

George Kanarakis

Charles Sturt University

The impact of Athens on the development of the Greek language and the ancient Greek letters

Abstract

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Introduction

Athens, whose culture is one of Europe's greatest legacies, and whose impact, especially on European civilisation, is profound from early antiquity, has been the most celebrated city of Greece in time. Although Athens was one of the first city-states, its origins are clouded by the mists of the centuries before the dawn of recorded history. Actually scholars know little about the history of Athens before 1900 BC when Greeks (reputed to be Ionians who also attributed their name to Ion, son of Apollo) first occupied Attica. Later, as it is known, the Athenians even attributed the name of their city directly to a goddess and nothing less – Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom and patroness of the arts and crafts, who sprang, full grown, from the forehead of her father Zeus, king of the gods.

Solon, the statesman and poet, was accurate when he declared in his *Athenian Constitution*, in poetic form (Shavin 1993: 10):

*Never will our city be destroyed by Zeus' decree,
Nor by the will of the bless'd immortal gods,
For, born of a potent father, great-hearted guardian
Pallas Athena spreads her hands o'er our city*

Athens always moved between myth (with its peculiar laws) and truth, between dream and reality, between metaphysics and the tangible world. Eventually, Athens, in its historical course, emerged as a phenomenon of an ideal city which produced a surprising number of the largest possible calibre of philosophers, poets, statesmen and artists, such as Socrates, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Pericles, Praxiteles and others. It also rose to the point even to challenge the concept of the prototype of a city where the form of life and the attitude of its citizens put man in the centre of the world and made beauty and proportion divine. No other city has contributed more to the civilisation of mankind than Athens with its elegant simplicity, its passion for wisdom and its love of beauty.

As a result this remarkable city became the emblem of Greek culture and the centre which set the standards of excellence in many aspects of life, such as in politics, philosophy, theatre, the arts, architecture, and various other theoretical and practical fields, an entire legacy which Athens did not keep for herself, but generously shared with the rest of the world (Waterfield 2004: xvi, *passim*).

However, since Athens, as it is known, succeeded in acquiring an exceptionally high position in written civilisation, not only of Greece but also of the entire western world, it is not surprising, though quite reasonable that this city ought to have left its mark even on the course of the Greek language. In this context a very important contribution was made to the Greek alphabetic writing system.

Four main Greek dialects

We know that there were mainly four types of alphabet used in Greece: the Ionian, the Corinthian, the Western or Chalkidean (transferred in the eighth century by settlers from Chalkis to Southern Italy, and then borrowed by the Etruscans via Cumae in Campania and developed into the known Latin alphabet) (Cook 1987: 10–11; Healey 1990: 39, 40; Mikou-Karachaliou 1999: 10) and the Attic. In reality, the use in Greece of the alphabet – completed with the critical addition of vowels and a few consonants (Φ, Χ, Ξ, Ψ) – was a great innovation, because the writing systems previously used were cumbersome. These constituted: the hieroglyphic (approx. 2000-1750 BC), which was used mainly on engraved seal stones excavated by Evans in Knossos; Linear A (approx. 1700-1450 BC), both not yet deciphered; the

deciphered syllabographic Linear B (approx. 1450-1200 BC); all three Cretan, Cyprominoan (approx. 1500-1100 BC), not deciphered yet; the deciphered Cypriot syllabary (approx. sixth to fourth centuries BC); and the deciphered Phoenician script (approx. tenth century BC); all of which were much less user-friendly writing systems compared with the alphabetic script which is a phonetic system (Thompson 1960: 11–13; Babiniotis 1985: 76; Karali 2001: 157–64). The alphabetic script proved to be an innovative concept of global significance because it established an analogy between sounds and letters, resulting in the elimination or restriction of vagueness and ambiguities. After all, the Greek language is characterised by a syllabic structure too complex to be recorded by a syllabic system.

Importance of the Attic dialect

Of the four main alphabetic systems used in Greece (Attic, Ionic, Corinthian and Chalkidian or Western), the Attic was the one used in Athens and in the whole Attic peninsula, as well as in the neighbouring islands. The earliest form of the Attic alphabetic system appeared in pre-Classical times, in the eighth century BC, and was used until 600 BC and is known as pre-Solonian, while from 600 BC until 450 BC – that is from later pre-Classical times until the beginnings of the Classical period – the so-called Solonian alphabetic script was used. In turn, from 450 BC until 403 BC (this entire period known as Classical times) another form of alphabetic system was used, known as the Periclean. Actually, these three forms of the Attic alphabet remained known as *αρχαία (αττικά) γράμματα* ‘ancient (Attic) letters’. Finally, from 403 BC, when a reform of writing occurred in Attica (introduction of Η, Ω etc.), a fourth and last form of alphabetic script was fully developed and used in Athens, the Euclidean alphabet, which in reality, is the one used, almost intact, until today in writing modern Greek. It is worth noting here that in the alphabet before 403 BC, the letter E indicated either the letter ε, η or even ει (γένος, κόρη > κόρη, είναι > εἶναι κ.λπ.).

