

## The Greek Language as a Basis of Intellectual Creativity.

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Allow me to begin my address with three important points: the first is a statement by **Ferdinand de Saussure**, the founder of modern linguistics, who expressly taught that: "*Language can be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and language is the back. One cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time.*" The second statement belongs to perhaps the greatest philosopher of language, **Ludwig Wittgenstein**: "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*". The third point is a widely known saying of the **English language** in connection with the Greek language: "*The Greeks must have a word for it.*"

Out of these points three significant issues seem to arise which will be dealt with in our talk: (a) Language and the intellect (b) Language and creativity, and (c) The Greek language and intellectual creativity.

### (a) Language and the intellect

Every human language is a tool for classification, is a *taxonomy* of the world. **Each language is a different classification of the world.** It is a different way of seeing, feeling and arranging the world, which is realized through linguistic means, always depending on the way a people codifies *notions into meanings*. This is effected in two particular ways: through the **lexicon** and through the **grammar selected** by each people in order to express the notions they need. It is evident that the linguistic procedure is in close relationship to the way of *thinking* and the *mentality* of each people.

I have consciously used the word 'select' because in the creation of a national language nothing is accidental or mechanical. A language is the final product of selections made by the members of a linguistic community from a variety of possible formal and semantic approaches. Thus **the construction of a language is, by definition, a very subtle and complex creative procedure. Intellectual creativity starts with individual speakers but it is effected collectively, as every language is the outcome of processing, participation and silent consent by the whole of a people; it is the final outcome of a social convention.**

Here we may refer to another basic issue: Man **thinks by means of the words and the grammatical patterns and notions** of his language. **Tren-delenourg's** famous statement that "*Aristotle's categories would be different, if the philosopher spoke a different language*" is typical of the case. The **Sapir-Whorf** theory, according to which all our intellect "*is at the mercy of a particular language which constitutes the means of expression of a society*", is too well-known: we are obliged to think *through* and *by means* of the categories and distinctions codified in each particular language. This "linguistic determinism", however, which had already started with **Wilhelm von Humboldt** (that language determines our intellectual functions), in terms of the current state of linguistic science, does not mean that man is enslaved by his language. The opposite is true: human language – as

Chomsky has shown – is characterized by the quality of **creativity** par excellence. Through his mother tongue man is in a position to produce and perceive (in the form of sentences) an infinite amount of information, which by far exceed his linguistic experience, in the sense that they contain elements of novelty.

Concluding, we may say here that **language and the intellect are closely and directly bound in a kind of relationship which is by no means one of ‘subordination’** (that of language to the intellect or vice versa), but one of *freedom* and *creativity*. Human intellect functions **before** the words, **through** the words and **beyond** the words. Whatever our intellect perceives, we can express it through language. It is not accidental that the Greeks came to coin the word λόγος with a double meaning: that of **logical thinking** (ratio, reason) and that of **language** (oratio, oration), conscious of the close connection between language and the intellect.

#### (b) Language and creativity

- (i) **Language as a code** is inherently creative. The code of language is a finite system of *lexical items* and *rules* through which an **infinite number of combinations** and denotations are produced. It is in this quality of language that **creativity** lies.
- (ii) **The production of speech** (spoken or written) is also by no means an automatic or mechanical procedure. Each sentence we produce in our linguistic communication is a product of a **conscious selection**, depending upon the subtlety or difficulty of a sentence. Selection entails the speaker’s duty to choose the *proper word* or *phrase*, the proper *syntactic structure* and *order of words*, the correct *intonation* (or *punctuation*) and so on, among a multitude of choices and interrelationships. **The production of speech may thus become a highly demanding creative process, depending upon the particular text or level of communication.**
- (iii) **The perception of speech**, on the other hand, is an equally creative linguistic process. Linguistic research has shown that the perception of oral or written speech, decoding and comprehension, requires complex perceptual processes. **Once more we may stress the fact that language perception is a very complex, fine and extremely creative**

**linguistic and intellectual procedure**, especially when perception of *literary texts* is concerned, considering the problems of *interpretation*.

