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The Greek Koine and the Logic
of a Standard Language

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My purpose in this chapter is to look at the factors that led to the rise of the *koine*, and by so doing give a sketch of what, in my view, a definition of the *koine* might look like. I do not mean that I shall be looking at the external *realia* of the expansion of the *koine* (Macedonian imperialism, and so on), though this has its place in the study of any language. Rather, taking as a starting point the view that language is in an important sense a cultural product (an approach that is at least as old as Edward Sapir), I want to investigate how we imagine a community shifts from thinking about language as a bundle of overlapping resemblances (Wittgenstein) to thinking of it as essence with variation (Plato).

It is part of my premise that the first model reflects a view of language that obtained in the Greek world at the time (say) of the Persian wars. The reference to Wittgenstein is a short-hand reference to his critique in the *Philosophical Investigations* of an ancient, and still prevalent, view of definition:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: 'There *must* be something common, or they would not be called "games"' – but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that . . . And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing.[1]

Wittgenstein here questions an approach (the second model) which is captured by Plato in an amusing passage of the *Meno*. Socrates, trying to manoeuvre Meno into defining the essence of virtue, turns to the word 'bee' to illustrate his point:

> I seem to be in luck. I wanted one virtue and I find that you have a whole swarm of virtues to offer. But seriously, to carry on this metaphor of the swarm, suppose I asked you what a bee is, what is its essential nature [εἴ μου ἐρομένου μελίττης περὶ

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[1] Wittgenstein (1953) §66.

οὐσίας ὅτι ποτ᾽ ἐστίν], and you replied that bees were of many different kinds, what would you say if I went on to ask: 'And is it in being bees that they are many and various and different from one another? Or would you agree that it is not in this respect that they differ, but in something else, some other quality like size or beauty?'[2]

The second model represents not only a view of definition which is still widespread, but also a view of the relationship between language and dialect (or, more simply, of linguistic variation). That is to say, just as in the ancient grammatical tradition nominal inflection was conceived as a citation form with πτῶσις (Latin *declinatio*), falling away from the standard,[3] so by the time of the Alexandrian grammarians linguistic variation was regarded in terms of a standard which underwent mutation or modification. The phrase for 'citation form' (ὀϱθὴ πτῶσις ~ Latin *casus rectus*) is echoed in the term ὀϱθότης 'uprightness, correctness', used of language by Gorgias, and picked up by Aristophanes in a reference to Sophistic discourse.[4] The slippage between correctness as a property of locution (a matter of style and rhetorical theory) and correctness as a property of language itself (a concern of dialectology) was as easy in antiquity as it is in the modern national context. At approximately what period this slippage started in the Greek world, and how it relates to the development of the *koine*, is an important issue in the study of how a notion of standard language emerged. The focus of this chapter will be the willingness or otherwise of speakers in the Greek world to modify the way they wrote more or less before 400 BC.

Western classical scholarship has not, on the whole, dealt in a satisfactory way with the notions of linguistic diversity and standard language in the ancient world, no doubt because the glasses through which we look at ancient views on language are inherited from the classical tradition itself, to borrow another image from Wittgenstein).[5] The interpretation of linguistic variety as essence and variation (mostly conceived as corruption) which emerged in the complex sociolinguistic milieu of Hellenistic and Roman Greece was easily translated into a Latin context by Roman grammarians, and spread with equal ease into medieval and modern European thought. There was no obvious external challenge to this way of thinking about language. The closest neighbour and intellectual rival of the Greco-Roman world (subsequently medieval and Byzantine Europe) was the Islamic Arab civilization along its southern border. Here by coincidence a similar model (and an analogous grammatical tradition) emerged, owing to the canonization of the language of the Qur'ân as 'Arabic' *tout simple*, and (as in Greece) the subservience of grammatical activity to textual exegesis.[6]

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[2] Meno 72a–b, tr. Guthrie.

[3] First at Aristotle, Poetics 1457a18.

[4] So also in Plato; useful discussion by Dover (1993) 29–31; Gorgias fr. 6.2 (Epitaphios: probably last quarter of the fifth century); Ar. Frogs 1181 τῶν ἐπῶν.

