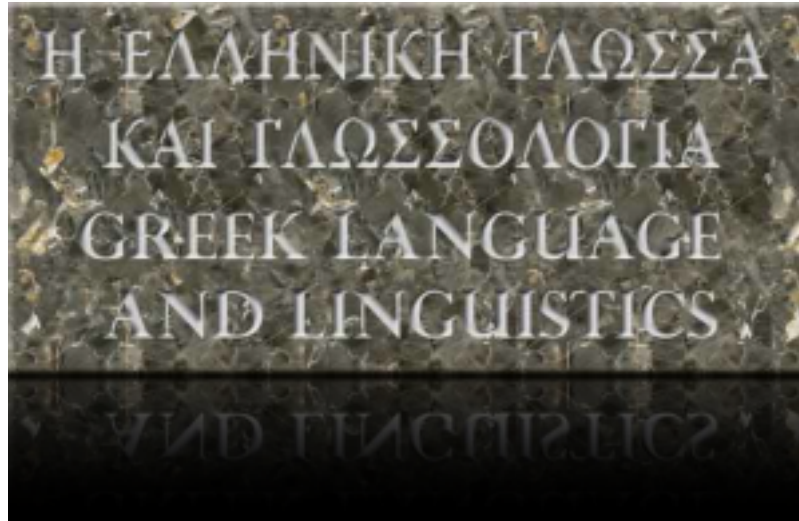


The Greek language

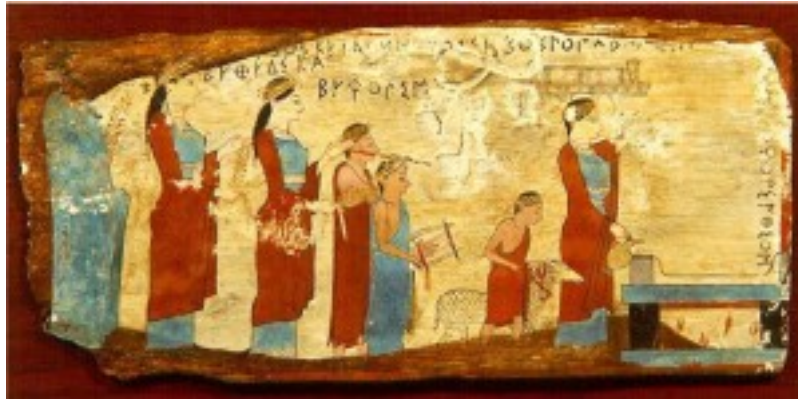


Greece is linguistically homogeneous; only an estimated 2 to 3 percent of the population does not use Greek as the primary language. Because of this uniformity, the national census omitted the category of mother tongue after 1951. Modern Greek is spoken on the mainland, on most of the surrounding islands, in the Greek community of Istanbul, in most of Cyprus, and in some villages of Calabria in southern Italy. The most frequently used other languages are Turkish, Slavic Macedonian, Vlach (a Romanian dialect), Albanian, and Pomak (a Bulgarian dialect). Greek is a direct descendant of an Indo-European language spoken by civilisations in the northeastern Mediterranean for centuries before Christ. The Modern Greek language is a mix of the ancient Greek language influenced by a number of contemporary idioms and dialects. Greek is the oldest live language in Europe and archaeological proof shows that there is a 4,000-year-old oral and 3,000-year-old written tradition. The Greek language is now spoken by almost 15 million people around the world, but it used to be the main medium of communication between nations for many years.

Greek was the main language used in the Mediterranean and Middle East during the primary and archaic historical times, due to the widespread influence of the Greek civilisation. Alexander the Great through his glorious expedition managed to spread the Greek civilisation even further reaching as far as India and set the beginning for the Hellenistic era where the Greek civilisation and language became cosmopolitan.

Greek was the official language of the Roman and the Byzantine Empires while its importance for the Christian world is strengthened by the fact that the first Christian scripts were written in Greek by the four evangelists. The Greek language continued to influence the Western civilisations, even after the collapse of the Empire in 1453. The Greek language nearly became the official language of the American nation when in 1774 during the compilation of the American constitution, it came second in a referendum that would determine the official language that was being born, losing to English with a difference of just one vote. Nevertheless, the Greek civilisation has influenced the American nation and just a visit in Washington DC's governmental buildings would reveal their Hellenistic architectural style.