#### (c) The Greek language and intellectual creativity

It is widely acknowledged that in ancient times (especially during the so-called *classical antiquity*) the Greeks developed a civilization, a system of *principles* and *values*, *institutions* and *arts*, *sciences* and *letters*, i.e. all those constituents which formed the basis of what in our days is known as the **European civilization**. Such basic notions as those connected with the social institutions, i.e. *democracy*, *aristocracy*, *tyranny*, *politics*, and so on, have their origins in the ancient Greek civilization; and so do the notions pertaining to the arts: *theater*, *myth*, *mythology*, *drama*, *comedy*, *tragedy*, *music*, *melody*, *rhythm*, *architecture* etc., or terms like *theory*, *practice*, *empirical*, *logic*, *system*, *method*, *category*, *hypothesis*, *analysis*, *synthesis*, *criterion*, *hierarchy*, and those for whole fields of science as: *philosophy*, *philology*, *history*, *mathematics*, *geometry*, *astronomy*, *economics*, *physics*, *technology*, etc. The same is true about such notions as those connected with education: *school*, *pedagogics*, *academy*, *gymnasium*, *lyceum*, *athletics*, etc., or for that matter, those pertaining to the description of language: *grammar*, *syntax*, *etymology*, *lexicon*, *phrase*, *syllable*, *synonym*, *phonetics*, *dialect*, *alphabet*, and so on. One could go on with thousands of words, if we only think that c. 30.000 words of the English language directly or indirectly are of Greek origin.

This unusual bloom which marked the Greek civilization was the formulation of the **principles** and **values** which must lie at outcome of an exceptional intellectual development, born out of the inquisitive spirit of the Greeks. This quest, especially their capacity and intellectual eagerness *to ask questions* and *pose problems*, brought them to the basis of man’s life.

I have said all these in order to show how, through the cultivation of *knowledge* (the sciences) and *beauty* (the arts), that is through a substantial concept of **education**, the Greeks reached some very high pinnacles in the cultivation of the spirit and, at the same time, very fine and complex forms of intellectual creativity. For all these intellectual conceptions to be expressed by the great thinkers, the philosophers, scien-

tists, poets or dramatists, an equally developed linguistic instrument was needed: a **language** which would possess the capacity to bring to light the most subtle and dense philosophical concepts, the finest emotional shades in drama and poetry, the most precise and explicit terms of science. In short, what was needed was a **finely cultivated language**, one which would lend itself to the expression of thousands of altogether novel notions; a language with a great potential for **production** through all the grammatical categories. Such a language cannot exist **before** the communicative needs of a highly civilized society. **Language does not precede intellectual development. Education, civilization, intellectual development create the necessary prerequisites for the existence of a cultivated language, a language which will express creativity in the sectors of science and civilization. Once such a language of high quality and explicitness is born, it stimulates the intellect towards creative function.**

The great thinkers (philosophers, poets, dramatists, historians, scientists, etc.) are by necessity the **great creators of language**. The subtle, complex, rich in original ideas and thoughts, content of a text demands an equally high quality language to express it. A significant criterion of quality is the *derivational dynamism* and the *compounding potential* of a language. It is moreover the existence of **fine linguistic mechanisms** which in Ancient Greek have become incorporated into the grammatico-syntactic system of the language.

I will refer here to a few examples, indicative of the case. A sample of fine and precise linguistic expression is provided by the grammatical structure of the so-called **“optative mood of indirect speech”**:

- (1) Herakles eporei poian hodon epi ton bion trapoito.

“Hercules was wondering which way to follow in his life”.

The speaker of Ancient Greek would use this particular type of the verb (which denotes *weak affirmation*) if the verb of the subordinate clause depended upon a main clause verb in the past tense. We can see it more clearly in the *‘that’ clauses* (clauses with *hôs*) :

- (2) elegen ho katêgoros hôs egô hubristês eiên.

“The accuser contended that I was an offender”.

In contrast to:

- (3) legei ho katêgoros hôs egô hubirstês eimi.

“The accuser says that I am an offender”.

The subordination to a past tense (elegen) in (2) makes obligatory the use of the optative of the indirect speech (eiên), as an indication of “weak affirmation”; while in (3) we have the use of the mood of strong *affirmation*, the indicative mood (eimi =I am), because of the connection to a verb of a present tense (legei =he says): distance vs. proximity to the present reduces or increases respectively certainty/affirmation (weak vs. strong affirmation).

