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Pillars of language: a column capital from the Parthenon.

WHAT MAKES GREEK UNIQUE?

Henry Cullen

gives his verdict on a book on Greek language that has taken Europe by storm

Andrea Marcolongo (translated by Will Schutt), *The Ingenious Language: Nine Epic Reasons to Love Greek*. London: Europa Compass 2019. Pp. 176. £12.99. ISBN 9781787701830

One of the more revealing questions you can ask a classicist (whether they are a nervous sixth-former enduring a mock university interview, an applicant for a teaching post or simply a colleague musing over a glass of retsina) runs something like this: what's distinctive about how Greek operates as a language? If your chosen victim also knows Latin, a comparison between the two can serve as a productive sub-question.

The best answers I've heard generally focus on:

(a) the astonishingly versatile definite article, the uses of which include the bog-standard 'the', a vestigial pronoun form, *ὁ δε* ('but he'), the quasi-relative *ὁ τρεχων* ('the man who is running') and a gerund (*το εἶναι*; '[the act of] being');

(b) the full use of participles in various tenses and voices, which enables long sentences to get away with the bare minimum in terms of main verbs and obviates the need for so many temporal clauses, relatives, absolute phrases and so on;

(c) the surprisingly small 'core' vocabulary on which Greek relies – it makes a small set of words do a lot of work, meaning that ostensibly simple words like *λογος* need to have umpteen meanings and nuances. Number-crunchers at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania have calculated that fewer than 500 separate Greek words account for some 65–70% of all words in the Greek corpus. This means that just a small pool gets you a very long way; for the equivalent coverage in Latin you need to learn nearer 1,000.

None of the above, though they may well identify a thoughtful linguist, is particularly sexy. It's hard to claim that any one of them proves that speakers of Greek thought about the world in a manner wholly set apart from speakers of less-blessed tongues. And none of them features in Andrea Marcolongo's *The Ingenious Language*, which attempts to pitch Greek as a language that has a unique way of conceptualizing the world around it.

The book, first published in Marcolongo's native Italian in 2016 to much acclaim, has now been translated for an English-speaking audience. The blurb on the inside flap promises us 'a joyous love song', and in this regard it does not disappoint, for the book's primary asset is its sheer missionary zeal.

Marcolongo claims that she ‘thinks in Greek’. She frequently recalls her *liceo classico* training, which comes across as a rather grim slog where the sunlit uplands of reading poetry are never reached, even after years of prose. Its lessons, though, have clearly stuck with her into adulthood; the Greek bug bit hard and has not yet released its grip.

Marcolongo’s exploration of some of the ‘nine epic reasons to love Greek’ (the book’s subtitle) is heartfelt and often touching. She focuses on linguistic features that she believes set Greek aside: aspect (i.e. Greek verbs are, she claims, overwhelmingly concerned with frequency of action rather than tense); the dual, which expresses how two items are spiritually bound into a pair; the optative, which reveals nuanced attitudes of the speaker or writer about likelihood and desire; and so on. The final chapters are more general, offering reflections on the process of translation itself and a whistle-stop history of the Greek language. Inset text-boxes scattered liberally throughout the volume offer a rich assortment of entertaining tangents on topics as diverse as Greek colours and Isidore of Seville; they are probably my favourite sections.

There are plenty of gems at which both Hellenists and experienced teachers will nod approvingly. I particularly liked this:

I know that all teachers recommend reading the entire passage before beginning to translate, and that no student ever does.

And this:

The survival of the optative in Greek, the one Indo-European language to safeguard it tenaciously, is proof of Greek’s unmistakable, extraordinarily durable verb system. Verbs, not nouns, dominate ancient Greek.

Marcolongo’s discussions of features such as breathings and cases are lively, accessible and clearly the product of half a lifetime’s careful rumination.

You will sense a $\delta\epsilon$ coming to balance the unspoken $\mu\epsilon\upsilon$, and indeed the book is not without problems. Most frustrating, perhaps, is something that almost inevitably dogs ‘joyous love songs’, in that many passages are overblown and their claims rather over-egged. Marcolongo was, in a previous life, a speechwriter for the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, and sections of the book do indeed feel rhetorical to a fault. The following typifies what I mean:

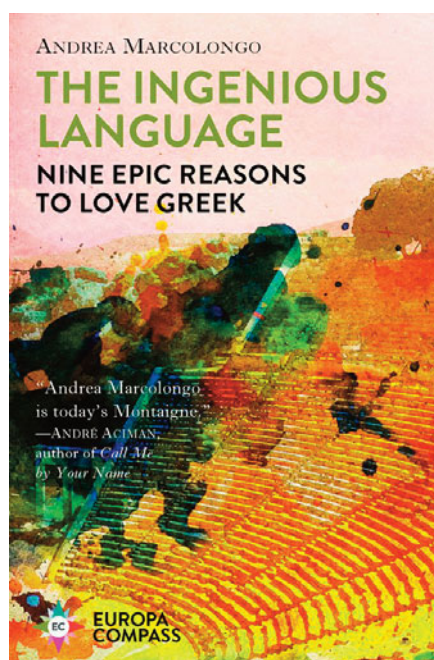
The Greek optative is, for this reason, the perfect measure of the distance between the effort required to take stock of what we desire and the strength needed to express it – to ourselves most of all; in the conviction that, no matter the situation, elegance is what gives us a slight but sure advantage, especially when it comes to language. It’s just us – and our desires.

It’s one thing for explanations to be poetic; it’s another, though, for them to be undermined by errors, and there are some unfortunate ones in this edition. Most obvious is that, after claiming that aspect (the first ‘epic reason’) was completely dominant in the psyche of Greek verbs, Marcolongo seeks to illustrate

it by using three *indicative* verbs (they flee; they fled; they have fled). The problem here is that, in the indicative, Greek verbs do in fact operate by tense rather than aspect. Marcolongo might rather have used imperatives or infinitives to make her point. She is correct to observe aspect as a quirk of Greek, but her claims are too sweeping. A second problem is that this English translation seems not to have been checked by an English-speaking classicist, who would have spotted some obvious slips; twice, for example, it is claimed that the verb ‘to translate’ is derived from the Latin verb *traducto/traducer* [sic]. This claim works for the Italian *tradurre*, but not for the English equivalent, whose Latin root is *transfere*. Such slips, and several others like it, cannot help but undermine the reader’s confidence.

An overarching issue is that it is not entirely clear whom this book is for; I wasn’t sure, even after finishing it. Practising classicists will be frustrated by the flaws I’ve identified above; those without Greek will, meanwhile, be unable to follow a fair bit of the finer detail, despite the blurb’s assurances to the contrary. In her introduction, Marcolongo singles out lapsed Hellenists who may have studied the language at school, but have memories of it that make them shudder or even recoil. But it’s worth reflecting that in the English and US educational systems there are vanishingly few students who are forced to stick with Greek without having chosen to; Hellenists who get as far as encountering the concepts of aspect, the dual or the optative will have generally been won over already.

Marcolongo has certainly created a thought-provoking volume whose enthusiasm will win it many admirers. But I sense that a gap in the market remains for a book which can cover some of this one’s omissions (including the less-than-sexy features I mentioned at the outset) and convey rather more clearly, if rather more soberly, just what makes Greek unique.



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