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Hellenistic Koine and Modern Global Languages

In the history of mankind the phenomenon known as a world or global language has been developed based on various social-political, socio-economic or religious-cultural factors.

Why a language becomes global language has little to do with the number of people who speak it. It is much more to do with who those speakers are.¹ There are 6 909 identified languages all over the world (2 473 from which are in the danger of extinction, according to UNESCO),² and the most widespread languages are Chinese, Spanish, English, Arabic, Hindi, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, and German. According to recent studies, French is in a sixteenth place.³

A language can be considered as a world or global language, not only due to the number of native speakers, but due to some other reasons: if it is widely spread and spoken as a second language by a big variety of ethnic groups, which is usually determined by political, economic and partly by cultural factors.

Sumerian, Acadian, ancient Aramaic, Greek Koine, Latin, Arabic, Sanskrit have been recognized as world languages historically. Nowadays the languages like Chinese, Spanish, French, Russian and English pretend to be global,⁴ but according to recent studies English is most widely

¹ Crystal D., *Why Global Language?*, in: *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, 7.

² <http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>

³ http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/distribution.asp?by=size#2

⁴ Esperanto is theoretically also a world language, but due to limited use, it should be considered just a utopian global language. "The potential users will prefer a European language with which they are already familiar (English) over a quasi-European language with which they are not (Esperanto)." Paul Bruthiaux, op. cit., 137.

spread and spoken all over the world.⁵ “The cluster of economic, military, political, and technological factors that led to the worldwide dominance of English as a language of wider communication is well documented.”⁶ “In a rare and useful attempt at quantifying perceptions of language dominance in terms of number of speakers, geographic distribution, and ratio of speakers per capita GNP, Navarro shows that English leaves behind other languages of wider communication (past and present) such as Dutch, German, Italian, Hindi, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian but also more often mentioned competitors such as Arabic, Chinese, French, and Spanish.”⁷

The subject of my interest is Greek, so-called Alexandrian or Hellenistic Koine in the context of contemporary world and its relation to modern global languages and their main characteristics. Which are the main features of a contemporary world/global language? Did the Hellenistic Koine bear the same features more than 20 centuries ago?

A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country.⁸ A global language should be widely spread geographically and spoken by different ethnicities due to mostly military-political, trade-economic and/or religious-ideological factors. In addition, a global language is not only a language of communication, but it also bears a certain ideology and/or tries to disseminate a certain culture. Usually, due to the wide area of distribution, a global language loses its “purity” influenced by the languages of different ethnic groups speaking this language as a second one.⁹

Thus, four main characteristics of a global language can be distinguished: 1. Wide geographical area where it is spoken; 2. Use by many and different ethnic groups; 3. The military-political, socio-economic, ideological-religious grounds; 4. Different linguistic changes and lose of its “purity”. It should be mentioned that the distribution of a certain cultural values through a global language usually is a result, but not a goal.

⁵ For the debate on the issue see: Bruthiaux P., Predicting Challenges to English as a Global Language, in: *Language Problems and Language Planning* 26:2, John Benjamins Publishing Company 2002, 129-157.

⁶ Bruthiaux P., op. cit., 129.

⁷ Bruthiaux P., op. cit., 130. For details see: Fernando A. Navarro, Which is the World’s Most Important Language? Application of an Objective Method of Assessment to the Twelve Main World Languages, in: *Lebende Sprachen* 42, 1997, 5-10.

⁸ Crystal D., op. cit., 3.

⁹ On the characteristics of global languages see: Bruthiaux P., op. cit.; Crystal D., op. cit.

The Greek is one of the most ancient world languages. The oldest Greek inscriptions are dated by XIV-XII c. BC. The Greek language has passed different stages of development and transformation. One of the most important periods in the history of Greek is so-called Hellenistic era.

The Attic dialect gained importance in V c. BC at least for the Attic Union, where it played a role of Lingua Franca. It was used as a literary dialect not only by local writers, but by the writers of other regions too. E. g. Anaxagoras in Asia Minor, Gorgias in Sicily etc. The Attic dialect became a good ground for linguistic unification. It was like a model for the up-coming common language.

In the period of Philip II, which managed to subdue many different territories including Greece, the Attic dialect initially is used just locally, but later, after being influenced by other dialects and mainly by Ionian, it is widely spread.

In the end of IV c. BC Alexander the Great created a big empire, stretched from Macedonia to India. Namely, from the Adriatic Sea to the East Iran, from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf. Greeks along with the Romans and many different people of East - the Jews, the Babylonians, Parthians, and Egyptians constitute the Empire of Alexander the Great, the so-called Hellenistic world.

