

Report I

The McGill Greek Project*

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The McGill Greek Project was set up under a grant of US \$48,520 from the Ford Foundation, to produce elementary teaching materials in Ancient Greek. The Project is directed jointly by Professor C. D. Ellis, Department of Linguistics, and the author of this paper. The text being produced under the Ford grant is in fact the third version of our materials. The first two were prepared in 1964 and 1966, and we are deeply indebted to McGill University for its moral and material assistance from the very beginnings of our work.

Rationale

Before beginning the third version, we had to make a number of decisions:

- 1) Concerning the immediate aim of the course. We decided to try to produce a course which would teach all the important forms and syntax of the language, and which would prepare the student — usually at the university level — so thoroughly that he would be able to proceed in his reading and subsequent work with ease.
- 2) Concerning the actual language which the course was to teach. The problem here was whether it would be better to introduce the “Greekless” student to an amalgam of dialects, drawn from the literature of Antiquity as a whole, or to limit instruction entirely to one dialect, as written in one place at one definable period. We chose to do the latter, on what seemed to us the sound pedagogical principle that it is more efficient to teach one thing thoroughly than to try to teach a whole range of things with varying degrees of thoroughness, and with corresponding confusion for the student.

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- 3) Concerning the dialect and chronological and geographical limitations. We needed a form of Greek in which there was a large amount of original material available, so that our students, on completion of the course, would then be able to exercise their skills on a satisfactorily large corpus. We also needed a form of Greek which would provide a solid jumping off point from which to proceed to the acquisition of skill in other dialects. Almost any dialect would have fulfilled the second requirement, but only one dialect fulfils the first, namely Attic as written in the fourth century BC. Our choice here was an easy one, and in no way revolutionary.
- 4) Concerning the corpus. We decided that all the reading matter should be taken from the original source, insofar as this was consistent with the student's level of progress. We chose as the corpus one work of each of two Athenian authors of the period, namely Plato and Xenophon. This too, was not a startling innovation. The actual works which were to form the corpus had to be in dialogue form, largely because we wanted to be able to present the student with real Greek which incorporated the whole range of verb and subject forms. This is less easy to come by in straight narrative. Our choice fell on the *Euthyphro* of Plato — which we use in its entirety — and the *Symposium* of Xenophon — of which we use about a third. Our reason for choosing two authors instead of only one was simply that we felt it would be a good idea to present the student with two differing styles of writing in the same dialect.

Our next task was to decide what things had to be taught and the order in which they would be taught. This involved an analysis of the dialect, on the one hand, and of the corpus on the other. We have not performed an exhaustive contrastive analysis of Attic Greek and English. If we had embarked on this, we should still be at it years from now. However, we did focus on features of relevance, both morphological and syntactic, at the initial teaching level, with particular attention to the verb system; and Professor Ellis analyzed the phonology for the express purpose of developing contrastive drills. We have also relied heavily on tried and tested grammatical compendia. A careful analysis of the corpus indicated that if we concentrated in the first half of the course on the progressive stem of the verb and on all the nominal and adjectival forms, the student, by the mid-way point, would be capable of reading over

half the corpus. Frequency counts enabled us to work out the actual teaching sequence.

Units of the Text

We chose to compose the text in thirty units, each of which could be sub-divided into a varying number of class periods, depending on the nature of the school and the relative maturity of the students. The number thirty was worked out on the basis of one week per unit, assuming that the average college year contains thirty weeks. At the university level, it should be possible to get through a whole unit in three class periods of 45-50 minutes each, plus labs.

The only atypical unit is Unit One. Since our course is basically an audio-lingual one, it seemed logical to begin with the sound system.

