The perception of historical and Indo-European linguistics in the instruction of Greek

Abstract

Indo-European linguistics has a long tradition which is manifested by an extensive bibliography and findings that are integrated into other domains such as lexicography or comparative philology. Still, one may observe a certain degree of scepticism towards the Indo-European studies, which is largely attributed to the fact that Historical Linguistics’ and Archaeology’s methodologies do not easily comply with each other, so the results of one may question findings of the other. What is more, within the language discourse in Greece, Indo-European linguistics is confronted with an intensive denial of its theories which is based on a ‘hellenocentric’ paralinguistic pseudo-science. The article traces the roots of this anti-Indo-European rhetoric in Greece and indicates the deficient incorporation of IE theory into the language instruction of (Ancient) Greek at primary and secondary education with respect to the way the findings of comparative linguistics are presented in relevant handbooks.

1. Introduction

1.1 Indo-European linguistics: An ‘occult’ science?

Among the various linguistic domains, Indo-European (IE) studies may seem a quiet occult one. This impression is evoked by factors such as the names of long forgotten peoples and their languages, such as Tocharian, Luwian, Dacian, Messapian, or reconstructed lexemes, i.e. restorations of how the common root of words that are cognate within the languages of the IE family should have sounded at least 4,000 years ago. Such forms like *gʰþom- ‘earth’ (Clackson 2007: 36), with antecessors in Sanskrit kṣám-, Greek χθόν, Lithuanian žemė, Old Irish dú, are the outcome of applying the comparative method that cannot be easily refuted by linguists who seriously deal with historical linguistics but may seem confusing to non-specialists.

The problem we address here then is not a matter of validity or justification of the IE theory per se. The problem is to examine why IE theory is confronted beyond the limits of its discipline with scepticism and denial that may get emotional.

IE studies are a well-established field of research and despite the overall decline in humanities, research is productive. Reasonably, there is a better representation thereof in Western countries and the fact that German-speaking countries developed a long tradition is associated with ideological issues. An overview of the institutions
that run IE study programmes is available on the site of the project TITUS:1 <http://titus.fkidg1.uni-frankfurt.de/framee.htm?/index.htm>. Similarly, the activities within the field are monitored by the Society for Indo-European Studies in the site of which <http://www.indogermanistik.org/> one can see the work of an assiduous scholarship. In recent years, there have been numerous publications and introductions that are suggestive of the interest in IE and comparative linguistics (e.g. Beekes 2011; Clackson 2007; Fortson 2010; Meier-Brügger 2000; Tichy 2000). It goes without saying that the list is not exhaustive and one should consider the various theses, articles and monographies that are being published.

So, the realization that, in terms of scientific production, IE linguistics is still rigorous may seem superfluous to the insiders but it is not to the rest of scholars and for sure not to the wider public. The very term *Indo-European* sounds obscure and generally one can notice that the findings of the field are not common knowledge to the public, therefore there are misconceptions about the field. In the case that interests us here, in Greece and in the instruction of Greek in our country, the term may raise eyebrows, if not hostility. In Sections 1.2 and 1.3, we discuss some aspects that contribute to the problematic reception if IE linguistics, in Greece and elsewhere.

1.2 Indo-European linguistics and its ideological implications

IE linguistics is a branch of historical linguistics, which in turn contributes to the formation of a national historical narrative. History again is crucial in creating national narratives and therefore the rise of IE studies did not exclusively occur out of pure academic interest but was abetted by ideological motives and its findings had repercussions linked with politics. Pereltsvaig & Lewis (2015: 17) observe: “Debates about Indo-European origins and dispersion have played a surprisingly central role in modern intellectual history. At first glance, the ancient source of a group of languages whose very relatedness is invisible to non-specialists would seem to be an obscure issue, of interest only to a few academics. Yet it is difficult to locate a topic of historical debate over the past two centuries that has been more intellectually provocative, ideologically fraught, and politically laden than that of Indo-European origins and expansion. Although the controversies have diminished in the Western public imagination since the middle of the twentieth century, they still rage in India, and elsewhere their reverberations persist. As a result, the Indo-European question is anything but trivial or recondite.”

