

On some reasons why Greek is one of *The World's Major Languages*

Brian D. Joseph
The Ohio State University
[joseph.1@osu.edu]

In 1987, Croom Helm Publishers of England brought out a book entitled *The World's Major Languages*, edited by Bernard Comrie. It has been updated and has now been re-issued, becoming available in 2008 (with an imprint date, however, of 2009).

Its original publication also coincides closely with the occasion for this gathering here, namely the founding of the Modern Greek program at this august university here in St. Petersburg. The link between these two events should become clear as I proceed.

The book contains descriptions of 40 languages considered by the editor to be “major languages”. The 40 languages are Swahili, Yoruba, Tagalog, Malay, Korean, Japanese, Burmese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Tamil, Hausa, Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Finnish, Hungarian, Pashto, Persian, Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit, Serbo-Croatian, Czech, Slovak, Russian, Polish, Romanian, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, French, Latin, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch, German, English, and Greek.

I am proud to say that I was asked to write the chapter on Greek, and I consider that chapter to be one of the most important of my various publications over the years. My task was to discuss the history of the language, to give a characterization of its structure, and to provide basic demographic and sociolinguistic facts, all in about 30 pages (some languages with shallower histories had proportionally more space — Romanian, for instance, was allocated about 20 pages).

So why was Greek included? The criteria that Comrie used to decide which languages are “major” are varied and, as he himself admits, rather subjectively applied too. Still, he lists considerations like the following, even though not all are necessarily applicable to each of the languages chosen (p. ix):

- a. number of speakers
- b. status of the language within nation-states (official language or not)

- c. use of the language in several countries
- d. associated with a long literary tradition (cultural importance)

Ultimately, therefore, he recognizes that “the notion of ‘major language’ is primarily a social notion” (p. 1) and he states that all languages are potentially “major” in terms of what they tell us about the linguistic abilities of humans and about language as a general human phenomenon. Moreover, he notes that the “majorness” of a language can come and go: among ancient languages, he notes that Sumerian once was a major language, some 4,000 or more years ago, but it no longer is; on the other hand, Latin is included in this volume because even though “long since deprived of native speakers [it has] immense cultural importance” (p. ix).

So where does Greek fit in? As noted, it is among the 40 “major” languages of the world, and the editor is careful to point out (p. 4) that for Greek we generally use a single basic designation for all of its stages of development and in that way the language and its temporal scope are unlike Latin and the Romance languages (French, Spanish, Italian, etc.). And indeed, in writing the chapter on Greek, I treated it as a single entity with variously differentiated stages of development, more or less as I had been asked to do (that is, the editor did not single out any one stage of the language that I was to focus on; rather I was to write simply on “Greek”).

While the inclusion of Greek in the volume makes sense to all Hellenes and Hellenophiles, for various reasons, Greek might be considered a difficult choice.

First, as compared with the other 39 languages, Greek has a relatively small number of speakers, perhaps some 10,000,000 at the time the book was conceived twenty or so years ago. Some of the languages included have fewer speakers, e.g. Slovak has only 4,500,000 but it was bundled together in a single chapter with its very closely related sibling Czech, with its 9,500,000 speakers); Pashto is estimated to have about the same number of speakers as Greek today; and Malay, though widely used in four countries, is a second language for most of those who use it, not a native language (making the notion of “speaker” for this exercise a bit tricky to apply, admittedly).

Second, as compared with the other 39 languages, Greek occupies a relatively small territory, though some comparisons are hard to make since such a large part of Greece’s national territory includes the open waters of the Aegean Sea; still, it is currently the official language of two nation-states, Greece and Cyprus.

Third, there are, moreover, some languages in the book that are somewhat comparable (more or less) with Greek in terms of number of speakers and geography, at least as far as a “homeland” might be concerned, but which have had a far-reaching spread from having been associated with relatively recent colonization, for instance, Dutch, with some 20,000,000 speakers in the 1980s, and Portuguese with some 10,000,000 in Portugal. But Portuguese, due to colonial expansion since the 1500s, spread to Brazil and several other parts of the world (including some areas in Africa and Asia) and so is robustly represented with over 200,000,000 speakers now. And Dutch, even though geographically limited to The Netherlands and Belgium, gave rise to, again through colonial enterprises, Afrikaans in South Africa, and was influential in the formation of some Creole languages in the Caribbean. By contrast, the time of great expansion and spread for Greek and of its considerable influence over other languages came much earlier, in the Hellenistic period and into the Byzantine period, and so has less relevance for deciding major languages of the modern world. And, unlike Latin, another ancient language with a wide expanse of use in earlier times, Greek has not necessarily given rise to a whole host of well-populated languages, as Latin has with the Romance languages.