In general, what modern linguistics terms a system of **modalities**, the various shades of meaning of a speaker’s utterance expressed by the verb, comprises an elaborate mechanism of Ancient Greek, grammatically realized in the form of a rich system of **moods** (as is, for instance, the case with the *simple optative*, *potential optative* and *optative of the indirect speech*). The combination of the *four finite moods* of the verb (*indicative*, *subjunctive*, *optative* and *imperative*), as well as those of the *infinitive* and the *participle* across the **time gradations** (past-present-future) and the **quality of time** (**aspect**, that is *duration*, *repetition*, *perfectivity*, *completion* of action/state of being), has created a very elaborate, fine and various conception of the *verb* (and we know that verb constitutes the basis of human speech). **Ancient Greek modalities system, rich, subtle and flexible as it was, has largely aided intellectual function towards the most precise expression of the finest shades of human thought.**

Speaking of **hoti clauses** (‘that’ clauses), one has to mention another subtle use as well as intellectual challenge. The speaker had at his disposal two choices as far as specification is concerned: he might either present the information as objectively accepted or, alternatively, doubt its objectivity and present it as the subjective and actually questionable opinion of somebody.

In the first case he will use ‘**hoti**’ (objective marker), while in the second one he will opt for ‘**hôs**’ (subjective marker). [In English both are rendered by ‘that’ and it is by lexical means that objectivity vs. subjectivity is denoted; if say or assert (vs. *contend or argue*)].

- (4) legei ho katêgoros hôs hubristês eimi.

“The accuser contends that I am an offender (which is not true)”.

- (5) pantes homologousi hoti oudena êdikêsa.

“Everybody admits that I have harmed nobody” (and that is the truth).

Differentiation could also be effected in the case of **negation** as there were two types of negation: that for strong *assertion* (expressed by **ou[k]**) with verbs meaning “say”, “think”, “understand” etc., and that for *weak assertion* or expression of a *wish* (expressed by **mê**) with verbs meaning “want”, “propose” “intend” etc. Thus, if the speaker wanted to use an affirmative or declarative infinitive (the so-called **hoti infinitive**), he had to use the **ou[k]** negation; an infinitive of weak assertion or wish, on the other hand, (the infinitive of purpose) would be accompanied by a **mê** negation:

- (6) Sôkratês ebouleto tous politas mê legein alla prattein ta ortha.

“Socrates wished the citizens not simply to speak but to act in a moral way”.

- (7) nomizete oun tous polemious ouk ienai epi tèn polin.

“So you think that the enemies will not attack the city?”

Another formal feature of Ancient Greek which stimulates the intellectual function while at the same time guarantees high quality of **declarativity** and **disambiguation** is its **rich system of declension** of *nouns* (substantives, adjectives, pronouns, articles) and even more so the inflection of the *verbs*. The inflection paradigm of the grammatical forms of each *verb* of Ancient Greek (for active, medio-passive voices and the partici-

ple in all tenses, moods and persons) counts more than 500 items, while that of the *adjective* (together with the forms of the degrees of comparison) can produce more than 70 items.

The sensitivity of the speakers of Ancient Greek in issues of **syntactic concord** of the constituents of the sentence (adjective/article/ pronoun/participle and noun), reached a climax with the distinction of the three types of grammatical gender (*masculine – feminine – neuter*). Although it does not provide any further semantic information, concord (in terms of the *grammatical gender*) stresses the close relationship of the *defining* element (the adjective, the article, pronoun, or participle) to the *defined* one (the noun). **In this sense an intensive intellectual awareness of the speaker is born in regard to the application of the rules of the language, a process which constitutes both exercise, as well as discipline of the intellect.**

On the level of *words*, now, I wish to refer to a lexical mechanism of Ancient Greek which provided the speaker with the possibility to specify or modify or change the basic meaning of a word upon an astounding scale. This was achieved through a mechanism of **verbal prefixation** with **prepositions**, affixed to the verbs. A typical example of this function is provided by the verb **ballô** (meaning ‘pose’). In the Liddell-Scott-Jones Dictionary appear 104 composite verbs of **ballô** with prepositional prefixes. Here are some of them:

- (8) ekballô emballô eisballô sumballô proballô  
prosbollô  
anaballô kataballô diaballô metaballô  
apoballô periballô  
hyperballô paraballô hupoballô anaballô  
epiballô etc.

