Towards a Socio-Historical Analysis of Ancient Greek?
Some Problems and Prospects

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Abstract: In studies of Ancient, especially Post-classical and Byzantine Greek, the need of taking into account both text and context has become generally accepted. In the present paper, I discuss exactly how this can be done. For this purpose, I give an overview of five modern linguistic approaches which may be helpful for the analysis of Ancient Greek. In the second part of the paper, I illustrate my findings with some evidence from the Roman and Byzantine papyri.

1   Introduction: Sociolinguistics and socio-historical linguistics

Recent findings in sociolinguistics, the work of William Labov (e.g. 1994, 2001) in particular, have greatly enhanced our understanding of both the mechanisms of linguistic change, and the nature of language itself. One of the key linguistic findings concerns *variation*: scholars have come to realize that from a synchronic point of view variation is ubiquitous and reflects change in progress. The work of Labov and others has also shed new light on the social mechanisms of language change. Among others, it has been shown that the spread of a given variant happens in an orderly way, not only within language itself, but also within the speech community.

Up until now, however, sociolinguistic methods and techniques have been applied predominantly to change that is ongoing in the spoken language, which can be be very accurately observed, described and analyzed. Its application to written documents remains disputed and has been given relatively little attention, perhaps because Labov himself has shown a negative attitude to historical linguistics, which he characterizes as 'the art of making the best use of bad data' (Labov 1994:11). One of the scholars to have opposed this view is Romaine (1982), who in her pioneering work on *socio-historical* linguistics, observes that 'variation also occurs in written language in, one can assume, a patterned rather than a random way' (Romaine 1982:13). Romaine even turns the tables in explicitly asking 'whether theories which cannot handle all the uses/forms in which language may manifest itself in a given speech community over time are actually acceptable' (1982:18), and arguing that a sociolinguistic theory which cannot handle

written language is very restricted in scope and application and cannot claim to be a theory of 'language' (Romaine 1982:122).

When it comes to Ancient, especially, Post-classical and Byzantine Greek, the need of taking into account both text and (social) context has become generally accepted. In the introduction to his *Greek: A history of the language and its speakers*, for example, Horrocks (2010:4) stresses the need to 'look at the Greek language in all its varieties, and in the context of the changing social and historical circumstances of its speakers/writers'. This being said, the question remains exactly how we can take into account social context. The aim of this paper is twofold: first, I intend to give a criticial discussion of some modern linguistic approaches that can be helpful for students of Ancient Greek. Second, I wish to briefly illustrate one of these theoretical frameworks with findings from my most recent research project on the language of the Roman and Byzantine papyri (I – VI AD).

2   Social context: some approaches

2.1   Individual sociolinguistic variables

The first type of approach which I would like to introduce is that whereby individual social variables such as *gender*, *age*, *social class*, *origins*, *education*, etc., are focused upon. This is the classic, Labovian type of approach, which has been highly influential in the past decades (see e.g. Labov 1994, 2001).

In the field of Ancient Greek linguistics too, some attention has been paid to the relation-ship between individual sociolinguistic variables and language. Particularly when it comes to the notion of 'dialect', there is a very extensive bibliography. Gender is another sociolinguistic variable which has received some attention, particularly with regard to the Classical period. Recent studies by Sommerstein (1995) and Willi (2003, ch. 6), for example, give a catalogue of gender-specific features in comedy. These are syntactic, pragmatic and lexical in nature, rather than phonological. Some examples are: the use of ὅπως (rather than ἵνα); βούλει/βούλεσθε with the subjunctive; the ethic dative; possessive μου and σου (rather than ἐμός/σός); the avoidance of obscene language; the use of certain forms of address, etc.

This type of approach has as its major advantage the specificity with which one is working: very specific social variables are investigated. Scholars working within this tradition have made some very interesting observations, not only within but also across individual languages (e.g. the observation that women tend to use less non-standardised features than men; see e.g. Willi 2003:157-8). The major disadvantage, however, is that it is unclear how variables such as gender relate to other socio-linguistic variables (in other words, there is no integrated sociolinguistic framework).

2.2   Accomodation theory

The notion of '(linguistic) accomodation' refers to the fact that a speaker can adapt the manner in which he/she speaks, depending on his/her attitude towards the addressee. In the 1970's, Howard Giles developed speech accomodation theory in order to explain why and how speakers accomodate their speech (see e.g. Giles 1980). Two key concepts in this regard are 'convergence' and 'divergence': *convergence* refers to a process whereby the speaker modifies his or her speech to resemble more closely the addressee's speech, while *divergence* refers to a process whereby the speaker moves in the opposite direction. The psychological motivations behind these processes are relatively obvious: convergence signals a speaker's solidarity, whereas divergence signals a speaker's social difference and distance.

