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**CLASSICAL GREEK STUDIES ON THE VERGE OF THE MILLENNIUM:  
A LINGUIST'S VIEW**

1. Despite the title of this brief communication, its intention is much humbler: it is not to give a state-of-the-art report on the subject of Classical Greek Studies, something that may be reached at the end of the conference as the cumulative result of all the reports; I only wish to refer to a few points of interest that may have the potential of showing where we stand today and what more could be done, and all this viewed from the angle of a historical and comparative linguist. The last portion of the preceding sentence "historical and comparative linguist" introduces us to the nucleus of my argument, also in consonance with the general theme of the conference which, with the phrase "on the verge of the centuries", places the subject of Classical Greek Studies on the axis of diachrony.

Although the emphasis is usually on Classical Greek, it should be stated that the history of the Greek language and literature does not end with the classical period; we have to stress the unbroken continuity (with the expected, of course, influence from various sources throughout its course) of both language and literary production to the present day. This diachronicity should not be neglected or be taken lightly by specialists of the Greek language of any period. Unfortunately, this is not the case in most Universities and similar institutions where the study of Greek is mainly and foremost - if not exclusively - of Ancient Greek and, in a few cases, through the Middle Ages, but even there in separate academic units often with little or no interrelation to one another. For obvious reasons, the only exception to this trend are the Greek Universities where the Departments of Philology comprize specializations in Classical, Medieval, and Modern Greek Philology in a coherent scheme of study and practice. Greek philology has always been historical, but rarely comparative. Structuring, of course, a modern University in this way, poses a practical problem: it is very difficult for a University today to allow equal space to all phases of all the languages and literatures that are offered in that University. This would create mammoth Universities and dysfunctional academic units. However, in the case of Greek and Latin, i.e. the traditional Classical Studies of western Universities, one would like to see more global and holistic approaches to the study of these languages in their historical development, instead of the fragmentation into narrow specializations (which in certain cases are also needed). Such a change would perhaps also require a change in terminology, from "Classical Greek Studies" to simply "Greek Studies".

2. But, this is only part of the "complaint" that a historical linguist like myself may have with regard to the state of Classical Greek Studies today. The rest has to do with the comparative framework within which Greek studies should be placed. This refers to the possibility of seeing Classical Greek Studies in relation to its cognate languages and, to some extent, literatures of Indo-European. This comparative Indo-European framework comprises, besides Greek and Latin, also languages like Indic, Iranian, Armenian, Slavic, Germanic, Celtic, and especially useful for Archaic Greek the languages of ancient Anatolia, mainly Hittite and Luvian, as well as other languages of the Indo-European family, to mention only the "major". This is the background against which Greek has to be cast and studied on all levels (language, literature, culture, etc.). In fact, in many Universities in Europe and North America this has been done ever since the comparative Indo-European Philology was established in the early part of the 19th century. It is this aspect where Greek Universities fall behind (with few exceptions but even there done on an occasional and non-systematic way): for instance, Sanskrit or Old Iranian or Celtic probably have never been taught in Greece; not even the classic course of Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin. To my mind, the religious devotion with which we are confined to studying just Greek and Latin excluding and ignoring all else is a serious mistake and a serious handicap of the Greek Uni-

versities. This means that Classical Greek Studies must acquire a comparative “big brother” which is the wider Indo-European perspective.

Why is such an approach necessary? What are the benefits for Classical Greek Studies from this comparative approach? As an illustration I shall briefly discuss two examples with regard to different aspects of language study and comparison on which the comparative approach can facilitate our understanding of certain problems and possibly provide adequate solutions. The first example deals with a phonological and morphological problem, i.e. with etymology, the second with a lexical-semantic problem. It should be added that the method we are applying here is the well-known to historical linguists “comparative method”, whose main aim is, by using comparative data from different languages, to establish genetic relations among the languages studied and to reconstruct earlier stages of a language which was once their antecedent but which is no longer attested.

