

LANGUAGES OF THE WORLD: GREEK, MODERN

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Abstract: An overview of Modern Greek is offered here, locating the language and its speakers in time and space, surveying the geographic and sociolinguistic diversity to be found among those speakers, and describing the major elements of the structure of the language, with attention to its phonology, morphology, and syntax. Bibliography pointing towards useful sources of general and specialist information on the history, dialectology, and structure of Greek is offered as well.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Although very much a living and vibrant language today with speakers numbering in the millions around the world, the history and development of Modern Greek actually begin thousand of years ago, when speakers of a very ancient form of the language entered the Balkan peninsula some time in the early part of the second millennium BC. These

speakers moved quickly, according to most current accounts, into the southern part of the region -- what is now northern and central Greece and the Peloponnesos -- and into most of the neighboring islands of the Aegean Sea and beyond including Crete as the most southerly point and Cyprus to the east. This settlement area essentially defines the space where to this day the Greek language remains an enduring presence, though there has been spread into other areas, in some cases dating from ancient times.

Modern Greek is the official language of the Hellenic Republic (i.e., the Republic of Greece) where there are some 11,000,000 speakers, and also of the Republic of Cyprus, with some 600,000 speakers. In large part the result of ancient colonization, Greek is found today in numerous communities and enclaves around the Mediterranean and Black Sea area, including Southern Italy, Alexandria (Egypt), and the region around the Crimean peninsula. Moreover, Greeks in modern times have migrated to many locations throughout Europe (but especially England), Australia (with a large concentration around Melbourne), and North America (particularly in New York, Chicago, Ohio, Florida, and Toronto), forming the modern-day “Hellenic Diaspora”. While Greek is mainly a second language in these diaspora communities, it is still robust and alive there, and these communities add perhaps as many as 2,500,000 speakers to the overall total of speakers of Greek world-wide.

The language is generally referred to as “Greek” in English, but the linguistic autonym for Greek speakers is based on an entirely different root. Greek speakers call their language *eliniká* (i.e., “Hellenic”) or *neoeliniká* (i.e., “neo-Hellenic”); occasionally also

the designation *roméika* is used (literally, “Romaic”, a use deriving from the affinities many (Orthodox Christian) Greeks have felt for the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire, centered in Constantinople after the 4th century AD).

The modifier “Modern” is generally used in referring to the language in English, in much the same way that the Greeks themselves often use *neo-*, literally “new”, in their self-designation (*neoeliniká*, as above). Indeed, the unadorned label “Greek” in English usually refers to the ancient language. This usage reflects a recognition of the fact that the language has a long and rich documented history, being attested as early as the 13th or 14th century BC (so-called “Mycenaean Greek”) and continuing through ancient times and the Byzantine era up to modern times.

In many ways, the modern form of the language is significantly different from its Ancient Greek predecessor, with regard to pronunciation and general structural features, but at the same time (as perhaps with all languages) there is noticeable continuity as well. The changes that set Modern Greek apart from the ancient language (e.g. the falling together of some 8 distinct vocalic nuclei to [i], the shift from a pitch accent to a stress accent, a greater degree of analyticity in nominal and verbal constructions in place of earlier synthetic ones, among others) can be seen in nascent form in the period of the Hellenistic Koine (the era of New Testament Greek), and by the 10th century AD, the language in many respects had a quite modern look to it. Still, it is customary to date the modern period of Modern Greek to approximately the 17th century, recognizing that even in the so-called “Medieval Greek” period, some structural differences from contemporary

Greek are to be found (e.g. syntactically in the continued use of an infinitive, morphologically in the formation of a clearly periphrastic future tense, and phonologically in a more restricted distribution of dental affricates and voiced stops and the presence of a front rounded vowel) as well as numerous lexical differences.

DIALECTS OF MODERN GREEK

Modern Greek taken as a whole exhibits great diversity across all its varieties, defined both geographically and socially. However the considerable differences are largely masked by the dominance and ubiquity of the standard language, the variety reflecting the everyday usage of speakers in Athens and environs, by far Greece's leading population center, with over 4,000,000 inhabitants, and the country's focal point for culture, economy, religion, and government.

Looking first at diversity from a geographic standpoint, the major modern regional dialects (following Newton 1972) that can be identified are: Peloponnesian-Ionian Greek, traditionally viewed as the basis for the contemporary Standard language; Northern Greek, in a zone starting north of Attica (the province where Athens is located) and extending up to and beyond Greece's second largest city, Thessaloniki; Cretan, the dialect of the island of Crete; Old Athenian, the dialect of Athens before the 1821 War of Independence, and as a result of various resettlements, found elsewhere in Greece into the early 20th century; and South-eastern Greek, including Greek of the Dodecanese

islands as well as Cypriot Greek, though modern Cypriot shows significant differences on all levels (phonological, morphological, and syntactic) that invite classification as a separate language.

Two other important geographic varieties include Tsakonian, the rather divergent form of the language, a direct descendant of the ancient Doric dialect, spoken still in the eastern Peloponnesos; and the Pontic dialects, which were once spoken along the Black Sea coast (Crimea area and Asia Minor) but now mostly found in various parts of Greece as a result of the 1923 population exchanges with Turkey. Both Tsakonian and Pontic diverge significantly from the rest of Greek and so merit consideration now as separate languages (though still clearly Hellenic).