[5] Wittgenstein (1953) §104.

[6] Unlike the Greeks, the Arab grammarians refer to notional (idealized) native speakers (in general, the Bedouin) whose language is by definition 'correct' (the Roman attitude is perhaps closer to that of the Arabs in this respect). The critical similarity, however, is as follows: 'Through a process of

The questions that need to be answered are: (i) where exactly do we find standard and variation in the epichoric period (Greece before the Macedonian hegemony) and what is the relationship between them? (ii) how does this relate to the so-called Hellenistic *koine*? In Greek studies linguistic diversity as a fact has of course been faced, since it is a troublesome feature of ancient texts which cannot be ignored. The dominant paradigms in interpreting the data have, it seems to me, been as follows: to handle linguistic diversity as a literary device, and to view linguistic homogeneity (the rapid rise of the *koine*) as analogous to the imposition or spread of a modern colonial language such as English or Spanish.

In this context modern scholarship has on the whole found it convenient to divide the Greek data into three distinct categories, corresponding to three chronological stages. Firstly, the language of oral epic (Homer and Hesiod), which is a special case and is explained by appeal to the literary term *Kunstsprache*. This is a vague notion which denotes a language marked by forms belonging to different dialects and different periods: it could never have been spoken at any particular time, and is therefore 'artificial'.[7] The position taken here is that the difference between the epic *Kunstsprache* and other literary languages of the Greek world (poetry and prose) is not so qualitatively significant, given that every genre of ancient Greek literary output was marked by a characteristic (and, on a simplistic view, 'artificial') mixture of dialect forms. Secondly, we find in the so-called archaic and classical periods a period of acknowledged diversity where across the Greek world people spoke and wrote in various local dialects, except that when composing high literature they often used a 'foreign' dialect, or at least a dialect marked by 'foreign' forms. This can be interpreted as an artistic-literary device, connected with the classical notion of 'first inventor' (πρῶτος εὑρετής): the genre reflects the dialect of the person or group most associated with the development of that genre.[8] Finally the dialects were squashed by the *koine*, an idiom spread by the Macedonian empire and clearly an expanded form of Attic.

None of this is unreasonable as part of a literary analysis of individual texts, or indeed of a particular poetic idiom (Homeric language, or the language of Pindar). The problem is that the relationship between diversity and standard has hardly been explored beyond the most basic level. What is needed is a framework

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idealization, not uncommon in a speech community in which there is diglossia, this language [sc. the correct variety] is also regarded as the mother tongue of all members of the community who have received an education and make an effort to speak correctly': Versteegh (1997) 42.

[7] Since the work of Parry it has been accepted that the linguistic mix of the poetry owes its genesis to the input of a number of different dialects in oral composition over a long period. A useful overview in Palmer (1980) 83–101.

[8] Attic comedy and forensic rhetoric are generally (and no doubt rightly) thought to be the literary idioms closest to 'real' Attic. This of course begs the question, which Attic? Presumably one linguistic variety (and not necessarily the Umgangssprache) of a particular socio-economic group. In any case, it is clear that comedy – being written in verse – contains literary forms (such as the disyllabic dative plural) which are by convention 'filtered out' of dialectal analysis. Analogous processes may have been at work even in naturalistic orators such as Lysias. See in general Dover (1997) 96–130, and for comedy Willi (2002).

within which to make sense of the (quite substantial) data that we have. This is a sociolinguistic rather than a literary issue, and for answers we can turn to models from modern linguistic investigation.

We can start by asking: was there *no* notion of standard in the epichoric period? how, for example, do we imagine the widespread familiarity with epic across the Greek world influenced the linguistic culture? how do we imagine the dramatic transition from dialect diversity to *koine* took place?

