the term *Greek* in English, as well as its French equivalent *grec(que)* and other languages as well, refers to the totality of the language (as in the title of Antoine Meillet's classic work *Aperçu d'une histoire de la langue grecque*, which covers the Greek language from Proto-Indo-European up into the 20th century), one still has to reckon with the further fact that in English, at least, the unmarked sense of "Greek" refers to the ancient language, thus requiring the designation "Modern" for contemporary Greek; significantly, the opposite occurs with other language names in English, such as *English* / *Old Englis*, *French* / *Old French*, *Chinese* / *Archaic Chinese*, etc. In this way, therefore, the standard designations for the languages reveal something significant about how different stages of Greek are viewed, relative to one another. A second consideration concerning the general disregard of Modern Greek by typologically inclined linguists is also a matter of attitude, and concerns the fact that Greek, as an Indo-European "Standard Average European" language is not particularly "exotic" nor, seemingly, sufficiently "different" from other well-studied languages to merit attention.

Regarding this last point, an examination of typological studies in general shows a bias towards non-Indo-European and non-European languages, inasmuch as these languages seem to be considered to be more revealing of the range of features that characterize human language. Here, the structure of many graduate degree programs in linguistics is revealing, for many have (or have had till recently) courses and/or requirements focusing on the study of non-Indo-European languages (such was the case at Ohio State University until the early 1990s). The study of Modern Greek as a vehicle to get at typological diversity in human language gets trapped somewhat by that mode of thinking.

One can of course counter such attitudes by first of all remarking that *any* language provides significant and important input into the determination of the limits on the notion "possible human language". Still, such a philosophically-based argument is somewhat abstract in its thrust. Thus, a better way to combat this attitude and the ensuing disregard is to be more concrete and to come up with a characterization of Modern Greek from a typological perspective along a number of parameters — phonological, syntactic, etc. — that show that this state of the language provides a number of interesting contributions to the understanding of universal grammar and the limits on natural languages. Furthermore, so as to ensure that there are no preconceived notions about what is important and that the results are as "clean" as possible, this task should be approached as if one were coming to Greek anew, with no prior knowledge of any stage of the language before the modern period.

Taking such an ahistorical view of typology is important, even with a well-known language. It is not unusual to find in discussions of Modern Greek grammar, e.g. with regard to the marking of major grammatical relations like indirect object, statements like "Modern Greek lacks a dative case". It is clear that whoever makes a statement of this sort has in mind an audience where "Greek" refers to "Ancient Greek" or at least for whom Ancient Greek provides the basic point of reference for things Hellenic. Yet, on the face of it, a statement of this sort is rather odd. We do not describe indirect objects in French, for instance, by saying that it lacks a dative case, even though Latin had a dative case to the same extent as Ancient Greek, and French and Modern Greek are comparable in terms of their relation to their respective parent language. Nor do we say such a thing about languages that may never have had a dative case, e.g. the syntax of indirect objects in the Alqonquian language Cree is described in the standard treatment of Cree grammar (Wolfart 1973) without any reference to the absence of a special nominal form. A statement of this sort is rather like a traffic sign that tells a driver (as some in the United

States do) that a “Traffic signal sequence has changed”; this is informative if one has been to the particular intersection before, but on the first time a driver reaches that point in the road, it is of no concern if the signal is different from what it was the day before, only that it is operative *today*! Thus, approaching Modern Greek without the prejudice that a knowledge of Ancient Greek gives us is healthy.

Furthermore, starting the examination of Greek with a clean slate helps to overcome the potential problem of non-exoticness, if that is indeed an issue. Typically, when one approaches “exotic” languages, no preconceptions are held about their structure, and thus one stands ready to be surprised by whatever the language might offer; with a more familiar language, however, there are certain expectations that can color the eventual “discovery” procedure.

