

The Evolution of the Γραμματική Τέχνη

In the texts of all historical periods, the terms *γραμματική* and *γραμματικός* are typically rendered into English by their cognates ‘grammar’ and ‘grammarian’. However, when the terms are viewed in their context, it is clear that these translations are inadequate. Rather, *γραμματική* underwent a process of semantic development that should influence the way scholars translate the term and conceive of its related art. An appropriate appreciation of the evolution of the *γραμματική τέχνη* clarifies various problems in the history of grammar and linguistics.

After some philological analysis, one can infer the following stages in the development of the study called *γραμματική*. (1) It began as the basic art of letters: knowing how to turn a stretch of spoken language into a string of alphabetic symbols, and to turn a string of alphabetic symbols into a stretch of spoken language.¹ Classical authors such as Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon testify to this conception. (2) At some point after Aristotle the art of reading became identified with the study of literature. The term for the basic ability to read and write, *γραμματική*, was applied to what we would call literary criticism, which required a sound grasp of etymology, rhetorical figures and familiarity with regalia, and obsolete expressions. Because of its prominence in the curriculum, *γραμματική* came to be associated so closely with literary criticism that criticism displaced the art of basic reading as the main referent of the term. This evolved meaning of *γραμματική* is most evident in Dionysius Thrax’s 2nd century BCE treatise, the *γραμματική τέχνη*. Among other authors, one scholiast of this text witnesses to an older and a newer meanings of *γραμματική*, making clear that Dionysius’ handbook treats of the latter. Now that it seemed odd to call the basic art of writing and reading by the same term as the advanced

¹ See Aristotle, *Top.* 142b30-143a1.

art, the term γραμματιστική was coined to replace it.² (3) The study of language gradually became more autonomous, more general and also more complete, so that what had been only a tool for reading and understanding literature—grammar—came to be seen as coterminous with the γραμματική τέχνη. This final stage seems to have occurred only in the period of the Roman Empire.

While the English cognate *grammar* should only be used to render γραμματική in the Roman period, it is consistently used without regard to the period of the text in which the term is found. The conclusions of this paper do not entail that there was no study of grammar before the period of the Roman Empire. They show only that whatever grammatical knowledge was assembled to this time was not yet called γραμματική and had not yet emerged as an autonomous discipline. Thus histories of linguistics or of grammar are not thereby overthrown. However, the conventional interpretation of specific texts and of the history of grammar does require revision. For example, understanding that γραμματική denotes literacy in the classical period helps clarify some obscure passages in Aristotle and comports with the evidence that grammar had not yet become a formalized field of study.³ Additionally, according to Swiggers and Wouters, “The definition of grammar as given by Dionysius Thrax, and the description of its components, testify to a tradition in which grammarians were interested in the wording of literary texts....”⁴ When we note that γραμματική denotes literary study in the Hellenistic period, we recognize that this gets things backward: rather, *literary critics* were interested in *grammar*. Moreover, we need not strain at the fact that in ancient education, the γραμματικός primarily taught literary criticism,

² Formally γραμματιστής and γραμματιστική are both derived from γραμματίζω “teach letters” (attested only in the third century B.C.E.). See Chantraine 1968, 236. The first term is found in Plato and Xenophon signifying a teacher of reading, and earlier in Herodotus meaning a scribe or secretary (see Powell 1938 s.v.).

³ Cf. *Categories* 1a23-27, *De Amina* 417a22-25.

⁴ Swiggers and Wouters 2004, 81.

and that grammatical exercises such as the “systematic practice of declension and conjugation...w[ere] apparently unknown in Hellenistic schools.”⁵

To recognize that the γραμματική τέχνη has historically been defined by more than grammatical knowledge is to admit a significant error in conventional wisdom. The revised interpretation that I have proposed produces greater clarity in the history of ancient linguistics and grammar.

Works Cited

- Chantraine, Pierre. 1968. *Dictionnaire Etymologique De La Langue Grecque: Histoire Des Mots*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Criore, Raffaella. 2001. *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.
- Powell, John Enoch. 1938. *A Lexicon to Herodotus*. Hildesheim: Olms.
- Swiggers, Pierre, and Alfons Wouters. 2004. "The Concept of 'Grammar' in Antiquity." *History of Linguistics in Texts and Concepts*. Ed. Gerda Hassler and Gesina Volkmann. Münster: Nodus Publikationen. 73-85.

⁵ Criore 2001, 210.