It is noteworthy that such composite verbal forms may become even more specified with **additional prefixes**. The following are indicative:

From **epi-ballô** we may have:

- (9) sun-epiballô pro-epiballô  
par-epiballô pros-epiballô

From **dia-ballô** we may have:

- (10) epi-diaballô ana-diaballô en-diaballô sun-  
diaballô  
hupo-diaballô pro-diaballô pros-diaballô

**Abstract thinking**, typical of Ancient Greeks on

various levels but mainly in the field of philosophy and science, created a multitude of abstract words in the language by whose feedback, intellect itself it was further enriched in the course of time. More precisely, the *quality* expressed by adjectives was denoted by a series of *abstract nouns* deriving from them, such as:

- (11) sophos : soph-ia (wise-wisdom)  
 eusebes : euseb-eia (pious-piety)  
 dikaios : dikaiio-sune (just-justice)  
 praos : prao-tês (mildmildness)  
 tachus : tachu-tês (rapid-rapidity)  
 bathus : bath-os (deep-depth)  
 eurus : eur-os (wide-width)  
 krinô : kri-sis (think-thought)  
 prattô : pra-xis (act-action)  
 poiô : poiêsis ( do/make-poetry)  
 mainomai : man-ia (rage-rage)  
 epithumô : epithum-ia (wish - wish)  
 trepô : tropê (change-change)  
 oduromai : odur-mos (lament- lamentation)

The fact that the denotation of the **possibility** for something to be done or the **moral obligation** and **commitment** on the part of the speaker for the performance of an action, have become a part of the grammatical structure of the Ancient Greek verb, is also typical of an intellectual search for preciseness and a high linguistic sensitivity. Here are some instances:

- (12) epainô: epaine-tos epaines-imos  
 epaine-teos  
 praise: praiseworth possible to praise  
 has to be praised  
 didaskô : didak-tos didax-imos didak-teos  
 teach: teachable possible to teach  
 has to be taught  
 prattô : prak-teos  
 perform has to be performed

From the verb legô (say, state, speak) 33 compounds are formed with up to 224 derivatives in **-logos** (“one who means about”), and another 189 with **-logia** (cf. **-logy** in philo-logy).

One could provide a multitude of examples of the wealth of derived and compound types which provide the intellect with tremendous expressive capacity. I would rather not go into it any further as time is pressing.

## Epilogue

Each language - by nature - constitutes the foundation and the prerequisite for intellectual creativity.

The Greek language particularly, blessed with the gift of being cultivated profoundly and of being used to express a vast range of intellectual conceptions, came at a very early stage to be one of the most developed languages, with regard to the spoken language, but in the written language as well. The Greek language was also fortunate in being studied in regard to its structure very early. A great number of analytical works of grammar and syntax as well as glossaries and linguistic commentaries on the texts of the writers were early compiled, so that the grammatical and syntactic structure of Greek was systematically described to the extent to serve as a grammatical model for grammatical description of almost all European languages. Thus the Athenian citizen who was very often required to speak in the ancient Parliament or Public Assembly of the city or in any other public occasions had at his command an extremely elaborate language, which could be utilized in the most demanding situation. This was even more the case for a poet, a playwright, a philosopher or a scientist. What actually occurred in practice and which is also the case in any language is that *intellect gave birth to language and vice versa: language (with its linguistically codified concepts) served intellect and provided it with the means to function creatively*. This mutual feed-back of language and intellect is not at all new. It is a natural process. The more successful semantic denotations a language has (more words to denote subtle meanings and semantic connotations) the more intellect is activated and greater is the intellectual challenge for qualitative thought and conceptual development.

Words are keys that “unlock” and activate intellect, often functioning as stimuli. The entire intellectual wealth of a nation is laid down and codified in its language. Behind *words* there are *meanings* that link *notions* which in turn refer to the *things*, to what is known as “*real world*”. The lexical wealth of a language paves the way to intellect and challenges the intellect to act creatively - by offering choices and expressive possibilities to the speaker of a language, even if - quite often - the speaker is not conscious of this fact.

The Greek language, being a profoundly and un-

usually developed language, can offer to those who use it, both to Greeks and non-Greeks, tremendous opportunities for a creative utilization of the human intellect. It is no coincidence that even nowadays, scientific language still resorts to the Greek sources seeking creative solutions for denoting novel terms of science. Nor is it a coincidence that in “demanding texts” (essays, newspaper editorials, scientific articles etc.) there is often a plethora of Greek words in an attempt by the writer to enhance, improve or to embellish the style of the text. The saying “*The Greeks must have a word for it*” demonstrates, to say the least, the belief of many non-Greeks that the Greek language at some point in its vast history created a word for everything. This concept alone must mean something.