

Intermission 8?: Koine Greek

As we mentioned in the lesson on dialects before, each area of Greece spoke and wrote in their own dialects and inscribed texts were recorded in the dialect of the region where they were set up. As you might expect, however, there was for a long time a “common” dialect—known as Koine—that was spoken in the ports, markets, and other “multinational” spaces in Greek poleis. There were local variations between the various forms of Koine, based on the primary formal dialect of the region. However, since a majority of the islands and coastal cities—i.e., those most involved in interstate trade—around the Aegean spoke variations of Ionic or related East-Greek dialects, the dominant version of this common tongue was largely a simplified version of Ionic.

Several factors converged in the later fifth century and throughout the fourth that led to the concretization and Atticization of this lingua franca. The formation and administration of the Delian League required increased interstate communication than was usual in the archaic and earlier Classical period. At first the Ionic Koine was the primary dialect used for the records of the league. Athens’ eventual hegemony over this federation led to further centralized control over official communication and the use of a heavily Atticized form of Koine for these documents. Athens’ growing political power and the status of Attic as the preeminent literary dialect ensured that the Attic-Ionic Koine of the Delian League became the prominent form of interstate communication by the 4th century.

Philip II of Macedon furthered this trend by instituting the use of the Attic-Ionic Koine as the official language of the Macedonian court. While the Macedonian language was a part of the Northwest Greek family of dialects—and, as such, was related to Doric—Macedonians were long criticized as “barbarians” by other Greeks (v., e.g., Demosthenes’ criticism of Philip [*Philippics* 3.31]). Philip may have used the Attic-Ionic Koine to curry favor with his potential allies and add a sense of legitimacy to his tenuous rule. Regardless of the reasons this variation of Koine became standard within the Macedonian court, it soon spread to the army and the wildly successful military campaigns of Philip and his son Alexander secured the Attic-Ionic Koine’s place as the most widely spoken dialect of the Greek world.

After Alexander’s death, the successor kings retained the use of Koine as the official language of their states. As the veterans of the Macedonian army spread throughout these nascent Hellenistic states, so too did the Attic-Ionic Koine. The Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt and the scholars at the library at Alexandria took great efforts to preserve the earlier standard dialects in the literary texts from the

classical period. The widespread use of Koine as a spoken language, however, ultimately ensured its eventual elevation in status to that of a literary dialect. An important step early in this process occurred in Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE as the Hebrew Bible was translated into Koine Greek. This work was later called the Septuagint, from its Latin description *versio septuaginta interpretum* (“translation of seventy interpreters”), which nods at the tradition that seventy scholars worked on the translation. The Alexandrian Jews, being more fluent in Koine than in Hebrew, used the Septuagint as their primary text of the Old Testament. So, too, did the early Christian sects, who quote the Septuagint widely and follow its language in composing the New Testament, which was also written in the now-familiar Koine. The Greek Church Fathers, too, continued this use of Koine in their writings. Even among the non-Christian literary authors of the Second Sophistic movement (2nd and 3rd centuries CE), we find various elements of Koine mixed into their largely Attic or, more properly, Atticizing texts.

As a general rule, anyone who can read Classical Attic Greek can read Koine with little trouble. Being aware of the major shifts, however, will ease that process and help you appreciate the beautiful simplicity of Koine. Most of the morphological and syntactical changes that occur in the shift from classical Greek to Koine aim at a “regularization” or levelling of forms or syntactical function. These shifts include:

Morphological Changes:

- 1) Many **athematic “–μι” verbs** come to take thematic forms; i.e., they become “ω-verbs” or, in some cases where a thematic option already exists, they just do so more regularly.

δείκνυμι [Class.] = δείκνυω [Koine]

ὄμνυμι [Class.] = ὀμνύω [Koine]

ex: cf. the forms of this word we encountered in the Hipp. *Oath* (5th cent.) to that in the Oath of the Chersonitai (3rd cent.)

- 2) **Strong aorists** come to be replaced by their weak aorist equivalent forms, though they usually just take alphabetic and not sigmatic forms built on the strong aorist base. Where suppletive verb systems have a strong and weak alternative forms for the aorist, the weak form is used more regularly.

ἦλθον [Class.] = ἦλθαν [Koine, v. Luke 2.16]

εἶπον (or rarely ἔλεξαν) [Class.] = ἔλεξαν and εἶπαν [Koine]

ἔλαβον [Class.] = ἔλαβαν [Koine]

ἔπετον (or sometimes ἔπεσον) [Class.] = ἔπεσαν [Koine]

- 3) Although the pluperfect remains rare, in later Classical Greek the **pluperfect active** levels the vowel contraction from the 3rd person singular (ει) to all forms: -ειν, -εις, -ει, -ειμεν, -ειτε, -εισαν. This change is then retained in the Hellenistic Koine.

