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Diachronica provides a forum for the presentation and discussion of information concerning all aspects of language change in any and all languages of the globe. Contributions which combine theoretical interest and philological acumen are especially welcome.

Diachronica appears twice a year (in spring and fall), each issue consisting of 3-5 articles, 1 review article, 4-8 reviews, a miscellanea section carrying notes, reports and discussions, and an annotated list of recent publications received.

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The Greek language has one of the longest recorded histories of any language, with written documentation being attested as early as the 14th century B.C. (in the form of the Mycenaean Linear B tablets) and nearly continuously since then up to the present day. Despite the potential that Greek thus offers as a ‘laboratory’ for studying language change over literally millennia, most of the attention paid to the history of Greek has been focused on Ancient Greek, its dialectology, its development from Proto-Indo-European, its development into the Hellenistic Koine, and so on. The later Post-Classical period, from the end of the Hellenistic period in the 6th to 7th centuries A.D. through the Byzantine era and the Medieval period on into Modern Greek, has been largely ignored, despite offering a gold mine for the interested historical linguist.

This work by Henri Tonnet (henceforth: T) is thus a welcome account of the later history of Greek, complete with numerous extracts from texts showing the grammatical developments discussed in his exposition. In many ways, this highly readable and informative book compares quite favorably to Robert Browning’s masterful 1982 synopsis of the emergence and development of Medieval and Modern Greek, though with T’s own perspective on matters. For instance, T pays considerable attention to Greek orthography over the years, and especially to what it can reveal about changes in the pronunciation of the language.

T brings out an important point at the outset, recognizing (p.4) that it is not enough simply to compare Ancient Greek with Modern Greek, and stating that instead one must focus on ‘l’évolution de la langue’. He then proceeds to outline the development of Greek following a chronological organization, covering first Ancient Greek (briefly), then the Hellenistic Koine, followed by the ‘période obscure’ from the 6th to the 11th centuries, the medieval period (12th to 15th centuries), the Turkish period (15th to 18th centuries), and the period of the development of the modern standard language (18th century to present). This periodization is found elsewhere, e.g., in Browning 1982, though in the latter stages it is based more on external historical events (especially the fall of Constantinople in 1453) than on purely linguistic criteria (for which a Medieval
period of the 11th century to the 17th century is perhaps more justifiable). In each of these sections, besides giving the broad picture of general characteristics of the language in the relevant period, T presents well-chosen examples of texts, complete with detailed annotation, to illustrate these traits.

The extent of the linguistic detail which T presents is impressive (and goes well beyond Browning in this regard). For instance, he discusses the fate of word-final -n at each stage, the loss of which — with subsequent restoration from the learned language or by analogy — was a recurring (and possibly variable) sound change throughout Post-Classical Greek up to the late Medieval period; T makes the important observation that some of the apparent variability in the loss of final -n can be attributed to its having attained status as a morphological marker of nominative/accusative in certain noun classes (e.g., what historically were neuters in -ma, which came to show -man, but not those in -i, from earlier -in from Ancient Greek -ion). Similarly, T gives considerable space to the apheresis of unstressed initial vowels (rightly seeing it as originating as a sandhi phenomenon) and to the resolution of a hiatus through the change of -i to a glide before a vowel at various stages and in various dialects (note that his observation (p.87) that the modern standard language shows no glide formation in abstract nouns like ἐλευθερία “freedom” (pronounced [elefeeria]) overlooks the colloquial variant λεφτερία ([leftejia]), which admittedly, though may not have the same currency now as its by-form).

In what was surely a wise decision for such a survey volume, T steers a middle course on several controversies in the history of Greek, mentioning but taking no definitive position on the status of Ancient Macedonian (whether it was a dialect of Ancient Greek or not), the origin of the -itas diminutive suffix (whether it is a Slavic borrowing or the result of Greek-internal palatalization), and the so-called ‘language question’ which crystallized in the diglossic situation in the modern period.

Despite the excellent overall plan and careful execution evident in this book, it does have some shortcomings. Like most histories of Greek, T’s account does not give adequate recognition to the input of the neighboring Balkan languages in helping to shape Greek, except at lexical level. The remarkable parallelisms found between Greek and other Balkan languages (see Sandfeld 1930, Schaller 1975 for details) are ignored altogether, a stance which would suggest that these developments in Greek were all purely internally motivated ones. It is likely, however, as argued in Joseph (1983), that contact in the central Balkans among Greek, Slavic, and possibly Albanian played a key role in the retreat of infinitive in all these languages, though admittedly the beginnings of the process in Greek predate the period of contact.

T however is not averse to looking to language contact for the source of some developments in Greek. For example, he suggests French as a source for two Medieval Greek innovations, the use of an infinitive with the definite article as a circumstantial adverb and the occurrence of a ‘have’-plus-infinitive periphrasis in subjunctive clauses. Though French influence is an intriguing hypothesis, T here may have been a bit too quick to look outside of Greek: regarding the latter innovation, for instance, Browning (1982:80-81) suggests that it is “an interesting conflation of two future periphrases belonging to different stages of the language”, so that it in effect reflects the fact that the origin of the later Greek ‘have’-perfect lies in an earlier Greek ‘have’-future.

This work was written in part for a popular audience, and so is a bit deficient with regard to bibliography; for the most part, T cites Greek or French sources, thereby overlooking some important secondary literature on the history of Greek in English (though Browning is cited extensively throughout). Still, all in all, this latest important contribution to the history of Modern Greek is a must for several scholarly audiences as well: historical linguists, who can benefit from the rich linguistic detail presented on the development of an historically well-documented language; all Neo-Hellenists, whether linguists or not, for whom the history of the language provides windows on the external history of the speakers and on the development of their literature; and all students, Classicists and otherwise, of the earlier stages of the Greek language in general, for whom the later history contains interesting echoes of Ancient Greek.

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