CHAPTER 2

Language Correctness (Hellenismos) and Its Criteria*

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1 Introduction

The study of language in classical antiquity—the ‘technical’ part of the extended range of knowledge and scholarship embodied by the expression γραμματική (sc. τέχνη, grammar)†—can be divided into two major fields of investigation: the doctrine describing the constitutive elements of the language

* English translation by Rachel Barritt Costa. I am very grateful to Albio C. Cassio for helpful comments on a draft of this chapter.
† Pagani [2011] 17–21, with bibliography.
(letter, syllable, word, part of speech), and that of language correctness, designated by the term ἑλληνισμός (and the corresponding term Latinitas in the Roman world). Language correctness dealt partly with determining the correctness of individual words, from the point of view of spelling, prosody (vowel quantity, presence or absence of aspiration, position and nature of the accents), phonetics, inflection, dialect differences, derivation and meaning (change in word meaning over time and cases of parasyonymy), and partly also with word combinations. Therefore it intrinsically concerned the establishment of rules.

In the most ancient phases, this topic became interlinked with philosophical reflections, such as the debate on the ‘correctness’ of names (ὁρθοέπεια) and the related problem of whether language exists by nature (φύσει) or by convention (θέσει or νόμῳ); it also overlapped with concepts belonging to the field of rhetoric, for instance the doctrine of virtues and vices of style (ἀρεταί and κακίαι τῆς λέξεως). The two major defects of language were identified as residing in βαρβαρισμός (barbarism) and σολοικισμός (solecism). Barbarism was defined as a mistake involving a single word, while solecism was a mistake in word combination and thus occurred on the syntactic level, although originally the two terms were apparently used without this distinction. Such defects were the object of specific treatises (as in the case of Περὶ σολοικισμοῦ καὶ βαρβαρισμοῦ by Ps.-Herodian) and were often cited in the definitions of Hellenismos as mistakes not to be made in correct modes of speech. Consider the two examples given below:


Hellenismos consists in speaking in the manner of the Greeks, namely without committing solecisms and barbarisms.


4 On these two aspects see the more detailed treatments by Valente and Probert, respectively, in this volume.

5 Blank [1998] 204.

