

Vocabulary as part of language teaching in the Greek educational system: Historical review and contemporary reality

Maria Paradia

The rapid progress in applied linguistics over the past three decades has resulted in, amongst other things, the highlighting of the until then marginalised field of vocabulary, contributing to both a deeper understanding of language and a more effective process of language teaching.

A survey of the history of Greek education demonstrates that until the early 1980s the subject of vocabulary was significantly demoted for two main reasons: firstly, because this demotion was in keeping with the spirit of the traditional method that exclusively prioritised grammar and, secondly, because any progress in this area was historically associated with the use of Demotic Greek.

The official recognition of Demotic Greek in 1976 marked the end of the “language question” in Greece, also creating the necessary preconditions for the rise and gradual utilisation of vocabulary in language teaching. Nonetheless, despite the progress that has been observed, traditional conceptions have been so profound that even today vocabulary is considered a secondary subject that assists grammar, necessitating the implementation of series of reform measures in language teaching.

1. Introduction

It is today acknowledged that one of the main aims of modern language teaching is to assist pupils to acquire a broad vocabulary. As far as possible, this should consist of useful and functional words since the development of their lexical competence contributes decisively to their understanding and production of messages and is in general a necessary precondition for the achievement on their part of unhindered and effective communication (Mitsis, 2004).

In terms of the Greek educational system, however, we would say that until recently vocabulary formed a secondary branch of language teaching. In the past it had only a complementary and facilitating role in the teaching of grammar, which was considered,

according to the traditional approach, to be the main subject and core of language teaching.

For centuries vocabulary had been approached with this mentality and through this specific prism, yet it did not function in the Greek system of language teaching as an independent or autonomous subject. Instead it was used primarily as a source to provide grammatical material and as a means for formulating examples to confirm and apply grammatical rules. Only from the mid-1980s did the achievements of linguistics begin gradually to influence language teaching in Greece (Mitsis, 1995; 1996; 2004; Chatzisavvidis, 1992).

In the past few decades it has been demonstrated that vocabulary is a major element of language. For some scholars it is the core and the centre of the linguistic phenomenon, as it prevails over grammar in the linguistic hierarchy, since the primary function of grammar is to systematise and order the lexical elements that precede it and pre-exist, thus creating various types and levels of relationships within the framework of the linguistic system (Aitchison, 1994; Lewis, 1993).

As might be expected, the new linguistic approach to vocabulary began to influence language teaching, with the result that a first attempt to upgrade vocabulary can be noted in current analytical curricula and the textbooks in use.

This new attempt is still, however, at the beginning and vocabulary is still not sufficiently utilised nor is it effectively taught in the Greek school of today, making necessary an attempt to use creatively the findings of applied linguistics in the immediate future.

2. The importance of vocabulary according to applied linguistics

The creation of applied linguistics and the incorporation of language teaching into it has resulted in the study of and focus on what were until then marginalised areas of the language phenomenon relating in particular to the teaching of language, with one of these areas being vocabulary. In terms of vocabulary, the findings of modern linguistics have made possible a more complete examination of its internal organisation, whilst answers have also been given to many theoretical and practical questions raised in the approach to its teaching.

Today we believe that the internal structure of vocabulary, which is known as the *mental lexicon*, is a broad and multilayered system that entails all the overlying individual systems and within which knowledge of a word appears to be a complex and intricate phenomenon. From a linguistic perspective this has three dimensions: form, meaning and use (Mitsis, 2009; Mpakakou-Orfanou, 2005).

Experts working on the question of lexical knowledge have many and various views. Even so, these researchers generally agree on the following three points:

- a) Knowledge of a word is a complex phenomenon in which elements relating to both linguistic and non-linguistic factors participate (Nation, 2001).

- b) Words do not all systematically have the same weight or the same value but are integrated into a scale, into a web that begins from the simplest and ends with the most difficult. This means that at one end of the thread there is a series of simple or basic words upon which language acquisition, and therefore language teaching, is initially based. These facilitate the gradual absorption of new and more complex words (Carter, 1987; McCarthy 1990; Mitsis, 2004).
- c) There are not only words of various types but also many stages and levels of knowledge of a particular word (Perry and MacDonald, 2001). Moreover, the acquisition of certain of these stages of knowledge presupposes the acquisition of corresponding levels of subsystems of the language.

