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Modern Linguistics and the Historical Greek Pronunciation

Modern Linguistics is divided into many different sub-disciplines, but in the main two of them are of particular interest in this connection: *General Linguistics* and *Diachronic Linguistics*. General Linguistics is concerned chiefly with general hypotheses and theories about human speech behavior that would apply to all languages. Diachronic Linguistics seeks to elucidate historical developments within languages.

It is thus obvious that for the purpose of a question such as the Greek pronunciation, General Linguistics is not of much help, since the question of Greek pronunciation is not a question of theorizing or hypothesizing, but of the factual evidence found during the course of the history of the language for its pronunciation. That linguistics as such does not contradict my findings in “The Error of Erasmus and Un-Greek Pronunciations of Greek” or “The Historical Greek Pronunciation and the Dichotomy of the Language” in my book on *The Development of Greek and the New Testament: Morphology, Syntax, Phonology, and Textual Transmission* (WUNT 167), Tübingen: Mohr 2004, pp. 339-396, is shown quite clearly by a specialist linguist, Leo Papademetre (of the School of Languages, Flinders University, Australia), who in his article “ΦΩΝΗ ΕΛΛΗΝΩΝ: Ideology of Fragmentation in the Scholarship of Its Diachronic Analysis” in *Γλωσσολογία-Glossologia* 11-12 (2000), 73-88, applauded my study on the error of Erasmus. He writes:

“Central among the Hellenic diachronic linguistics issues has been the analysis of the phonological and prosodic changes of Ἑλληνικά from the fifth century BCE to almost the end of the fifth century CE ... Especially relevant to this discussion has been the perceived “fundamental change” in the metrical system between the so-called “Classical and Modern periods” of Ἑλληνικά which is associated with the so-called “loss of vowel quantity distinction” ... However, although this “change in quantitative distinction” in phonological and prosodic terms reflects a process shift in the nature of the vocalism and rhythm system of the Hellenic language, the way the received ‘classics-linguistics’ scholarship has been analysing this natural evolution is indicative of the ideology many scholars adhere to, which fragments Ἑλληνικά into ‘areas of study’ and thus has established two distinct linguistic periods, “classical vs. post-classical” with an artificial scientific divide between them. This ideological attitude in scholarship seems to have had its genesis in the infamous debate on the Erasmian pronunciation which first appeared in Europe around 1528 and has exerted a significant influence even on linguistic scholars of Ἑλληνικά ever since.

Chrys Caragounis in his 1995 article “The Error of Erasmus and Un-Greek Pronunciations of Greek” characteristically indicates the determining criteria used by Erasmian-faithful linguists even today to support their canonical insistence on a re-constructed pronunciation of Ἑλληνικά and, by inference, to continue dividing the SPEECH of the Hellenes”.

Here follows a long quotation from my 1995 article (pp. 161-62) and then Papademetre continues:

Caragounis’ reference to Allen’s scholarship on the subject of Ἑλληνικά is important in the present discussion ...

For Allen’s often-quoted 1968 ... treatise reflects through its Latin title a covert element of the mediated view of Ἑλληνικά via latinate scholarship since European Renaissance: VOX GRAECA, is the subject of its inquiry, not ΦΩΝΗ ΕΛΛΗΝΩΝ.

This is a learned attitude born in schools of ideology about ‘other’ cultures examined from with-out, especially by those who consider ‘others’ “dead”. An ideology which, firstly, does not reflect a scientific interest in the evolution of Hellenic Speech and of its speakers—constantly creating their multi-aspects of their culture over time—and secondly, an ideology seemingly unaware of the fact that, in its almost 80 years of development, contemporary linguistics scholarship has been discussing and analysing such systemic phenomena associated with qualitative vs. quantitative rhythm systems from various theoretical perspectives as natural, universal processes in the development of a phonological and metrical system of any given language ...