An accident of historical terminology on the Greek side has prevented soul-searching which Latinists have been unable to avoid: that is to say, the question of when Latin turned into Italian (or Spanish, or Romanian) has not been an issue for Western Hellenists, simply because we speak of Ancient and Modern Greek, but not Ancient and Modern Latin. The question (when did Latin turn into Italian) is badly put and misleading, and we shall return to it: but it forced Romance philologists to question notions of 'standard' versus 'vernacular', in fact to sharpen their notions of what constitutes a *koine*. In the Greek world, on the other hand, one might think that people spoke and wrote as they pleased until the business-like imperialism of Macedon enforced a standard. The notion of *koine*, however, once unpacked, becomes difficult to contain within its traditional chronological boundaries. One problem that has dogged discussion of standard, variation (regional and social dialect), and *koine* is that the disciplines these terms pertain to (classics and linguistics) developed in an unusual sociolinguistic context, namely Western Europe and North America; and the language model that is in some sense built into them reflects their origin (nation states with peculiar colonial histories and standardized national languages). This is true also of the term *diglossia*, which was introduced into academic linguistic discourse (by Ferguson in 1959) in an effort to describe a situation which is essentially alien to Western thought about language: linguists have used the term ever since while arguing about what it means and criticizing Ferguson's first attempt to apply it.[9] The problem, however, lies in the underlying language model, rather than in this or that nuance tacked onto the term: to talk of a continuum is hardly more helpful than talking of high and low varieties if one fails to distinguish between the language that speakers are producing on each occasion, and the language they imagine they are producing).

We have already noted some of the similarities between the Greek and the Arabic language communities; and if we look to Arabic for a model to understand the Greek *koine*,[10] we are immediately tempted by a new working definition: on the analogy of modern standard Arabic we can say that for our purposes the *koine* constitutes a written standard to which no spoken variety corresponds exactly. It is an abstraction which arguably corresponds to the feeling of speakers about their linguistic identity; adherence to the 'standard' is on this model a positive statement, not the result of coercion. We are then forced to question whether there

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[9] Criticism by El-Hassan (1977), among others. Ferguson (1959) did not in fact coin the term: see Shalev (2006).

[10] Following Versteegh (2002).

could ever be a written language which corresponded precisely to a vernacular (spoken variety). If not, it might turn out that this is not an accidental but an essential property of written language: and that *koine* starts in Greek with (*a*) the development of writing, and (*b*) the development of a sense that there existed a body of canonical 'texts'.[11]

Jumping back for a moment to the other side of the dark ages, the decipherment of Linear B started a perplexed debate among Mycenologists: how could tablets from across the Greek world (from Crete to Thebes) be so linguistically homogeneous? The answer seems to be a common scribal language (another *koine*), bundled up with a largely uniform script, which does not reflect local dialect differences.[12]

Mycenaean script disappeared, of course, with Mycenaean civilization, and the Greek dialects flourished and diverged for two or three relatively unsettled centuries, free from the checks that a writing system and associated cultural paraphernalia interject.[13] If any sense of common 'Greek' identity survived these centuries it must have been tied up with cultural artefacts such as poetry. One thin thread of continuity which emerged from the so-called Dark Age was the tradition of heroic song which the Greeks, in common with many other Indo-European peoples, had maintained from an earlier era. The designation of epic language and other poetic idioms as *koinai* is well-established,[14] and implies, not that the poets working within the tradition use an identical idiom, but that they refer back to a common idiom which their own production both instantiates and expands. The poetic idiom is a variety of language which is identifiable by being subject to certain norms, and the reasons for accepting these norms are cultural: a speech community accepts constraints (such as foreign dialectal forms) for the sake of a perceived benefit (the location of the 'text' in a particular space). The poetic *koinai* are not so different from the political *koine* which is most associated with the term. In this connection we may recall Lord's study of Homeric composition, where he draws an analogy between the bardic appropriation of the poetic tradition and the speaker's mastery of her native tongue:

> When we speak a language, our native language, we do not repeat words and phrases that we have memorized consciously, but the words and sentences emerge from habitual usage. This is true of the singer of tales working in his specialized grammar. He does not 'memorize' formulas, any more than we as children 'memorize' language. He learns them by hearing them in other singers' songs . . . The learning of an oral poetic language follows the same principles as the learning of language itself.[15]

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[11] As Homeric and Hesiodic epic gradually supplanted rivals. The social tensions that a body of classical literature can produce is a favourite theme in Aristophanes: see Dover (1993) 24–37.