The idea of linguistic unity, along with some other principles, laid the basis of Alexander's empire: The Greek became the official language of the state. There was no anymore a lack of a unified literary language. In this period a so-called κοινή διάλεκτος (Koine dialect - a common dialect) has been developed on the basis of somehow transformed Attic dialect. This name has become more popular in its reduced form κοινή (Koine), which was later adopted and used in a generalized meaning, denoting cultural unity. Koine, in fact, has become a main linguistic norm, a literary language not only for the Greek Diaspora, but also for various ethnic groups in the empire of Alexander the Great. The process of linguistic unification finished after the end of Alexander's conquests and generating the Kingdoms of Diadokhoi in Asia and Egypt.

It is interesting to learn which part of world population in Hellenistic Period used to speak Greek Koine. As far as I'm informed the exact number of the Koine speakers and its relation to the world's population of that period is still unknown and is a subject of future studies.

The regional dialects continue their existence even after the formation of the Koine, but its influence on them used to be more and more significant, which resulted in merging of local dialects with the unified

language. The Greek inscriptions of IV c. BC found in various places show up gradually increasing number of Attic linguistic elements.¹⁰

There is a one important factor that differentiates the Hellenistic Koine from the modern world languages. All global languages widely spread in XX and XXI c.-s already had their shape and had been transformed by the speakers of different ethnicities. Unlikely, the Koine, is the only one world language, which did not exist before and has been formed only after the wide geographical spread has occurred. Koine after becoming a global language served as a stimulus for linguistic unification of Greece (and it is basis of Modern Greek too). Therefore, if the modern global languages are in the danger of losing their own face, the common Greek Koine is formed in the process of globalization.¹¹ If the globalization often has a negative effect on the language, it could be said, that in case of Koine the globalization had a positive impact.

The loss of language purity can be considered one of the main challenges of contemporary global languages. "If English is your mother tongue, you may have mixed feelings about the way English is spreading around the world. You may feel pride, that your language is the one, which has been so successful; but your pride may be tinged with concern, when you realize that people in other countries may not want to use the language in the same way that you do, and are changing it to suit themselves. We are all sensitive to the way other people use (it is often said, abuse) "our" language. Indeed, if there is one predictable consequence of a language becoming a global language, it is that nobody owns it any more."¹²

The linguistic unification and the formation of the Koine after some changes in the Attic dialect was perceived and treated by the intellectual circles as a loss of linguistic "purity", which was followed by the proper reaction. Approximately since I c. a tendency of recovering "pure" Attic linguistic forms in some literary works can be observed and this trend is called Atticism movement.¹³

¹⁰ Debrunner A., *Geschichte der Griechischen Sprache*, I, Bis zum Ausgang der klassischen Zeit, 3. Aufl. Von A. Debrunner, Berlin 1953, 34-52.

¹¹ There are some attempts of standardization of English, but these attempts are not successful till now. For details see: Bruthiaux P., *op. cit.*, 140-145.

¹² Crystal D., *op. cit.*, 2.

¹³ It appeared after the Roman domination and the social-political and cultural fall of the Greek World.: Pisani V., *Manuale Storico della lingua greca*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia 1973, 231. About Atticism see: Ανδρώτης Ν., *Ιστορία της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας (τέσσερις μελέτες)*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1995, 57-66, Αργυριώδης Γ., *Νεοελληνική Γλώσσα, Ιστορι-*

Diogenes of Laertius, Herod Atticus, Dion Chrysostom, Lucianus, Aelius Aristides, Aelianus, Philostratus and some others can be mentioned as the best representatives of Atticism.¹⁴ They are more moderate, avoiding the so-called hyper-Atticisms, too often use of Attic linguistic forms and sometimes they even apply vulgarisms.¹⁵

It should be noted that in the Hellenistic period, there was, on the one hand, the so-called literary Koine – based on the Attic dialect, spread all over the Empire and unified despite the slight stylistic variations – and, on the other hand, there was the folk (i. e. speaking) Koine, which due to the influence of local dialects, distinguished by some peculiarities. *History* by Polybius, *New Testament* and *Septuaginta* could be mentioned as the vivid examples of literary Koine, while the Folk Koine could be found in the papyri, private letters and documents of IV c. BC – VI c.¹⁶

The principle of linguistic unity continued existence for centuries even after the collapse of the empire of Alexander the Great. The Greek Koine of Hellenistic period became a world language and it was dominant along with the Aramaic in Mediterranean Area and Asia. It should be noted that even after the Roman domination, the conquered peoples communicated with the invader using Greek Koine.

