

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

May 2, 2005

Speaker: Peter Mackridge, Oxford University (visiting scholar, Princeton University)

Topic: Greek as a Sacred Language: Modern Greek Translations of the New Testament

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Stephane Charitos, Columbia University; Peter Constantine; Rachel Hadas, Rutgers University; Monika Kallan, Foundation for Hellenic Culture; Chrysi Kotsifou, Columbia University; Elias Kulukundis; Christos Tsiamis

Summary of Presentation:

Mackridge framed his talk as part of an ongoing examination of the dialectical relationship between the development of the Modern Greek language and national identity. Mackridge opened with reference to the request made by the Archbishop of Athens in September 2004 that all priests within his diocese incorporate readings of the day's texts in Modern Greek translation after the chanting of the liturgy. This request constituted the first official admission by the Orthodox Church that it is difficult or impossible for Modern Greeks to understand the language of the New Testament Greek. Mackridge's presentation aimed at placing the archbishop's decision in its cultural and historical context, offering a historical overview of translations of the New Testament into Modern Greek, and examining the issues and debates raised by these translations.

Mackridge noted that Orthodox Greeks don't have much of a history of publishing the new testament even in the original; there is a tendency for the Orthodox Church to consider the New Testament to contain mysteries so unfathomable that only people within the church hierarchy can understand them. The first full translation of the New Testament into spoken Greek was published in 1638 in Geneva, home of Calvinism, paid for by the Dutch government, with a preface by the Patriarch of Constantinople, who was later executed by the Ottomans at the urging of the French Jesuits. This en face edition formed the basis of the first modern Greek edition in 1810 which was reprinted several times. In 1844 another translation was published in Athens by the British and Foreign Bible Society, in a simple form of *katharevousa*. Mackridge pointed out the history of foreign involvement in these translations.

1901 saw the publication of two separate translations of the gospels came out. One, an en face translation into the "*laiki*" language undertaken at the behest of Queen Olga of Greece, was carried out by her own private secretary, and is the only translation of the New Testament into Modern Greek by a woman. It was viciously attacked by the conservatives, perhaps in part precisely because it was authored by a woman, and the Holy Synod characterized its language not as "*laiki*" but "*hideia*." The other 1901 translation was completely by Alexandros Pallis and serialized in the newspaper *Akropolis*. The appearance of modern translations of the gospels in the profane context of a newspaper led to violent protests in which several people were killed. Mackridge brought up the fact that in 1903 similar disturbances occurred when the *Oresteia* was performed in *katharevousa* translation, and suggested that the similarity

of these two reactions points to a kind of sacralization of classical texts. If we see Orthodox Christianity and the worship of ancient Greek texts as two religions existing side by side, the ancient Greek language is made in some sense doubly sacred.

Mackridge then presented a brief summary of arguments used in 2004 by Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens for the inclusion of modern translations of the New Testament in church services. One argument centered around the defective teaching of ancient Greek in Greek schools creating an inability to comprehend the language of the New Testament in a whole generation of Greeks. Another argument was that the problem of language is a “purely pastoral matter,” thus challenging the idea that the Greek language is divine and given by God. According to this argument, the New Testament is divine, but not its language. The hymns of the liturgy are to remain untranslated, because they are “masterpieces of literature and theology.” Archbishop Christodoulos also maintained that “Our lord spoke the language of the people.” Other arguments made to support the use of Modern Greek translations of the New Testament that appeared in the Greek press included the fact that since the Septuagint is a translation, there is already a precedent for the translation of Biblical texts into Modern Greek; likewise, since the New Testament has been translated into virtually all the languages of the world, and Modern Greek need not hold itself as the single noteworthy exception. Another argument that Mackridge considers statist and not really logical unless you consider the Orthodox Church as an arm of the Greek state is that since the official language of Greece is the demotic, and since ancient texts are taught in translation, the New Testament should be as well.