[12] So Bartoněk (1966), Palmer (1980) 53; cf. Duhoux (1985) 38–9. The term 'Mycenaean koine' is also used by archaeologists to refer to the material culture of the region.

[13] See Morpurgo Davies (1987), on the development of ancient notions of 'language' versus 'dialect', and Ruijgh (1995) on the fluctuating date of the Greek alphabet (recent work has tended to put it back, even as early as the tenth century BC).

[14] For a good collection of essays on the subject, see Hodot (2001).

[15] Lord (1960) 36.

The notion of a literary *koine* is useful, therefore, because it implies a package of cultural behaviour greater than a mere literary dialect or *Kunstsprache*. It is widely, if vaguely, accepted that Homeric epic did not have to be 'translated' from one dialect to another: this is a statement partly about the pan-Hellenic nature of the texts, and partly about the mutual intelligibility of the Greek dialects. It is of course true that many peculiarities of the epic tradition will not have been subject to dialectal alteration: features of phonology, morphology or lexicon which were either integrated into specific formulas, or constituted part of the resources of the 'artificial' bardic language.[16] Nevertheless, Parry's analysis of bardic method gives every reason to believe that epic language (especially perhaps at the phonological level) was adapted to local dialect within these parameters.[17] There is indeed evidence from the dialects for regional varieties of epic diction: Boeotian inscriptions, for example, show that there must have been a native Homeric tradition which was fundamentally the same as the tradition familiar to us from the vulgate of Homer, but which had made itself at home in the Greek of Boeotia.[18] The notion of normativity, then, that epic language carries with it is not tied narrowly to dialect; but it does imply that genre is associated with a specific linguistic variety which is likely to contain alien elements. There is an interesting analogy with the local alphabets of Greece: while it seems likely that the Greek states individualized their own varieties of the script (to achieve distinctiveness),[19] they are nevertheless all variations on a single pattern (recognisably the same script).

It is notoriously uncertain when the Homeric poems were written down: but the spread of Homeric epic, and in general the whole pan-Hellenic consciousness that has been connected with the later Geometric period (eighth century BC),[20] seems to coincide also with the spread of the new alphabet in the Greek world.[21] These two developments (which I am assuming to be unrelated) must have had an impact on Greek linguistic consciousness. In particular, it seems likely that they played an important role in the rise of three (related) ideas: (*a*) genre, specifically the connection between form and a peculiar variety of language, (*b*) the notion of a standard, against which everyday speech could be compared and judged, and (*c*)

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[16]   Apart from the technical reasons, there are also literary or ideological reasons for maintaining exotic and archaic elements in a special register such as epic: witness the use of this medium by the Delphic oracle.

[17]   So rightly Horrocks (1997) 18: 'Although such an artificial language could never have been the spoken dialect of any region, it should be emphasized that the fundamentals of epic grammar and diction were subject to regular modernization, broadly in line with the contemporary spoken Greek of the localities where epic bards were working, albeit with archaic and "foreign" dialectal retentions at each stage.' Cf. Parry (1932) 9–10, 17–21.

[18]   See the study by Vottéro (1996).

[19]   So Luraghi (forthcoming).

[20]   So Snodgrass (1971); cf. Nagy (1979) 7 and (1990) 52–115.

[21]   The relationship between writing and Homeric epic has been treated at length by Powell (1996), whose conclusion (not widely accepted) is that Phoenician script was adapted for the purpose of writing down epic.

the connection between text and (national) identity.[22]

So (returning to Plato's bee) if Greeks had a sense that they were Greeks by reference to a common national property such as epic, then one can see how there might be a subtle shift in the linguistic culture, as bundled-up with epic comes the idea of epic language. At the same time, writing leads to a number of regional standards, to which we can now turn.

