The Expositor, 6th Series Vol. IX (1904) 215-25.

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For Ted Hildebrandt at biblicalelearning.org

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CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW TESTAMENT GREEK. (Pt. 2)

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II

IT will be necessary to deal more minutely with the two

classes of Semitisms which the negative evidence of the

papyri may compel us to recognize provisionally in the

Greek New Testament. But for the present we may be

content with the general thesis that the Greek Bible is

written in the common Greek vernacular, modified through-

out the Old Testament and some parts of the New by

conditions which are abundantly paralleled in the literal

translations of the English Bible. It is time now to pass on

to the description of Hellenistic Greek, apart from its special

use in the Bible. But before leaving the subject I should

like to mention two or three examples of the bearing of this

grammatical study upon literary criticism.

In dealing with the New Testament constructions with

ἐγένετο in the note appended to my last paper, I had

occasion to record that this notable Hebraism was in the

New Testament almost confined to the writings of the

Gentile Luke.1 It does not of course stand alone. There is

an instructive little point in Luke's report of the preaching

of John the Baptist. In iii. 8, he has καὶ μὴ ἄρξησθε  
λέγειν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς. Dalman, *Words of Jesus*, p. 27, shows

that in narrative "the Palestinian-Jewish literature

uses the meaningless 'he began,'" a conventional locution

which was evidently parallel with our Middle-English

auxiliary *gan*. It is very common in the Synoptists, and

occurs twice as often in Luke as in Matthew. Dalman

1 My suggestion (p. 75) that the construction of ἐγένετ with infin. was

Luke's own coinage is dispensed with by two papyrus quotations which

I noticed too late to include. In *Papyrus Cattaoui*, a Roman-named

soldier says ἅρτι ἐὰν γένηταί με ἀποδημεῖν; and in *B. U.* 970 we find ἐάν

γένηται μὴ εὐτονῦσαι αὐτόν. They are both dated 2nd cent. A.D. I fully

except that I have overlooked other examples.

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thinks that if this Aramaic שָׁרִי with participle had become

practically meaningless, we might well find the same use in

direct speech, though no example happens to be known.

Now in the otherwise verbal identical verse Matt. iii. 9

we find δόξητε for ἄρξησθε, “do not presume to say,” which

is thoroughly idiomatic Greek, and manifestly a deliberate

improvement of an original preserved more exactly by

Luke. It seems to follow that this original was a Greek

translation of the Aramaic logia-document, used in common

by both Evangelists, but with greater freedom by the first.

If Luke was ignorant of Aramaic, he would be led by his

keen desire for accuracy to incorporate with a minimum of

change translations he was able to secure, even when they

were executed by men whose Greek was not very idiomatic.

But *ne staff ultra crepidam*: these things belong to the

higher critics and not to the mere grammarian. I must,

however, venture to hammer on their last a little longer.

The grammarian necessarily claims his say on the Johannine

problem. We saw above (Expositor, January, p. 71), that

the author of the Apocalypse writes as a man whose Greek

education was not yet complete: like many of the farmers

of Egypt, he did not know the rules of concord for gender

and case. If then his date is to be 95 A.D., he cannot have

written the fourth Gospel only a short time after. Either,

therefore, we must take the earlier date for the Apocalypse,

which would allow the Apostle to improve his Greek by

constant use in a city like Ephesus where his Aramaic

would be useless; or we must suppose that the authors of

John xxi. 24 mended his grammar for him throughout

the Gospel. Otherwise, we must join the ranks of the

Χωρίζοντες.1 Here, of course, I am only putting the

question, leaving it to the experts to solve it.

Finally, as a transition to the next subject, let me note

1 May I, in passing, express the malicious satisfaction which a

grammarian feels in reading the words of a very cocksure critic,

Prof. B. M Bacon, in the current *Hibbert Journal* (p. 345)? “Jesus ‘is

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one or two suggestions by the great modern Greek scholar,

Albert Thumb who has used dialectic differences in the

language of to-day in a way which promises to repay further

research. In an article in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*,

1903, p. 421, he calls attention to the prominence of ἐμός,

etc., in the fourth Gospel, as against mou, etc., elsewhere.