This means: (a) that different speakers of a language may all know the same word without, however, having acquired it in the same way and to the same level, and (b) that sufficient knowledge of this word is not achieved automatically but gradually and always in combination with the acquisition of other prerequisite or parallel knowledge (Mitsis, 2009).

All the above lead to two main assertions: (a) that vocabulary is not simply a catalogue of words (according to the traditional understanding), but it is an intricate, multi-levelled and complex field, and (b) the need for systematic and scientifically documented teaching is clear.

In conclusion, contemporary scholarly thinking, in contrast with earlier beliefs, tends to accept that the primary field of language is vocabulary and that grammar, which is considered chronologically later and of lesser importance, comes along to bring order to the lexical structures that are the primary tissue (Lewis, 1993:89, 133). As might be expected, these views have overturned entrenched beliefs about language and have gradually resulted in new priorities in language teaching.

3. The teaching of vocabulary in the Greek education system: a brief history

It has already been noted that the international developments in the field of vocabulary over the past few years have not yet influenced, at least not to a significant degree, language teaching in Greece, where the traditional method continued to prevail until the mid-1980s.

This means that the influence of linguistics, applied linguistics in particular, has only recently begun to have an influence on language teaching, with the result that language teaching, in comparison with other countries, is behind in many aspects.

Even so, language teaching in Modern Greece, both in Primary Education (henceforth PE) and Secondary Education (henceforth SE) has not remained stagnant but has instead undergone a particular development that we do not see in other countries (Mitsis, 1995).

This development, which includes vocabulary, shall be examined in broad terms below, starting with PE, in the history of which we can distinguish four periods of development marked by particular features that are also associated with broader social and political developments (Mitsis, 1995; 1999).

The first period (1830–1880) is dominated by archaism, a cultural and linguistic movement that desired the teaching and use of Ancient Greek with the aim of establishing it as an official language and as a Panhellenic means of expression. In accordance with the beliefs of the era, a return to the language of the ancient ancestors could be achieved primarily through grammar and, as such, very little is said about the teaching of vocabulary (Mitsis, 1999).

The second period (1880–1917) is characterised by a gradual decline in archaising attitudes in favour of a simpler language, which gradually took on the features of the so-called school *Katharevousa*, a compromise between Ancient and Modern Greek. During this second period, which could be described as the period of linguistic “purity”, the language question in education was manifested as a disagreement between Ancient Greek and *Katharevousa*. This came to an end with the prevalence of the latter and there was no space in all this to concentrate on subjects such as vocabulary (Mitsis, 1999).

The third period (1917–1974) is characterised by the appearance of Demotic Greek, which now competes for its place not only as the language of the school but also as the official language of the state. During this period the language question developed into an intense controversy between *Katharevousa* and Demotic, which continued undiminished for a period of around sixty years. It should be noted that during the third period the first sporadic provisions for vocabulary began to appear in various Analytical Curricula (AC), although this did not take any coherent and systematic form given the intense linguistic disputes (Mitsis, 1999).

The fourth period (1974–today) has as its starting point an important political change that in 1976 leads to the complete resolution of the language issue with the passing of a new law recognising Demotic as the official language of education and government. The official recognition of this linguistic form, which had become established in practice as the common language, meant that language teaching was liberated from the bonds of the *language question* and led to the beginning of a new era for seeking effective ways of describing, analysing and teaching language, with direct ramifications for vocabulary teaching in PE (Mitsis, 1999).

This special effort to improve language teaching was, however, only attempted in the mid-1980s, an era during which new AC and textbooks were gradually composed. Although this change in language teaching was oriented towards the structural model, through which a mechanical manner of language acquisition was attempted, the contribution of the AC and textbooks of this period must be underlined, as vocabulary was seen for the first time as a specific field of language teaching and this approach was henceforth to be given and self-evident. This conception was further strengthened and promoted during the reform efforts of 2000–2007, when greater emphasis and

autonomy were given to vocabulary and, in addition to the revised textbooks, the first dictionaries for use in schools were produced.

