

# History of Koine Greek

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## Introduction

Man is, according to Aristotle, a political animal –meaning that, within the city, in a society organized by consensus, he can exploit his innate abilities to the fullest and acquire new ones as well. In the city, language, the communication instrument par excellence, is enriched, refined and normalized. In the Archaic period, the formation of the city-state, along with the institution of panhellenic athletic and religious centers, the contracting of alliances and other political unions (amphictyonies), and the development of commercial activities contributed to the smoothing out of differences between dialects. In the pioneering region of Ionia, a type of hypertopical koine language appears next to the equally hypertopical literary dialects of the epics and of choral poetry. Until the beginning of the Persian Wars, this Ionic Koine, which almost completely monopolized artistic prose, was the language of distinction.

After the end of the Persian Wars, Athens assumed the political and cultural hegemony of Greece. Fear of the Persians rallied the Greeks and this rallying favored the Attic dialect. The Athenian League (478/7 B.C.), with the Temple of Apollo on Delos as its base, enforced its will that Athens be regarded as the center of reference for the majority of mainland cities and islands. With this new gravitas, Athens also attracted theoroi, litigants, metics, actors, misfits, sophists and prostitutes. In order to fit into the rather exclusive and demanding Athenian society, newcomers were forced to espouse the Athenian way of life and, more impor-

tantly, to learn how to wield the Attic dialect with fluency. The cosmopolitan city of Athens became the “prytaneum of wisdom”, the «E . . . ».

Neither the sad outcome of the Peloponnesian War nor ongoing civil convulsions -not even the rise of the Macedonian dynasty- impeded the development of the Attic dialect into the Panhellenic linguistic medium. On the contrary, Philip II, a magnanimous and discerning ruler, established the Attic language as the official language for education and administration in his state. Alexander and the offspring of other aristocratic Macedonian families all received an Attic education. The celebrated panhellenic campaign to the East promoted Hellenic culture all the way to Baktria. The multi-ethnic states of Alexander’s successors furnished the proof of Isocrates’ statement that anyone receiving a Greek education was a Greek. The Koine dialect, which at the time of the successors became an international instrument of communication, was an idiom based on the Attic dialect. This idiom was consciously promoted by the Macedonian administration and the army, as well as by merchants, fortune-hunters and scholars in Asia Minor, the Near East and Egypt.

While the term koine is ancient, grammarians have tended to disagree on the origin of the koine dialect. Some argued that it originated in the comingling of the four basic dialects ( . . . ); others believed that it was the “mother” of the four dialects; yet others considered it to be a fifth dialect, or a transformation of Attic. The latter view, which was also supported by G. Hadji-

dakis and other reputable scholars in recent years, turns out to be the right one. Nevertheless, today the term Koine is used to indicate the various levels used throughout the Hellenic world in the oral and, in part, the written language from the Hellenistic to the Early Byzantine period. This is a syncretistic and “encyclopedic” language, which has a central core and several radiating spurs. Needless to say, Athenians and Peloponnesians, Ionians and Macedonians, the Hellenized Jews and the rulers from Eastern Libya did not all speak the same language. In contrast to the spoken language, which presented a pronounced lack of uniformity, the written language tended toward homogeneity. Nevertheless, here, too, differences were important. The historian Polybios writes in a refined and rich Koine, whereas the author of a spell would use a spicy argot.

Our immediate sources for the koine are the texts that were preserved in inscriptions, papyri and shreds (fragments of vases). A wealth of material is also provided by the lexica/dictionaries of the Atticists; the Greco-Latin glossaries -namely the elementary methods of learning Greek meant for the native speakers of Latin- as well as literature. Among the most important samples of the koine are the translation of the Old Testament by the Septuagint, the New Testament, the Apocrypha and the Writings. Indirect sources are also found in the dialects and idioms of the modern Greek language, that go back to the Byzantine koine. An exception is found in the Tsakonic dialect, which originated in the new Doric dialect of Laconia.

Right from the start, the Koine laid siege to that bulwark of linguistic conservatism: literature. Of course, all the poetic genres that survived (epic, elegy, iambic, epigram) retained their old artificial idiom, with some compromises. New genres were composed in new, also artificial, dialects. For instance, Theocritus' *Bucolics* were a hypertopical Doric dialect based on the dialect of Syracuse. A refined version of the Koine was used by the minor composers of the *Anacreontia*, the early Christian Hymns as well as work songs and erotic verses. Nevertheless, the first samples of poetry using stress accents, which later dominated, first appeared in the early post-Christian centuries. The traditional prosodic poetry would soon be demoted into a museum piece.