The political structure of the ancient Greek world meant that there was no standard language corresponding to Latin in Roman Italy, or a modern standard such as English, French, or Italian. It is hard to think of a parallel, ancient or modern, for this situation: a collection of small states speaking closely related dialects, with a loose sense of political and ethnic affiliation, each state using its own written standard (and indeed its own variety of the alphabet). Even within the Greek world, however, there were exceptions to the principle of unchecked diversity: the larger Greek city-states (πόλεις) such as Attica and Laconia must presumably have contained numerous 'sub-dialects' (social and regional) for which there was no written form; and in Ionia the Ionian states adopted a written standard based on Miletus at such an early stage that there is very little evidence for the diversity which Herodotus records and general dialectology would in any case predict.[23] There were, however, distinctive cultural attitudes towards language use and literacy across the Greek world: we can contrast the Ionian practice with (say) that of Laconia or Boeotia, where differences in orthographic culture grew, presumably, out of differing degrees of interest in language. The Boeotians took great efforts to record changes in their language, as it raced ahead of all the other dialects towards modern Greek, while the laconic Spartans seem to have been relatively uninterested in orthographic consistency.[24]

The area of the Greek world for which we have the most evidence is of course Attica, which, as we noted above, is unlikely to have been linguistically homogeneous. Clearly there is orthographic standardization: but the phonology and morphology have also been standardized, and, since we are used to believing that Greeks were unworried by linguistic diversity, we need to ask why. I have argued elsewhere that there is evidence in the fifth century for a prestige variety within Attica, rather than the mere recognition that different social groups speak in different ways.[25] The literary evidence points to this: Old Comedy refers to politicians who, it is alleged, could hardly speak proper Attic.[26] This is generally the result of one or both of the following deficiencies: barbarian blood (the link

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[22] Cf. Meillet (1929) 138: 'Au moment où la littérature est apparue et s'est développée, sans doute avec rapidité, le monde hellénique, tout divers qu'il était, sentait son unité.' See further Silk, pp. 00–00 above.

[23] Herodotus 1. 142, γλῶσσαν δὲ οὐ τὴν αὐτὴν οὗτοι νενομίκασι, ἀλλὰ τρόπους τέσσερας παραγωγέων.

[24] Cf. Bourguet (1927) 8): 'Je crois bien que nulle part n'est attesté un usage aussi peu tyrannique qu'à Sparte. Ce fait est dans doute fort inattendu dans un pays de discipline.'

[25] Colvin (2004a).

[26] Colvin (1999) 282, 292.

with ethnicity), and low social status (stems from the absence of an appropriate *paideia* – to speak good Attic one needs an education). Another reference to what we might call social dialect is the ranting of the Old Oligarch against the incursions of the new 'Piraeus Greek';[27] this, no doubt, was the expanded international Attic which lay at the vernacular end of the continuum later known as the Hellenistic *koine*.

There is also evidence from epigraphy: the contrast between public and private inscriptions is an obvious place to look. We know that the Ionic alphabet was in widespread use in fifth-century Attica; Threatte puts the main period of transition at 480-30, and concludes that 'Ionic script was employed by most persons for private purposes by the last quarter of the century.'[28] Public inscriptions, on the other hand, are written almost exclusively in Attic script until 403/2 BC. By the middle of the fifth century a *stoichedon* Attic chancellery style was established, which Immerwahr describes as a 'purist Attic alphabet that tended to resist the influx of Ionic letters'.[29] Now, the first page of any linguistic textbook warns you not to confuse script with language; but a written standard plays an enormously important role in the formation of a social consciousness of a 'language',[30] and we shall need to return to this.

For further evidence of standardization we can turn from script to language proper, and here we do indeed find differences between private and public inscriptions at the phonological and morphological levels. They have been well-documented, and include the retention of the *a*-stem dative plural ending –ασι/-ησι in public inscriptions until around 420, when (it must have been) by official decision they were replaced by the -αις that one finds in literary texts and private inscriptions.[31] (The distribution of *o*-stem dative plurals is similar, although –οισι gives way to -οις by the middle of the century.) Phonological variation is notoriously difficult to detect, owing to the standardized orthography that we have already considered. To find traces of colloquial varieties in a corpus language the best one can do is to look at graffiti, curse tablets, and a variety of private inscriptions in the hope of finding an orthographic mistake: that is, a spelling which gives an insight into the pronunciation of a (relatively unlettered) writer. The recent publication of an ostrakon bearing the text τὸν λιμὸν ὀστρακίδ<δ>ω indicates (in my view) the likelihood of a social dialect of Attic which shared the δδ (< *dy*) reflex with Boeotian in place of standard Attic ζ.[32]

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[27] Ps.-Xenophon, Ath. Pol. 2. 7–8.

