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Intra-writer variation in prescriptive texts: On the standards of Standard Modern Greek

Intra-writer variation in texts that somehow elude prescriptivism is usually considered as evidence of possible “changes from below”. In this paper intra-writer variation is examined in authoritative prescriptive texts as evidence of “changes from above”.

In particular, I will examine the grammatical and stylistic variation in the writings of Jannis Psycharis (1854–1929) and Manolis Triantaphyllidis (1883–1959), two grammarians who are considered to be the founders of Standard Modern Greek. Psycharis’s norm has been condemned as “strict”, “dogmatic”, “artificial”, “puristic”, “uncompromising”, “allowing of no exceptions”, “overdemoticized” or “excessively μαλλιαρή” (“hairy”, i.e. vulgarized). It will be shown that, contrary to this common *méconnaissance*, Psycharis standardized the Greek language *by example*, through his own writings, not only prohibiting but also exploiting considerable variation. My presentation will concentrate on Psycharis’s popularizing works and also on his novels. I will also look at the writings of a few eminent “Psycharists”, i.e. followers of Psycharis, in order to diagnose the effectiveness of Psycharis’s norms.

Triantaphyllidis’ norm, on the other hand, made extensive use of “permissives” (Moschonas 2019), i.e. prescriptive acts of the form: ‘one may use variant X in addition to variant Y under condition C’. A careful cataloguing of such prescriptive acts in Triantaphyllidis’s *Modern Greek Grammar* (1941) reveals a norm that is quite tolerant towards the high (archaistic) variants of the Greek language, makes use of several dialectal forms, and permits a considerable amount of stylistic variation.

The writings of those two grammarians provide a counterexample to the widely held conception of standardization as “the imposition of uniformity” upon a linguistic variety (Milroy 2001: 531). Under certain conditions, the selection of a non-uniform, “polycentric” standard (Deumert & Vandenbussche 2003: 4) is a prerequisite for its acceptance. I argue that the conception of a standard as a “uniform variety” is a folk, ideological, pre-theoretical construct, and thus it cannot form part of the theorization of the standardization process.

References

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