Accomodation theory is relatively unknown in Ancient Greek linguistics. It was briefly discussed by Consani (2014) in a contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics*. Consani provides the following example of accomodation: in an archaic dedication from the Pelopponese, two different dialects, Arcadian and Laconian, which belong to two different dialect groups, are combined. Consani suggests that the author of the dedication, who may have been a powerful person from Laconian society, chose Arcadian forms 'in order to testify to his political power in a period during which Sparta was interacting with some Arcadian cities'. Accomodation theory was also briefly referred to by Malina (1994) in his essay on the nature of John's Christian group.

Accomodation theory constitutes a well-elaborated theory of the processes of linguistic convergence and divergence, and the psychological motivations behind these processes. Its main disadvantage, however, is that it is mainly oriented towards living speech, in particular dialogue. Moreover, the theory has been criticised because from a linguistic

point of view it lacks sophistication and precision, while from a social point of view the theory has become increasingly complex.

2.3 Politeness theory

The next approach is centered around the notion of 'politeness'. According to one influential view, that of Brown & Levinson (1987), politeness consists in respecting other people's feeling, and attenting to their so-called 'face' needs. Brown & Levinson (1987) distinguish two major 'politeness' strategies, that is, 'positive politeness strategies', and 'negative politeness strategies', which correspond to two types of 'face', that is, 'positive face' and 'negative face'. Positive politeness strategies 'emphasize closeness between speaker and hearer by confirming or establishing common ground' (e.g. addressing somebody with 'pal'), whereas negative politeness strategies, 'suggest distance by accentuating the hearer's right to territorial claims and freedom from imposition' (e.g. addressing somebody with 'Sir') (Kasper 1998:678). Brown & Levinson (1987) postulate a positive correlation between the weight of certain contextual factors and politeness investment. These contextual variables are, (i) social distance between speaker and hearer; (ii) their relative power; and (iii) the magnitude of the issue that gives rise to the need for politeness (Dickey 2012:314).

The notion of politeness has been applied to Ancient Greek by a number of scholars, including Lloyd (2006) and Poccetti (2014) (see also Dickey 2012 for Latin). Lloyd (2006) gives some examples of positive and negative politeness strategies in Sophocles, e.g. the use of friendship terms such as φίλε, the second person optative with ἄν rather than the imperative, the use of the third person singular rather than the second, etc.

Politeness theory, especially Brown & Levinson's (1987) framework, has been widely applied as a sociolinguistic model. As Dickey (2012) notes, it offers a simple template that can be used to describe politeness phenomena in any language. Moreover, Brown & Levinson's framework has predictive power: 'any utterance that can be identified as positively or negatively polite can tell a researcher something about the relationship of the speaker to the addressee and/or about the weighting of the request … in their culture' (Dickey 2012:314). However, it has the disadvantage that it concentrates exclusively on politeness and politeness-related social variables such as social distance and social power. Each of these social variables represents a composite construct, which needs to be further elaborated. Moreover, there are also some serious theoretical

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concerns. Among others, Brown & Levinson take it that their theory has universal validity, but that seems to presuppose that cultures across the globe have identical notions of 'self' or 'face', which does not seem to be true. The relationship between 'face' and 'politeness' has also been criticised: the view that face motivates politeness is a very strong assumption, which does not seem to hold up against cross-cultural evidence. The impact of contextual variables may also vary across cultures. For example, the subvariable 'age' may be attributed more importance in Asia than in Europe.

2.4 Audience design

The fourth theoretical approach which I introduce here is called 'audience design'. This theory was conceived by Alan Bell in the 1980s (see e.g. Bell 1997, 2001). According to this model, speakers adjust their speech towards that of their audience in order to express solidarity, or away from their audience's speech in order to express distance. As may be clear, there are some parallels with the earlier-mentioned accomodation theory, although it should be emphasised that audience design arose from socio-linguistics, rather than social psychology. With audience design, even greater emphasis is put on the role of the audience. Bell focuses on different audience features, such as gender, ehtnicity, age, class, origins, etc., and distinguishes between different types of audiences. Bell (2001:146) also includes 'stylistic' variation according to topic or setting, which, he argues, can be explained by the fact that different topics/settings are associated with typical audience members (for example, we talk about education in a manner that echoes how we talk to a teacher; Bell 1997:247). Interestingly, Bell not only takes into account 'responsive', but also 'initiative' style shifts, which initiate a change in the situation (that is, they redefine the nature of the interaction, e.g. a student talking in an informal way at an exam to make the situation less formal).