There is an opinion that simplicity of the language, its morphological and syntactic lightness can help it to become world language. For example, as early as in the 19th c., the British magazine *Athenaeum* wrote: "In its easiness of grammatical construction, in its paucity of inflection, in its almost total disregard of the distinctions of gender excepting those of nature, in the simplicity and precision of its terminations and auxiliary verbs, not less than in the majesty, vigour and copiousness of its expression, our mother-tongue seems well adapted by organization to become the language of the world."¹⁷

κές και γλωσσολογικές μελέτες, Εκδοτικός Οίκος Αδελφών Κυριακίδη, Θεσσαλονίκη 1990, 150-152; Beck H.-G., *Η Βυζαντινή χιλιετία*, Αθήνα 1992, 202-208; Pisani V., *Manuale Storico della lingua greca*, Paideia Editrice, Brescia 1973, 231-236; Κοιμδάκης Μ. Ζ. (Επιστημονική επιμέλεια), *Ιστορία της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας*, Αθήνα 1999, 114-122.

¹⁴ Two terms are used in Greek scientific literature: Ἄττις and Ἀττικίζουσα. Beck H.-G., *Η Βυζαντινή χιλιετία*, Αθήνα 1992, 202.

¹⁵ See: Beck H.-G., *Η Βυζαντινή χιλιετία*, Αθήνα 1992, 202.

¹⁶ Debrunner A., *Geschichte der Griechischen Sprache*, I, Bis zum Ausgang der klassischen Zeit, 3. Aufl. Von A. Debrunner, Berlin 1953, 69-71; Αργυριάδης Γ., *Νεοελληνική Γλώσσα*, *Ιστορικές και γλωσσολογικές μελέτες*, Εκδοτικός Οίκος Αδελφών Κυριακίδη, Θεσσαλονίκη 1990, 139-154.

¹⁷ Crystal D., *op. cit.*, 8.

The history of many world languages and of the Koine as well, showed up that such arguments are misleading and misconceived. Latin was once a major international language, despite many inflectional endings and gender differences. French, too, has been such language, despite its nouns being masculine and feminine. And so – at different times and places – have the heavily inflected Greek, Arab, Spanish and Russian. Ease of learning has nothing to do with it.¹⁸

The Koine became a world language first of all due to the imperial policy by Alexander the Great. “A language has traditionally become an international language for one chief reason: the power of its people – especially their political and military power. The explanation is the same throughout history. Why did Greek become a language of international communication in the Middle East over 2000 years ago? Not because of the intellects of Plato and Aristotle: the answer lies in the swords and spears wielded by the armies of Alexander the Great.”¹⁹

Except of the above-mentioned, there is another factor which differentiates the Koine from the contemporary global languages. Historically, behind the each modern world language there is a concrete, very rich and valuable culture, but after becoming global, these languages become mainly the distributors of the ideology, which made them global, which brought to them the status of the global language. Much more limited is the distribution of the culture, to which each global language historically belongs to. For instance, Russian was primarily engaged in the propaganda of communist ideals, and only indirectly, much less intensively Russian tried to spread the intellectual values by Chekhov, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. English, historically the language of Shakespeare and Faulkner, today is much more associated with policy makers, business leaders and other professionals²⁰ and at the same time it is a language of Hollywood, MacDonald’s and modern informational technologies. According to some scholars, English is connected to modernizing and liberating values too, but in the context of contemporary world wars aiming at “modernization and liberation”, the definitions like modernizing and liberating sometimes are understood negatively by the common people.

“A language doesn’t become a global language because of its intrinsic structural properties, or because of the size of its vocabulary, or because it was once a vehicle of great literature in the past, or because it was once

¹⁸ For details see: Crystal D., *op. cit.*, 8.

¹⁹ Crystal D., *op. cit.*, 9.

²⁰ See: Bruthiaux P., *op. cit.*, 146.

associated with a great culture or religion. These are all factors which can motivate someone to learn a language, of course, but none of them alone, or in combination, can ensure a language's world spread".²¹ "Economics replaced politics as the chief driving force. And the language behind the US dollar was English."²²

This is valid for the Hellenistic Koine as well, but it should be mentioned that the Koine differs from the modern world languages not only as the bearer of the great and ancient culture, but also as the active distributor of it. The trade, economy and ideology are the most important driving forces of the contemporary global languages, but in case of the Koine the Hellenic and Hellenistic culture is an important driver too.

The Koine was a language of the government, the trade and the court and, at the same time, it was a literary language for many different nations in the empire of Alexander the Great. They used to write their own history and their own religious traditions not in their mother tongue, but in Koine.²³

The whole Hellenistic world was full of cultural centers such as a theater, gymnasium, and library. The main aim of the Alexandrian Library was to preserve and spread the Hellenistic literary works existing at that time. After the archaeological excavations, the gymnasium, as a symbol of the harmonic Greek Education, is found in Ai Khanoum.