We are very fortunate in having available recent books on the problem of the pronunciation of Ancient Greek by Professors W. S. Allen and W. B. Stanford, in addition, of course, to Sturtevant, and other works. Professor Ellis has worked to reconstruct the pronunciation up to as high a level of accuracy as one may reasonably expect to achieve. Having done this, he undertook a contrastive analysis of the sound systems of Attic and English, and based the introductory drills on this analysis. We have also restored the accentuation system to its rightful place as a pitch variation code. There are, of course, great differences of opinion as to the usefulness and feasibility of teaching the accentuation system. We can only judge by results, and the results indicate that our students have more success with the proper use of accents than we ever did as students. This may be because they are provided with a valid motivation for the study of accent as an integral part of the word.

Units Two to Thirty are composed in accordance with a single pattern. Each is divided into six sections, lettered A to F. Sections A and B are recorded on tape.

Section A presents one, or more, pieces of basic dialogue, the overall length of which is virtually constant throughout the course. In the Basic Dialogue are incorporated examples of the forms which are being introduced in the unit. Each dialogue is to be learnt from memory, although in practice we find that one can afford to be less rigorous here with university students. The idea of a basic dialogue is not a new one, and has been used often.

Section B contains drills, in which the new forms are taught through use. The drills are of three kinds. First, mimicry drills, in which the new forms are learned by rote. Without being specialists in learning theory, we are aware that fresh winds are blowing across the field. Accordingly, an effort has been made to embody useful features of both the cognitive and habit-pattern approaches by introducing a graduated sequence of questions following the mimicry drills. Second, recognition drills, in which the student is expected to show that he can identify the new forms. Third, production drills, in which he is made to produce the new forms. Most of the drills are self-correcting. The only drills in which rote learning figures are the mimicry drills, and even here, it is possible, with university students, to ring the changes on these drills, using them as production rather than mimicry drills. In fact, this is what I usually do in my own class, before sending the students to the language laboratory to work their way through them as mimicry drills. In the recognition and production drills, the correct response is often difficult to predict, and can involve complicated manipulations. We have had good success with drills of this kind.

Grammar is first introduced in the drills. For example, a production drill for the infinitive will require the student to transform indirect statement of one type to another using accusative-infinitive, having been given a preliminary model to follow. The student concentrates on producing the infinitive form, but at another level he is absorbing the mechanism of the accusative-infinitive construction.

Section C of each unit is the grammar section, in which the new forms introduced in A and practised in B are discussed, analyzed, and codified. New grammatical features employed in the drills are now brought to the fore, and commented on.

Innovations

Sections A and B, as described, do not embody any radical departures from accepted practices. Section C is straightforward grammatical exegesis intended as commentary on what has already been learned. The really new elements which this course offers are to be found in Sections D and E. But before I describe them, it will be necessary to say something about the preparation of the corpus.

The *Euthyphro* and *Symposium*, as they stand, were not suitable for students at the beginning of the course. They had to be

adapted to fit in with what the student was expected to have learned at each successive stage. This adaptation involved, not so much re-writing, as condensation and simplification of only the passages which were required for use in each unit. In fact, there has been relatively little re-writing, and even at the very earliest stages of the course, very little of the corpus material could be called "artificial."

A passage from the corpus, once used in a simplified form, is then available for re-use later in forms more closely resembling the original, until finally the student can safely be confronted with the original text, as Plato or Xenophon wrote it. Thus, as the student's repertoire grows, he is able and is given the opportunity to re-read and re-study the text at intervals throughout the course. It is this repetition factor which constitutes a very useful and effective element in the teaching of the language. The course is so arranged that, by the end of it, the students will have read the entire corpus through up to three times. So far, no signs of boredom have appeared. On the contrary, my students find it helpful to encounter familiar matter, and it is less difficult for them to absorb new material which is presented in a familiar context.

This procedure is followed not only in the basic dialogue of Section A, but also in the supplementary readings of Section D. Unlike Section A, the amount of material in D is not constant, but increases gradually throughout the course.

