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# The Influence Of Greek On Other Languages

George Kanarakis\*

*“The urge to discover secrets is deeply ingrained in human nature”*

John Chadwick

## RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur de cet article se penche sur l'influence de la langue grecque sur les autres langues et note que les linguistes acceptent qu'il n'y a pas de langues en contact qui soient complètement pures et libres des formes et des structures linguistiques transférées. L'influence de la langue grecque et sa contribution à d'autres langues est un phénomène historique et culturel d'intérêt international. Cet article met l'accent sur l'influence linguistique et socioculturelle diachronique de la langue grecque sur 28 autres langues dans le monde, comme l'illustre un travail collectif publié récemment. Les chercheurs ont éclairé nos connaissances sur ce sujet important et contribuent pratiquement à la planification et l'organisation de l'enseignement / apprentissage d'une langue seconde ou étrangère, fournissant un stimulus pour une exploration plus poussée et productive du sujet vital des contacts mondiaux interlangues et interculturels.

## ABSTRACT

Linguists accept that no languages in contact are completely pure and free of transferred language forms and structures. The Greek language's influence and contribution to other languages is a historical-cultural phenomenon of international interest. This paper focuses on the diachronic linguistic and sociocultural influence of the Greek language on 28 other languages of the world as illustrated in the collective work *H διαχρονική συμβολή της Ελληνικής σε άλλες γλώσσες* [The diachronic contribution of Greek to other languages, ed. George Kanarakis, Athens, 1st ed. 2014, 2nd ed. 2015, in Greek]. The 34 studies by 32 noted scholars enlighten our knowledge on this important subject, contribute practically to the planning and organisation of second or foreign language teaching/learning, and provide a stimulus for further productive exploration of the vital subject of global interlanguage-intercultural contact.

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Within the multinational, multilingual and multicultural history of Europe, the Greek language, which has been since 1981 one of the official languages of the European Community, equal in rank with the languages of its member countries, constitutes a special case of interest.

According to the general acknowledgement of linguists, Greek is the historically unifying language of the European peoples, distinguished by the oldest written texts (the Knossos tablets in the syllabic writing system known as Linear B, dated to at least approximately 1450 BC) covering a time of about 3,450 years,<sup>1</sup> while according to the celebrated hellenist James Thomas Hooker, “We can hypothesize validly that [Linear B] appeared in a somewhat quite older chronology”.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the tremendous historical interest which the Greek language presents with its oldest and rich written tradition among the languages of Europe, it also constitutes a case of particular significance because of its steady cohesion and uninterrupted diachronic continuity, due to the high percentage of words used since antiquity until the present day,<sup>3</sup> without ever losing its original Greek character. Regarding the uninterrupted historical continuity and the unbroken cohesion of the Greek language, which has been used since antiquity in the same geographical area by the same people (the Greeks), the linguist Brian D. Joseph states characteristically “[...] Greek is essentially a single language throughout its long history, yet constitutes a separate and distinct branch of Indo-European, though it too has considerable dialect diversity at all points in its history”.<sup>4</sup>

For these reasons, but also for its early and in depth cultivation by celebrated Greek intellectuals of an international and diachronic range for the expression of high modes of thought (philosophy, rhetoric, science, poetry, logic, etc.), the Greek language succeeded in rising to a level of diachronic value, and did not merely develop to a structurally flexible communication medium. Consequently, it became a base of semantic expression (*semantic language*),<sup>5</sup> a steady point of reference and, therefore, a source of continuous direct and indirect contribution to other languages, especially the European ones and through them to other languages even in remote parts of the world. In addition, Greek never lost its vitality nor its plasticity and it never even reached the point of breaking down into daughter languages, as happened, for example with Demotic Latin to the so-called neolatin languages. In fact, the cultural and purely linguistic

prestige which the Greek language acquired even beyond its geographical area, wherever it was spoken as mother tongue (*national language*), is acknowledged indicatively by the linguist Kenneth Katzner in his work *The Languages of the World*: “Greek, the first great language of Western civilization, is considered by many to be the most effective and admirable means of communication ever devised. Its lucidity of structure and concept, together with its seemingly infinite variety and modes of expression, render it equally suitable to the needs of the rigorous thinker and the inspired poet. We can only surmise how classical Greek must have sounded to the ear, but the spoken word was probably no less beautiful than the written”.<sup>6</sup>