Mackridge then presented several arguments against the translation. Some of these arguments rested on historical misunderstandings, such as the claim that Christ himself spoke ancient Greek. Others maintained that if Archbishop Christodoulos’s “pilot program” of bilingual readings takes off, the original will inevitably be set aside and only the translation will be read. Others suggested that if the priest were to interpret and comment on the readings to help people understand, as he is supposed to do but rarely actually does, there would be no need for the translation. The most serious objections came from Amvrosios, Metropolitan of Kalavryta and Aigeialeia, and Christos Giannaras, Professor of Philosophy at the Panteio University. Metropolitan Amvrosios argued that any translation of the New Testament desacralizes the text, turns the gospels into “*haroumenes istorioules*.” He also asserted that the understanding of holy writ depends not on knowledge and intellectual comprehension but on enlightenment from the holy spirit. Giannaras argued that the symbolic idiom of the New Testament is ultimately more important than its meanings, and accused Christodoulos of “Protestant efficiency,” introducing an element of didacticism and ignoring the importance of the “*ecclesiastiko gegonos*.” Giannaras accused him of continuing the work of Protestant missionaries, attacking evangelical fundamentalism within the Greek church itself.

In conclusion, Mackridge suggested that in Greece the question of New Testament translation has been a test case for westernization. All of the translation projects have been part of modernization efforts with impetus often coming from the outside or from foreigners, resting upon western rationalist principles. For that reason, Mackridge considers many of the arguments for banning Modern Greek translations of the New Testament as prompted primarily by nationalist motivations.

Summary of Discussion:

Questioner opened the discussion by agreeing with a comment Mackridge had made that it would be interesting to conduct a survey of Greeks asking to what extent they are able to understand the liturgical texts chanted in church. *Questioner's* sense was that for most Greeks the atmosphere of the liturgical experience is far more important than the meaning of what's being said. He also pointed out the populist sentiment behind Archbishop Christodoulos's decision, and noted that this urge toward linguistic simplification in the church is interesting given the recent shift in literature toward the use of difficult language or dialect, in writers such as Karistiani, Kapsalis, and Dimitriou. Mackridge added that it would be interesting to gather statistics on whether or not, with the institution of modern translations being read in church, congregations will grow or will continue to shrink as they have been in recent years.

Questioner brought up the issue of language teaching in the diaspora, and how closely linked it often is with religious teaching, because of the preponderance of Greek schools run by churches. He referred to his own Greek teacher from his youth, and her virulent anti-Semitism, her conflation of language, religion, and nation; Mackridge commented that this is, unfortunately, not uncommon, and that even among the educated and "cultured" such ideas persist.

Questioner asked Mackridge if he had considered the case of the Catholic Church, which went through the same kind of debate in the 16th century with the translation of the Bible into the "vulgar" language in the context of nation building. Mackridge commented that, since the switch to the vernacular, Catholic services have become more and more like protestant services, and that members of the Orthodox Church often tend to think of themselves as last bastion of true religion standing out against these reforms and innovations; Christodoulos, on the other hand, sees the need to follow this trend.

Questioner asked how much of a distinction is made between language of liturgy and language of catechesis. Mackridge responded that Orthodox priests are supposed to interpret the scriptures they read during services, and there has never been a prohibition on priests using the spoken language in that setting. On the contrary, since the 16th century, sermons have been written in something close to demotic, and nowadays priests do speak in demotic when they're addressing the congregation, though during the dictatorship priests for the most part gave sermons in *katharevousa*, with very few exceptions.

Questioner asked whether, in discussions of Archbishop Christodoulos's decision in the press, there was ever any discussion of loss of message entailed in translation. Mackridge responded that after the publication of the 1985 version, a theologian at the University of Athens wrote an article examining the specific choices made by the translators. Mackridge also commented that in fact some of the translative choices do seem to him rather odd, making Jesus look more like social revolutionary than the son of God, using terms like "*odigitis*." He suggested that ultimately perhaps poets are better translators than university professors of theology who might not have quite the same sense of language. *Questioner* then raised the question of populism again, and the way in which the translation of the New Testament into Modern Greek also involved an attempt on the part of the Church to pose itself as a stronger political

force. She also pointed to the link between translation and missionary work. She noted that there is a change taking place in the Greek Orthodox Church of America, with a new emphasis on converting non-Orthodox Christians to Orthodoxy.