In examining the history of PE we can see that here there are no distinct periods of development, since until 1930 only Ancient Greek was taught (Mitsis, 1995; 2002). The absence, however, of Modern Greek language classes from SE schools meant that special textbooks were not produced, teaching methods were not developed, there was no related experience and, at the same time, a dismissive attitude towards the teaching of Modern Greek emerged. According to this, Modern Greek was not systematically formed; it did not have principles and rules and, consequently, its teaching was neither essential nor effective.

In terms of the introduction of Modern Greek teaching, the history of language teaching in SE can be divided into the following two periods:

The first period (1830–1930) is characterised by the exclusive teaching of Ancient Greek and we cannot, as such, talk of language teaching and even less so, the teaching of vocabulary (Mitsis, 2002).

The second period (1930–today) is characterised by the introduction of Modern Greek lessons as an independent subject, which was to remain for a long period as an unfulfilled demand of the programme (Mitsis, 2002). The periods during which the teaching of Modern Greek took place in SE were 1929–1933, 1964–1967 and 1976–today. The intensity of the language question, the controversies and delays did not permit significant progress, which only gradually started to be seen after the recognition of the Demotic language.

It is to be expected that during the first decade after the fall of the dictatorship (1974–1984) the main concern of the reformists was the description, promotion and acceptance of the grammar of the Demotic language, something entirely natural during the initial phase, after its official recognition. This was initially done with the composition of handbooks — such as the adapted “Triantafyllides grammar” (1976) and the “syntax of Demotic” (1978) — and later with the establishment of the monotonic accent system (1982). In these conditions it was only to be expected that vocabulary would comprise a secondary or even marginalised area, intended simply to aid and strengthen grammar which had now acquired new content.

The first attempt fully to liberate language teaching from the bonds of the traditional method began in 1984 with the development of new AC and the publication of a series of new textbooks with the title *Νεοελληνική Γλώσσα για το Γυμνάσιο* (*Modern Greek Language for Lower Secondary School*) (Kandros et al, 1984).

The new AC and books marked the first attempt to modernise teaching with the adoption of a structural model, whilst vocabulary, although it was not yet a specific subject, acquired particular significance; favourable conditions were created for its further promotion. Particularly in terms of the new textbooks, vocabulary was significantly upgraded since its study and use greatly exceeded what was forecast in the corresponding AC. More specifically, the presence of vocabulary was sufficiently used in parts Three and Four of the teaching units, with part Three having an exclusive

lexical content, concerned with the production and meanings of words. Part Four began with a table (or tables) of a set of words that were considered essential both for understanding the subject of the teaching unit as well as for underscoring the grammatical phenomena taught in it.

In general, vocabulary continued to be supportive and assistive to other aspects of language teaching, in particular the teaching of grammatical structure. Even so, for the first time in the history of SE language teaching there were special provisions for vocabulary and particular attention was paid to it.

At the Upper Secondary School (Lyceum) level a relative delay in developments can be noted, since for almost the whole of the 1980s not only vocabulary but also “language teaching” were considered as secondary categories, which complemented and strengthened the subjects of Modern Greek Literature and Essay Writing.

This attitude started to diminish with the composition of the series of language teaching textbooks for the three Upper Secondary School classes, with the title *Έκφραση — Έκθεση για το Λύκειο (Expression and Essay for Upper Secondary School)* (Tsolakis et al, 2001; Tsolakis et al, 2002; Tsolakis et al, 2004).

As for vocabulary, one might say that although it was not yet approached as an autonomous subject of language teaching its presence here was again significantly improved. This created favourable preconditions for its further upgrading during the next reform efforts.

The next and final step both for the improvement of language teaching in general and of vocabulary in particular concerned only the Lower Secondary School. This took place in 2002 with the composition of new AC for mandatory education, which were published in 2003 with the titles Cross-Thematic Curriculum Frameworks (DEPPS) and Analytical Study Curriculum (ASC) for Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education/Pedagogical Institute, 2002).

