Review Article

Doing without the Fez: Greek Language Questions

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Abstract

This definitive history of the Greek Language Controversy shows how Greek's status as a prestige language galvanized a national movement attracting various ethnicities of the *Millet-i rum*. The status of classical Greek resonant in Adamantios Korais's *katharévoussa* helped consolidate the Greek state. An alternate demoticist programme, anticipated by Katartzis, developed in the Ionian Islands, and formulated by Psycharis, took hold through the efforts of the Educational Demoticists. Standard Modern Greek is a synthesis of the two programmes—neither the phonologically puristic *Romaika* of Psycharis nor an archaizing *Schriftsprache*, it retains elements of both.

Keywords

Diglossia, *katharévoussa*, purism, Korais, Psycharis, sociolinguistics, Language Question, Language Controversy

Peter Mackridge. *Language and National Identity in Greece, 1766–1976*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2009.

Since 1976 the Language Question that agitated the Greek-speaking world for some two hundred years is history, and in Peter Mackridge it has found its historian.

The Language Controversy, as Mackridge translates the Greek το γλωσσικό ζήτημα, was a debate about nature of the Greek language, its historicity and perennity. Both sides wanted a standard national language to symbolize the continuity of Hellenism, a patent of succession to the prestige and authority of classical antiquity. Partisans of the puristic *Schriftsprache* sought to teach and improve a fallen people, to restore lost continuity and make them worthy of their heritage. Demoticists saw the spoken language of the people as proof of an existing continuity, and urged urban Greeks to take the boatman,

tailor, and cobbler as their teachers. There is much more to this story, however, than the polarity of *katharévousa* and demotic, and Mackridge's account respects its complexity at all stages. The debate about the Greek language was really about the identity of the Greek nation, and so the history of the language controversy amounts to a history of Greek national consciousness. Mackridge's contribution promises to be as abiding and influential in its sphere as K. Th. Dimaras's history of Greek literature (Dimaras, 1949).

The Greek nation arose because of the status of the Greek language within the Ottoman world and the West. "La grande langue de culture de l'Orient" (42), Greek was the language of educated Ottoman Christians, and the language of the Church and of commerce. For western Europe it was the language of classical Greece, an inspiration to the Enlightenment and the national ideals it engendered. Without the dominant position of the Greek language within the *Millet-i Rum*, the Greek national movement would not have become the vehicle for the revolt of Christians of different ethnicities against Ottoman power. Without the influence of French revolutionary ideology and the support of European Philhellenes inspired by visions of ancient Greece, the Greek state might not have been achieved.

Thus Greek nationalism arose from two different cultural heritages as assimilated by Greek-speaking elites; this dual inheritance would lead to the development of two rival national language programmes, a distinction Greece shares with Norway. Mackridge's theoretical perspective, set forth in the first chapter, puts aside the models of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm as of little relevance to a nation shaped neither by the vernacular press nor by industrialization, and adopts Anthony Smith's model of nationalism as constructed from a collective cultural identity. Mackridge finds special relevance in Michael Silverstein's emphasis on the importance of ideology in language development, and John Joseph's observation that national identity can shape language as much as the contrary.

As the French state after 1789 sought to *franciser les français* by supplanting dialects with standard French, so the Greek national movement articulated by Adamantios Korais aspired to Hellenize the Greeks by purifying their language. But where the French language programme was based on a spoken vernacular, Greek identity was based on an ancient language. As André Mirambel observed, this was a choice dictated by the prestige of antiquity and the primacy of the written language. Evangelos Petrounias saw purism as motivated by a sense of cultural inferiority, a ruling elite at odds with the majority of the population, and a false conception of linguistics. Trubetzkoy considered the outcome to be the epitome of false nationalism: a hybrid of petty self-conceit, militant chauvinism, and cultural conservatism

(Trubetzkoy 1991: 76). And yet without the puristic program, and its attendant veneration of antiquity, the Greek state might not have been achieved.