[28] Threatte (1980) 33.

[29] Immerwahr (1990) 121.

[30] Cf. Meillet (1929) 121: 'Il y a de l'hypocrisie dans le dédain des linguistes pour les langues littéraires.'

[31] Dover (1981), who also points out that Ar. Thesmo. 431 (τὰ δ'ἄλλα μετὰ τῆς γραμματέως συγγράψομαι, 'the rest I shall get written down with the secretary') implies the existence of a chancellery style.

[32] Kerameikos ostrakon published by Brenne (2002) 97–100, and dated to c. 471. Discussion of linguistic implications by Colvin (2004a).

For cultural and political reasons Boeotian was a dialect the Athenians may have had particular reasons to distance themselves from (we can speculate that this may be a reason why the chancellery language took such a long time to let go of the disyllabic dative plural). We have already noted the tendency of the Boeotians to innovate orthographically as their dialect changed. Now, Luraghi has argued that Greek states with similar dialects manipulated their graphic systems to achieve distinctiveness from their neighbours, and the difference between the Boeotian and Attic practice is intriguing in this light:[33] the implication is that differences in regional epigraphic standards were deliberately maintained. However, Athenian conservatism may also be partly due to the large body of literary material in Attica which was written down by the late fifth century, a tradition of writing which could be traced back to epic itself (we may imagine that the Athenians regarded themselves as heirs to the Ionic literary tradition). Constant *metacharakterismos* (transcription) would be very inconvenient in a culture which was coming to regard itself as the centre of Greek literary production; and we remind ourselves that this is another area in which the Athenians differed from the pitiful Boeotians, who were probably without a tradition of written high literature at this date.[34]

Here it may be helpful to consider the question we posed above regarding the change from Latin to Romance, where the link between linguistic consciousness and written standard seems to have played a central role. In the last two decades it has become accepted in Latin studies that one must distinguish between linguistic change (which may be gradual, and generally operates at a level below the consciousness of the language speakers), and change in linguistic terminology (including the designation by name of languages, dialects, and other varieties). To name a linguistic variety is to make an ideological choice which is likely to have social or political implications; it need not be the immediate result of linguistic change (and conversely, linguistic change need not result in a change in language name). Latin turned into Italian when speakers stopped calling it Latin, shortly after Dante established a new written standard. Language naming seems always to have been intimately connected with the creation of a written variety: the Italian discovery of *Italiano* follows a similar development in Gaul, namely the creation of written Old French.[35] Dante had called Latin *Grammatica*, and Italian *Latino*: he 'did not regard Latin as the origin of the popular languages, but rather he apprehended it as a common way of writing, unaffected by dialectal differences'.[36] There is a parallel between Latin in the linguistic diversity of 'pre-Romance'

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[33] Luraghi (forthcoming).

[34] The effect of metacharakterismos in Attica has been overestimated: it was formerly imagined that literary production was in the Attic script until 403/2, when a wholesale translation into Ionic script took place which is likely to have introduced errors into the manuscript traditions of earlier texts. It seems clear, however, that most literary production made use of the Ionic script by the second half of the fifth century: see Colvin (1999) 92–103 and D'Angour (1999).

[35] Wright (1991b).

[36] Janson (2002) 123, a sketch of the position given more fully in Janson (1991). See also Lloyd (1991) and Wright (1991b).

Europe and modern standard Arabic: the contemporary difference between the two language areas is the result of European nationalism in the early modern period which led to the creation of a number of regional standards (the development is still in progress in post-Franco Spain and elsewhere).