The Euclidean alphabet, which gradually spread all over Greece, takes its name from Euclides, the archon of Athens of the time. It was a remarkable and brave innovation in Athens in the Classical period. In 403 BC after the suggestion of the politician and orator Archines, the Athenians passed a law that made the use of the alphabetic script of the Ionian city of Miletus compulsory in official documents. It had 24 letters which have been retained

until today. Eventually, the Euclidean alphabet superseded the other local variations, and after this the Greek alphabet underwent no further radical alterations. This means that the alphabet which is used in writing modern Greek today is the alphabet as it was formulated at the end of the fifth century BC in Athens.

Another innovation of Athens in writing was the change since 550 BC into 'direct' writing (εξ εὐθύ), that is from left to right, abandoning the older Greek styles: from right to left (ἐπί τὰ λαϊά) like the Semitic, the later form from left to right continuing down to left towards right, and so on (*voustrophidon*, meaning 'ox-turning'). So, ever since, the texts in Athens used to be written in the alphabetic system from left to right, a practice followed until today.¹ In turn, Athens lent its alphabet to other parts of Greece, such as Macedonia where it was established by Philip II as the official language of the Macedonian state, and to other peoples such as the Lycians in southern Asia Minor. Also, from the fourth to the ninth centuries AD, to the Goths, the Armenians, the Slavs, the Copts in Egypt and others, although naturally, it had to be adapted to the repertoires of sounds used in those languages.

Another absolutely significant language contribution made by Athens was its local oral dialect which, assisted by the appearance and use of written script as well as by the development of a Panhellenic culture, became a language with Panhellenic prestige and radiance and evolved into a literary dialect, known as the Attic dialect. The literary dialect of course differed essentially from the everyday oral form of dialect.

Although the literary dialect was based on the language of the average people, it progressed rapidly. For example, the poet, who of course, knew the oral communicative form of dialect long before, now had the facility and chance to innovate regarding the choice and the composition of the words, and also to imprint his personal style through dexterous treatment of the language. Of the literary works, those closer to the oral dialect were the Aristophanean comedies and the dialogue parts of the tragedies. Purely literary prose language (influenced by the Sophists) was the language of historiography, philosophy and rhetoric, that is, the language of Thucydides, of Plato, Demosthenes and other orators.

This dialect, also known as the 'dialect of Athens', emerged from the Ionic, with which during the Mycenaean period must have been a uniform dialectal group from which it split later, and gradually developed its own

language characteristics (Margariti-Roga 199: 38–39; Panayiotou 2001: 299–307; Adrados 2003: 148–51), for example:

- a) Ionic η > Attic α after ρ , ϵ , ι (Ionic καρδίη, ιστορίη > Attic καρδία, ιστορία), Ionic $\epsilon\alpha$, $\epsilon\omicron$, $\epsilon\omega$ > Attic η , \omicron , ω (Ionic έτεα, φιλόμεν, γενεών > Attic έτη, φιλούμεν, γενών), Ionic $\sigma\sigma$ > Attic $\tau\tau$ (Ionic πλήσσω, θάλασσα > Attic πλήττω, θάλαττα, Ionic $\rho\sigma$ > Attic $\rho\rho$ (Ionic θάρσος, άρσην > Attic θάρρος, άρρην)
- b) innovations in the vocabulary etc.

Of course, the Attic dialect was not the only literary dialect which emerged from among the many local oral dialects in Greece. Other main literary dialects in historical times, which actually cultivated one or more specific literary genres, were the Ionian used in the epic poetry, in various types of lyric poetry and in the early historical prose writing, the Aeolian (Achaean) used in the melic poetry and the Doric used in the choric poetry, but of all of them the Attic was the one which prevailed from the fifth century BC.²

So, finally the Attic dialect became established among the Greeks as the dialect which was suitable to become ‘the common voice of Greece’ (η κοινή της Ελλάδος φωνή), thus overshadowing all the other literary dialects.

