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Landmarks

Language Teaching in the Greek and Roman Times

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What do you think language teaching looked like in the Greek and Roman times, say about 2500 years ago? Was it very different from what we do today? What have we learnt from that great tradition we call the Greco-Roman tradition? You may be surprised to note that some of the issues that are debated today were also important during those days. For example, the Greeks and the Romans also wondered whether language teachers should focus on grammar or literature teaching.

Socrates and philosophers before him were more concerned about the nature of language and its use for man, and from their discussions, emerged schools such as the Stoics. Stoicism considered language to be 'a cultural universal', and in that sense natural to human beings. In Plato's *Cratylus*, we find Socrates' views on the 'general questions of language' and in Plato's and Aristotle's writings one sees the beginnings of structural analysis of sentences (Robins, 1993, p. 26). Serious thinking about language thus preceded the programmes of pedagogical practices involved in second or foreign language teaching. It should be obvious that any language teaching programme that is not informed by a conceptual understanding of the nature and structure of language and its acquisition is bound to fail. In fact, Aristotle was the first to talk about the modulation of words and describe them in terms of Case relations (Robins, 1993, p. 26). There was no discussion, however, of language acquisition. Since the Greeks were a more or less homogenous community speaking different dialects of the same language (even when they

lived in the different city-states), it is easy to understand that they did not give much thought to issues of language acquisition or teaching. Hence, it is no surprise that there was no discussion on language-teaching or focused efforts on grammar-writing during the Greek times.

Later, Greek ambition brought together the small city-states of Ancient Greece and many other lands further east. The newly acquired lands and the foreigners, or the ‘barbarians’ (as the Greeks referred to them) had to be incorporated into the Greek culture and for this it was important that the ‘uncivilized’ barbarians be taught the Greek language and Greek values. This process is what has been called ‘hellenization’, and it led to the conscious development of grammar and language-teaching. Before this, the Greeks were largely expected to appreciate their own literature and art, of which Homer was the finest specimen.

With the passage of time, the centre of power and the Greek civilization moved eastward via Rome, finally settling in the city of Byzantium. The people of Rome saw themselves as inheritors of the glorious Greek heritage and it remained the most important city for the Graeco-Roman civilization. The Romans had two goals: a) preserving the old Greco-Roman tradition by teaching people the Greek language and Greek values and b) ‘hellenizing’ the newly acquired population by teaching them Latin. Since Latin had become the language of the court and administration, it was wiser to teach Latin since that would also help in the running of a peaceful state. Although by the end of the ninth century, there was very little Latin spoken, systematic teaching of Latin continued in places of learning. Here, then, are the first seeds of systematic language teaching and grammar writing; the era of language pedagogy had appeared on the horizon. The

Byzantines wrote several commentaries on the writers and poets of the past. It may not be premature to mention Dionysius Thrax’s definition of grammar which summarizes for us the purpose of grammar:

“Grammar is empirical knowledge of the general usage of poets and prose writers. It has six divisions: first, expert reading with due regard to prosodic features; second, explanation of the literary expressions found in the texts; third, the provision of notes on particular words and on subject matter; fourth, the discovery of etymologies; fifth, the working out of grammatical regularities; sixth, the critical appreciation of literature, which is the finest part of all that the science embraces” (Robins, 1993, p. 44).

The subsequent generations have followed the above techniques; in fact, until recently, literary appreciation remained at the centre of language teaching across the world. The grammar also largely followed the same model of grammar writing. Such a view of grammar decides in some sense the role that language-teachers are supposed to play. It also reveals that the pronunciation of texts was an important part of teaching and learning, and the purpose of learning one’s language was to enjoy and appreciate one’s literature and ultimately one’s culture.

For later generations of language-teachers, Dionysius Thrax’s *Techne Grammatike*, the complete works of Appollonius Dyscolus’, and Priscian’s *Institutiones Grammaticae* served as the three major authoritative texts on Greek and Latin. To this list we may add *Ars Grammatica* by Donatus for he and Priscian became the ‘schoolmasters of Europe’ (Robins, 1993). These works served as reference points for other grammarians, and all language-teaching and material building adopted the form and style of these texts.

What is noteworthy is that although all future grammar and linguistic studies were guided by these works, the Byzantine scholars didn't stop at the grammar they inherited; instead they went on to write and add to these resources. They made these additions with the awareness that they were first language-teachers, and later grammarians. Such a realization helped them keep their focus on pedagogy and they did not drift into other disciplines, unlike their predecessors.

The grammar writers set the grammar and lesson plans in different form and styles, hence, parts of the lessons could be framed in a 'question and answer format and grouped into pieces'. According to Robins, this was done for 'ease of memorization by pupils and ease of presentation by teachers.' (Robins, 1993, 32). He also added that some grammars were elementary and didactic, with little attempt at explanation and theoretical justification of the information given, whereas others concentrate on correct pronunciation of different forms of words (Robins, 1993, p. 31).

Finally, the task of the teachers was to indicate the flaws in the spoken and written forms of language. These included errors such as non-standard usage, mistakes in sentence form, wrong concords, etc., and 'barbarisms', as well as mistakes in pronunciation and word formation. The grammarians on the other hand were mainly concerned with the correction and prevention of errors. There were parts of grammar containing grammatical and other linguistic information for instructional purposes; the students learnt to identify individual words and assign word classes to them. In other words, these devices ensured that students learnt how to parse words. Some of these rules were set in verse (Robins, 1993, p. 125). As you can see, this has largely been the burden of language teaching till date. Yet, not

everybody even at that time was in favour of such parsing exercises as is attested by Anna Comnena, the daughter of Emperor Alexius, who expressed her distaste for such didactic and instructional grammars that carried parsing exercises, in her biography of her father: ...now not even a second place is allotted to more exalted studies, studies of our poets and prose writers and of the knowledge that comes from them. This passion for parsing and other improper subjects is like a game of draughts. I say you this because I am distressed by the complete neglect of general elementary education (Robins, 1993).

The seeds of language teaching then are in trying to teach 'aliens' the language of the rulers and maintain 'purity' of language; in many ways we continue to do that even today.

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