SOCIOLINGUISTIC SETTING AND OTHER DIVERSITY

Geography and regional dialects present only part of the diversity present in the Greek-speaking world; an additional crucial facet is the diglossia (in the sense of Ferguson 1959) Greek exhibits, as an outcome of centuries of cultural influence on modern speakers by the Classical Greek language and Classical Greece itself. Classical Greek and Classical Greece were treated as the prescriptive norms against which speakers of later stages of Greek generally judged themselves, resulting in a “two-track system” for the language, with a consciously archaizing form that speakers and writers modeled on Classical Greek set against a vernacular innovative variety. With the founding of a new

nation-state of Greece after the revolution of 1821, these two tracks developed into a significant register and stylistic difference between a high-style variety associated with official functions (those involving government, education, religion, and the like), known as *katharevousa* (“Puristic”, literally “(the) purifying (language)”), and the ordinary, day-to-day language of the people, known as *dimotiki* (“Demotic”, literally “(the) popular (language)”). These two varieties vied for status as **the** primary form of the language, and each had its advocates, for whom language attitudes tended to correlate with certain social attitudes and political positions, more conservative for advocates of *katharevousa* and more progressive for followers of *dimotiki*. The competition continued throughout most of the 20th century, with *katharevousa* generally being in the ascendancy for official use, but was resolved most recently by various governmental acts and actions in 1976 declaring *dimotiki* as the official language. Still, all throughout the various official and unofficial periods of diglossia, the usage that speakers exhibited has always actually been mixed, showing borrowing between the two varieties, in particular with *katharevousa* forms incorporated into *dimotiki*. The present state of Standard Modern Greek is essentially *dimotiki*, but with significant influence from *katharevousa* involving grammar (morphology and syntax), pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Linguistic diversity for Modern Greek, therefore, involves the mixing of varieties of both a regional and stylistic/social nature and mutual interactions among them.

STRUCTURE OF MODERN GREEK

From a structural standpoint, Modern Greek exhibits the following characteristics.

Its vowel system is fairly unremarkable, showing /i e a o u/ with no distinctive length or nasality. Consonants include /p t k f v θ ð s z x γ j r l m n t^s d^z/; /b d g/, while deriving in some analyses from underlying nasal plus voiceless stop combinations, are probably best taken now as distinctive elements in their own right. Still, the consonants are somewhat overstocked with fricatives, by most typological standards.

Modern Greek has a distinctive stress accent, restricted to occurring only on one of the last three syllables in a word; to some extent, accent placement is tied to particular morphological categories but in general there is some degree of unpredictability as to which of the final three syllables is to be stressed.

In its morphology, Modern Greek is for the most part synthetic and fusional, with grammatical endings marking two numbers (singular and plural) and four cases (vocative, nominative, accusative, and genitive (covering some ‘dative’-like functions)) in the noun. In the verb, there is a complex interplay of realizations for tense (present, past, future), mood (indicative, imperative, subjunctive), aspect (perfective and imperfective, with the so-called “perfect tense” perhaps forming a third distinction), person (speaker, hearer, and other, i.e. first, second, and third), and number (singular and plural), with endings carrying most of the marking functions but some categories being realized by prefixal (or prefix-like) elements, especially future

tense and subjunctive mood. Weak object pronouns (“clitics”) under some analyses are considered to be transitivity markers on the verb, thus possibly constituting a further inflectional category. Negation too might be considered to be realized via prefixal elements.

With regard to syntax, Modern Greek shows a significant degree of analyticity, even with its generally synthetic morphology. Sentential complementation is always via person- and number-marked finite clauses, as there is no infinitive proper in the language now, and for some case functions, especially of the genitive case, prepositional phrases occur as alternatives. Word order is fairly free, responding more to pragmatic and discourse-related criteria such as focus and topicalization than to purely syntactic concerns. Dislocated elements are often cross-indexed, so to speak, on the verb through use of agreeing weak pronouns (so-called “object reduplication”).

Much of what Modern Greek shows in its surface syntactic and morphological patterns that differ from Ancient Greek may be attributable in part to interactions between speakers of Greek and speakers of other neighboring languages in the Balkans during the medieval (i.e., pre-modern) period, though language-internal factors clearly played a major role as well.

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Brief Biography

Trained in Linguistics with a B.A. from Yale University (1973) and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University (1976, 1978 respectively), Brian D. Joseph is Distinguished University Professor of Linguistics and The Kenneth E. Naylor Professor of South Slavic Linguistics at The Ohio State University, where he has taught since 1979, with a joint appointment in the Department of Linguistics and the Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures. A specialist in historical linguistics, Dr. Joseph has focused his research primarily on the Greek language, examining its historical development, its synchronic structure, and its relation to its neighbors in the Balkans. He has written extensively on Greek, on Balkan linguistics, on Sanskrit, and on general issues in historical linguistics, language contact, and morphological theory, authoring or co-authoring six books, editing or co-editing a dozen volumes, and publishing over 170 articles in journals and conference proceedings. He is currently editor of *Language*, the Journal of the Linguistic Society of America.

Key Words

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