Fourth, even though association with a long literary tradition was a criterion, it is not clear that the significant literary contributions of ancient Greek writers should count for Modern Greek, even if we accept the premise that all of Greek is one language, a topic I return to later on.

So, based on such considerations, we might well ask whether Greek actually does belong in such a catalogue of the “World’s Major Languages”? I would argue yes, based on some other criteria that Comrie does not mention.

First, going back to the matter of a literary tradition, one can note that **MODERN** Greek is the native language, and the medium of writing, for two Nobel Prize winners in literature – Georgos Seferis in 1963 and Odysseus Elytis in 1979. (One can add that Nikos Kazantzakis was seriously considered for a Nobel Prize and probably would have been awarded one, but that effort was blocked by the Greek government for political reasons due to Kazantzakis’s political views.)

A search through the Nobel Foundation’s website (www.nobel.org) reveals that other languages on Comrie’s list, e.g. French, German, and English, have done better than Greek as far as garnering Nobel Prizes is concerned, and that some of the smaller languages, especially

Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish, have multiple winners, even more than Greek. Interestingly, though, there are some “larger” languages on Comrie’s list that have no winners, e.g. Hindi or Korean or Thai, and some that have fewer than Greek, e.g. Arabic, Chinese, or Turkish, each of whom have one Nobel laureate. It is important to note here that for each of these last three languages, their one winner came several years after Comrie’s book had appeared, so that at the time that Greek was selected as a major language, it was far ahead of these far more populous and regionally influential languages. And, some had fewer than Greek at the time of the publication of Comrie’s book only to catch up with Greek later, e.g. Japanese had its first laureate in 1968 and gained a second only in 1994.

It is important here of course (something the Nobel Foundation itself does **not** do) to distinguish between country of birth, country of residence, and language used in writing --- for instance, the 1981 winner, Elias Canetti, was born in what is now Bulgaria, but was a Sephardic Jew who wrote in German. Also, there are four Nobel laureates in literature from Ireland, but they wrote in English (William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, and Seamus Heaney) or French (Samuel Beckett – also English in his case). Thus the Irish language, despite being well-represented in the Nobel listing for what might be thought of as largely irrelevant reasons as far as the language is concerned, is not on the list of major languages in Comrie’s book; yet, surely its exclusion by Comrie had more to do with the number of speakers and limited geographic reach of the language, and the fact that there have actually been **no** Nobel laureates writing in Irish is likely to be just coincidental.

Moreover, there are some languages represented in the list of Nobel literature laureates that are not in Comrie’s book --- Yiddish, through Isaac Bashevis Singer (1979) is a notable example. Still, for the most part, no language with two Nobel prize winners in literature is excluded from Comrie’s book.

We can therefore add the evidence of these two Nobel laureates to the reasons for it being right to include Greek on the list of major languages. That is, there is a **MODERN** literary tradition that places Greek today in a key role, quite apart from the literary contributions of the ancient Greek writers or questions of Greek as a single language; recall, for instance, that Comrie’s book focused mainly on contemporary languages.

Second, even though Comrie says, quite rightly, that any language can be a major language with regard to what it potentially tells us about the human linguistic abilities and the

nature of human language, it is the case that Greek offers the world something that very few languages can, namely a virtually unbroken 3500-year documentation of the language. In the case of Greek, this stretches from Mycenaean Greek of the 14th century BC right up to the present day, with only a gap of a few hundred years between Mycenaean Greek and the earliest alphabetic inscriptions and the language of Homeric epic. In this regard, only a few languages, such as Chinese or, if we take the languages of India that are descended from Sanskrit as showing a single line of descent, then languages like Hindi and Bengali too.