The reasons for this development had been:

- a) *historico-political* – mainly the subjugation of Ionia by the Persians and the prestige which Athens acquired because of its leading role in pushing the Persians back, and also because of the establishment and broadening of the democratic system of government and the founding of the Athenian hegemony
- b) *economic* – the unprecedented prosperity of Athens
- c) *cultural* – the amazing development and superiority of Athens in the letters and the arts, especially, towards the end of the fifth century BC, facts which took Athens to the premier position among the other cities of fifth century BC Greece.

So, for all these political, economic, artistic and literary factors, the ‘Ionised’ Attic dialect spread from its original birthplace, the peninsula of Attica, to Asia Minor, as well as to Greek colonies of the then known world. After all, Attica meant Ionia, since for example, Solon’s Attic dialect and the language of the drama were a variation of Ionic. Therefore, the Attic dialect became a kind of common language – a lingua franca – among the educated

Greeks, not only during the period when Athens reached its flourishing point, its 'Golden Age' (fifth to fourth centuries BC), but also after 404 BC, when Athens ceased to be a leading political power and slumbered peacefully. All this resulted in the Attic dialect becoming the foundation for the development of the Greek language throughout its future historical course. Actually, during the fifth and fourth centuries BC there appeared significant changes in the Attic dialect (restriction of certain characteristics) dividing it into older (until the end of the Peloponnesian war) and more recent (until the end of the fourth century BC).

Because of Athens' politico-economic and cultural status in the Greek world of the time, the Attic dialect had the great fortune to become a linguistic tool of almost all the branches of human endeavour – literature, theatre (except the choric parts, which as mentioned above, were written in the Doric dialect), philosophy, rhetoric, history, science, et cetera. However, the fame it gained beyond national boundaries, is due to the fact that it was cultivated by intellectual giants of the Classical period. The Attic dialect of this time reveals a rich and varied expressiveness, accommodating both simplicity and grandeur. We see it in the dense syntax and bold metaphors of Aeschylus, in the rich antitheses of Euripides and Thucydides, and in the exuberant lexical inventiveness of Aristophanes.

For all the above reasons, the Attic dialect became the prototype of linguistic expression and attained such a high level of cultivation that it managed to dominate the civilisation of all Greeks and to become the only medium in which Greek thought found refined and clear expression, and actually to such an extent that today when talking about 'Ancient Greek Letters' we mean, in particular whatever has been written in the Attic dialect, which for many years constituted the only literature in Europe, and which, from one point of view, is not only the progenitor, but also the matrix and the canon of all the others which appeared later on that continent.

Conclusion

It is obvious, therefore, why the opinions of historians, philosophers, poets, orators and others in antiquity agree as far as the acknowledgement and appreciation of Athens is concerned. For example, Thucydides calls Athens 'education of Greece' and 'Greece of Greece'. Plato affirms it as 'the *prytaneum* of wisdom in Greece'. Theopombos also calls it '*prytaneum* of Greece'. Pindar

sings its praises as 'divine city', Isocrates 'teacher of all those who can speak or teach'.

It is quite natural, therefore, that the language of Athens, a leading city of such political power and intellectual influence would become gradually the only common language, and 'from the 4th century onwards, especially for prose writing, the Attic would become the one and only philological language' (Debrunner 1954: 34 cited in Babiniotis 1985: 110) in Greece and in the Hellenised lands abroad. In the end, the language of Athens in which even the learned Romans rapidly became fluent, enriched the vocabulary of the rest of the world with absolutely basic, multidimensional and much discussed terms and concepts such as *democracy*, *timocracy*, *ethics*, *idea*, *psyche*, *analysis*, *synthesis*, *category*, *theory*, *problem*, *logos* and in particular *dialogue*, to signify discussion with the other side, et cetera.

Finally, from around 323 BC (the time of the death of Alexander the Great) the Attic dialect, under mainly Ionic and Macedonian, but also foreign, linguistic influences, developed into a Panhellenic Koine, known as Alexandrian or Hellenistic Koine, into which the Old Testament was translated in Alexandria, Egypt, by 72 Jewish Hellenists, as well as three of the four Gospels (except, of course, Matthew's which originally was written in Aramaic), and the other 23 books of the New Testament would be written.

In conclusion, for all the above reasons, the impact which Athens exerted on the Greek language and intellectual endeavours in general, and which illumines subjects of diachronic range relating to human society and values, will always be dynamic and contemporary.

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Notes

¹ For this see Herodotus' testimony (ii.36.4) "The Greeks write their letters and reckon with counters from left to right, but the Egyptians go from right to left".

² However, it must be noted that in tragedies various dialects were used, that is the Doric for choric parts and the Ionic, with many elements from the Attic, for the text.