PROLOGUE

A HISTORY OF GREEK

Greek and Chinese are the only languages still known to us after three thousand five hundred years that are still spoken today. They are not the only languages of culture that have been spoken and written for many centuries – some of which are still in use today, others dead, such as Sumerian, Egyptian, Hebrew or Arabic – but they do have a longer history and have had a greater influence. There is no doubt that, if judged by the influence it has had on all of the European languages, and continues to have today on all languages, Greek can be regarded as the most important language in the world. The direct or indirect influence of its alphabet, lexicon, syntax and literature has been and is immense.

This must be taken into account when embarking on a new history of the Greek language, after those of Meillet, Hoffman, Palmer, Hiersche and Horrocks and Christidis (ed.), among others, and a copious bibliography. Greek arrived in Greece and other parts in the second and first millennia before Christ and spread with Alexander’s conquests, although its expansion was soon curbed by the resurgence of conquered peoples and, much later, by invaders such as the Slavs, Arabs and Turks.

Earlier, when the Romans had conquered the East, Greek continued to be spoken there. Indeed, from the second century BC it had a great influence on Latin and consequently, directly or through Latin, on practically every other language. This was a long process, as a result of which today many of our languages can be seen as a kind of semi-Greek or crypto-Greek (as I have noted on other occasions).

Today, Greek is a living language in Greece, but it also has a second life: its alphabet, lexicon, syntax and literary genres can be traced in all languages. In a sense, it is through these new forms, or avatars, as the Indians would say, that Greek has survived.

A new history of Greek must take these matters into account. Indeed, in dealing with Greek in Ancient Greece and Hellenistic Greece, it must highlight the literary, cultural and social factors which have conditioned the Greek language and in turn are expressed by it.
In its ancient phase, we know Greek by two means: through epigraphy (from the period of Mycenae onwards) and through manuscripts. Thus, we are able to study the fragmentation of its dialects and the unifying features that penetrated them until they were finally absorbed by one of these dialects, Attic. We can also study the different languages used in Greek literature; the specific languages used for the different Greek literary genres.

I will elaborate. First and foremost, we must place Greek within Indo-European: in a specific phase and dialect, and with certain starting points. In this book I will develop the ideas that I have expressed elsewhere: Greek as descending from the final phase of Indo-European expansion in Europe, which introduced a polythematic Indo-European – the Indo-European traditionally reconstructed. Within this polythematic Indo-European, Greek descends from the southern group, which had still not reduced the verbal stems to two, and within this still, from the group that preserved gutturals and a system of five cases. It is at this stage that Greek began to develop multiple innovations.

It is important to make a detailed study of what we can assume to have been Common Greek, its fundamental characteristics, from which it could transform, much later, into the great language of culture.

**Fragmentations and Unifications**

This is the starting point of the history of the fragmentation of Greek into dialects (perhaps already in progress in Common Greek), and of the successive attempts at unification which culminated in the imposition of Attic, and its derivative *koinē*, as the common language of all the Greeks – a language which, with some differences, has survived to this day and has influenced all languages.

The two main dialects of Greek are the eastern dialect, which penetrated Greece around the year 2000 BC, and the western dialect (Doric), which penetrated around the year 1200. This is the first fragmentation, occurring outside of Greece and introduced there later. But there was a political division at the time (between the Mycenaean kingdoms and the later cities) and a dialectal fragmentation within the two main groups, which crystallised in the first millennium but which was perhaps already in progress in the second millennium.
However, this growing fragmentation was accompanied by the expansion of certain important common isoglosses around the year 1000. Indeed, there was tendency towards linguistic unity. Actually, common languages had already been created in the second millennium, linguis francas which had a specific geographic origin but which later spread throughout Greece: Mycenaean, an administrative language, and what I refer to as epic Achaean, the language of the epic, which evolved, and, in Homer in the eighth century bc, absorbed later dialectal elements.