To the best of my knowledge, no scholar of Ancient Greek has applied Bell's theory of audience design, although it is mentioned occasionally in linguistic studies.

The advantages and disadvantages of Bell's model are similar to those mentioned for ac-comodation theory. Bell provides a well-elaborated, falsifiable framework, which 'applies to all codes and repertoires within a speech community' (Bell 2001:145), and which allows for detailed linguistic analysis. Bell's approach allows one to focus on the individual, while maintaining a worthwhile level of generalisation. However, the theory

is mainly oriented towards conversation, and focuses especially on the speaker's audience, rather than the speaker himself.

2.5 Register

The final theoretical framework which I discuss here is that which is centered around the notion of 'register'. One approach which I will focus upon here, that is, the *Systemic Functional* approach, defines register as 'a language variety associated with a particular situation of use'. Halliday (1978) and Hasan (1995) recognise three main vectors of context, which are called 'field' (what the language is being used to talk about), 'tenor' (the interactants and their relationships) and 'mode' (the role language is playing in the interaction).

There have been more than a few applications of the notion 'register' to Ancient Greek, especially when it comes to Post-classical and Byzantine Greek (see further Bentein 2013, with references). For example, Porter (1989:152-3) distinguishes four tenor-oriented registers, which he calls 'vulgar', 'non-literary', 'literary' and 'atticistic'. Scholars of Classical Greek typically focus on field-oriented registers. López-Eire (2004:116), for example, distinguishes between the registers of *scientists*, *philosophers*, *politicians*, etc. in Aristophanes' plays.

The major advantage of working with this theory is that we can rely on an overarching theoretical framework (see esp. Hasan 2009). Linguistically too, one is invited to pay attention to larger patterns of co-occurrence. In practice, the disadvantage is that scholars simply posit different types of register, for example, a 'low', 'middle' and 'high' register, without clearly defining the social factors behind these registers, as well as the linguistic features that characterise them. One exception in the latter regard is Horrocks (2007:630-1), who clearly defines three 'levels of writing' for the 'later Roman imperial period', and attributes several typical linguistic features to each of these.

3 Particle-usage in the Roman and Byzantine documentary papyri

In the first part of this paper, I have outlined a number of approaches which may be useful for the sociolinguistic analysis of Ancient Greek texts. In the second part, I would like to briefly illustrate these theoretical considerations with some findings from my most recent, post-doctoral research project, which involves a *Systemic Functional*

approach towards the language of the Roman and Byzantine documentary papyri. In what follows, I focus specifically on the use of particles in letters and petitions (for further details on the corpus, see Bentein *forthc.*).

3.1 Operationalisation of the Systemic Functional framework

As mentioned, the *Systemic Functional* framework distinguishes between three main 'vectors of context', called field, mode, and tenor. For our present purposes, it will be useful to pay particular attention to the 'tenor' vector, as the mode of discourse remains stable, and the field of discourse is known to have relatively little influence on grammatical differences. Systemic Functional linguists subdivide the tenor vector into three dimensions, that is, (i) 'agentive role', (ii) 'social status', and (iii) 'social distance'. In what follows, I discuss how each of these three subvectors can be operationalised specifically with regard to the documentary papyri.

Agentive role is relatively straightforward: various agentive roles can be discerned in the documentary papyri. For example, a letter can be written by a mother to her son, by a brother to his sister, by a friend to a friend, by a citizen to an official, etc. The disadvantage of working with such very specific agentive roles, however, is that (i) it is not always possible to clearly determine them, and (ii) that we neglect the fact that some of these agentive roles are related. Therefore, it is useful to work with more generic agentive roles or 'macro-roles'. Following Stowers (1986:27), three of these can be discerned, that is, (i) family-relations; (ii) relations between equals; (iii) hierarchical relations.

Social status is a complex notion. The Romans themselves focused heavily on ethnicity, by dividing the population into three strata: (i) holders of Roman citizenship; (ii) citizens of the Greek cities of Egypt; (iii) Egyptians. As Mairs (*forthc.*) notes, however, it is important for us modern scholars not to focus exclusively on ethnicity when approaching identity. Moreover, for our present purposes this threefold classification has the disadvantage that (i) it is far from easy to know to which class a given individual belonged, and (ii) that it was only valid for a certain period of time. It is therefore worth concentrating on other social aspects, such as professional occupation. A number of 'occupational groups' can be distinguished in this regard, such as, (i) actors and athletes; (ii) craftsmen and tradesmen; (iii) officials; (iv) landowners/tenants; (v) liberal professions (e.g. managers, doctors, lawyers); (vi) other service workers (e.g. slaves,

prostitutes); (vii) military; (viii) priests/clergy. Other factors that are worth taking into account are *gender*, *age*, *education* (literacy) and *location*.