So, while the influx of the richness of Greek into Latin, for example, was impressively extensive and diverse, its influence even on other more recent languages, especially to most European ones, has not been insignificant. Compared with some languages it has been diachronic and at the same time deep and multifaceted. In the past Greek words and word stems entered mainly indirectly through Latin, French or other European languages, while in modern times through newly structured words. In the latter case, these newly made words have as a base mainly Greek word stems adopted into every day communication as well as into scholarly and scientific expression, although frequently this escapes our attention or proves difficult to pinpoint in all its extent. This is a process which has been going on for centuries now, especially since the Renaissance (14th-17th centuries) until our times. This is the unceasing capability of Greek as a special case of a language of civilisation to give expression of new knowledge, something which makes it appear always expressive and timely. This is why we are not surprised that various languages, particularly the European ones, as well as European education and science in general, continue to utilize to full advantage both the linguistic and cultural qualities of the Greek language to the extent that specialist scientists and intellectuals in general acknowledge the inventive dynamism of Greek for a deeper understanding of their own language.

A relevant example, among many others, is the opinion of the American lexicographer John C. Smock, who observed “the mastery of a relatively small number of Greek words infuses with significance tens of thousands of English words and [...] these circumstances justify continued emphasis of the importance of the study of Greek in institutions of general culture”.<sup>7</sup>

In more recent years, among other scholars, worth noting are the opinions of the French linguists Jean Bouffartigue and Anne-Marie Delrieu who in the prologue of their book *Trésors de racines grecques* point out characteristically: “In reality what we were interested in more was to reveal how suitable the Greek language is to describe other worlds as well, apart from the one in which it developed” and then, referring to their native language, state that “the understanding of our language, the rediscovery of its essence – this is the usefulness of knowing the Greek word stems. The Greek stems give the French language its deepest support and, at the same time, they provide it with the highest ability for abstraction. Greece is a distant source of our civilisation, and is alive in the words we say. It shapes our language every day”.<sup>8</sup>

This is why, for the above reasons, according to the renowned linguist David Crystal, “Some writers have even begun to talk of ... Eurogreek”.<sup>9</sup>

However, as we very rarely come across absolutely pure civilisations, in the same way rarely do we come across pure languages. According to Ronald W. Langacker, “Living languages never hold still. Every language is the product of change and continues to change as long as it is spoken. (...) In all probability, no language whose speakers have ever had contact with any other language is completely free of borrowed forms”.<sup>10</sup>

The Greek language’s influence and contribution to other languages, especially to those of the peoples of Europe during antiquity and mainly during the Renaissance period (14th to 17th centuries) and through them to other languages of the world, is a historical-cultural phenomenon of particular interest. After all, the Greek language, being a profoundly cultivated and developed language of civilisation has proven a rich source for the linguistic and cultural creative utilization of the human intellect in Europe, a fact reflected in the old adage, “The Greeks have a word for it”.

Of course, until now the Greek language has been studied extensively regarding not only the language elements it has received from other languages but also the elements of the various language levels (phonetic-phonological, graphemic, morpho-syntactic, lexical and semantic) it has lent to other languages. What had been missing, however, was the examination of the diachronic contribution of Greek to the enrichment of the language levels, not of one language or even of a few but of a large number of languages, not only genetically related like most

languages of Europe (belonging to the Indo-European family), but also of those belonging to different language families geographically located on other continents, as well as isolates. A work of this nature and range had not been attempted in the past, although a number of scholars had noted the need, particularly in the present context of globalization. The collective volume entitled *Η διαχρονική συμβολή της Ελληνικής σε άλλες γλώσσες* (The Diachronic Contribution of Greek to Other Languages), published in Athens by Ekdoseis Papazissis in 2014 (2nd edition, rev. and enl., 2015), is a contribution towards helping to fill this gap in Greek language studies in the field of contrastive linguistics and to inform those who are interested in interlanguage contact and influences, and particularly in the Greek language as linguistic and cultural lender, and why today we can speak of it as “Globogreek”.<sup>11</sup>

