

Administrative Greek in Ptolemaic Egypt: Power and Prestige from Linguistic Capital

In this paper, I argue that aspects of life in Ptolemaic Egypt were affected by the way language was used by the ruling Greeks and the non-elite Egyptians and the power structures which were created by them. The use of Greek as an administrative language by the conquering Macedonians and later subsequent Greek immigrants created a stratified social sphere full of complex relationships between those who had legitimate linguistic competence and those who did not. Language played a vital role in the way the Ptolemaic kingdom developed and formed into the power it was known to be for several hundreds of years in the Mediterranean region. I build upon the theory of linguistic capital from Bourdieu which argues that “the political process of unification whereby a determinate amount of ‘speaking subjects’ is led in practice to accept the official language” (Erickson and Murphy 2013). This legitimized language is inculcated into the members of society through the education system and backed by the administration in society. Certain realms of society require the official language while others do not; those places of legitimized language include locations such as schools, public administration, and political institutes. In this way, “the state language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured” (Erickson and Murphy 2013).

Further drawing upon Bowman and Woolf (1994) there are two perspectives as to why Greek became the dominant language in Ptolemaic Egypt. One idea follows the colonial model of imposed languages by conquering forces in order to maintain power and dominance; another idea follows an adaptive model believing the adoption of Greek as the dominant language was due to the benefits switching to it held for elites to retain their prestigious and lucrative positions within society. As such, bureaucratic jargon developed in certain administrative and elite

language situations as a means to create a divide between those competent and those not competent in this specific language practice, further creating social and linguistic stratification (Bowman and Woolf 1994). In a similar manner, the education system that was most prominent in Ptolemaic Egypt was based on knowledge of Greek language and culture; main lessons included learning the a-b-c's and traditional Greek literature from Homer to contemporary Hellenistic poets, epic to tragedy (Bowman and Woolf 1994). Finally building upon Shipley (2000), it is due to an influx of Greek men, but not women, in Ptolemaic Egypt there was a lot of intermarriage between Greeks and Egyptians, mainly Greek men and Egyptian women (Shipley 2000). However, another probable reason follows Bourdieu's theory that women are more likely to adapt and are quicker to adopt the new legitimate language as their main means of social mobility. Egyptian women would have had a chance, if they had some level of competence in the prestigious Greek administrative language, at gaining the attention of one of these Greek men, which would automatically provide upward mobility because the Greeks already had privilege from their mastery of the dominant language.

The social stratification and power distribution of societies affected by language gives us insight into the development of those classes and elite culture. In particular, analyzing this information in a historical setting has many advantages. One such advantage is the complete view through the history of the society involved, allowing for a more holistic analysis of how language affected the different structures of power. This topic is also an important one to study due to its interdisciplinary nature, looking at classical studies through the lens of anthropological theory. These studies are important to broaden our academic perspectives outside of our normal field as well as to create new material on subjects that may have been never-before-studied. Further research into this topic would really help advance the field of linguistic anthropology in a

historical light. Very few works exist that offer a comprehensive study of the historical fact with the addition of an applied anthropological theory. Similar research that could be done is examination of the other Hellenistic kingdoms and how use of Greek as an administrative language affected their cultures. Additionally cross cultural comparisons of administrative languages and their cultural affects could better help anthropologists understand the nature of linguistics and culture even more so.

Bibliography

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