In attempting to evaluate the contribution of the new AC, we can say that their composition and implementation provided another step in the direction of utilising the findings of applied linguistics in the field of vocabulary. Specifically, in the new AC for the Lower Secondary School there were several and important provisions for the teaching of phenomena, principles and skills that came under the subject of vocabulary and which had never in the past been incorporated into the material and aims of language teaching.

Even so, it must be noted that these provisions did not foresee that vocabulary would become an autonomous subject and were instead, more complementary in relation to other areas of language teaching, for example grammar. In general, however, there has been remarkable progress which has become even more apparent in the language teaching textbooks of the Lower Secondary School that were composed after the publication of the aforementioned AC. These covered all three classes and were published in 2006 with the title *Νεοελληνική Γλώσσα (Modern Greek Language)* (Aggelakos et al, 2006; Gavriilidou et al, 2006; Katsarou et al, 2006).

The above language teaching textbooks also made a significant attempt to improve and modernise the teaching of vocabulary. This did not, however, reach the point of systematic teaching, something that was in any case, not foreseen by the AC. Even so, despite the limitations and difficulties, the writing teams of the new language teaching textbooks promoted vocabulary to a significant degree, an indication that its value was being increasingly recognised.

The spirit of renewal has also been strengthened by the parallel publication of two Lower Secondary School handbooks, specifically: (a) an interpretative dictionary of Modern Greek (Gavriilidou et al, 2008), and (b) a new grammar of Modern Greek (Chatzisavvidis and Chatzisavvidou, forthcoming), which have incorporated many current scholarly approaches to the language phenomenon.

In conclusion, one can say that even after these recent developments, the teaching of vocabulary in the Lower Secondary School has not yet become autonomous but it has however, been significantly strengthened and renewed in relation to the efforts made in the past. Both the new textbooks as well as the handbooks have to a degree incorporated new scholarly approaches to vocabulary, a precondition for more favourable developments in the near future.

4. Observations and Conclusions

Despite the fact that in the traditional model the *word* comprised the exclusive unit for the description and analysis of language, *vocabulary*, as already underlined, was never a central focus of linguistic interest prior to the 1980s. This was primarily due to an attitude that gave priority and emphasis to grammar.

It must here be noted that, according to the historical sources, progress in the area of vocabulary was connected historically with two basic preconditions: (a) with the presence and teaching of the mother tongue (Demotic), and (b) with the extent to which the findings and principles of linguistics, applied linguistics in particular, were implemented.

Of these preconditions the former, that is the official adoption of the Demotic language, was legally achieved in the mid-1970s with a decision that transformed the historical conditions and created the preconditions for further favourable developments. The resolution of the language question during this period found Greek education divided and unprepared, without, that is, the necessary knowledge and experience in basic matters of language description, analysis and teaching.

Consequently, only when the remnants of the language question had been overcome was there a series of efforts for the scholarly study and more effective teaching of the Demotic language. This was combined with the gradual acceptance and implementation of the principles of linguistics, which occurred in two phases: a first phase from the mid-1980s until approximately 2000, during which time vocabulary was viewed, in most cases, through the prism of structural theory and teaching practice; and, a second phase from 2000 until today during which vocabulary has begun

to be approached in a contemporary manner, that is through the prism of textuality and a communications approach, due to the increased absorption of the principles of linguistics and other related fields (Andreou, 2002).

In closing one would say that, despite the indisputable progress that has been made over the past three decades, the subject of vocabulary has not yet acquired its necessary autonomy. Its teaching has not reached a completely satisfactory level in keeping with the demands of contemporary linguistics, applied linguistics in particular; this makes changes and the reorientation of language teaching essential.