Thus, there were unifying elements and the dialectal differences do not seem to have been very marked. But when the Dorians arrived they drove wedges between the dialects, isolating the East Greek of the Peloponnese from that of central Greece: at the same time, certain dialects of East Greek emerged. From this base, differences became accentuated: eastern dialects were created which were then exported, or had already been exported, overseas; that is, Ionic-Attic, Arcado-Cyprian, and Aeolic. These dialects were infinitely subdivided during the fragmentation of political power among the Greek cities. There was also West Greek, Doric, which in turn was also fragmented.

However, the unifying tendencies continued to grow. As already mentioned, from about the year 1000 certain isoglosses almost entirely invaded both groups of dialects, eastern as well as western. Although the Mycenaean dialect had already disappeared, the lingua franca or common language of the epic, the Homeric language, continued to exist everywhere in an evolved form. New lingua francas, or common languages of poetry, were also created: in particular, that of elegy (from the seventh century bc) and choral lyric (from the end of the sixth century bc). Of course, these languages had a specific geographic origin, but soon they became known and cultivated in many parts. Their Ionic element provided the base for the later diffusion of Ionic prose, and the latter for that of Attic prose.

In this way, literature was essential to the unification of Greek. Prose followed poetry, as I observed earlier: first Ionic prose became internationally known, then Attic prose, all towards the end of the fifth century. Although Athens was unable to impose its political hegemony, having lost the war against Sparta, it did manage to impose its linguistic hegemony: Attic began to infiltrate and substitute all the dialects, transforming them into koine or Common Greek. It absorbed the Ionic intellectual vocabulary, developed a new one,
and the koine continued in this same path. There was again a ‘Common Greek’, the base for all subsequent languages of culture.

Curiously, the power which imposed its political hegemony, Macedonia, played a decisive role in the diffusion of Attic. The political unity did not last, but when it died out, the linguistic unity continued. This is essentially the history, albeit in a very abbreviated form.

Yet the history does not quite end there. The new split was different: that of educated, literary or traditional Greek as opposed to popular or spoken Greek. It is known to us from the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. Both strains continue to this day and are referred to respectively as the ‘pure’ (καθαρέον) language and the ‘popular’ (δημοτική) language. At some point (from around the end of the Middle Ages perhaps, it is not known exactly), the ‘popular’ language began to split into dialects. A new and final unification occurred, based on the popular language spoken in Athens, after Greek independence. This saw the emergence of a new koine.

There are many varieties of the Greek language, and the study of their history is fascinating: from their Indo-European origins to Common Greek, and, subsequently, to the small regional dialects and the literary and scientific languages. Sometimes these languages need to be reconstructed, other times they can be studied in a more or less complete form. In any case, the task of interpreting their origins is not always easy. Indeed, at a particular point in time, all of these Greek languages shared common features, such as the Homerisms and Ionicisms of the literary languages, and, later, the elements from Attic and the scientific and intellectual languages as a whole.

**Is a History of Greek Possible?**

The history of the splits and unifications in the Greek language is a rather curious one. It is a story of the expansion of the territory in which Greek was spoken, and then its reduction, of political defeats and linguistic triumphs. Today, Greek forms the basis of a practically international language of culture.

There are many conflicting theories regarding the Indo-European origins of Greek, Common Greek and its dialectal fragmentation, as well as Mycenaean and the Homeric language. These topics cannot be ignored, yet the main emphasis in this study will be placed on
the literary languages, the socio-linguistic levels and the influence of Greek on other languages.

I will then attempt to describe the eventful journey of the Greek language through the ages: its influence on so many other languages, its role as the language of the Eastern Roman empire and later the Byzantine empire (as the language of the Church and State), and finally as the language of the newly independent Greece.

The influence and very existence of the Greek, within and without Greece, is fundamentally due to the cultural role that it has played. I cannot emphasise this enough. Other languages may have also served as vehicles of culture (some of which I have already cited), but Greek was the language that most transcended its own limits, along with the whole culture associated with it. Its acceptance at the court of Macedonia was of great cultural significance. It would later become the second language of educated Romans, and it was used by King Ashoka of India, the khans of Bulgaria and the kings of Meroe in Ethiopia. To be sure, Berosus, Manetho, Josephus and Fabius Pictor, among others, preferred to write in Greek rather than in their own languages.