ἐγεγράφεα [Ion.] = ἐγεγράφη [Att.] = ἐγεγράφειν [Koine]

- 4) The so-called “**irregular**” **comparatives**, i.e., those that demonstrate the sound changes we expect to occur when the Yod of the comparative marker meets a velar or dental at the end of the adjective base, become rare and alternative forms or synonyms are used or a periphrastic form is used.

μειζον [Class.] = μᾶλλον μέγα—or even—μεγότερον [Koine]

ex: Theophrastus, *de Piet.*: μᾶλλον μεγάλη τίς ἐστι τιμή

Syntactical Changes:

- 5) There is an overall **increase in the use of prepositions** where the cases alone would have sufficed in the Classical period. Note that this change also occurred in other IE languages and ultimately led to the loss of nominal inflection and the collapse of the case system altogether in many modern languages (modern Greek, English, French, and Italian, for example, all developed from inflected IE languages but have now allowed the use of prepositions to (largely) supersede the original case-based inflection system).

τοῦ πατρὸς ἐγεννήθη [Class.] = ἐκ πατρὸς ἐγεννήθη [Koine]

ἐπὶ τὰ ἡμέρας [Class.] = ἐπὶ ἑπτὰ ἡμέρας [Koine]

ex: Epist. to Hebr. 11.30: πίστει τὰ τεῖχη Ἱερικῶ ἔπεσαν κυκλωθέντα ἐπὶ ἑπτὰ ἡμέρας.

- 6) The **infinitive is used for purpose clauses** much more frequently in Koine Greek instead of the usual ἵνα, ὅπως, or ὥς with the Subjunctive that is typical in Classical Greek.

ἦλθον ἵνα προσκυνήσωμεν [Class.] = ἦλθον προσκυνῆσαι [Koine]

ex: Matt. 2.2.: ἦλθομεν προσκυνῆσαι αὐτῷ

- 7) Similarly, there is a general loss of the original force of the **Subjunctive and Optative moods**. Instead these moods are used almost interchangeably in various subordinate clauses without regard for their original uses or the temporal sequence of moods. Additionally, there is a drastic decline in the

Intermission 田: Koine Greek

overall use of the optative in Koine Greek (less than 1/2 of a percent of the finite verbs in the New Testament are optative).

οὐ οἶδε τί ἀποκρινοῦνται [Class.] = οὐ οἶδε τί ἀποκριθεῖεν [Koine]

οὐ ᾔδει τί ἀποκρίνοιτο [Class.] = οὐ ᾔδει τί ἀποκριθῇ [Koine]

ex: Mark 9.6: οὐ γὰρ ᾔδει τί ἀποκριθῇ.

- 8) The **middle voice** loses its original reflexive force and is replaced by an active verb with a reflexive pronoun instead. Though the causative middle persists, most middle/passive forms you encounter in Koine Greek will be true passives.

εὐνοούχισαντο [Class.] = εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς [Koine]

ex: Matt 19.12: εἰσὶν εὐνοῦχοι οἵτινες εὐνούχισαν ἑαυτοὺς διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν.

βλέπεσθε [Class.] = βλέπετε ὑμεῖς ἑαυτούς

ex: Mark 13.9: βλέπετε δὲ ὑμεῖς ἑαυτούς

Phonological Changes:

There are also a number of phonological changes that occur in the Hellenistic and Roman periods that bring the pronunciation of Koine Greek very close to its modern equivalent. For the most part these are shifts in phonology only and will not be reflected in the texts as you read them. To satisfy your curiosity, however, the most important of these include: the fricativization of some of the stop consonants (β: /b/ > /v/; δ: /d/ > /ð/; γ: /g/ > /ɣ/; φ: /p^h/ > /f/; θ: /t^h/ > /θ/; χ: /k^h/ > /x/) and zeta (ζ: /sd/ > /z/), pitch-based accentuation is replaced by the stress accent, loss of distinction in vowel quantity, monophthongization (α: /āi/ > /ā/; η: /ēi/ > /ē/; ω: /ōi/ > /ō/) and other slight vowel shifts, and the loss of the spiritus asper (/h/) due to the influence of Ionic in the development of Koine.