The conquests of the koine in the realm of prose are even more significant. Aristotle, who was much admired by Cicero, used an early form of literary koine. Koine was also the language used by philoso-

phers, historians, scientists, mythographers, and fabulists. Nevertheless, the deviations are worth noting: the language of Polybios (201-120 B.C.) is highly artificial (neologisms, poetic words, avoidance of hiatus), whereas the language of Epictetos (55-135 A.D.), who was a freedman, is very similar to the popular koine.

In other words, the cultural prestige of Athens, literary production (especially prose) and the browbeating suasion exerted by state authority (Athenian alliances and, later, Macedonian hegemony, reinforced Attic in the contest of dialects. Nevertheless, the koine that emerged was the result of multiple concessions and compromises. Thus, some uniquely Attic characteristics, such as the use of  $\text{—}$  instead of  $\text{—}$  and the second Attic declension ( ) were rejected, since the other dialects were able to offer a unified type. The tendency of Attic oral speech towards simplification found some unexpected allies. Native speakers of other languages, those speaking other dialects as well as ordinary people could not easily use the numerous eccentricities, the flamboyant particles, the complicated syntax and the finest semantic of the unforgiving Attic dialect. With time, major changes took place on all levels, leading to the creation of a plastic, rich and, at the same time, simple linguistic instrument or idiom.

While the Attic dialect comprised the core of the koine, other dialects, mostly the Ionian, also played a role in its creation. St. G. Kapsomenos (1907-1978) and Agapetos Tsopanakis proved that the contribution of the Doric language was more important than previously thought. The Doric language significantly enriched both military and legal terminology:  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$  (originally the leader of mercenaries),  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$ . The widely used terms  $\text{—}$  (NE instead of the Attic  $\text{—}$ ),  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$  were also Doric. Even the marginal NW endowed the Koine, especially the modern Greek one, with the extension of the ending  $\text{—}$  from the nominative of the third declension to the accusative:  $\text{—}$  (and, by analogy,  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$ ). The language of administration and the military was strengthened by the Macedonians:  $\text{—}$  (>NE  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$ ),  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$ ,  $\text{—}$ , while Macedonian was also the origin of the word  $\text{—}$  and of the ending  $\text{—}$  (M  $\text{—}$ ).

Thus, at the time of the Koine, major changes were introduced in the phonological system, in the morphology, syntax and vocabulary of the Greek language. Nevertheless, the most significant changes, those that primarily led to the shaping of the mod-

ern Greek language, took place in the realm of phonology. The stress of the ancient Greek language was musical, as is indicated by the terms *melic*, *melic*, *melic*, and others. The transition from the musical to the dynamic stress (more specifically, the transition of the word stress from musical to dynamic) seems to have had, as its principal effect, the suppression of prosody. Thus, the turn of the diphthongs into single notes is accelerated ( $\alpha \rightarrow i$ ,  $\epsilon \rightarrow e$ ) and consonants become isochronal. Thus, for instance,  $\alpha$ ,  $\epsilon$ ,  $\eta$ , and  $\omega$  ended up being pronounced as  $i$  (the transformation of the pronunciation of the diphthong  $\alpha\epsilon$  to  $i$  was completed only in the 10th century A.D.). One of the results of iotacism was the creation of many homonyms. Changes were also sweeping in the realm of consonants. Nevertheless, even today in modern Hellenic dialects, double consonants ( $\alpha\alpha = \alpha\alpha$ ) continue to be pronounced, while the ending  $\alpha$  – that has been hounded by both grammarians and popular usage, since the 4th century B.C. continues to resist. The script remained phonetic. The variance between the written word and the phoneme resulted in a plethora of spelling mistakes:  $\alpha\alpha$  instead of  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$  instead of  $\alpha\alpha$  etc.

Morphology is dominated by the tendency towards simplification, which is mainly accomplished by analogy. Two-syllable and three-syllable formations replace capricious monosyllables in terms of declension:  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ . Irregular comparatives are replaced:  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$  or  $\alpha\alpha$  (instead of  $\alpha\alpha$ ),  $\alpha\alpha$ . Adverbs ending in  $\alpha$  ( $\alpha\alpha$ ) are limited to the advantage of those ending in  $\alpha$  ( $\alpha\alpha$ ). The multiplicity of the verb is sharply limited. Some verbs ending in  $\alpha$  – acquired an ending in  $\alpha$  ( $\alpha\alpha$ ). The dual, which had suffered since the 3rd century B.C., received the final blow by Christ himself: «

» (Luke, 16, 13). Nevertheless, the Atticists attempted to revive this archaic type: «  
 $\alpha\alpha$ , » (Phrynichos).