In order to operationalise *social distance*, I concentrate on the difference between official (formal) and non-official (informal) documents. While petitions are typically formal, letters can be formal or less formal. Three main types of letters are typically distinguished: 'private' letters, 'business' letters, and 'official' letters. Only the last of these three types is more formal.

3.2 Particle-usage in the Greek documentary papyri (I – VI AD)[1]

To briefly illustrate the *Systemic Functional* framework, I have analysed a corpus of 736 letters and 230 petitions for particle-usage. To be more specific, I have investigated four groups of particles in these texts, that is, (i) the focus particles γε and γοῦν, (ii) the co-ordinating particles τε (... καί) and μέν ... δέ; (iii) the discourse-connecting particles τοῖνυν, τοιγαροῦν, μέντοι, and καίτοι; (iv) the modal particles ἄρα, δή, μήν.

In terms of *social status*, the texts in which the particles occur have a similar profile: the sender and especially addressees of these documents typically belong to the upper social classes: they are high-ranking officials, landowners, military officers, priests, etc. Exceptionally, the particles that have been investigated are used by the lower occupational classes, as in (1):

(1) συνεβίω[σα] Δημ[η]τροῦτι Ἡρακλε\ί/δου, κα[ὶ ἐ]γὼ μὲν οὖν ἐπεχορήγησα αύτῇ τὰ ἐξῆς καὶ ὑπὲρ δύναμιν. ἡ δὲ ἀλλότρια φρονήσασα τῆς κοινῆς συμβιώ[σεως] κατὰ πέρ[α]ς ἐξῆ[λθε] καὶ ἀπηνέκαντο τὰ ἡμέτερα ὦν τὸ καθ' ἓν ὑπόκειται. (P.Oxy.2.282, ll. 4-14; 29-37 AD)

"I married Demetrous, daughter of Heraclides, and I for my part provided for my wife in a manner that exceeded my resources. But she became dissatisfied with our union, and finally left the house carrying off property belonging to me a list of which is added below." [tr. Grenfell & Hunt]

In this petition to the *strategus*, Tryphon the weaver complains that his wife has left him, carrying off various items belonging to him. By using μέν ... δέ, Tryphon contrasts himself with his wife: while he provided everything for his wife, she nevertheless became dissatisfied.

When it comes to *social distance*, that is, level of formality, there are some interesting differences between the particles: the focus particles γε and γοῦν, for example, primarily

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[1] The findings presented in this section are based on Bentein (forthc.).

occur in informal contexts. The same is true for the discourse-connecting particles μέντοι and καίτοι. Other particles, however, almost always occur in formal contexts: τοίνυν, for example, is almost exclusively found in petitions, as in (2), a petition from three inhabitants of the village of Theadelpheia to the prefect:

(2) ἀξιοῦμεν τοίνυν τὴν σὴν ἀνδρίαν εὐεργε[τῆσαι ἡ]μᾶς κα[τ]ὰ τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὰς κελεύσις, ἡγεμών, [σοῦ καὶ] ἄ[λ]λων ἀρχόντων, τὰς ἀσθενεστέρας κώμα[ς] [ταῖς εὐ]ποθμ[ο]ύσαις κώμαις συνάπτεσθαι, καὶ ἡμᾶς [κοινωνη]θῆναι τοὺς μερισμοὺς τῇ εὐποθμουση κώμ[ῃ] [τοῦ πεδί]ου, λέγομεν τῇ Ἑρμουπόλει, ᾗ καὶ ἔτι πρότ[ε][ρον . . . .] τοῖς δεκαπρώτοις ἐπενεμήθημ[ε]ν αὐτ[ῇ] (P.Sakaon.42, ll. 13-9; ca. 323 AD)

"We ask, therefore, that your Worthiness show his beneficence and that, in accordance with the laws and the edicts, my lord, both of yourself and of other governors, which provide that the poorer villages be attached to the richer ones, we too share our imposts with the rich village of the plain, and we mean Hermoupolis, to which even in the past we had been allotted ... the dekaprotoi." (tr. Parassoglou)