Chapter Two sets forth the preconditions for the language controversy. In the Ottoman empire, Greek had a privileged position as the language of religion and administration of the *Millet-i Rum*. All four patriarchs resident in Istanbul were Greek-speakers, and a quarter of Ottoman subjects were subject to patriarchal authority. Fanariot elites occupied important positions at the Porte and in the Danubian principalities; Panagiotis Kodrikas argued that from the 17th century Greeks were no longer captives of the sultan but subject to him. Orthodox Christians, like Armenians and Jews, had the commercial advantage of being dispensed from military service. A Greek-speaking merchant class emerged with diaspora centers in Venice, Vienna, and Odessa, where the *Filiki Etaireia* was founded in 1814. Leading protagonists of the language controversy came from the liberal and literate merchant class.

Well into the nineteenth century, Orthodox Christians in the Balkans who aspired to education had to learn Greek. Centers of Greek learning, such as Jassy, Bucharest, and Constantinople, were outside the borders of what would become the Greek state. In this multilingual world of complex identities, ethnicities were associated with occupations—a Greek was likely a merchant, a Bulgarian was likely a peasant, a Vlach was likely a transhumant shepherd, an Albanian was likely a mercenary. In the diverse community of the *Millet-i rum*, Greek was the prestige language; not only the language of education for Aromanian, Slav, and Albanian speakers, in their communities “it was spoken as their home language by the families of high profile figures such as merchants, doctors, and teachers” (189). In Istanbul, Greek retained its status after the foundation of the Greek state: “In the cosmopolitan capital ... Greek was a sort of *lingua franca* among the non-Muslim populations (Armenians, Jews, Levantines, Europeans) until the middle of the twentieth century” (Strauss, 2003: 49).

Mackridge emphasizes “how much choice was available to talented Christians in the Balkans during the late Ottoman period—choice of identities, choice of careers ... competence in the Greek language was a key to this kind of social mobility” (64). Evgenios Voulgaris from Corfu studied at Padua, taught in Yannina, Kozani, the Athonite Academy, and Constantinople, resided in Leipzig and Halle, and settled in Russia, where he “introduced himself to the Russian empress in 1771 by referring to himself as ‘Slaviano-Bulgarian by origin, Greek by birth, Russian by inclination’” (85). Nikolaos Pikkolos was Korais’s associate, helped Claude Fauriel with his publication of Greek folk songs, donated generously to the Greek revolution, and then lobbied for Bulgarian independence in Paris.

In this sociolinguistic situation, the Greek language had a strong power of attraction, compounded by the efforts of evangelists of Hellenism to persuade speakers of other Balkan languages to adopt Greek. St. Cosmas Aitolos promoted Greek education among Aromanian, Albanian, and Slavonic speakers. Daniil of Moschopoulos sought to convert Vlachs into Greek speakers and merchants. Neofytos Doukas urged Vlachs to abandon their squalid language for that of Hellenic culture (59).

For a nation to exist it needed an ancient past; other Balkan languages lacked a literature around which to construct a national identity. Speakers of Slavonic, Aromanian and Albanian were drawn to the Greek cause because well into the 19th century there was no alternative expression for national consciousness. Like other Christians, the Bulgarians whom Zambelios praised for their contribution to the struggle of 1821 saw it as a struggle against Turkish and Islamic domination.

Chapter Three describes the early stages of the language controversy. Mackridge dates the beginning of the modern Greek language controversy to 1766 and Evgenios Voulgaris's attack on the use of modern Greek in philosophy in the preface to his *Logic*. The Corfiot clergyman, whom Kitromilides calls the patriarch of the Greek enlightenment, regarded only ancient Greek as a suitable vehicle for the discussion of modern philosophy. Mackridge notes that it was no accident that the language controversy arose in the realm of philosophy, the special area of Western influence on Greek thought.