5. Attempting the necessary modernisation of vocabulary teaching

A systematic attempt to further modernise language teaching so as to make it effective must follow certain basic principles, which can be summarised as follows:

- a) Vocabulary teaching must be incorporated into the general concept of the communicative and text-centred approach to language teaching, within which it can function as an autonomous subject that will decisively strengthen the whole process of language learning and contribute to its fuller and faster acquisition.
- b) The teaching and therefore learning of vocabulary can, in the future, clearly not be random or occasional but, on the contrary, needs to be intentional and systematic, in keeping with a prioritisation that will proceed from the simple and easy to understand, to the difficult and more complex (Carter, 1987; Goutsos, 2006; Mitsis, 2004).
- c) The vocabulary that is intended for language teaching must not in the future be a product of empirical assessment and personal judgment but be, rather, the result of systematic research, related to differences in vocabulary level; enhanced with vocabulary teaching methods and materials, techniques of developing and assessing vocabulary and vocabulary mistakes (Goutsos, 2006; Paradia et al, 2009; Coady, 1997; Meara, 1997; Paribakht and Wesche, 1997; Read, 2000).
- d) Taking into consideration the importance of the subject of vocabulary and the need to broaden pupils' vocabulary, the teaching process must be reinforced by a series of parallel processes and complementary teaching methods; the primary ones being *vocabulary learning strategies*. This is a series of purposeful strategies used by teachers to empower the learners so that they are able to enrich their vocabulary independently, both within the classroom and outside of it (Goutsos, 2006; Cross, 1992; McDonough, 1995; Mitsis, 2004; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 1997).
- e) The prospect of vocabulary teaching in the Greek education system makes necessary the composition of new, open-type AC. Modern AC, in contrast with

traditional models, must focus on aims rather than teaching materials; such aims are implemented via not one but many textbooks simultaneously, and these, in turn provide a range of basic provisions (Jennings and Doyle, 1996; Mitsis, 1996; Nunan, 1998; O'Dell, 1997; Sinclair and Renouf, 1998).

- f) Information and communications technology (ICT) can be a significant support tool in achieving the goals of vocabulary teaching, either as a reinforcement of teaching in the classroom or as a means of developing new teaching applications exclusive to an electronic environment. Specifically, a more systematic use of software and educational environments for language teaching including dictionaries, electronic text corpuses, the use of new collaborative tools and services on the internet and user-oriented learning management systems are seen as able to contribute to the development of pupils' vocabulary with the precondition that vocabulary teaching is satisfactorily integrated into the goals of language activities (Goutsos, 2003; Paradia et al., 2004; Paradia et al., 2005).
- g) Another necessary precondition for a successful new reform effort with provisions for the improvement of language teaching, in particular vocabulary teaching, is the appropriate education of teachers, providing them with sufficient linguistic training to enable them to respond to the demands of the task to which they are assigned.

In summary, the promotion of vocabulary as a basic subject of language teaching and its appropriate use for effective language acquisition, presupposes a systematic teaching intervention that is in tune with current scholarly beliefs and that responds to the requirements of applied linguistics.

6. Epilogue

The outline of historical events relating to the diachronic approach to and teaching of vocabulary in the Greek education system has shown that, despite the progress noted over the past few years, there are still significant barriers in this area, even today.

The traditional view, especially in Greece, held that language acquisition was primarily achieved through the mechanical learning of grammar and only secondarily with the assistance of other language subjects. Today, however, it is generally accepted that it is impossible for speakers to express their knowledge of concepts and objects when they do not know the words that represent them. As such, an insufficient knowledge of vocabulary negates the possibility of effective communication, even when there is sufficient knowledge of the grammar. This means that contemporary linguistic thought and research accept that language is primarily lexical (Lewis, 1993). Nonetheless, because the strength of tradition in Greece was — and to an extent still is — so powerful, vocabulary learning, although it eventually became a special subject of

language teaching, was not approached until recent times, according to the findings of applied linguistics. At this point it is worth noting that even in the most recent AC and textbooks that are distributed today, grammar continues to have precedence, albeit to a lesser degree, over vocabulary.

As such, a series of reform interventions into language teaching is today deemed essential, with the goal of overcoming outdated concepts of teaching so that vocabulary can be approached according to the needs of contemporary linguistics. It should here be noted that conditions are now ripe for updating language teaching methodologies, in which vocabulary learning would be given its rightful recognition: it is now generally accepted that for all speakers a satisfactory knowledge of vocabulary is a basic precondition for effective communication.

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