

Dal greco antico al greco moderno: alcuni aspetti dell'evoluzione morfosintattica (Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2012)

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Abstract

In this contribution, I offer a summary of my 2012 Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Florence (Firenze) on given morphosyntactic changes between Ancient Greek and Modern Greek.

Keywords

Greek – historical linguistics – morphology – syntax – syncretism genitive-dative – infinitive – perfect tense – clitics

1 Introduction

The study of the history of the Greek language is lacking with regard to a focus on certain periods:¹ for example, the centuries running from the Hellenistic and Roman periods to the Arabian conquest have been less examined than the Classical or Modern times. After the conquest by Alexander the Great, a variety of Greek based on the Attic dialect was imposed and spread all over his empire as the official language. Given that the *Koiné dialektos* was at the same time the language of administration and literature, and was also used as the everyday language, it underwent a two-fold change: the official idiom crystallised in fixed forms, while the spoken variety underwent the changes that ultimately led to Modern Greek.

¹ The most complete work on this subject is Horrocks (1997).

In order to shed light on the less examined stages of linguistic change, my doctoral dissertation (see now Zinzi 2014) concentrates on private letters contained in papyri. In particular, the analysis mainly focuses on four innovations pertaining to the Greek language, namely genitive-dative syncretism, the loss of infinitive, the formation of the periphrastic perfect and the dislocation of clitics. The dissertation aims at tracing these changes back to their starting points and taking a close look at their further evolution.

Data have been collected by creating a corpus of circa 300 private letters on papyrus, which were chosen among already published collections of letters or non-literary papyrus documents: testimonies were brought together and translated.

2 Basic Claims and Results

Why choose private papyrus letters as testimonies? Since *Koiné* underwent a double evolution, and official or literary texts were composed in an artificial and crystallised language, it has been necessary to find the documents which reflect the real habits of Greek speakers of the time. Letters are used in instances where face-to-face dialogue is not possible, and they were already widely used as a means of communication in ancient times. However, from the Hellenistic period onwards, letters also became the output of a brand-new literary genre called epistolography, inasmuch as writers can tell a story through the exchange of messages between two or more characters. In the very first phase of my research, I distinguished private letters from the literary ones, or even from those which showed a feeling for language. Since “the most revealing documents are those whose variations from the traditional norm of orthography reflect the spoken word,” as Gignac (1976: 49) emphasizes, we can assume that the less letters are conceptually and stylistically sophisticated, the more likely they are to preserve the spoken language. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to provide a survey and, as far as possible, an explanation of the innovations that brought about linguistic changes in Modern Greek. The private papyrus letters allow the researcher to get as close as possible to everyday speech, given that they represent dialogue in textual form. The corpus that I have gathered contains documents that date from the fourth century B.C. to the seventh century A.D.; all the documents come from Egypt.

After this testimony was collected, papyri were examined in order to highlight the four chosen linguistic issues concerning Greek that are essential within its evolution. Every chapter of the dissertation covers one innovation: a complete review of the theories proposed for each phenomenon is provided.

As the testimonies are examined, it immediately emerges that, whereas less frequent use of the dative and the infinitive is attested in the analysed papyri, very little evidence can be found with respect either to the current form of the Greek perfect tense or to the dislocation of clitics in Modern Greek.

With regard to the dative, it is frequently replaced in private letters on papyrus by the genitive or the accusative, with or without prepositions: the earliest attestations of the phenomenon date back to the second century B.C. How can this be explained? I have proposed that we should consider two co-factors, namely a phonetic-morphological one and a functional one. As for the former, my suggestion is that the *o*-stem nouns acted as prototypical in Greek nominal flexion: as Mayser (1923) and Mandilaras (1973) highlight, ω and $\omicron\upsilon$ were often confused in papyri, which means that the genitive and the dative of the so-called second declension were no longer phonetically distinguished. Due to a confusion in the use of the two cases, which could be only syntactically distinguished, they syncretised in one form, namely that of genitive. Thereafter, since the *o*-declension was steady and productive in Greek, system congruity² prevailed, so that the genitive-dative syncretism applied to all declensions.

A further explanation of the genitive-dative syncretism could be their sharing of semantic roles: there are papyri, for instance, which exhibit genitives governed by verbs traditionally governing a dative as Indirect Object, and even the cluster $\delta\acute{\iota}\alpha$ plus genitive instead of the plain dative in order to express an Instrument. Affinity of semantic functions and content expressed by different cases could lead to their syncretism. I tentatively propose that the two factors, both phonetic-morphological and functional, caused the syncretism of the genitive and the dative in Greek: the formal identity of the two cases, widely attested in the analysed letters, and the compatibility of the basic grammatical concepts underlying them contributed to their merger.