But this is not an isolated case: within the ranks of this ‘classics-linguistics’ scholarship there reigns a consistent insistence on entropic analysis of so-called “classical Greek” disregarding the systematic phonological and prosodic connections of all stages of the language’s development that lead to contemporary, living Ἑλληνικά. Indicative of this inherited entropic attitude is how such scholars define the parameters of scientific discussion on the subject, prime example of which is Devine & Stephens in their recent authoritative book, *The Prosody of Greek Speech*,” ...

from which Papademetre quotes:

“The reconstruction of prosody of a *DEAD* language, particularly those aspects for which the orthography provides no evidence, is prima facie an almost impossible undertaking. ...”

Papademetre continues:

In this impressive book of 565 pages of collated/correlated facts from research studies ranging from neurology, anatomy, psychology to poetics, musicology, and canonical ‘classics’, there is seldom a comparative reference to studies related to the analyses of the stages of development of Hellenic speech from pre-classical to modern times, the period, that is of over 2500 years during which Ἑλληνικά, empirically and scientifically, has never stopped being a living language with numerous native speakers and writers. So, why this canonical insistence on regarding Greek as a “dead” language? On the basis of which

linguistics (or ‘other’) theory of language death — or under which scientifically proven linguistic circumstances — the last speaker of ‘Ελληνικά died?

In view of the evolutionary nature of Language and Culture universally, the burden of scientific proof regarding linguistic entropy lies with the entropic scholars. For, ‘classics-linguistics’ scholars choosing to remain canonical in their Hellenic scholarship base their research and argumentation on an established ideology of fragmentation of the Hellenic language in water-tight compartments ‘στεγανὰ ἐπιστήμης’ of taxonomic periods and subjectively-measured literary styles. They prefer to disregard scientifically the language’s evolutionary systematicity as empirically manifested in the continuous existence of Hellenic speakers, writers, creators of a culture in constant development ...

Papademetre goes on to ask among other things:

For how long still will linguistics scholarship condone the *status quo* in the diachronic analysis of ‘Ελληνικά based on circularity and entropic mentality of classics-linguists?

The article by Papademetre ought to be read in its entirety. But here I may confine myself to pointing out the following simple, undeniable facts and thereon based conclusions:

1. We know what the pronunciation of Greek today in Hellas is. This is incontrovertible.
2. We also know that, however Greek was pronounced in antiquity (hypothetically), its pronunciation came to be what it is today in Hellas, that is, there is historical continuity. This, too, is incontrovertible.
3. This means, that the pronunciation must have changed some time between, say, Homeros’ time and today. The question is, *when* did the change actually take place?
4. Virtually every Erasmian concedes, owing to the evidence of the papyri, that by Hellenistic times Greek pronunciation was practically identical with that used in modern Hellas today. This means that there are no theoretical linguistic reasons against the changes that have taken place in pronunciation.
5. The change that I advocate as having happened is not contradicted by pure historical linguistics. It is, in fact, freely accepted by linguists, and no one would dare deny the existence of the living pronunciation of Greek in Hellas today. Now, if this change could *happen* during Hellenistic times, or let us even assume, for the sake of argument during Byzantine times, it *could* happen linguistically. In other words, there is nothing that makes such a change a *linguistic impossibility*. Now if such a change *could happen linguistically* in Hellenistic or in Byzantine times, it could also have happened *earlier*. The time of the happening is beyond the legitimate sphere of competence of modern linguistics. Hence, modern linguistics has nothing to say on this matter. This can only be decided by *concrete evidence*

outside the control of modern linguistic hypothesizing. This matter can only be settled by the concrete evidence of the sources on the actual time when changes were introduced in pronunciation.

6. My work has shown that ***exactly the same kind of evidence in the papyri that has forced the Erasmians to admit the change of pronunciation from whatever it was in ancient times to what it became in Hellenistic times, is to be found already in the inscriptions from around 600 B.C. on!*** This is not a matter of linguistic speculation and empty theorizing. This is *hard evidence* that cannot be explained away. The inscriptions have been dated by their editors, not by me. We have no choice but to accept the evidence of the inscriptions that the Historical Greek Pronunciation began to be used in Athens in the Vth cent B.C.