This extensive volume presents the collaboration of thirty-two scholars from different countries, including Greece. It highlights through thirty-four specialised studies in a scholarly yet quite easily understandable manner the diachronic dimensions of the international phenomenon of interlanguage contact and the influences arising from it, as well as the multi-level impact (direct and/or indirect) of Greek on other languages throughout its history. The impact of Greek on other languages is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a sociocultural one. Additionally, this work intends to reflect the various ways (similar or different) that these influences have been embodied by other languages and through them into the civilisations of their peoples. It is noteworthy that this volume is based on primary research and investigates the interlanguage and intercultural influences of Greek, relying on relevant documentation, avoiding thoughtless exaggerations which frequently lead to linguistic chauvinisms.

The articles included in this volume go beyond the “expected”, sometimes temporary, influences, and therefore frequently provide important information even for the most established influences of the Greek language.

The languages included are Latin, Italian, French Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, English, German, Dutch, Afrikaans, Swedish, Danish, Russian, Polish, Bulgarian, Croatian, Albanian, Finnish, Hungarian, Turkish, Georgian, Hebrew, Arabic, Maltese, Thai, Korean, Japanese and Chinese. Of course, this does not mean that Greek influences are absent from other languages. The range of studies included in this volume provides a quite comprehensive understanding

of the extent of the influences of Greek on other languages ranging across a broad spectrum of the world.

Notably, the advantage of this collective work lies in the following points:

- First, this broad collective work of thirty-four studies, including two introductory articles, contributed by linguists, philologists and other scholars from a variety of countries, contained in one volume presents research into twenty-eight languages from five continents. From this viewpoint, I believe that it fills a relevant gap in the Greek bibliography.
- Second, the knowledge and methodology of the contributors, who share both their expertise and experience, insure an objective, informed approach to the subject matter.
- Third, this volume substantiatively expands the bibliography, available up to this point of the 21st century, related to the diachronic influence of Greek on other languages of the world (although indirectly in some respects) even on languages geographically and culturally beyond Europe.
- Fourth, the twenty-eight languages presented are not limited to the *Indo-European* family but also belong to other language families not genetically related, such as the *Uralic* (Hungarian, Finnish), *Altaic* (Turkish), *Kartvelian* or *South Caucasian* (Georgian), *Afro-Asiatic* (Hebrew, Arabic, Maltese), *Tai-Kadai* (Thai or Siamese), *Sino-Tibetan* (Chinese), also including *isolates* of East Asia, such as Korean and Japanese (according to some linguists Altaic or, according to others, members of a united Japanese-Korean family).
- Fifth, the total number of languages examined are typologically (structurally) extensive and diverse, that is, some belong to the so-called *inflectional* or *synthetic languages*, like most European ones, and those of idiosyncratic structure, such as Hebrew, Arabic and Maltese. Others are *agglutinative* or *agglutinating*, such as Hungarian, Finnish, Turkish, Georgian, Korean and Japanese, while others are *isolating* or *analytic* or *root* languages, such as Thai and Chinese. The diversity of the languages under examination adds to the originality and pioneering nature of this collective volume.
- Sixth, the totality of the studies reveals different approaches to the common subject of the volume, also reflecting each scholar's particular interest and point of view. This characteristic contributes to a more complete understanding of

the multidimensional variety of ways in which Greek has enriched other languages. Some studies with a historical approach reveal the contacts and influences of Greek which spread to languages of ancient times (Latin, and others), while others relate to comparatively more recent ones (French, Italian, Spanish, and others) and some to even more recent (Finnish, Korean, Afrikaans, and others). Correspondingly, some studies are theoretically more linguistic in the manner of examining the subject and explore the influences of Greek on the various previously mentioned language levels where they appear.

