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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS


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Every now and then, a scholar produces a book or article that becomes at once a defining work on a subject and is destined, moreover, to remain as such for some time to come. Leonard Bloomfield’s 1946 sketch of Proto-Algonquian is one such work involving some languages of North America, for it put Algonquian studies on a par with well-known language families of the Old World; similarly, in regard to a part of the Mediterranean area, one could mention Kristian Sandfeld’s classic 1930 study of the interrelations among the languages of the Balkans, a work which effectively launched the modern era of Balkan linguistics and has been a standard reference ever since. The present volume under review, George Drettas’s Aspects pontiques, clearly qualifies for consideration under this rubric, for in this monumental work, the author (hereafter D) provides the most thorough and complete description ever produced for the Pontic dialects of Modern Greek, definable as the varieties of Greek spoken along the Black Sea coast in what is now Turkey, from ancient times up until the population exchanges of 1923 (after the Treaty of Lausanne). With this book, D has not only elevated Pontic studies to a new level, but he also has enhanced and enriched Modern Greek dialectology and the study of the historical development of the Greek language.

D provides a wealth of important information on Pontic, covering first its sociolinguistic and historical setting, and then presenting, in copious and exquisite detail, a full account of the grammar. In successive chapters, D treats “le ‘mot’ pontique”, “les phonèmes”, and “le phénomène de sandhi” (all in the section on “phonologie”), “le groupe nominal”, “le syntagme verbale”, “les structures élémentaires de l’énoncé pontique”, “le système aspectuel”, “la subordination”, “la modification”, and “déixis spatiale et marqueurs de localisation” (in the section on “morpho-syntaxe”).

Pontic occupies a very interesting position within Greek dialectology. It is not as divergent as some forms of Greek (in particular Tsakonian, spoken still in the Peloponnesos), and there is much that is recognizably “Greek” in D’s Pontic material, especially in the way of lexical items, as a glance through D’s compendious glossary (56 pages, with some 5000 entries) quickly reveals, e.g. aðeliri ‘sister’, afino ‘leave, let’, πίνει ‘I drink’, πίνω ‘I am hungry’, πατέρας ‘father’, etc.

Nonetheless, Pontic presents some key innovative differences that distinguish it sharply from other dialects. For example, in terms of historical phonology, while most dialects show [i] as the outcome of Ancient Greek eta (graphic <η>, phonetically [e]), Pontic has [i] for unstressed eta in some positions and words. Synchronously, from a
phonetic standpoint, Pontic voiceless stops are strongly aspirated in syllable-initial position, a feature that is not widely found in other Greek dialects but occurs in Turkish and, in Pontic, extends to Turkish loan words (e.g. [kʰitáp] ‘book’). Accentually, also, while most dialects observe the law of limitation by which the word accent falls on one of the last three syllables, Pontic allows forms such as élénye ‘they said’ (accent on fourth syllable from word-end, cf. Standard Greek léyane (or éléyan), efýmnéstine ‘we were leaving’ (accent on fifth syllable from word-end), and even combinations of a verb with a weak pronoun, e.g. ekáláfevan. emasene ‘they were speaking to us’ (accent on seventh syllable from phonological word-end), since weak object pronouns, which can be as long as four syllables, are unstressed and form part of the phonological word with their governing verb. And, in terms of grammar, Pontic presents a “particule de thématisation forte”, i.e. a topic marker, /-pa/, which does not have a ready counterpart in other dialects, and a negator /kʰi/ which is obviously Greek perhaps only to the trained historical linguist, deriving from Ancient Greek  oukʰi (graphically <oùk>), an emphatic form of the negator ou (<où>).

The area in which Pontic was originally spoken is one that has seen numerous peoples and languages throughout the centuries, and Pontic certainly shows some effects of contacts with others. However, not all of the differences between Pontic and other forms of Greek can be attributed just to language contact.

To some extent, nonetheless, D’s presentation seems designed to highlight the divergences from more familiar forms of Greek. For instance, he sometimes presents clearly cognate material in such a way as to obscure the relation, a move which is justified by the fact that he is, quite admirably, attempting to present Pontic on its own terms, rather than through the medium of a comparison with Standard Demotic Greek. For example, as suggested above concerning accent, he treats weak object pronouns simply as “suffixes personnels” marking objects (an analysis that has been advanced – and can be defended – even for Standard Modern Greek (see Joseph 1988, 1989), but which has not received much acceptance, largely owing to the tradition of considering these elements as quasi-independent “clitic pronouns”. Similarly, D treats the possessive pronouns, rightly it seems, as suffixes more along the lines of the Turkish possessive endings on nouns.

The differences allow D to suggest that Pontic perhaps can be considered as a distinct language from the rest of Greek (as he suggests also for Tsakonian), though he is well aware of the difficulties of distinguishing language and dialect. He does place Pontic in its social setting, recognizing that now, with most Pontic speakers in mainland Greece owing to the 1923 population exchanges, the value of the Pontic variety as a marker of distinctive identity is different from what it may have been prior to 1923. Indeed, arguably as important as the rich linguistic detail D provides is the wealth of sociolinguistic information and facts about the external setting of Pontic, about key historical events, about the speakers themselves, and the like, even down to genealogical charts of his principal informants (by way of showing how Pontic families developed, dispersed, and settled in the 20th century).

All of the linguistic examples that D gives in the grammatical sections are carefully translated, an act of user-friendliness that facilitates analysis by the reader. An especially significant feature of the work is the substantial final portion (pp. 517-691), in which D
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presents two long texts and five shorter ones, including some poetry, together with detailed word-by-word glosses, translations, and commentary. Finally, there is a lengthy bibliography, covering both Greek and non-Greek titles, as well as an index of all Pontic words mentioned in the work.

This book is truly a work of love and devotion to a fascinating speech community that forms an important part of the Hellenic world. Hellenists, Mediterraneans, and Middle Eastern scholars, as well as general linguists, anthropologists, and historians, all owe an immense debt of gratitude to D for this remarkable book.

REFERENCES


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Einer kurzen, den geschichtlichen Hintergrund bietenden Einleitung folgt die eigentliche Grammatik, zum Glück in einigermaßen traditioneller, mithin verständlicher und informativer Anordnung und Darstellungsweise; Lautlehre, Verbmorphologie, Prono-