In this paper, therefore, a survey of the basic structure of Modern Greek is undertaken, looking at its phonology, morphology, and syntax, by way of highlighting those aspects of Greek linguistic structure that deserve the attention of linguists, and then to focus on a few areas in which Greek can make significant contributions. While it might be considered especially desirable to uncover aspects of structure that Greek uniquely brings to the arena, under the assumption that any such otherwise unattested features necessarily add to the overall view of what constitutes a possible human language, it is equally true that progress toward refining this notion can be made also by bringing to light additional instances of already-known phenomena; at the very least, such additional examples add to considerations of statistically based (implicational) universals (see Dryer 1997).

This discussion will be focusing just on structural issues that Greek presents, and thus is quite apart from contributions Greek might make to the typology of the social setting of a language, where, for instance, Greek diglossia, as presented by Ferguson 1959, constituted one of the paradigm cases for sociolinguists to consider.

To turn then to structural matters: first, with regard to its phonology, Modern Greek shows a balanced vowel system, a consonant system that is imbalanced regarding fricatives (f v θ ð s z x ɣ) versus stops (p t k) and has interesting asymmetries in voicing (under an analysis of the surface phones [b d g] as non-underlying, with instead the anomaly of differential distribution and frequency under an analysis in which [b d g] are underlying), and complex consonants (ts dz) which, as is the case in many languages, give evidence of ambiguity of analysis as clusters or as unit segments and which are

distributionally skewed towards occurrence in affective lexical domains (occurring primarily in onomatopoeia, baby talk, and generally affective vocabulary (Joseph 1994a).

With regard to its morphology, Modern Greek shows case-marking, more inflection than any other "Standard Average European" language (showing both case marking and number marking in nouns, pronouns, and adjectives, and marking for numerous categories in the verb), a complex verbal system with a complicated interplay of cross-cutting categories (aspect, tense, mood, voice (Joseph & Smirniotopoulos 1993)) and an arguably agglutinative structuring of the markers for these various categories (Joseph 1990, Janda & Joseph 1992).

Further, in its syntax, Greek shows relatively free word order constrained pragmatically by discourse and information-flow factors, the "registration" on the verb of the occurrence of objects (via the weak pronominal forms), only finite subordinate clauses (with concomitant controversy concerning the analysis of control structures), and several "little words" (weak pronouns, tense markers, attitudinal markers such as να) that challenge well-established taxonomic criteria governing their categorization as affixes, clitics, words, or something else again (Joseph 1988, 1990).

Finally, in its lexicon, Greek gives evidence of stratification, due to the effects of internal borrowing from the once high-style variety of the language (katharevousa) and external borrowing (e.g. from neighboring languages), that provides a ready-made stylistic mix

Moreover, the understanding of two areas that have been of great interest to typologists is enriched by Modern Greek evidence: the language's several relative-clause forming strategies test the "accessibility hierarchy" (Keenan & Comrie 1977) governing which nouns can form relative clauses (Joseph 1983); and a restricted class of constructions that occur with a weak subject pronoun (e.g. που 'ν' τος 'Where is he?') although subject pronouns are usually not expressed challenge the "Null Subject Parameter" (Jaeggli & Safir 1989), as discussed in Joseph 1994b. Furthermore, the presence of a weak subject pronominal form such as τος means that the language has a three-way distinction in pronominal realization with weakest (null-subject), weak (τος, and its paradigmatically related gender and number forms), and strong (αυτός, and its paradigm), a system found elsewhere (e.g. Hittite and Czech) but not widely instantiated among languages of the world.

Through these considerations, therefore, this paper reaches a three-fold audience: pedagogues, for whom recognizing the ways Greek is similar to and different from other languages, i.e. contrastive analysis, is a critical step towards effective teaching strategies for learners with a different language background; social/cultural historians, for whom the unwillingness of scholars to treat Modern Greek on its own terms fuels the further exploration of the relationship between ancient and modern Greece, and the reception by scholars of this relationship; and linguists, who stand to gain from a consideration of the facts that characterize Modern Greek, and unite it with — as well as separate it from — other natural human languages.

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