There is no language in Europe where a great number of words don't have a Greek root and there is no science that doesn't use Greek words in its terminology. In spite of this continuity, the chief linguistic problem for Greeks has been a dichotomy between usage of the spoken language and the traditional literary language. That divergence continues, with three forms in varying degrees of use.



Koine, which means common, developed from an Attic dialect and became the spoken language of Greece when Alexander the Great consolidated his empire. The New Testament, the writings of the early Christian church fathers, and all of Greek literature for about ten centuries was written in this language. As Koine underwent internal modifications and influences from other languages in the Byzantine period (until 1453), scholars preserved the Greek that had been used by the classical writers beginning with Homer, in a purer form known as Attic Greek. The dichotomy between Koine and classical Greek grew even wider when a new feeling of national identity arose in the late eighteenth century. Language became a political issue as people debated which form of Greek would be most appropriate for the independent state that they contemplated founding. In the opinion of some people, the classical roots of Attic Greek best represented the Greek nation but for others the use of Koine in official Constantinople gave that form a more recent claim to acceptance.

A third group favoured a modified form of demotic Greek, the modern spoken language, because they equated nationhood with the practice of the majority of Greeks.

Modern demotic Greek is based on the version of the spoken language used in the Peloponnese. The language's evolution in the Byzantine period is imprecisely known because its use was restricted to speech and informal documents that generally were not preserved. Elements of demotic Greek had begun appearing in some poetic works in the fourteenth century, but until almost the end of the nineteenth century only Crete and Cyprus used it for serious literature or translations from Western languages.

In this situation, the nationalist Adamantios Korais (1748- 1833) suggested a compromise between Attic and demotic Greek. Therefore, a new, artificial Greek, called Katharevousa (from *katharos*, meaning pure), was devised and accepted as the official language of the newly independent Greek state. Katharevousa, which was an attempt to recover elements of classical Greek, remained the official state language until 1976.



Alexandros Papadiamandis Although the new form gained in intelligibility among the emerging state elite in the nineteenth century, a renaissance of the spoken language occurred at the same time. Katharevousa had the effect of homogenising Greek dialects, and a number of literary figures such as Alexandros Papadiamandis produced notable works of literature in Katharevousa. Papadiamandis was born on Skiathos and also went to school on Skopelos.

In 1888 Ioannis Psicharis, a scholar of the speech of the common people and the leader of the demotic movement wrote the first book in demotic Greek.

Although demotic Greek had been used in primary education almost continuously since 1917, Katharevousa remained the standard language of secondary and university education until 1976, when a law replaced it with demotic, or standard Modern Greek. Use of Katharevousa was enforced especially stringently during the military dictatorship of 1967-74. After 1976, however, the practices of government agencies, which previously had used Katharevousa, varied widely because some, most notably the courts, lagged behind the others in adopting demotic Greek. Thus a single government document originating from more than one agency could contain more than one language style. Although the previous mixture of styles had disappeared from newspapers in the early 1990s, Greeks still needed to know Katharevousa because of its survival in many older books, laws, government publications, and church documents.

A number of local dialects comprise the third form of Greek in active use, although the dialects became more standardised after the introduction of Katharevousa. The greatest variation from standard Greek is shown in Tsakonian, which is spoken in the mountains of the Peloponnese, and in the dialects closely matching those spoken by Greeks in southern Italy and Turkey.

Each of the other, more common dialects is distinguished by one or more specific variations in sound and inflection patterns. Of that group, Old Athenian, the language of Athens until independence, is now used on the southern coast of Attica and on the island of Euboea. The northern dialects are spoken in the northern parts of the mainland and of Euboea and in the northern Aegean Sea.

The dialects of Crete, Cyprus, Rhodes, Chios, and other islands show another set of characteristics. Generally

speaking, class and regional variations from standard Greek in pronunciation, construction, and vocabulary are less distinctive than are the differences between provincial English and French and their respective "standard" forms.

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