[Ἐμός occurs thirty-six times in John, once in 3 John,

once in Apocalypse, and thirty-four times in the rest of the

New Testament. I am bound to admit that the argument is

not strengthened by the figures for σός, ἡμέτερος and ὑμέτε-

ρος], which between them occur 11 times in John (Gospel

and Epistles), 12 times in Luke's two books, and 21

times in the rest of the New Testament.] He tells us that

ἐμός and the rest survive: in modern Pontic-Cappa-

docian Greek, while the genitive has replaced them else-

where. The inference is that the Fourth Gospel comes

from Asia Minor. I might add that on the same showing

Luke has his Macedonian origin encouraged, for he hardly

uses ἐμός; and the Apocalypse, which has only one occur-

rence between the four possessives, suits a recent immigrant

very well. In the same paper Thumb shows that the

infinitive still survives in Pontic, while in Greece proper it

yields entirely to the periphrasis. Now the syntactical

conditions under which the infinitive is still found in Pontic

answer very well to those which appear in the New

Testament, in uses where western Greek tended to enlarge

the use of ἵνα. Obviously this tells us little more than that

the New Testament has eastern provenance, which no one

is likely to deny. But the principle will be found useful later.

We proceed to examine the nature and history of the

vernacular Greek itself. It is a study which has almost

come into existence in the present generation. Classical

scholars have studied the Hellenistic literature for the sake

raised’— ἐγείρεται—not ‘rises’ — ἀνίστησι (*sic* !!)—from the dead” [in

John xxi]. If John's grammar was equal to this, the work of the

Ephesian revisers was no sinecure.

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of its matter: its language was never considered worth

noticing, except to chronicle contemptuously its deviations

from “good Greek.” There perhaps the authors were only

receiving the treatment they courted, for to write Attic was

the object of them all, pursued doubtless with varying

degrees of zeal, but in all cases removing them far from the

language they used in daily life. The study of the vernacular

itself was not possible, for the Biblical Greek was inter-

preted on lines of its own, and the papyri were mostly

reposing in the Egyptian tombs, the small collections that

were published receiving but little attention. And equally

unknown was the scientific study of modern Greek. To this

day, even great philologists like Hatzidakis decry as a mere

patois, utterly unfit for literary use, the living language

upon whose history they have spent their lives. The

translation of the Gospels into the Greek which descends

directly from their original idiom is treated as sacrilege by

the devotees of a “literary” dialect which no one ever

spoke. It is left to foreign students to recognize the value

of Pallis’ version to those who would study the original in

the light of the continuous development of the language

from the age of Alexander to our own time.

As has been hinted in the preceding paragraph, the

source of our present-day study of New Testament Greek

are threefold :—(1) the prose literature of the post-classical

period, from Polybius down through the Byzantine age;

(2) the Κοινή inscriptions, and the Egyptian non-literary

papyri; (3) modern vernacular Greek, with especial refer-

ence to its dialectic variations, so far as these are at present

registered. Before we discuss the part which each of these

must play in our investigations, it will be necessary to ask

what was the Κοινή and how it arose.

