

A Brief History of the Greek Language

Compiled by Glenn Jones

Information came largely from and is often directly quoted from these two sources:
Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, by Dan Wallace, pub. by Zondervan; (June 2, 1997)
Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar, by Bill Mounce, pub. by Zondervan; 2nd Ed. (August 1, 2003)

Languages, like individuals, are related to one another in families. According to two independent estimates, there have been 2796 languages in the world and these may be classified into about 26 families.

The Indo-European family is the family of languages that should be of most interest to the student of New Testament Greek.

Besides Greek, this family includes seven of sub-families of languages:

- 1) Indo-Iranian, 2) Armenian, 3) Albanian, 4) Italic,
- 5) Celtic, 6) Germanic, and 7) Balto-Slavic

The Greek language has a long and rich history stretching all the way from the thirteenth century B.C. to the present:

- 1) The earliest form of the language is called “Linear B” (13th century B.C.)
- 2) The form of Greek used by writers from Homer (8th Century B.C.) through Plato (4th century B.C.) is called “Classical Greek.”
 - a. The Classical Greek alphabet was derived from the Phoenician’s.
 - b. It had three primary dialects: i) Doric, ii) Aeolic, and iii) Ionic
 - c. Attic Greek was a branch of the Ionic dialect.
- 3) In the fourth century B.C., Athens was conquered by King Philip of Macedonia. His son was named Alexander, who became Alexander the Great and conquered most of the known world. Alexander was tutored by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Alexander spoke Attic Greek.
- 4) When Alexander went out to conquer the world, part of his goal was to spread the Greek culture and language. This meant that the main Greek dialect that was spread came from the Attic Greek that Alexander knew and loved.
- 5) This spread of Attic Greek in the 4th Century B.C. was the beginning of the Hellenistic Age.
- 6) Koine Greek, which means “Common” Greek, was born out of this world conquest by Alexander. It first developed in his troops, which came from Athens as well as other

Greek cities and regions, who had to be able to speak to one another. This close contact produces a melting-pot Greek that inevitably softened the rough edges of some dialects and abandoned the subtleties of others.

- 7) Next, the conquered cities and colonies learned Greek as a second language. By the first century A.D., Greek was the *lingua franca* of the whole Mediterranean region and beyond. Since the majority of Greek-speakers learned it as a second language, this further increased its loss of subtleties and moved in toward greater explicitness for everyone to understand.
- 8) Synonyms for Koine Greek are “common” Greek and, more frequently, Hellenistic Greek (which normally implies that Greek is a second language – i.e., the speakers have become “Hellenized” [cf. Acts 6:1]).
- 9) Historical Development in summary:

- a. The golden age of Greek literature effectively died with Aristotle (322 B.C.).
- b. The Koine was born with Alexander the Great’s conquests.
- c. Hellenistic Greek began with Alexander’s troops who came from all the regions of Greece. The troops, then, produced a *leveling* influence.
- d. It developed further as a second language of conquered peoples, when new Greek colonies sprang up due to Alexander’s victories. The conquests, then, gave Greek its universal nature.
- e. Koine Greek grew largely from Attic Greek as this was Alexander’s dialect, but was also influenced by the other dialects of Alexander’s soldiers. Hellenistic Greek is a compromise between the rights of the stronger minority (i.e., Attic) and the weaker majority (other dialects).
- f. This new dialect, however, should not be perceived to be inferior to Attic. It was not a contamination of the “pure gold” of Classical Greek, but a more serviceable allow for the masses.
- g. It became the *lingua franca* of the whole Roman Empire by the first century A.D.
- h. When is Koine Koine?

Though Koine Greek had its birth in c.330 B.C., this was its physical birth, not its linguistic. Just as a newborn baby does not immediately speak a language, it took some time before Koine really took shape.

10) Types of Koine Greek

- a. Vernacular or Vulgar (e.g., papyri [paper], ostraca [pottery])
- b. Literary (e.g., Polybius, Josephus, Philo, Diodorus, Strabo, Epictetus, Plutarch)
- c. Conversational (e.g., New Testament, some papyri)
- d. Atticistic (e.g., Lucian, Dionysius of Halicarnasus, Dio Chrysostom, Aristides, Phrynichus, Moeris)
 - i. This is an artificial language revived by litterateurs who did not care for what had become of the language (much like many advocates of the KJV today who argue for its purity based on some false idea of inspiration and glory).

11) Place of the Language of the New Testament in Hellenistic Greek

- a. **The Issue:** How much Semitic influence is there on the Greek of the NT? How much is the Greek of the NT affected by other influences?
- b. **The Background:** In 1863, J. B. Lightfoot anticipated the great discoveries of papyri parallels when he said, “If we could only recover letters that ordinary people wrote to each other without any thought of being literary, we should have the greatest possible help for the understanding of the language of the New Testament generally.”

In 1895 (thirty-two years after Lightfoot’s statement), Adolf Deissmann published his *Bibelstudien* (Bible Studies) – an innocently titled work that was to revolutionize the study of the NT. Deissmann showed that the Greek of the NT was not a language invented by the Holy Spirit (Hermann Cremer has called it “Holy Ghost Greek,” largely because 10 percent of its vocabulary had no secular parallels).

And in 1897, Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt pulled a bunch of paper scraps (papyri, actually) from a garbage dump in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. These were full of the kinds of notes sent by common people: shopping lists, notes from parents to children, bills, receipts, etc. This further substantiated Deissmann’s work and he published another book in 1908 entitled *Light from the Ancient East*.

Deissmann demonstrated that the vast bulk of NT vocabulary was to be found in the papyri recovered from the Egyptian garbage dump. The pragmatic effect of Deissmann’s work was to render obsolete virtually all lexica and lexical commentaries written before the dawn of the 20th century (i.e., Thayer’s lexicon, published in 1886, was consequently outdated shortly after it came off the press – yet, ironically, it is still relied on today by many NT students).

c. **The Proposals:**

i. **NT Greek = Vernacular Greek** (Deissmann's view)

ii. **NT Greek = Vernacular Greek with some portions heavily semitized** (i.e., some scholars view the Gospels, the first fifteen chapters of Acts, and the Apocalypse as virtual translation Greek. That is, the original was in Aramaic, and what we have in our extant copies is a Greek Translation)

iii. **NT Greek = A Distinct Dialect** (Similar to the "Holy Ghost Greek" before the discoveries at Oxyrhynchus, Egypt)

d. **In Sum:** Most scholars today would hold to a view somewhere between the first and second one. But there are increasing studies that promote the first view.

e. **Perhaps there is Another Way to Look at Things:**

i) There is a distinction between style and syntax. Semitisms affect the style of the NT, while the syntax is still Hellenistic Greek.

ii) There are levels of Koine Greek.

iii) The language is multi-faceted, not linear.

f. **Generally speaking:** From the proposals noted above in (c.), there is not a single one that answers all the questions regarding all the differences among the New Testament letters. Therefore, to clarify, the range of literary levels of the NT authors can be displayed as follows...

Semitic/Vulgar

Revelation
Mark
John, 1-3 John
2 Peter

Conversational

Most of Paul
Matthew

Literary Koine

Hebrews
Luke-Acts
James
Pastorals
1 Peter
Jude

In the above table, the books are listed in descending order of purity. Thus Hebrews is more literary than 1 Peter; Revelations is more Semitic than Mark, etc.