It must also be mentioned that some contributions surprise with the types or even the extent of the influences of the Greek language which were unforeseen and which until the publication of this volume had remained unnoticed. This is due to the fact that quite a few of these studies – as several of their writers have confirmed – had not been undertaken until now, such as with Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Afrikaans, and others.

For the above-mentioned reasons, I believe that this publication which presents the conclusions of expert researchers from Greece and other countries, together with the relevant international bibliography accompanying each study, constitutes a significant collective examination of the impact of Greek on other languages. It not only enlightens this important, often problematic subject by broadening our knowledge, but it also contributes practically to the planning and organisation of Greek language teaching and learning as a second or foreign language. Furthermore, to make their studies more comprehensive, many writers have provided introductory information on the identity and even the history of the language under examination.

In conclusion, I believe that this collective work will attract the interest not only of experts in the theoretical and applied linguistic sciences and of educators in second or foreign language teaching and learning, but also of the general readers. Moreover, it authoritatively expands our knowledge in these scholarly fields providing a broader understanding of the extent of the impact that Greek – one of the oldest and most significant languages of civilisation – to the linguistic and cultural enrichment, initially of the languages of Europe and through them of many other languages of the rest of the world.

It is hoped that this publication will become a stimulus for further productive exploration of the vital subject of global interlanguage-intercultural contacts



and interinfluences within the multinational and multicultural reality of our times.

## NOTES

1. Among other sources, see John Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 13, 15; John Chadwick, *Linear B and Related Scripts*, London: British Museum Publications, 1987, p. 8; Brian D. Joseph, “The Indo-European Language Family: The Linguistic Evidence”, in *A History of Ancient Greek: From the Beginnings to Late Antiquity*, ed. A.-F. Christidis, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.163.
2. J.T. Hooker, *Εισαγωγή στη Γραμμική Β (Linear B: An Introduction*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1980, transl. Haralambos E. Maravelias), Athens: Morfotiko Idryma Ethnikis Trapezis, 1994, p. 53.
3. According to the linguist George Hadzidakis, of the 6,840 words of the Homeric epics 3,385 were used by the Attic writers and 1,165 have survived until today. As well, of the approximately 4,900 words of the New Testament, 2,280 are still used in today’s Standard Modern Greek, while another 2,200 are comprehensible to all Greeks, and only 400 are unintelligible because they are either foreign or they are archaized written words, not of the spoken form of their time (Nicholas G. Contossopoulos, *Γλώσσες και διάλεκτοι της Ευρώπης*, Vol. Α’, Athens: Ekdoseis Grigoris, 1998, p. 59).
4. Joseph, 2001, p. 163.
5. The term “semantic” language indicates that there is primary, that is, causal relation between the word (*signifier*) and its meaning (*signified*), in contrast to the so-called “semiological” languages in which the words (*signifiers*) are conventional and their meanings (*signified*) arbitrary.
6. Kenneth Katzner, *The Languages of the World*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 98.
7. John C. Smock, *The Greek Element in English Words* (ed. Percy W. Long), New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931, p. xi.
8. Jean Bouffartigue and Anne-Marie Delrieu, *Οι ελληνικές ρίζες στη γαλλική γλώσσα (Trésors des racines grecques*, Paris: Belin, 1981, transl. Amalia Mozer), Athens: Ekdoseis Eleftherotypia, 1993, p. 9.
9. David Crystal, “English as a Classical Language” [<http://www.davidcrystal.com/?fileid=-4042>, accessed: 14/12/13].
10. Ronald W. Langacker, *Language and Its Structure: Some Fundamental Linguistic Concepts*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, p. 176.

11. Indicatively see Usa Korntaptim, “The Influence of Greek on Thai”, in *Η διαχρονική συμβολή της Ελληνικής σε άλλες γλώσσες*, ed. George Kanarakis, Athens: Ekdoseis Papazissis, 2014 (2nd edition, rev. and enl., 2015), p. 629.

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