The Greek word ἄναξ “leader, king” remains till now with no certain etymology, that is to say the history of the word and its connection to other words from related languages has remained difficult to trace. However, a recent suggestion by Hajnal (1998:64ff.) provides a reasonable and plausible explanation. Hajnal argues that the word ἄναξ (which has a stem *ἄνακτ-* if we judge from the Genitive case ἄνακτος) is morphologically identical to another word from archaic Greek of the area of social and political organization, the Mycenaean word *ra-wa-ke-ta* which phonologically must be */lāwāgetās/* and which is analyzed as *\*lāwo-ag-etās*, i.e. a compound consisting of the word *λαφός* “military people”, the root *\*h<sub>2</sub>ag-* “lead” (Gk. ἄγω), plus the common Greek suffix *-etās*. Now, the word ἄναξ appears to have a similar formation: the zero grade of the root *\*wen-* “win, gain”, the root *\*h<sub>2</sub>ag-*, plus the suffix *-t-*, thus deriving from a protoform *\*w<sub>h</sub>h<sub>2</sub>ag-t-s*. Finally, the extra Greek etymological comparandum is provided by Sanskrit *vanij-* “merchant” which is explained as deriving from PIE *\*wen-ǵ-* (*-ǵ-* < *\*h<sub>2</sub>ag-*, i.e. the zero grade of *\*h<sub>2</sub>ag-*). Thus, the Greek word ἄναξ finds an explanation which is phonologically and morphologically plausible, and this by means of inner Greek evidence and the support of comparative information.

The second example illustrates something from the area of syntagmatics, i.e. combinations of lexical items into larger linguistic units. Such traditional combinations are the so-called formulae, and, in addition to purely linguistic information, can also provide important information on social life and institutions of a people. This area has been the subject of study since the early 1850's and finds its best epitome in Rüdiger Schmitt's monumental work *Dichtung und Dichtersprache in indogermanischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden, 1967). However, the following example is not found in Schmitt's book, but has been studied by other scholars, notably by Ivanov 1981, Pinault 1982, and others. It has to do with the expression “put/make a name”, which is attested in many Indo-European languages, e.g. Greek ὄνομα τίθεσθαι (cf. also the noun ὄνομαθέτης), Sanskrit *nāma dhā-*, Latin *nomen faciō* and *nomen in-dō*, Hittite *laman dai-*, and similar combinations from other languages. The combined evidence from the different Indo-European languages points to the inherited nature of the above phrase, and we reconstruct a protoform like the following: *\*(H)nom<sub>h</sub> dhē*.

Moreover, by studying this expression in the textual context of its use we can also reconstruct an old institution of the Indo-Europeans, that of “name-giving”. By so doing we discover that there is a lot of symbolism involved in every act in the process of name-giving, and this is explained on the basis of the double meaning of the verb *\*dhē-* as “put, place” but also “make”, on the one, and on a series of prescribed steps for the ritual, on the other: the raising of the child by the father (or some other male kin) and placing it on his knees, then making a fitting name for the child, and finally giving the name. The symbolism lies in the following: the raising of the child by his father and placing it on his knees symbolizes the acceptance, recognition, and legitimation of the child by the father; it also symbolizes transfer to the child of strength, vitality, and generative power for the perpetuation of the family line. Finally, the making and placing of the fitting name on the child saves the child from anonymity, thus becoming a real person, but also saves the name of the family. Both institution and relevant beliefs are encapsulated in the linguistic formula *\*(H)nom<sub>h</sub> dhē* that we briefly examined here. That many people are so sensitive and protective of their name is not accidental; this belief is deeply rooted in the lap of prehistory, and continues to this day to enjoy a high esteem among many nations. Remember the Modern Greek proverb: *Κάλλιο να μου βγει το μάτι παρά το όνομα* “I'd rather lose my eye than my name!”.

What we did here is placing the Greek expression ὄνομα τίθεσθαι in its wider context, with the application of the comparative method on material that we first noticed in one language (Greek), and

gradually adding to the picture more cognate material from other languages, until the puzzle is complete, offering thus the provenience of the Greek expression and understanding its very old status. Secondly, we took our investigation a step further, discovering that this expression of Ancient Greek speaks of an institution that is as old as Indo-European, the mother language of Greek, Sanskrit, Latin, Hittite, etc. Comparative philology offers this opportunity, to farther see and better understand things that otherwise remain hidden or "unique treasures of one nation and of one language". This perspective is necessary for Classical Greek Studies, since it may revitalize and greatly enrich the field, features surely needed in today's world.