Heretofore the different registers of the Greek language had coexisted. The desire to imitate ancient literary models was already a bimillennial preoccupation in Greek literature when the language question arose. Mackridge observes that "the modern language controversy is in a sense a replay of the controversy during the Second Sophistic, and is therefore in itself a manifestation of a Greek sense of cultural continuity" (74). Fanariots such as Alexander Mavrokordatos wrote something close to ancient Greek. Byzantine schooling as it continued under the Ottomans involved study of the psalter and the horologion; the more advanced education available to the clergy was in ecclesiastical Greek. The prevailing *koinon yfos* was a mixture of archaic and modern features; there was no programme to impose a standard language.

Other Enlightenment thinkers were not so wedded to ancient Greek as Voulgaris—a philosophical translation into the *koinon yfos* by Iosipos Moisioudax (the name means an Aromanian from Bulgaria) had drawn Voulgaris's ire. Moisioudax sought to improve the teaching of Greek by using modern words in defining vocabulary, and looked to the teaching of Modern Greek to cure *amatheia*. The polyglot freethinker from Constantinople, Dimitrios Katartzis, also defended the vernacular Romaic as a language with its own grammar.

It fell to Adamantios Korais, the protagonist of Mackridge's fourth chapter, to reconcile the Romaic language spoken in Ottoman lands with ancient Greek. As the preeminent δάσκαλος του γένους, he did not reject the spoken language out of hand but sought to purify it of the corruptions he saw as the result of Greece's downward trajectory since Hellenistic times. William Slater has observed that Atticism arose from the application of principles of textual criticism developed in Hellenistic Alexandria (Slater 1976: 241; Brown 2008: 71); similarly, Korais's purism involved treating Modern Greek "as if it was a vast collection of manuscripts containing corrupt readings of ancient Greek that required correction" (Mackridge 2010: 130). His project to develop a written language in relation to the spoken one, developed in prefaces to his editions of the classics, correspondence, and speeches, was part of a campaign "to espouse modern readings of Classical humanist ideals such as liberty, democracy, the rule of law, and civic duty" (62). He rebutted the *Paternal Teaching*, the patriarch's warning against the doctrines of the French Revolution, with a *Fraternal Teaching* arguing that Christianity was compatible with the new ideas of liberty. The work of Kitromilides has emphasized the progressive political outlook of Korais, while Iliou (1989) has shown how that outlook has been distorted by writers who refracted Korais through the prism of Greek politics.

Chapter Five documents alternate approaches by archaists such as Kommitas and Doukas, Fanariot conservatives—most prominently Korais's Parisian rival Panagiotis Kodrikas, and the vernacularists Christopoulos, Vilaras, and Psalidas. By 1821 Korais had prevailed.

The two newly created Greek states, the Kingdom of Greece and the United States of the Ionian islands, represented two very different language situations, as described in chapter six. Mackridge contrasts the classicizing romanticism of Athens, aimed at consolidating the Greek state, with the liberation-oriented romanticism of the Ionians. In Greece usage became ever more archaic, while the islands under British rule were an incubator for demoticism.

Fallmerayer's polemic against Greek claims to descent from the ancient Greeks was a challenge to Greek nationalism; so too was the emergence of competing Balkan nationalisms in the mid-nineteenth century. Emblematic is the case of Grigor Parlichev (1830–1893). Parlichev had received a traditional Orthodox education in the Greek language, as opposed to a Greek nationalist education. Using the name Grigoris Stavridis he won the Greek national poetry prize as a "pro-Greek Bulgarian." He became a Bulgarian nationalist after the Miladinov brothers, one of whom had been his Greek teacher at school in Ohrid, died in prison. They had been imprisoned (at the behest of a Greek bishop, Parlichev believed) for publishing a collection of what Mackridge refers to as "Bulgarian Macedonian" songs. "It is probable that, if

Parlichev had been born a generation earlier, he would have remained an active propagandizer of Greek culture rather than simply retaining an emotional attachment to Ancient Greek poetry; yet if he had been born two generations later, he might have become a Macedonian nationalist” (189–190).