The history, geography and ethnology of Hellas are jointly

responsible for the remarkable phenomena which even the

literature of the classical period presents. The very school-

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boy in his first two or three years at Greek has to realize

that “Greek” is anything but a unity. He has not thumbed

the *Anabasis* long before the merciful pedagogue takes him

on to Homer, and his painfully acquired irregular verbs de-

mand a great extension of their limits. When he develops

into a Tripos candidate he knows well that Homer, Pindar,

Sappho, Herodotus and Aristotle are all of them in their own

several ways defiant of the Attic grammar to which his own

composition must conform. And if his studies ultimately

invade the dialect inscriptions, he finds in Elis and Heraclea,

Lacedaemon and Thebes, Crete and Cyprus, forms of Greek

for which his literature has almost entirely failed to prepare

him. And the Theban who said *F* ίττω Δεύς and the

Athenian who said ἵστω Ζεύς lived in towns exactly as

far apart as Liverpool and Manchester! The bewildering

variety of dialects within that little country arises partly

from racial differences. Upon the primitive “Pelasgians,”

represented best by the Athenians of history, swept first

from Northern Europe1 the hordes of Homer's Achæans, and

then, in post-Homeric days, the Dorian invaders. Dialectic

conditions were as inevitably complex as they were in our

own country a thousand years ago, when successive waves

of Germanic invaders, of different races and dialects, had

settled in the several parts of an island in which a Keltic

population still maintained itself to greater or less extent.

Had the Norman Conquest come before the Saxon, which

determined the language of the country, the parallel would

have been singularly complete. The conditions which in

England were largely supplied by distance were supplied in

Greece by the mountain barriers which so effectively cut

off each little State from regular communication with its

neighbours—an effect and a cause at once of the passion for

1 I am assuming as proved the thesis of Professor Ridgeway, in his

*Early Age of Greece*, which seems to me a key that will unlock many of

the problems of Greek history, religion and language. Of course *adhuc*

*sub iudice lis est*.

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autonomy which made of Hellas a heptarchy of heptarchies.

Meanwhile a steady process was going on which deter-

mined finally the character of literary Greek. Sparta might

win the hegemony of Greece at Aegospotami, and Thebes

wrest it from them at Leuktra; but Sparta could not pro-

duce a man of letters, and Pindar, the lonely “Theban

eagle,” knew better than to try poetic flights in Bœotian.

The intellectual supremacy of Athens was beyond challenge

long before the political unification of Greece was accom-

plished; and Attic was firmly established as the only

possible dialect for prose composition. The post-classical

writers wrote Attic according to their lights, tempered

generally with a plentiful admixture of grammatical and

lexical elements drawn from the vernacular. Strenuous

efforts were made by precisians to improve the Attic quality

of this artificial literary dialect; and we still possess the

works of Atticists who cry out against the “bad Greek”

and “solecisms” of their contemporaries, thus incidentally

providing us with information concerning a Greek which

interests us more than the artificial Attic they prized so

highly. All their scrupulousness did not however prevent

their deviating from Attic in matters more important than

vocabulary. The optative in Lucian is perpetually misused,

and no Atticist successfully attempts to reproduce the

ancient use of οὐ and μή with the participle. Those writers

who are less particular in their purism write in a literary

Κοινή which admits without difficulty many features of

various origin, while generally recalling Attic. No doubt

the influence of Thucydides encouraged this freedom. The

true Attic, as spoken by educated people in Athens, was

hardly used in literature before the fourth century.1 the

Ionic dialect having large influence on the, to some extent,

artificial idiom, which the older writers at Athens used. It

1 Schwyzer, *Die Weltsprachen des Altertums*, p. 15 n., cites as the earliest

extant prose monument of genuine Attic in literature the pseudo-Xeno-

phon's *De republics Atheniensi*, which dates from before 413 B.C.

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was not strange therefore that the standard for most of the

post-classical writers should go back, for instance, to the

πράσσω of Thucydides rather than the πράττω of Plato and

Demosthenes.

Such, then, was the “Common Greek” of literature,

from which we have still to derive our illustrations for the

New Testament to a very large extent. Any lexicon will

show how important for our purpose is the vocabulary of

the Κοινή writers from Polybius down. And even the most

rigid Atticists found themselves unable to avoid words and

usages which Plato would not have recognized. But side

by side with this was a fondness for obsolete words with

literary associations. Take ναύς, for example, which is

freely found in Aelian, Josephus, and other Κοινή writers.

