Atticism was a complex phenomenon that has been described and explained in numerous ways, but its essential element was the tendency to look back to the language and literature of a former era as the model to follow, from a later time when the spoken language had changed and original composition of that literature was in the past. The former era was the Classical period, and access to it was through its texts, which were studied and imitated in the education system. The later time was almost the whole of the post-Classical period: the phenomenon appeared in the first century BC, reached a peak in the second century AD, and continued its influence through the Byzantine era, with effects still today. The results were seen not only in writing but in the shape of the language as a whole, in a differentiation of the spoken and written varieties, or a “diglossy/diglossia,” that affected Greek for the rest of its history.¹

Atticism was not simply a linguistic phenomenon but part of a larger enterprise to recover the Classical past. The cultural world of fifth and fourth century BC Athens was to be recreated, in literature, rhetoric, the arts and philosophy. Powerful cultural and social forces fostered the enterprise, and even emperors supported it. The whole was an exercise in imitation, but it had a deep and enduring—some would say disastrous—impact.²

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¹ For an accurate definition of the term (too long to repeat here), see Ferguson’s in R.A. Hudson, Sociolinguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 54. I am grateful to Michael Curran for reading this chapter and offering many useful comments.

The attempt to turn the clock back created complexity for users of the language, especially when they wished to commit anything to writing, or, at a more advanced level, engage in rhetorical display. Anyone who had been to school had been introduced to the notion that some forms, words, and uses were “better” or more “correct” than others. They were the ones that matched the Classical models, contrasting with new features that had arisen as a result of change in the spoken language. The contemporary, spoken language was disparaged, the older, obsolete features were approved and accorded prestige. The need for guidance in finding one’s way through these artificial shoals soon led to the creation of works offering instruction in how to do it. The authors of these works were the Atticist grammarians.3

There is a long list of names of Atticist grammarians, though most of their works survive today only in fragments. The effects of their efforts, however, and of the whole movement to treat the Greek of the past as the model of good Greek, are to be seen in almost all the written remains of post-Classical Greek. Most works of literature from that period exhibit artificial Atticizing features to varying degrees, and even the lower levels of everyday writing display some influence.4

Although the Atticizing movement had marked success, and writers at the top of the scale could write a whole work that appeared to reproduce the Attic of fifth-century Athens, this Atticizing Greek was not a spoken language or dialect separate from Koine Greek; it was a stylistic variety, or rather group of varieties, added on to the living language, Koine Greek. The

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3 The epithet “grammarian” is not quite appropriate, but it is hard to find a better alternative.