The second item of investigation in my dissertation is the loss of the infinitive in Modern Greek: previous research has shown that it retains the same uses and functions in private letters in papyri as in Classical Greek. Nonetheless, it bears some new features, including when it is introduced by an article; in particular, the cluster with the genitive $\tau\omicron\upsilon$ as a generic strengthening particle is very frequent.

In order to investigate the infinitive in diachrony, I mainly focus on complements, more specifically on the cases of co-reference of complement subject to matrix agent or experiencer. The rationale may not seem clear, but in reality an analysis of the cases of co-reference in complement clauses allows the

² See also Wurzel (1989: 105).

linguist to investigate the gradual loss of the infinitive and its substitution with finite verb clauses. In this respect, I note that, whereas the complement clauses using an infinitive—where the subject is either not expressed or occurs in the nominative—are the most widespread in Classical Greek, finite verb clauses show an upward trend in private letters on papyri. This situation is a perfect complement to the gradual disappearance of the infinitive, which underwent a process of desystematization in Greek and progressively fell into disuse. What is relevant, besides the traditional ὤς-, πῶς- and ὅτι-clauses, is that a new type, governed by ἵνα, arises: the complementizer governs a verb in the indicative or subjunctive, and it is semantically linked to complement-taking predicates that mean ‘to order, to command’.

It appears difficult to explain this gradual drop of the infinitive, and I agree with the hypothesis proposed by many scholars, who claim that, since the infinitive is not inflected for person and number, it lacks clarity and transparency. As Jannaris (1987: 569) states, “a Greek [...] who aimed particularly either at precision, or emphasis, or both, was often compelled to resolve the infinitive into a finite mood with the appropriate particle, and thus obtain the desired effect with regard to the precise meaning, person, number or time”. A general re-arranging of the morphology of the infinitive could have also influenced the progressive demise of the infinitive. Phonetic change could have been just as big a factor, as it led to the confusion of some instances of the infinitive with ones of the indicative or subjunctive. Thus, the co-occurrence of many factors seems to have contributed to the progressive loss of the infinitive.

I also make a suggestion with respect to the choice of *na* as the preverbal particle, which is still used in Modern Greek: it likely arose for semantic reasons. The cluster ἵνα plus finite verb is governed by so-called manipulative verbs: this particular type of complement-taking predicates was chosen as prototypical and was analogically extended to all complements.

To sum up, the following chronological evidence emerges from private letters on papyri: the infinitive is still alive and used throughout late antiquity, even if less frequently than in Ancient and Classical Greek (cf. Joseph 1978, 1983).

As for the formation of the periphrastic perfect, scant evidence has been found in the analyzed papyri: since such perfects later are governed by both ἔχω and εἶμι, it is clear that in this period still no auxiliary has been chosen. What is relevant is the well-attested confusion, both formal and functional, of the aorist and the perfect: whereas the two tenses carry a different aspectual meaning in Ancient and Classical Greek, they come to indicate a generic notion of past in post-Classical Greek. A portion of the chapter deals with this issue, taking into

account the previous research carried out on this issue:³ the fragile state of the perfect tense within the Greek verbal system is clear.

The last innovation I analyze in the dissertation is the dislocation of clitics. Since clitic pronouns are distributed differently in Modern Greek than in Ancient and Classical Greek, my research aims to trace this shift back to its origins. Whereas the current distribution of clitics is still not attested, papyri show that weak pronoun objects are still governed by Wackernagel's Law, given that they immediately follow the first tonic element in a phrase. What is remarkable is that we very often find the Verb in initial position, and clitics tend to immediately follow it: the "combination of canonical first position words with clitic pronouns seems to be no longer the result of a discourse strategy, but has been reanalyzed as a syntactic rule involving specific words and word classes."⁴

3 Conclusion

The analysis shows that, while the weakening of the dative along with its resulting syncretism with the genitive is a development starting in the first centuries of our era, the loss of the infinitive and the creation of a periphrastic form of the perfect, attested for the first time in the latter part of the Byzantine period, must be dated to the Medieval period. Changes in the positioning of clitics are not exhibited in post-Classical Greek, even though by the seventh century at the latest most of the structural changes in morphology and syntax had already taken place.

An important outcome of this research is that the Greek of Egypt, even if it is a regional variety of the language, underwent the same changes as did the mainland Greek: this indicates that, in spite of its geographical extension and the existence of several Greek-speaking enclaves, Greek remained one language. A large number of features once thought to be "Egyptian" have been shown to belong to the true internal history of the language.⁵ This makes papyri essential documents for any diachronic study of the Greek language.

Finally, I tentatively propose on the basis of the chronological evidence that linguistic changes that occurred both in Greek and Latin are the result of parallel drifts.

3 See Browning (1983), Hatzidakis (1975), Horrocks (1997), Jannaris (1987), Mandilaras (1973), Mayser (1923).

4 See Janse (2000: 245).

5 See also Horrocks (1997: 61)

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