

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

GREEK LANGUAGE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview Greek is an independent branch of the Indo European language family, that is native to Greece and to other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Spanning thirty four centuries of written records, it has the longest documented history among the I-E languages. For most of its history, its writing system has been the Greek alphabet, though there have been periods—as for Linear B or the Cypriot syllabary—during which other writing systems were used. The origins of the Greek alphabet itself lay in Phoenician, and the descendants of the Greek alphabet include Latin, Cyrillic, Armenian, Coptic, Gothic and other inter-related systems of writing. The prominence of the Greek alphabet and writing system, in general, derives from the greatness of the texts that have been consigned to Greek: the literary, scientific and philosophical texts of ancient classical Greece, and the early Christian religious texts of the New Testament and of the Greek fathers of the Church.

The sweep of Greek In ancient times, Greek was a widely spoken lingua franca throughout the Mediterranean world, and would eventually develop into the working language of the Byzantine Empire, which was to flourish into Renaissance times. Greek is spoken today by more than thirteen million people, in Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Albania, Turkey, and the Greek diaspora. In the past, Greek has been written since the third millennium B.C.E. It was first found on a clay tablet, which we view as the first example of the Greek syllabary called Linear B. Greek thereby counts as ‘the world’s oldest recorded living language.’

The five prominent stages of the development of the Greek language.

Greek can be conventionally, and conveniently, divided into five developmental stages:

Proto Greek, the condition of not yet written Greek at the time of the immigration of Hellenic migrants to the north Aegean during the Neolithic era.

Mycenaean Greek, Greek as spoken and written in Mycenaean civilization and recorded on tablets dating from the 15th century B.C.E.

Ancient Greek, the Greek of the Archaic and Classical periods, what we call ‘classical Greek.’ It is a period, which persisted through the Middle Ages, into the classical styles of the Byzantine Empire. When we refer to ‘the wonder that was ancient Greece,’ we refer to its language as ‘Ancient Greek.’

Mediaeval Greek, the continuation of the Greek of the Middle Ages, and which had its roots in the *koine*, or common Greek language, of the mediaeval Eastern Mediterranean and the earliest mediaeval Christian communities.

Modern Greek, the Greek emerging from the mediaeval forms of the language, and traceable in the mediaeval period as early as the 11th century. It is the language spoken in Greece today.

Historical unity of Greek. The educated contemporary Greek speaker is likely to experience his language as a single whole, and to find, as he reads his way back to his verbal origins, that he can read a great deal from the earlier written forms of his language. It is reasonably estimated that our ‘educated Greek speaker,’ above, is far more nearly able to read Homer (1000 B.C.E..) than is the educated contemporary native English speaker to read Anglo Saxon (800 C.E.)..

Trends in the evolution of the Greek language. The great in-use history of the Greek language leads us to ask the broadest of questions about the nature of an ancient language. Does it evolve, in the sense of acquiring new richness over time? Or does it tend to lose its value specific qualities, and to erode, as it were? In the instance of Greek, geopolitical historical factors have played a vast role in the evolution of

the language. What we consider the richest periods in that evolution—periods when the language made the finest distinctions, grew from its own accomplishments, and interacted creatively with its neighbors—coincide with periods (like those of the fifth century B.C., the surge of Alexandrian Hellenism, or contemporary post-Ottoman Hellenism). These were all periods during which either the political setting or the cultural development of the Greek people were under dynamic pressure to grow and respond. In view of the fixed mindset of the Greco Roman classical perspective, as it shapes our understanding of our own cultural past, it is of especial importance to factor in the extraordinary Renaissance of linguistic-literary development in the ‘modern Greek’ of the past two centuries.

The Poetic of the Greek language. While this entry targets a value free profile of the developmental stages of the Greek language, there are limits to the value of the value free, when it concerns the description of the history of a language. The Greek language has a long track record, of regenerating itself from its own powers—its fertile self-referential roots, its internal historical energies-- which make it its own most vigorous reference point, and which send forth its constantly self-renewing awareness of itself as an historical action. Greek, with Chinese and English, still promises to make its past the most reliable guarantee of its future greatness.

Reading

Browning, Robert, *Mediaeval and Modern Greek*, Cambridge, 1983.

Renfrew, Colin, *Archeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins*, Cambridge, 1987.

Discussion questions

What factors account for the longevity of a major language? Is that longevity a function of the political power of a given nation, or is it inherent to the nature of the language spoken in that nation?

To what extent does the durability of a language, like Greek, depend on its success in being adopted by powerful neighboring languages areas, as ancient Greece was adopted by Roman culture?

Does the generation of a widespread diaspora, without its supporting language community, contribute to the ongoing vigor of a language? What can we learn to this point from the study of the worldwide spread of the Greek language?