As it is already mentioned, the impulse for the Koine to become a world language was neither Plato, nor Aristotle, but at any rate the spread of Koine was always accompanied by the distribution of the Hellenistic literature and culture themselves.

There is another characteristic of the Hellenistic Koine, which is hardly found in the modern global languages.²⁴ By its impact and influence many

²¹ Crystal D., *op. cit.*, 9.

²² Crystal D., *op. cit.*, 10.

²³ Χριστίδης Α. Φ. (επιστημονική επιμέλεια), *Ιστορία της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας από τις αρχές έως την ύστερη αρχαιότητα*, Ινστιτούτο Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών, Ίδρυμα Μανόλη Τριανταφυλλίδη, Εβδομη ανατύπωση, 2010, 247.

²⁴ The fight against local languages and the imperial policy of Russification are among the main characteristics of the Soviet Union. Thus this policy had no results. "Why has the fall of the Soviet empire led to the immediate drastic decline of Russian, which barring a miraculous recovery is likely to continue, while French, and especially English, hardly lost ground after decolonization and became the official language of many newly independent states of Africa and South Asia?... Ironically, both the Leninist policy of linguistic generosity and its opposite, the post-Stalinist drive to make Russian the instrument of integration of the Soviet people, are chiefly to blame for the rapid retreat of Russian" (Kreindler I. T., *A Second Missed Opportunity*:

local languages were disappeared. For instance, Carian, Lydian and other regional languages in the west coast of Asia Minor, a Semitic language at Tyrus and Sidon.²⁵ It should be noted that there is no historical reference or any other evidence proving that such Hellenization was a result of the official policy of the Empire. It should be regarded as a result of the political and cultural power of the Hellenistic world.

Lower layers of the Hellenistic society better maintained their native language, while the higher layers used to be bilingual (in most cases it was due to the desire to obtain and/or maintain the power). Interestingly, a similar trend is observed with regard to the modern global languages (French, Russian, and others). But this tradition is adhered by English which is much more democratic, involving all sectors of society.

Based on the above, the following could be said on the relationship of the Koine with the modern global languages:

1. Koine was widely spread geographically, and it was spoken by different ethnic groups;
2. The main reasons for developing and spreading the Koine were the military and political factors, and the Koine played significant role in the trade and economic relations;
3. There was an issue of Koine's linguistic "purity";
4. The Koine was not only the official language and the language of communication, but the Koine was going through the deliberate dissemination of culture and cultural values, and it was not just a distributor of imperial ideology, that essentially differentiates it from the modern global languages;
5. The Koine was the aggressive tool of Hellenization. Such role (substitution of the local, native languages) has not been played by any of the modern global languages (despite of some attempts).

As it was already mentioned, neither English, nor any other modern language, which tend to be or become the global language, are bearing eternal cultural and spiritual values.²⁶ They are to spread the so-called mass-culture or they tend to have just an ideological impact on our societies. Real Historical Culture *vs* Mass-Culture and Ideology. There is a

Russian in Retreat as a Global Language, in: International Political Science Review, vol. 14, No 3, The Emergent World Language System, 1993, 269).

²⁵ Χριστιδης Α. Φ., *op. cit.*, 253.

²⁶ The opinion, that "Esperanto is a powerful symbol of the human linguistic heritage and hence of universal human values" is hardly convincing (See: Bruthiaux P., *op. cit.*, 147).

big gap in our modern societies owing to the lack of real cultural values. The gap should be filled, but how?

Let's recall the history of Latin as a global language. "Latin became an international language throughout the Roman Empire, but this was not because the Romans were more numerous than the peoples they subjugated. They were simply more powerful. And later, when Roman military power declined, Latin remained for a millennium as the international language of education, thanks to a different sort of power – the ecclesiastical power of Roman Catholicism."²⁷

Nowadays we need not a global language with educational and/or religious power (they already exist), but we need a new "Lingua Franca" for intellectual communication and the classical languages like Greek and Latin still may serve as the global languages in this respect.

Due to the Slavic, Arabic and Turkic expansion, the Koine gradually lost its international function. Its successor, the Modern Greek did not have any resource to be a world language, but the Ancient Greek along with the Latin has the potential to be learned much more intensively all over the world and to become global language, bearing eternal spiritual and cultural values and uniting different people intellectually. The global intellectual Koine, that is, the common language is needed for maintaining the world's humanistic traditions and for the expansion of the eternal values.

²⁷ Crystal D., *op. cit.*, 7.