The ‘great sin’ of Indo-Europeanists was of course the intertwinement of linguistics and racial ‘anthropology’, namely the formation of the Aryan theory. Hock (2003) supports the idea that we should accept a certain degree of (inadvertent or deliberate) contribution of the IE theory to the misuse thereof by racialism and rac-

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1 A platform with relevant information about IE linguistics such as texts and other tools, announcements etc., a sort of “IE Linguist List”.

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ism, especially the idea that the IE expansion involved Aryan, and thus racially “Germanic/Nordic” peoples (cf. also Arvidsson 2006; Pereltsvaig & Lewis 2015: 22ff). A manifestation of this ideological implication is the German term for Indo-European, namely Indogermanistik. Although the designation was coined, presumably, in order to show the two extremities of the once known languages of the IE family (Irish and Tocharian were not yet classified as IE), it still conveys undertones about the importance of Germanic tribes as the core of a hypothetical IE civilization.

So, the burden of this ideological heritage casts a shadow on IE linguistics. Especially after the 2nd World War and the defeat of Nazism there was certain doubt concerning the repercussions of the theory of a common linguistic family on the level of the formation of national narratives.

1.3 IE linguistics and archaeology: The conundrum of the Urheimat

Another reason for questioning the validity of IE studies has been the difficulty to connect linguistic findings and archaeology. Anthony (2007: 15), after positing the question “Why hasn’t a broadly acceptable union between archaeological and linguistic evidence been achieved?” provides the following explanations for that:

(1) Recent intellectual ambience in Western academia favoured the idea of fusion over the one of a single-source origin. Language families were considered as a sort of creoles between several neighbouring languages of distinct origins, in a way similar to cultural convergence.

(2) Archaeologists do not accept that the reconstructed vocabulary is reliable and indicating of a particular civilization.

(3) The archaeologists cannot agree upon the antiquity of Proto-Indo-European (PIE) as a spoken language, the dating stretches from 8000 BC to 2000 BC while some turn down the whole concept of an existing proto-language. “[...] the principal reason for this state of chronic disagreement is that most archaeologists do not pay much attention to linguistics.” (Anthony 2007: 16).

(4) Archaeological methods for the time span in which PIE should have been spoken are still undeveloped. Although it is true that “pots are not humans” (or languages), Anthony (2007: 17) suggests that when we observe “a very clear material-culture frontier – not just different pots but also different houses, graves, cemeteries, town patterns, icons, diets, and dress designs – that persists for centuries or millennia, it tends also to be a linguistic frontier.”

(5) Moreover, Anthony believes that archaeologists played down (or did not understand) the role of migration. The suggested location of the IE homeland: the Russian-Ukrainian-Kazakhstan’s steppes. This region was mostly investigated by Soviet archaeologists (in a time in which international collaboration was impeded by the cold-war politics) who published in journals not easily accessible to Western scholars and whose methodology was significantly different from the Western one.

(6) The domestication of horses and the usage of chariots as a weapon was not
thoroughly investigated. Of course, one should consider that this is Anthony’s main point in his line of argumentation.

On these grounds, there is no consensus about the homeland (the Urheimat as the established German term is) of the speakers of the Proto IE language. Pereltsvaig (2012: 24) refers to various theories about the IE homeland, like Renfrew’s Anatolian hypothesis and Gimbutas’ (and Anthony’s) steppe theory that associates IE homeland with the Caspian steppes. We are not going to discuss further this issue herein; we should however take into consideration (a) that the absence of unanimity about the IE homeland is used to justify theories of autochthonous origin, however, (b) it is misleading to claim that archaeology and linguistics contradict each other. This was never the case and, besides, recent archaeological findings seem to be compatible with linguistic theories (cf. also Pereltsvaig & Lewis 2015: 157ff).