Against these new threats, the history of Paparrigopoulos and the folklore studies of Politis reasserted Greek historical continuity while promoting more recent and popular manifestations of Greek culture. So too did the demoticist language programme espoused by Psycharis, the theme of Mackridge’s seventh chapter, which covers the period from 1880 to 1897. *To taxidi mou*, his demoticist manifesto, told the story of an expatriate Greek’s discovery of his homeland and of the vernacular Romaic language. Where Korais had naively identified language with literature, Psycharis’s Neogrammarian mentors discovered laws of sound change that made it possible to establish continuity between the current spoken language and that of ancient Greece.

Thanks to a revolution in linguistics, demoticism made it possible to vindicate both the ancient pedigree of modern Greek and the language of the people. National movements in Serbia, Bulgaria, and other East European countries had adopted the *Volksprache* of folk songs and poetry. Where Vuk Karadžić’s 1814 collection of Serbian folk songs helped establish the spoken language as standard, Dionysios Solomos was the only Greek writer of the period from 1800–1850 interested in folk songs. Until Psycharis, Greece alone in the Balkans based its linguistic identity on an artificial prose remote from the vernacular, culminating in Prof. Konstantinos Kontos’s efforts to bring puristic usage in line with the grammar of ancient Greek. Psycharis saw such pedantry as an impediment to Greek efforts to win over non-Greek speakers in Macedonia and other contested lands. The *History of Romiosyni* by his colleague Argyris Eftaliotis (who inverted the Hellenizing practice of assuming names from antiquity by changing his name from Kleanthis Michailidis) valorized Byzantium and the Romaic tradition.

Psycharis’s rival and adversary, George Hatzidakis of the University of Athens, the first to explain the history of Greek on Neogrammarian lines, defended *katharévoussa* on the grounds that spoken Greek was composed of many dialects. Like Korais, Hatzidakis believed that the existence of a standard *Kunstsprache* was a universal feature of civilized languages. Korais held that the spoken Greek of antiquity was much closer to modern Greek than the written Greek of the period, a view close to the Aeolodoric hypothesis of Christopoulos. Psycharis and Karl Krumbacher dismissed such diglossia as characteristic of oriental languages—Turkish, Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese (27, 275).

The demotic movement sought to increase popular participation in national culture for nationalist purposes (218, 281). Right-wing nationalists such as Petros Vlastos and Ion Dragoumis saw demotic as a more suitable vehicle for

irredentism and the creation of a homogeneous nation-state. The linguist Nikolaos Andriotis spoke of a thousand-year death struggle between Slavic languages and Greek, comparing Slavic to the microbe of an epidemic (314). Triantafyllidis blamed *katharévoussa* for the persistence of Albanian among the Arvanites of Attica (270).

Demoticism was in a sense more totalizing in its identification of language with the *patrida* than *katharévoussa* (225). *Katharévoussa* was an exercise in translation—of modern Greek into ancient forms and vocabulary, but also what Korais called *metakenosis*, the translation or decanting of French Enlightenment thought into Greek. Psycharis believed that the Romaic language was untranslatable, and urged Eftaliotis not to translate foreign books, since each people has a different way of thinking.¹ As Mackridge observes, “this is the opposite of Korais’ concept of the transfusion of European knowledge into Greek” (220).

Emmanouil Moschonas underlined the fundamentally bourgeois orientation of both movements: “Demoticism sought not to overthrow but to renew the system and render it more efficient” (262), and “did not aspire to aims that were different from those of the bourgeois conservatism by which *katharévoussa* was supported” (330). The protagonists of the puristic and demotic programmes had much in common. Both Korais and Psycharis were descended from merchant Chiote families; both spent their careers in Paris, and identified strongly with French culture. Both were remote from Greece, and seemed unaware that many Greeks did not speak Greek at home (226). Both sometimes expressed frank contempt for the Greeks; Mackridge cites a letter in which Korais urges discretion when addressing a Greek audience—“Il faut un peu de ruse quand on a affaire à la canaille, et qu’on veut sincèrement le bien de sa nation” (Mackridge 2010: 134). Psycharis professed goal was to turn the Greeks into *anthropoi*: “the Romaic language doesn’t possess words to express how much I’m disgusted by *Romiosyni*” (218–219).