The same is true for the modal particles ἄρα, δή, μήν, which predominantly occur in official letters and petitions. The co-ordinating particles have a more mixed profile: τε (... καί) and especially μέν ... δέ can be found relatively often in informal letters, as for example in (3):

(3) τρίτην ταύτην ἐπιστολὴν ἔγραψ[α] . . .[.] τ[ῷ] ἐμῷ ἀγαθῷ κ[α]ὶ θεοφυλάκτῳ δεσπό(τῃ) καὶ ἐξ ὧν μίαν † μὲν διὰ τοῦ σταβλίτου τοῦ ἀποφέροντος αὐτῇ τὰ δίδυφα, δευτέραν δὲ ὁμοίως μετὰ Ἄππα Κύρου τοῦ καθοσιωμένου, καὶ νῦν ταύτην, ὡς εἶπον, [τρίτ]ην χάριν τοῦ καρδαλαμίου (P.Oxy.59.4006, ll. 1-6; VI-VII AD)

"This I write as a third letter ... to my good and God-defended master, and of these (I sent) one by the stable lad who brought you the jujubes, and a second likewise with Appa Cyrus the soldier, and now this one, as I said, a third, on the subject of the sword-belt (?)"[tr. Handley et al.]

In this letter to comes and μειζότερος Theodorus, Christophorus asks to send a καρταλάμιον (probably an elaborate belt). He notes how he has already written three letters, for which he uses a μέν ... δέ structure, which is complemented by καί: μίαν μὲν ... δευτέραν δὲ ... καὶ νῦν ... [τρίτ]ην.

The last social parameter, *agentive role*, is connected to social distance: since petitions constitute the most common type of formal document, high social distance or formality tends to co-occur with a subordinate agentive role. Even in this regard, however, some distinctions can be made: the senders using τοίνυν, for example, almost always assume a subordinate agentive role, while those using a modal particle more often assume an equal agentive role, as in (4):

(4) κυρίῳ μο(υ) ἀδελφῷ Ἀβιννέῳ Λουππικῖνος. Σαραπίωνος τοῦ ἡμετέρο(υ) στρατιώτου ἐντυχόντος τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ φροντίδι [κατ]ὰ τῶν τέκνων Ἄρωνος Πέτρου ἀπὸ κώμης Φιλαγρίδος οὐ μὴ[ν] ἀλλὰ καὶ οἱ πξδεις αὐτο(ῦ) μετὰ ῥωπάλων καὶ ξιφῶν των τούτο(υ) υἱὸν κατέκοψαν (P.Abinn. 12, ll. 1-12; IV AD)

"To my lord brother Abinnaeus, Luppicinus. Sarapion, our soldier, has petitioned our care against the children of Aron, son of Peter, of the village of Philagris. Moreover, Aron's children struck down Sarapion's son with clubs and swords." [tr. Bell et al.]

In this letter, the military officer Luppicinus alerts Flavius Abinnaeus, *praefectus alae*, that a soldier named Sarapion petitioned him. To relate the specific charge which Sarapion has against the children of Aron, Luppicinus uses the particle group οὐ μὴ[ν] ἀλλὰ καὶ, which contains the modal particle μήν. There are several indications of the fact that an equal relationship is maintained in this letter: note how Luppicinus addresses Flavius Abinnaeus with κυρίῳ μο(υ) ἀδελφῷ "my lord brother", and speaks of τοῦ ἡμετέρο(υ) στρατιώτου "our soldier".

It goes without saying that these findings have limited scope: among others, it would be interesting to further expand the analysis so as to cover a third main type of documentary texts, that is, contracts. This would help us to further determine the relationship between 'agentive role' and 'social distance', and it could also further inform us about the social status of the people behind these documents. However, I hope to have shown that a framework such as the *Systemic Functional* one can help us to specify our analysis: it allows us to argue that specific particles occur in this or that register, and to specify the social parameters behind this claim.

4   Concluding remarks

To conclude, I hope to have shown that modern linguistics offers a number of frameworks which may be beneficiary for our analysis of Ancient Greek texts. Each of these aproaches has some distinct advantages and disadvantages, and the choice for one of them will depend, to some extent at least, on the purposes of the investigation and the text or corpus of texts that is to be analysed. For the Roman and Byzantine papyri, I have drawn attention to the benefits of *Systemic Functional* theory: this theory offers an integrated sociolinguistic framework, which is centered around three social dimensions, that is, 'field', 'mode' and 'tenor', each of which can be further specified. The notion 'register' is used to describe linguistic varieties according to these social dimensions.

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