In the realm of syntax, too, the Koine strives for simplification, analytical expression and precision. “Naked” cases are often replaced by the more precise prepositional structures. The accusative gradually replaced the genitive and dative ( $\alpha\alpha$  instead of  $\alpha\alpha$ ). The infinitive was likewise replaced: the infinitive of intent by  $\alpha\alpha$  + indicative and the infinitive of purpose by  $\alpha\alpha$  + subjunctive. The optative mood was shaken, and some of its applications became obsolete. Parataxis and the omission of conjunctions limited the subordinate clauses; therefore, the conjunction  $\alpha\alpha$  acquired additional mean-

ings.

There are perennial, short-lived and ephemeral words – the latter being the most noisome. The Koine was forced to reject a great number of words that either resisted the tendency to simplification or lost their etymological clarity, were highly idiomatic or represented ephemeral values and objects. Nevertheless, those losses were offset by the influx of thousands of neologisms that were necessitated by radical changes in society; the rise of the lower classes; political developments; the emergence of the multiethnic states of the successors and the Roman occupation; cultural innovations; and, finally, the advent of Christianity. Thus, for instance, many ancient words acquired new meanings in Christian idiom ( $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ ).

In the period of the koine, Greece was dominated politically by Rome (1st century A.D.) and culturally by Christianity. This double domination left indelible marks even on our national identity:  $\alpha\alpha$ , namely “Romans”, and  $\alpha\alpha$  instead of  $\alpha\alpha$ . The conquest of Greece by the Romans naturally led to an antagonistic linguistic exchange. The Romans as conscious founders of a multiethnic empire proved to be good students in areas that used to puzzle them. Thus, they systematically topped the Greek language to meet the needs of their poor agrarian language in art, science and voluptuous sensuality. In order to facilitate their administrative mechanism, they founded an official translating service in Rome. Moreover, a good part of the Roman upper class, especially women of the aristocracy, was bilingual. Caesar expired with a Greek phrase on his lips: « $\alpha\alpha$   $\alpha\alpha$ »; Augustus died with a line by Menander. Nero used to translate Aeschylus and was acclaimed as a performer of tragedy. The poets helped themselves to meters, genres and themes of both Classical and Hellenistic poetry.

By contrast, the Greeks (even  $\alpha\alpha$ ) had an arrogant attitude toward Latin and Roman civilization as a whole. Borrowings from the Latin language were limited to the first years of the conquest, and resistance was led by the Atticists, fervent champions of linguistic purity. Nevertheless, in the 3rd and 4th century B.C., many words (particularly from military, administrative and commercial terminology) insinuated themselves into Greek.

The effect of the Latin language on Greek is imperceptible on the level of syntax, only slightly perceptible in terms of morphology (particularly in the endings:  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha\alpha$ ), but was very promi-

ment in terms of vocabulary. Numerous words that found their way into the Koine, especially in its mature period, remain until today:

Latin was also the origin of the names of many months as well as of a number of personal names (A , K , Π ).

The meeting of Hellenism with Judaism was a traumatic experience for both sides. The Greeks attempted to impose their own world-view and way of life on people who identified themselves as the chosen people. The Jews threw off the Greek yoke, and for a certain period of time Judaea remained independent. Nevertheless, in 68 B.C., Pompey annexed the wider area to the Rome sphere of influence. In the interim, already from the 3rd century B.C., a large number of Judaeans of the diaspora spoke Greek as their mother tongue. Thanks to all those Greek-speaking Jews, the Old Testament was translated into Hellenistic Koine. It took them approximately three centuries to complete the translation (the book of Job was only translated in the first century A.D.). The text of the Septuagint does not have a unified linguistic form. The numerous barbarisms (Exodus 18,6, T ), solecisms, (Genesis 4,8 ), the indeclinable names (A , I ) and the overall unadorned and brusque style reveal that the authoritative voice of Yahweh was not at ease in a foreign tongue.

The New Testament is also characterized by a marked lack of stylistic uniformity. One end is occupied by the highly artificial Greek of Luke, the other by the strident popular language of the Apocalypse. The numerous Biblical scholars and Hebraists remind us that the New Testament did not supplant but rather continued and supplemented both the Laws and the Prophets. The peculiar Greek of the Bible, which caused such repugnance among followers of Hellenistic purism, influenced, under the dominance of Christianity, the popular tide of the Koine.