It does not appear in the indices of eight volumes of Gren-

fell and Hunt's papyri—except where literary fragments

come in—nor in those to vol. iii. of the Berlin collection

and the small volume from Chicago. (I am naming all the

collections that I happen to have by me.) We turn to the

New Testament, and find it once, in Luke's shipwreck

narrative, in a phrase which Blass (*Philology of the*

*Gospels*, p. 186), suspected to be a reminiscence of Homer.

In style and syntax the literary Common Greek diverges

more widely from the colloquial. The bearing of all this

on the subject of our study will come out frequently in the

course of our investigation. Here it will suffice to refer to

Blass's *Grammar*, p. 5, for an interesting summary of

phenomena which are practically restricted to Harnack's

Priscilla, and to parts of Luke and Paul,1 where sundry

logical and grammatical elements from the literary dialect

invade the colloquial style which is elsewhere universal in

the New Testament.

1 In quoting Blass here I should not like to accept too unreservedly his

opinion that Luke, in Acts xx. 29, *misused* the literary word ἄφιξις. The

suggestion that Paul meant “after my *arrival*, home-coming,” while not

without difficulty, at least deserves considering.

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The writers who figure in Dr. W. Schmid's well-known

book, *Der Atticismus in seinen Hauptvertretern von Dio-*

*nysius von Halikarnass bis auf den zweiten Philostratus*, were

not the last to found a literary language on the artificial

resuscitation of the ancient Attic. Essentially the same

thing is being tried to-day. The “mummy-language,” as

Krumbacher calls it, will not stand the test of use in

poetry, but in prose literature, in newspapers, and in

Biblical translation it has the dominion, which is vindi-

cated by Athenian undergraduates, with bloodshed if need

be.1 We have nothing to do with this curious phenomenon,

except to warn students that before citing modern Greek in

illustration of the New Testament they must make sure

whether their source is καθαρεύουσα or καθομιλουμένη, book

Greek or spoken Greek. The former may of course have bor-

rowed from ancient or modern sources—for it is a medley far

more mixed than we should get by compounding together

Cynewulf and Kipling—the particular feature for which it

is cited. But it obviously cannot stand in any line of his-

torical development, and it is just as valuable as Volapuk to

the student of linguistic evolution. The popular patois, on

the other hand, is a living language, and we shall soon see

that it takes a very important part in the discussions on

which we are entering.

We pass on then to the spoken dialect of the first century

Hellenists, its history and its peculiarities. Our sources are,

in order of importance, (1) non-literary papyri, (2) inscrip-

tions, (3) modern vernacular Greek. The literary sources

are almost confined to the Biblical Greek. A few general

words may be said on these sources before we examine the

origin of the Greek which they embody.

1 See Krumbacher's vigorous polemic, *Das Problem d. neugr. Schrift-*

*sprache* summarized by the present writer in *Expository Times*,1903, p. 550

Professor Hatziclakis replies with equal energy in *Rev. des Etudes greques*,

1903, p. 210 ff.

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The papyri have one very obvious disadvantage in that,

with the not very important exception of Herculaneum,

their provenance is limited to one country, Egypt. We shall

see, however, that the disadvantage does not practically

count. They date from the third century B.C. to the

seventh A.D. The monuments of the earliest period are

fairly abundant, and they give us specimens of the spoken

Κοινή from a time when the dialect was still a novelty.

The papyri are not of course to be treated as a unity.