Solomos’s expectation that demotic would win acceptance as the national language was disappointed, Mackridge argues, because he and his fellow early demoticists paid little attention to the importance of education in language standardization. The protagonists of Mackridge’s chapter eight are the educational demoticists. Translation of literary monuments into the vernacular had provoked fierce opposition, as with the deadly upheavals over Alexandros

¹ Gourgouris (1996: 93) argues for the origins of Herder’s view that “every language expresses the character of the people that speak it” already in Condillac, whom Mackridge cites as a source for Korais’s belief in the mutual dependency of language, thought, and morality (103). Augustinos (2008) contrasts the effect life in France had on Korais and Herder respectively.

Pallis's vernacular translation of the Gospels and a performance of the *Oresteia* in demotic. A new triumvirate of leading demoticists (Manolis Triantafyllidis, Alexander Delmouzos, and Dimitris Glinos) founded the Educational Association in 1910 to promote demotic through educational reform. Giannis Kampysis criticized Psycharis for his Gallic and prescriptive, sterile and phonologically puristic demoticism; Psycharis must have been stung by Hatzopoulos chiding his *daskalismós* (schoolmasterliness)—a vice Psycharis had associated with *katharévousa*—and by Karkavitsas's attack on his "Anglo-French idiom", a criticism that echoed Psycharis' own attacks on calques from French in *katharévousa* (278–279).

Chapter nine treats the political polarization of the language question during the period 1922–1976. The death of the autocratic Psycharis in 1929 was followed by a decade of extraordinary literary production, which attenuated Hatzidakis's argument that there was no Greek vernacular literary language capable of replacing *katharévousa*. The Educational Demoticists scored a victory with Metaxas's support for the demotic grammar of Triantafyllidis. At the same time demoticism was tainted by its association with the communist party since 1927, a stigma that was accentuated by right-wing governments after 1945. In vain Giorgos Theotokas argued in 1948 against the article introduced into the 1911 constitution that established *katharévousa* as the language of state. It should be abolished, he argued, as Kemal had abolished the fez: "The fez, too, had no legal or practical significance; it was a symbol. *Katharévousa* is our fez" (311).

Puristic Greek was in turn stigmatized by its association with the junta, and after 1974 *katharévousa* evaporated with the colonels' regime. Military government was permanently discredited by the comic opera junta. Greece's recurring military regimes had exploited popular disgust at a political class that vindicates Korais's apprehension that a Greek state would duplicate corrupt features of Ottoman rule (138); after 1974 many Greeks put their hopes in a nascent European Union, which recognized Greek as one of its many official languages. This new optimism was justified by the *paroches* and public works such as the Athens metro and airport the EU made possible, culminating in the euphoria of the 2004 Olympics.

In the Epilogue Mackridge takes a sanguine view. Standard Modern Greek has emerged from the clash of purism and demoticism as a fertile synthesis of both, a supple and comprehensive language, enriched by ancient Greek vocabulary yet truly vernacular. With Tasos Christides he dismisses the *katastrofolo-gia* of those who lament the loss of vocabulary among younger speakers and the incursions of English. The outstanding problem facing the Greek language in the years ahead is the assimilation of non-native speakers from the recent wave of mass immigration.

In the short time since the appearance of Mackridge's book the financial and monetary crisis has shown the loss of Greek sovereignty through debt and undemocratic EU structures. For all their differences, Korais and Solomos shared a preoccupation with ελευθερία και γλώσσα, believing that national independence could not be achieved without a national language. EU oversight has brought about a new kind of diglossia in Greek government. At a time when the English language is stipulated for many government documents, and a Greek prime minister who takes instructions from a troika of foreign officials shows a preference for English, the relationship between language and liberty remains an open question.

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