Thus, the Koine was a language of communication, different from one region to another as it is colored by the local dialect (Koine with Doric and Ionic elements). It favored lively expressions (direct speech instead of indirect, superlatives instead of comparatives), strove for emphasis, clarity and simplicity, and used, if necessary, loans from high literature ( ) as well as from the languages of nearby peoples. As a language, it was also the key to accessing the goods of high civilization. For many years, its reach was extensive. Foreign rulers (Armenians, Parthians, Siclo the King of the Nubians), priests

(the Egyptian Manethon, the Babylonian Barossos, the Druids of Gaul) and sophists – all wrote in the koine.

In the beginning of the 3rd century B.C., as the Koine began its triumphal course towards the linguistic unity of Hellenism, rhetoric gradually abandoned its cradle, Athens, and repaired to Ephessos, Smyrna and Rhodes. With the fall of democracy, the freedom of speech that had served to sharpen the orator's skill was restricted, but the rhetoric of the “ ” was still free to chatter about trivial subjects. The Asian style was no longer confined to the sphere of ostentatious rhetoric and threatened to inundate both philosophy and historiography as well. The Atticists, strict guardians of the Classical tradition, attempted to stop the trend. Nevertheless, the flamboyant, chattering and self-satisfied Asian style was an easy opponent, merely the pretext for a conspiracy of conservatives. The Atticists directed their furor mainly at the Koine, which was threatening to conquer prose. Their themes were: nostalgia for ancient glory, and a longing for the comfortably familiar and strict Attic language of Lysias and Plato.

Dionysios of Alexandria, who taught from 30-8 B.C. in Rome –the most significant center for Hellenic culture and letters at the time– was the most important theorist of the Atticists. This movement spread quickly thanks to the popularity of the Attic dialect; the prestige of the writers of the 5th and 4th centuries; Augustus' belief that Classicism in language and art could preserve traditions; as well as the philological work that were done by the Alexandrians on Classical texts (editing, lexicography, annotation). The enemies of Christianity also acceded to the movement of the Atticists; as representatives of the high intelligentsia, they scorned both the simple lessons of the Gospel and the Apostles as well as their simple language.

The direct aim of the Atticists seemed to be a shared one: a return to the pure and correct Attic dialect. However, which was the true scholarly Attic dialect? At this point, opinions diverged. Some singled out Lysias, others Plato, still others Xenophon. Nevertheless, all of them agreed that the imitation of form would sooner or later lead to the creation of masterpieces. Since the Atticists believed that the purely Attic idiom vouchsafed the urbanity of speech, they considered the presence of certain words in the texts of scholarly writers as an infallible criterion. Ulpian, a grammarian of the 2nd century A.D., was named “K ”, because, before sampling a dish he would attempt to

discover whether the name of that dish existed in the Attic paradigms ( ). However, it was not only the “outer shell” of language that captivated the supporters of retrogression. They also believed that simply being involved with the “texts” would automatically revive the ancient values of the soldiers at Marathon! In any case, regardless of the motives of its supporters, Atticism was ultimately characterized by the nobility of the quest for utopia and unattainable goals.

During the 2nd century A.D., the Roman state flourished. Education was no longer restricted to a narrow aristocracy. The Greek-speaking portion of the populace claimed cultural hegemony. At that time, the most popular writers of prose in the Greek-speaking world were the representatives of the Second Sophist Movement, led by Aelius Aristides (129-181). These witty Atticists, apparently captivated, with their well-paid talks, even illiterate audiences who failed to understand their sophist nuances or their manners of speech, due to the radical social changes that had taken place. Finally, strict Atticism was also accepted by the established Christian Church. This causes one to wonder how much of the wise words of the Great Fathers of the Church the poor congregation could even comprehend. However, among the achievements of Atticism were the protection of the written language from the influx of Latin words, and the protection of the cultural tradition of the Classical world from the purges and onslaughts of fanatic Christians.

However, retrogression came at a high price. The fixation of the Atticists on their glorious past and their refusal to accept the self-evident truth that language evolved over time, led to bilingualism, which afflicted the nation for two thousand years and widened the gap between the educated minority and the rude masses. Access to the benefits of education presupposed a long occupation with texts. This distorted estimation of a text based only on its language was the principal reason for the neglect of authors writing in simpler language – a fact that resulted in the loss of important scientific and literary works.

Towards the end of the fifth century A.D. in the wider Greek world, the state of language was nebulous. The Koine dominated oral speech, although differences were observed within each region, due to both tribal allegiances, social stratification and the overall differences in education. The written text was multifaceted. Authors who targeted the general audience as well as administrators compro-

mised by using different brands of the Koine. Nevertheless, official historiographers, orators, philosophers and the heads of the Church were Atticists. Some genres of poetry continued to be composed in traditional literary dialects. However, lyric poetry, particularly the writing of hymns, as well as popular songs were composed in the Koine. Poetry using stress accents had already made its appearance.