Greek was often translated into other languages and vice versa. Its presence can be traced in the evolution of these languages, their literatures and cultures. Indeed, almost from the start, its alphabet enabled many agraphic languages to be written for the very first time, and it was later adapted to write even more languages, from Latin to the Slavic languages.

There is also the important theme of the unity of Greek, from its beginnings to the present day. Greek has no doubt evolved, but if we compare the different ‘Greeks’, from Mycenaean and Homeric to the ‘common’ Greek of today, there are not so many differences after all. The vocalic system has been simplified (quantities, diphthongs and musical accents are gone), the consonantal system has evolved slightly, and morphology has been reduced: there has been a loss of the dual, dative, optative and infinitive, a fossilisation of the participle, a reduction of verbal inflection to two stems, the development of periphrastic forms, and some formal variations. But the fundamental categories and the essence of the lexicon remain the same.

It is possible to write a history of Greek from its beginnings to the present, whereas it would not be possible, for instance, to write a history dealing with Latin and Spanish. In the history of Latin
there is a strong differentiation with respect to chronology and geography, while in Greek, a fundamental unity has prevailed in both of these aspects. This was because of the supremacy of the educated language, defended by ancient tradition and by the Church and State of Byzantium, while in the West it was Latin that prevailed, and later became fragmented.

This is the history that I will attempt to recount: an internal history of Greek and an external history regarding its relation to other languages. It is a very complex history, across so many centuries and so many ‘Greeks’. I will expound my arguments in what I hope will be a coherent and accessible narrative, based, of course, on my own ideas, some of which I have presented in other publications. But this expository phase will occasionally be complemented with erudite notes in small print, providing information regarding the matter in question and the hypotheses put forward against it, as well as a bibliography.

It is not easy to write a history of Greek. To begin with, the earliest written records are nearly always documentary texts in the different dialects, ranging from Mycenaean of the thirteenth century BC to the various other dialects dating from the eighth and seventh centuries BC. Sometimes they are also literary texts, which have been handed down to us in Hellenistic and Roman papyri as well as in Byzantine manuscripts, and whose language or languages are in a problematic relation to the epigraphic dialects. These texts evolve and respond to various socio-linguistic levels: the lower levels being badly documented. How does one go about filling in the gaps and connecting all of this with an Indo-European origin and the later tradition? I believe that the main lines can be traced.

**THE PRESENT BOOK**

The justification for writing this book is clear from the above discussion: to trace the history of the totality of the Greek language and its influence on other languages. The histories of Greek, already mentioned, which we have today stop at Hellenistic and Roman koine, if not earlier. Indeed, Horrock’s new history deals with archaic and classical Greek in a very summary way and only goes into depth in the phase from koine to the present. Ancient Greek is treated as if it was a mere precedent, and this is reflected in the book’s cover.
illustration of a Pantocrator. All of these works fail to discuss the influence of Greek on our languages.

My aim is to write a balanced history of the Greek language, leaning neither towards ancient nor medieval or Modern Greek. Also, I will explore the subject of the diffusion and influence of Greek, and its survival in other languages.

It is important to point out that one of the main purposes of this book is to stress the crucial role played by the literary languages in the two unification processes, corresponding to ancient and Modern Greek. Time and again, these languages have triumphed over centrifugal tendencies, transforming Greek into the model for all the languages of culture.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part will study the trajectory from Indo-European and Common Greek to Attic, the new language that became the common language. The second part will study the origin and history of this koine or common language derived from Attic, and the history of its variants from the Hellenistic period until the present day, through the Roman and Byzantine periods.

However, at times there will be a special focus on the creation and diffusion of scientific Greek, which has penetrated all languages, whether directly or through intermediate languages.

Some new bibliography, collected and commented by this author, will be found in my paper History of the Greek Language 1983–2004, included in Madrid, C.S.I.C. (forthcoming).