To return to the Greek world: the beautiful *stoichedon* inscriptions erected by the Athenian state must have been influential in leading to a notion of Attic as a theoretical entity which defined a political-ethnic group (just as the Homeric text may have contributed to the concept of pan-Hellenism some centuries earlier). The critical period in which the groundwork was laid for a new political *koine* was the time between the Persian wars and the Macedonian hegemony – precisely, in fact, the period which has traditionally been designated 'classical' in the West. The Persian wars reinforced a sense of common identity among the Greeks, and were followed by a period of prosperity and self-confidence which saw an increase in epigraphic and literary production. Education became increasingly common, and was to a certain extent institutionalized; and this obsession with education was a development which transcended the individual city-states owing to the pan-Hellenic nature of the sophistic movement.

This is the context which made the emergence of a new *koine* natural and, indeed, inevitable. This was the *koine* of *paideia*, which covered education, rhetoric and (therefore) political discourse. It was, as a result, the *koine* of literary prose, and in this sense was the true heir to Ionic. No doubt the Athenian empire led to the emergence of an expanded 'international' Attic(-Ionic) vernacular, but without the underpinning of the *koine* this would have been just one more lingua franca that perished when the conditions which gave rise to it changed. No doubt also the Ionic flavour of the epic vulgate contributed to the sense that the Hellenistic *koine*, with *its* Ionic flavour, was a pan-Hellenic dialect; but there is a complex nexus of connections here, rather than the immediate causal link that has been supposed.

The *koine* did not take hold in the Greek world because it was imposed by the Macedonian regime. It was the natural idiom for the new political and cultural structures of the new Greek world, as the language of government (decrees, laws, letters) and education, Clearly, the Hellenistic world provided the bureaucratic and institutional framework for a prose *koine*, which was imposed only in the sense that 'Homer' imposed epic language onto heroic verse in archaic Greece (both *koinai* are positive statements of identity and cultural loyalty). And there is no reason to suppose that local dialects, or even local languages (for example, in Asia Minor),[37] ceased to be spoken as a result of the integration of the *koine* into the structures of government and elite education. The *koine* was the ideal, and the symbol of Greek history, culture, and identity. In an analogous manner, Arabic vernaculars persist, and Romance vernaculars also – until their political conversion into languages. In any case (as with Arabic and Latin), phonological changes which are already detectable in the late-classical period would have made many features

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[37] I have suggested elsewhere that Lycian continued to be spoken long after its disappearance from the epigraphic record (Colvin 2004b).

of the educated standard highly ambiguous in a spoken context.[38]

To return to a question we posed at the beginning of the chapter: the transition from the Greek idea of Greek as a family of overlapping idioms to the idea of Greek as an ideal with approximations will (on this view) have been in progress in the classical period itself; we can imagine the *koine* bubbling to the surface towards the end of this period like an underground stream which has been there all along, rather than simply appearing by decree in the new world of Alexander. Indeed, on a wider level it might be argued that Western classicists have always tended to overestimate the break between the classical and the Hellenistic worlds, and to overlook connections at the literary or political level. New Comedy and Hellenistic poetry would undoubtedly look less new if we had more fourth-century poetry and drama.

We might well question what we are talking about when we assign a name to this idiom which lasted a millennium or more. The present chapter has taken the position that it is more helpful to see a *koine* as an abstract norm based on a written tradition than as something likely to emerge from the mouth of a particular speaker. The development of chancellery language in imperial Athens systematized a conceptual framework whose genesis we can see, if we choose, in the very beginnings of Greek literacy and pan-Hellenic identity. The literary prestige of the Ionic dialect is unlikely to have had an impact on the spoken language in the Hellenistic period: languages generally change in the direction of the lowest social variety, not the highest;[39] and this is in fact what spoken Greek (like spoken English, in a later age) did. The *koine* is an idiom which implies that the speakers know who they are (Greeks); they know which language they are speaking (Greek); and they know that they will be able to communicate with anyone who shares the *paideia* which becomes the defining feature of the language community.

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[38] In a ritual context, of course, there are likely to be strategies employed to preserve important morphophonemic or lexical distinctions in a liturgical language (at least for an educated elite); this may offer a clue to understanding how declamations of classical or classicizing material were conducted in late antiquity (Libanius, for example, in the fifth century AD).

[39] See e.g. Milroy (1992), who comments (on 149): 'the difficulty in explaining why linguistic changes do not usually move in the direction of the prestige norm (as used by elite groups) is a familiar one.'

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