The purpose of the readings in Section D is twofold: first, to provide reading practice; second, review. Each Section D is based on everything learned up to the preceding unit. No new constructions are introduced here, only new vocabulary. Once again, the repetition factor plays an important rôle in increasing fluency and comprehension. The student, meeting familiar forms, can concentrate on the meaning of the entire passage. He can also see how a familiar passage can be elaborated by the addition of the new elements which he has learned since the last time he met the passage. This has proved to be a remarkably successful device with us. The reading passages are followed by content questions in Greek which further test the student's ability to understand what he is reading.

The most contentious part of the course, to judge from outside reaction, is contained in Section E, prose composition. Most new courses tend to cut down on composition or eliminate it altogether.

That we have not done so has caused some eyebrows to rise, but I think we can justify our decision to use composition.

The arguments usually advanced against the retention of composition are valid insofar as they are based on the assumption that composition must be justified as a teaching device. However, we do not see it as a teaching device. We regard composition, like the supplementary readings, as a form of practice and review.

If you are learning a modern language it is relatively easy to go out and find a native speaker to practise with. But you will never find a native speaker of Ancient Greek in any condition to converse with you. Granted, dead languages are read rather than spoken, and we have taken account of this important fact in the emphasis which we put on reading in Section D, but facility in using a language — and reading, too, must be regarded as *using* — requires practice in the manipulation of it. Modern language learners can manipulate their target language in conversation. But to students of Ancient Greek this avenue is closed.

It seemed to us that the only way in which we could provide controlled practice in manipulating Ancient Greek was through graduated pieces of prose composition. We could have devised some kind of conversation drill, but to what end? We wanted to focus the student's attention on the fact that almost all his subsequent encounters with Ancient Greek would be on the printed page. Furthermore, we wanted strict control over his use of the language, to ensure that he used all the forms and constructions of which he was theoretically capable.

So we decided that prose composition would be a useful — although limited — tool for review and practice. We then went and found ourselves a collaborator in the person of Mr. John G. Griffith, Fellow and Tutor in Classics at Jesus College, Oxford. We were very lucky in our choice.

The proses are presented first in their original English form. They are then re-cast into a form of English more closely representing a morpheme by morpheme translation of the required Greek version. This provides a necessary bridge for the student between the English manner of written expression and the Greek, and is a useful reminder that different languages are different, at least at the level of surface grammar.

The last part of the unit, Section F, deals with vocabulary, and contains among other things a list of all words first introduced

in the unit. There are about 1100 lexical items in the course, their introduction spread unevenly over the whole. We have relied on the repetition factor again to ease the burden on the student, but it is too soon to judge its effectiveness here.

At the end of the text will appear reference material, word lists, paradigms, and the like.

Evaluation

One of the questions we are asked most often is how our students adapt themselves when they go on to study Greek from other teachers using different methods. We shall not know about our current students until next year, but the alumni of the first two versions have had no difficulty in adjusting, and in going on to read more Greek and more different kinds of Greek. This may be due to various causes, but two suggest themselves to me: first, we are able to tell their new teachers exactly what they have learned from us; second, we have consciously retained almost all of the conventional terminology, on the assumption that their subsequent work will be in and through texts and commentaries which use the conventional terms.

We propose to write a teacher's manual which will include, among other things, tests, suggested timetables, supplementary drills, and background material. No teacher's manual, as we all know, can substitute for a good course in teacher training. We have in fact started a small program of our own in our Department, where I have two postgraduate students sitting in on the course, studying the method, and making up their own drills. They will also be expected to teach an entire unit of the course each. We hope to continue this program in the future, and would welcome enquiries from outside the University.

Further information, as well as a sample unit from the text and selections from the proposed teacher's manual, can be obtained without cost from the author.



Editor's Note:

As we go to press we are happy to learn that the Ford Foundation has granted the McGill Greek project an additional U.S. \$17,000 for 1970-72 to enable Professors Schachter and Ellis to produce a revised version of the text.