Despite the deep disunity between the spoken and the written language, the Greek language managed to beat out Latin in the struggle for linguistic domination of the East. This great victory greatly contributed to the gradual Hellenization of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

### **Alexander the Great the the Transmission of the Greek Language**

The conquests of Alexander the Great and the political and cultural unification of the Eastern Mediterranean, Asia Minor and the Middle East are historical phenomena that can be explained by the context of that period – however, they are also related with the personality of the Macedonian King. The creation of the Hellenistic world, which later became the backdrop for the Roman presence in the area and for the spreading of Christianity, was the result of both the socio-economic changes in Greece and Alexander’s conscious choice. The founding of numerous cities with a mixed (Greek and local) population in the subjugated regions; the intermarriages of the Macedonians with Asian princesses; the preservation of institutions and practices in areas that formerly belonged to multinational and multicultural empires; the plans for the transfer of populations from Greece to Asia and vice versa – all these indications prove that Alexander had envisioned the creation of a new Empire, not just the annexation of lands to the Macedonian kingdom.

Just as the military supremacy of the Athenians was associated with their cultural supremacy and resulted in the domination of the Attic dialect over the Ionian, Alexander’s victorious campaign against the Persians in the second half of the 4th century created the political framework and the conditions that resulted in the dissemination of the Greek language and, subsequently, of Greek civilization. The language of the time, known as the Koine, was developed gradually as a unified language used only by many inhabitants of the Greek universe, in lieu of various ancient Greek dialects.

At the time of Alexander, the Classical notion of

the “citizen” was replaced by that of the “cosmopolitan” and Greek cities were founded everywhere. Greeks were all those partaking in Greek education. Thus, the term “Greek” did not relate only with ethnic background, but also with the Greek education and way of life – and it was reflected in language. It included the Macedonians, the Classical Greeks, the Persians and other nations of Asia, or, even, the entire universe. This language was a simplified version of the Attic language, dictated by the new needs of the large and heterogeneous population groups in Alexander’s vast empire. The Hellenistic Koine became an international language and was used by the Greeks and the Hellenized foreigners of Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria and Persia. It was not only the official language of the administration but also the language of intellect, literature and commercial transactions – the common code of the many inhabitants of the Hellenistic world – the “lingua franca” of its time.

## Old and New Testament

At the time when the Koine was the dominant language, Greece’s political submission to Rome was succeeded by its cultural submission to Christianity, which constituted a true milestone in the history of the Mediterranean and, later, of Europe as well. Christianity emerged when the linguistic and spiritual unity of the Eastern Mediterranean had already taken place. As Greece was the best-known language and Greek philosophical and rhetorical schools existed in all major cities, Greek civilization had established its presence to the peoples of the East.

The new religion opposed the ancient Greek way of life, while the pagan religious rites of the ancient Greeks came into real conflict with the Christian tradition. However, Christianity was related to the principles of Stoic philosophy and the esoteric principles of Platonism, as well as to messages related to self-control, philanthropy and gen-

teness – all of them basic elements of Greek philosophy. Combining the great theological tradition of Judaism, transferred by the laws and prophets of the time, Christianity and Hellenism followed a common route, though not without conflicts.

Thus, the Koine, which was the formal written and spoken language in the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great to approximately the 6th century A.D., became the language of the sacred texts of Christianity. Moreover, the texts of the Old and New Testament along with the inscriptions and the papyri, are the main sources of information for the language of the period.

The Bible consists of 66 books, starting with the Genesis of the Old Testament and ending with the Apocalypse of St. John, the last book of the New Testament. The term Old Testament was used by the Christians to distinguish the Judaic scripts from the New Testament, which includes the preaching of Christ and his disciples.

The 39 books of the Old Testament were translated from Judaic and Aramaic into Greek in Alexandria, from the 3rd to the 1st century B.C. This translation is known as the Old Testament according to the Seventy (O), because according to a historically unsound tradition, Ptolemy II Philadelphus commissioned the translation of the Judaic Law to 72 Judean scholars – six from every tribe – to meet the needs of the Greek-speaking Judaists of the area. In essence, this is the oeuvre of many translators – a fact that explains its linguistic dissimilarity.

Similarly, the 27 books of the New Testament, which were written straight into Greek, exhibit a stylistic discrepancy, though with clear Semitic influence. Aramaisms and Judaisms could be due to either the bilingualism of the authors or their conscious attempt to imitate the language of the Seventy. Atticisms, Latin terms and neologisms abound in both the Gospels and the New Testament.