Those which alone concern us are simply the waste paper of

Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, and their style has the same

degree of unity as we should see in the sacks of

waste paper brought to an English paper-mill from a

solicitor's office, a farm, a school, a shop, a manse, and a

house in Downing Street. Each contribution has to be

considered separately. Old wills, law reports, contracts,

census returns, marriage settlements, receipts, and official

orders largely ran along stereotyped lines and as formulæ

tend to be permanent we have a degree of conservatism in

the language which is not seen in documents which are

free from these trammels. Petitions, contain this element

in greater or less extent, but naturally show more freedom

in the recitation of the particular grievances for which

redress is claimed. Private letters are our most valuable

sources, and are of course all the better for the immense

differences that show themselves in the education of their

writers. The well worn epistolary formulæ show variety

mostly in their spelling, and their value for the student lies

primarily in their remarkable resemblances to the conven-

tional phraseology which even the letter-writers of the New

Testament were content to use. The part of the letter which

contains the point is perhaps most instructive when its

grammar is weakest, for it shows which way the language

was tending. Few papyri are more suggestive than the

letter of the lower-schoolboy to his father (Ο.P. 119, second

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or third century), already referred to in my papers here

more than once. It would have surprised paterfamilias,

when he applied the well merited cane, to learn that seven-

teen centuries afterwards there would be scholars who would

count that audacious missive greater treasure than a new

fragment of Sappho! But this is by the way. It must

not be inferred from this laudation of the ungrammatical

papyri that the N.T. writers are at all comparable in lack

of education. The indifference to concord which we noted

in the Apocalypse is almost isolated in this connexion. But

the illiterates show us by their exaggerations the tendencies

which the better schooled writers keep in restraint. With

writings from farmers and from Emperors, and every class

between, we can form a kind of “grammatometer” by

which to estimate how the language stands in the

development of any particular use we may wish to inves-

tigate.

Inscriptions come second to papyri mainly because their

very material shows that they were meant to last. The

Greek may not be of the purest, but such as it is we see it

in its best clothes, while that of the papyri is in corduroys.

The special value of the common Greek inscriptions lies in

their corroborating the papyri, and practically showing that

there was but little dialectic difference between the Greek of

Egypt and Asia Minor, Italy and Syria. There would pro-

bably be varieties of pronunciation, and we have already

seen that districts differed in their preferences among sundry

equivalent locutions, but a speaker of Greek would be

understood without the slightest difficulty wherever he

went throughout the immense area over which the Greek

world-speech reigned. With the caveat already implied,

that inscription-Greek may contain literary elements which

are absent from an unstudied private letter, we may use

without misgiving the immense and ever-growing collections

of later Greek epigraphy. How much may be made of

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them is well seen in the *Preisschrift* of Dr. E. Schwyzer,1

*Grammatik der Pergamenischen Inschriften*, an invaluable

guide to the accidence of the Κοινή.

Finally we have modern Greek to bring in. Dr. Albert

Thumb's *Handbuch der neugriechischen, Volkssprache* gives

us now the material for checking statements about modern

Greek, which are often based upon the artificial Greek of

the schools. The great work of Hatzidakis*, Einleitung in,*

*die neugriechische Grammatik*, with its perpetual references

to the New Testament, shows forcibly how many of the

developments of the modern vernacular had their roots in

the Koinh< of two thousand years ago. The gulf between the

ancient and the modern vernacular is bridged by the

material collected and arranged by Professor Jannaris in

his *Historical Greek Grammar*. It will soon be realized

that the illiterate papyri of the early Christian centuries are

far nearer to the common speech of Greece in our own time

than to that of Attica in the fourth century B.C.2 And even

the educated colloquial Greek in which St. Paul wrote finds

illustration constantly in the popular dialects of to-day.

We may leave for the present the enforcing of this thesis,

which will come out in practice at every step of our

inquiry.

James Hope Moulton.

1 He was Schweizer in 1898, when this book was published, but has

changed since, to our confusion. He has edited Meisterhans' *Grammar of*

*the Attic Inscriptions*, and written the interesting lecture on *Die Weltsprache*,

named above.

2 Cf. Hatzidakis in *Rev. d. Et. gr.* 1903, p. 220, who says, “The language

generally spoken to-day in the towns differs less from the common

language of Polybius than this last differs from the language of Homer.”

*(To be continued.)*

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