3. It is a common phenomenon for languages of a geographical area to share some common traits, traits that belong to all of them, usually with a traceable source but oftentimes not so easily determined. Such languages form what is called a "Sprachbund"; however, we often deal in such cases also with a "Kulturbund", that is to say a group of shared features not only on the level of language but also on that of culture. In modern times, a good example of such a linguistic and to a large extent also cultural areal group is presented by the languages of the Balkan peninsula. All indications point to the assumption that at least the eastern part of the Ancient Mediterranean was precisely another case of Sprach- and Kulturbund, where a number of Indo-European languages interacted (e.g. Greek, Anatolian, and Paleobalkan languages, such as Illyrian in the North West, Thracian in the North East, etc.), but at different periods also various non-Indo-European languages (e.g. Semitic, Egyptian and others in the East, Etruscan and other languages in the Aegean and elsewhere, e.g. Linear A, Eteo-Cypriot etc.). Interactions and interrelations among the above groups can be proven to varied degrees by documentary evidence from lexical borrowings and by items from the cultural and institutional life, as well as by evidence from the historical and archaeological records. Thus we are dealing with a comparison on two levels: first, the comparative study of Greek in relation to other cognate languages within a geographical area, comparison that always yields a high volume of commonalities; secondly, the comparative study of Greek in relation to non-Indo-European languages of the wider linguistic area of Ancient Eastern Mediterranean. The latter field of study is also quite fruitful when conducted properly; by "properly" is meant the study by means of the accepted and established methodology, the comparative method and its complementary practices. Non adherence to the strict rules of this methodology leads to exaggerations and false results of the type, for instance, of Martin Bernal's statements about the Afro-Asiatic origins of classical Greek civilization, to which we will return shortly.

In the field of areal linguistics, we also talk of interactions or influences upon a language on three levels: "adstrate" relations, when languages coexist and show parallel and horizontal influences upon one another; "substrate" relations, when a language which was formerly spoken in an area is superseded by another "conquering" language but still forms an underlying layer for the new one; finally, we have "superstrate" relations, which is in a way the opposite of the substrate relations. The first case (adstrate) exhibits horizontal relations, the latter two vertical relations. Applied to the situation in Ancient Greece, this model gives us the following linguistic map: the substrate is covered by what we usually refer to with the term "Pelasgian" (although the picture may not be as simple as it appears), whereas the adstrate refers to the phenomena of interaction of the Greek language and culture with its contemporary languages of the area at different periods, e.g. Anatolian languages and languages of the Afro-Asiatic group such as Egyptian, Phoenician, etc. I think that the field of Classical Greek Studies needs this comparative look in order to find some fresh impetus which seems to be diminishing lately, but also in order to search for answers to some recurrent and persistent questions. If the issue of language is emphasized, this is not so much or only because of the identity of the speaker, but simply because language is the main medium through which the study of literature and related issues is effected.

4. The last two decades or so there is a tendency towards interdisciplinary approaches in the study of humanities in general, i.e. consideration of data and information provided by related disciplines. In the field of Classical Greek Studies, not only the study of language and literature but parallel study and consideration of material offered by history, archaeology, anthropology, religion, sociology of culture, etc. can provide the best methodological tool in the effort to tackle difficult issues in the field. In reality, this approach marks a return to the "old good days" of Classical Studies, after a period of wandering in the methodological paths of narrow specializations. This, however, is only a tendency, not the rule. Therefore, since its use proves to be beneficial to the field, it should be encouraged and further developed.