Thus this second point distinguishes Greek from just about every other language and language group in the world, and thus makes Greek a remarkably important laboratory for the study of language change. Indeed, Greek offers the linguist, and thus scientific knowledge more generally, a wealth of information about variously motivated types of change: internally motivated structural change in language, where the structure of the language system itself is the cause of the change; socially motivated change based in the indigenous society using the language, where the social setting for the language itself plays a key role in change --- I have in mind here the diglossic situation that Greek has struggled with for so many centuries; and also externally motivated change, where contact with speakers of other languages has an effect on the language itself --- I have in mind here not just the effects of the expansion of Greek during the Koine period, but also the interactions with other languages of the Balkans during the Ottoman period (leading to the so-called Balkan “Sprachbund”).

Still, this second point, especially when we consider that what is conventionally called “Chinese” is really a group of several languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, etc.), and that in adding a language like Hindi to the list of languages with long histories we have already made allowances for figuring language split into our calculations, leads into the question of whether Greek indeed is “one” language throughout all of its history. We must ask at this point what it means to talk about Greek as “one” language throughout all of its history; some have done just this, e.g. Browning (1983:vii; my emphasis/BDJ):

The Homeric poems were first written down in more or less their present form in the seventh century B.C. Since then Greek has enjoyed a continuous tradition down to the present day. Change there has certainly been. But there has been no break like that between Latin and the Romance languages. Ancient Greek is not a

foreign language to the Greek of today as Anglo-Saxon is to the modern Englishman. The only other language which enjoys comparable continuity of tradition is Chinese. ... **It cannot be too much emphasised that Greek is one language, and not a series of distinct languages.**

To some extent, talking about unity of a language over time is a misrepresentation, since all languages show some continuity with their past and some deviation from that past; that is, all languages are a mix at any one time of old features carried over from earlier stages of the language and new innovative features that are supplanting older ones. That is true whether we talk about the passage from Latin into French, or Sanskrit into Hindi, or Archaic Chinese into modern Mandarin, or Ancient Greek into Modern Greek, or, for that matter the passage from the English of Shakespeare into the English of hip-hop, or even from the English of the 20th century into English of the 21st century.

The divisions that we so readily place on the timeline as demarcating Old English as something distinct from Middle English, or for that matter as demarcating Latin as distinct from French, are really just arbitrary divisions.

In this regard, we can wonder if Greek scholars have done a disservice to their language by being comfortable with the idea of Greek as “one” language across all the historical periods of its development (as contrasted, for instance, with Latin and the Romance languages). That is, there is really great diversity across all of the pieces that go into what we call “the Greek language” and it might really be possible to discern four, or more, Greek languages in the present-day: standard Greek and its dialects, Pontic Greek (note that Drettas 1997 treats it as a separate language), Tsakonian Greek (note that its historical descent is different from that of the standard language and regional dialects, as it derives from the classical Doric dialect rather than from the Hellenistic Koine), and perhaps also Cypriot Greek (whether we are talking about the “deep” and now-receding older dialect or the Cypriot regional variety of the standard language. And further divisions could perhaps be made. By doing this, we would not be diminishing the unity of Greek any more than recognizing distinct Latin-derived languages diminishes the unity of the Romance languages. And, by doing so, we would be giving the modern form of the language some integrity distinct from earlier stages; note that the default in (most of) the West (the University of Michigan is a notable exception) is to think of the unmarked sense of ‘Greek’

as being the ancient language, so that the adjective “Modern” has to be added to signal the stage in question --- the same is not done with other language names like Russian, or Spanish, or French, and for them, earlier stages get the adjective, as we talk about Old Russian, Old Spanish, Old French, etc.). But Greek would not lose its link with a long literary tradition nor with its long history, any more than recognizing the diversity of Chinese or of modern languages of India separates those modern languages from their past.

In a sense, it may be, as Shakespeare put it, “What’s in a name?”, and thus that it is irrelevant how we label the language or conceptualize its relation with its past, and it is fair to wonder if Greek would have been “major” if it were one of a cluster of languages. But this is actually the case for ALL of languages in Comrie’s book (note how many varieties of English there are, or of German, or Hindi, or Thai) since the notion of “distinct language” is really a **SOCIAL** construct.

What is clear about Greek, however many Greek languages there are, is that it is well-deserved as an object of intense interest, and thus (on a personal level, but also for all of us here since we all have put considerable amounts of time into studying and analyzing this language), our time has been well spent!

References

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