From the point of view of comparative Indo-European linguistics, good examples of the benefits from the application of the interdisciplinary approach are three recent publications: (i) the epoch-

making work by Gamkrelidze & Ivanov *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans* (1995, originally published in Russian in 1984 by this very institution), a work which combines the innovative theoretical orientation of modern linguistic theory with the traditional historical and comparative linguistics/philology, utilizing all available evidence provided by linguistics, archaeology, mythology, anthropology and other related disciplines. (ii) The second work to be mentioned is by Mallory & Adams, *Encyclopedia of Indo-European Culture* (1997), a book that is in a way an update of Schrader & Nehrung's *Reallexikon der indogermanischen Altertumskunde* (2 vols, 1917-23 and 1929) and similar in its interdisciplinary approach to the Second Part of Gamkrelidze & Ivanov's book just mentioned. (iii) Perhaps the best illustration of how fruitful and effective is the application of comparative linguistic theory and culture to the study of classical texts of the Indo-European family (and not only of Greek and Latin) is Calvert Watkins' book *How to kill a dragon: Aspects of Indo-European poetics* (1995). These three works should be read by all classical philologists. Were this to happen, Classical Studies would change to the better. In addition to formal matters, these works offer the results of comparative reconstruction in the area of semantics, especially what was termed by Watkins as "historical comparative ethnosemantics", a procedure that is best exemplified by the work of Emile Benveniste (1969) on the social, religious, and political institutions of the Indo-Europeans.

5. I hinted earlier at the dangers of misapplying the comparative method. In such cases, the results would be disastrous for comparative philology. Martin Bernal in his *Black Athena* book has illustrated this point in the best possible way with his far-fetched "etymologies" for many lexical items of Ancient Greek. For instance, he derives the word λαβύρινθος from the Egyptian phrase *Ny-m3 't-R' ntr*, which means "the holy Ny-m3 't-R'" (viz. Amenemhe III), a connection that requires only the wildest phantasy to come up with. The Egyptian word *ntr* with meaning "pure, holy, divine growth" is, according to Bernal's theory, the etymological basis also for Gk. ἄνθος "flower", Κάνθαρος "a beetle", νίτρον "nitre", σάτυρος "satyr", as well as the name of the Thracian tribe Σάτραι, but also many instances of the suffix -ιθος as in λαβύρινθος and in many other Greek words. Thus, the word *ntr* is phonetically interpreted in Greek in five different ways(!), a plain insanity according to the established methods of comparative linguistics. If such an *anomia* is allowed in linguistics, then we are led to what Jasanoff & Nussbaum (1996:187), who also discuss this example, say about it: "There is a fine Greek word for all this: chaos." Sound etymology is based on systematic phonological, morphological, and semantic correspondences, not on impressionistic and random similarities that can be observed among all (completely unrelated to one another) languages of the world.

However, there is also the other extreme in the issue of where Classical Studies stand today. In a recent book, Hanson & Heath (1998) see in the present generation the last generation of classicists. According to them, there is no future of Classical Studies, and it is the classicists themselves who, with their elitist and indifferent attitude, have destroyed the love of young people for the field. For someone who has read the book most of what is said in it is true, but my view is not as pessimistic as theirs. In fact, I think that Classical Studies have never been as strong as today: a mere look at the volume of publications on classical subjects is good proof for that. Also, the number of students who enroll in courses related to Classics around the world is much higher than at any other period in the past. This may be due to the increase of the number of people who attend Universities, but whatever the reason it remains a fact. A worrisome sign, of course, is the tremendous decrease of courses in Classics offered in secondary education schools; and here is an area that classical scholars should do something to reverse the trend.

6. I believe that Classical Greek Studies have much to offer to today's citizens of a global society who doubt, fear, reject, and keep a waiting and reserved attitude. Perhaps the most important and lasting legacy of the ancient Greeks is the stimulus to inquire everything, to doubt, criticize, analyze, and finally synthesize. All this is done with the awareness that extremities and exaggerations have no place in a well run society. Indeed, such things constitute *hybris* with the known results; *hybris* against nature and divine law, *hybris* against society and human law. Man may be "the measure of all things", but man is also "measured" by his limitations of being human. All these are valuable lessons taught to humanity by the Classical Greeks; they are universal values that transcend space and time. For these reasons alone, Classical Greek Studies will continue to be cultivated. As long as civilization exists, we cannot afford to neglect this wealth, the ancient past will follow us, for, as Jacob Burckhardt says, "We can never be free of the ancient world, unless we become barbarians again" (*Historische Fragmente*, quoted by Albin Lesky in his *History of Greek Literature*, xii).

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