2. Pseudoscience and hellenocentric linguistic theories

2.1 Justifying ideologies and beliefs

The reasons we saw in the previous section and for which IE linguistic is treated with suspicion by some scholars are further intensified by pseudoscientific approaches that arise either because scientific reality may be less appealing to the public or because IE theory is less pleasant to nationalistic narratives. First, there is a general proclivity in most of us to accept or underscore ideas and theories that justify our beliefs. As Shermer (2011: 5) puts it: “We form our beliefs for a variety of subjective, personal, emotional, and psychological reasons in the context of environments created by family, friends, colleagues, culture, and society at large; after forming our beliefs we then defend, justify, and rationalize them with a host of intellectual reasons, cogent arguments, and rational explanations. Beliefs come first, explanations for beliefs follow.”

The tendency to formulate ideologically ‘pleasant’ theories is conspicuous in cases where the methodology of historical linguistics is employed to promote the idea that a language is older or superior to others. We already saw before that even IE studies are not immune to ideological misuses despite their sound scientific basis. Similarly, we encounter approaches of entirely absurd argumentation such as the Güneş Dil Teorisi fostered by Atatürk, according to which all human languages stem from Proto-Turkic (cf. Lewis 1999) or cases with a more elaborate base, like the “Out-of-India” theory, the supporters of which reject the idea that IE-speaking ‘Aryans’ invaded the Indic peninsula but, vice versa, India was the cradle of IE migrations (Pereltsvaig & Lewis 2015: 36ff). In most of these theories there seems to occur a confusing entanglement of anthropology, archaeology and linguistics which may have some seeds of true but the outcome is arbitrary and therefore erroneous.

2 For the Greek case cf. Giannopoulos (2012).
2.2 The tradition of linguistic pseudo-science in Greece

The presence of pseudo-science in the discourse concerning the Greek language is not unique but its extent is indeed a peculiarity. Giannopoulos (2012: 551) points out: “Especially in Greece the disquieting increase in the number of irresponsible, obsessive and mostly nationalistic popular-science publications, that is observable in recent years, often renders it difficult for many people to appropriately assess the credibility of new historical or archaeological information. New and fascinating research views can be light-heartedly dismissed, if they give the impression that they could gratify (or originate from) the one or the other group of ‘hooligans’ of pseudo-science.”

It is reasonable to postulate that nations in which the narrative of their ‘antiquity’ is dominant are less willing to accept the affinity with other ethnic groups, even if this affinity is distant and solely linguistic. In this aspect, the criticism against the IE theory in Greece seems to resemble to the “Out-of-India” arguments as these are represented by advocates of Hindu nationalism.3

In Greece, the literature which can be called ‘para-linguistic’ and promotes the concept of Greek as an autochthonous and particularly archaic language that exerted influence on a number of languages in Europe and globally is excessive and probably more proliferous than the academic publications on IE linguistics. As a phenomenon, this pseudo-science tradition in Greek publications is traced at least back to 1912, when Thomopoulos attempts to postulate a common indigenous Albanian-Greek substrate that he calls “Pelasgian” from which other languages such as Hittite, Etruscan and Sumerian sprouted. “Pelasgian”, a vague designation used by ancient authors to name Pre-Greek populations (cf. e.g. Herodotus 1,57), will become a key-term in these works.4 The Greeks are considered “Pelasgians” and not Indo-Europeans in many publications written by emblematic personae of the post-war Greek nationalistic movement, mainly Plevris (e.g. 1995) and Georgalas (e.g. 1999).5 A striking case is the one of Tziropoulou-Efstathiou who published an extensive work with basically totally arbitrary etymologies, e.g. the English kiss me is derived from the Homeric κύσον με or stork from Greek στοργή meaning ‘affection’ (since storks are tender to their chicks!). In other cases, words of common IE origin are arbitrarily attributed to a Greek source, e.g. bear versus φέρω.6

3 Cf. Pereltsvaig & Lewis (2015: 37): “This Indocentric school of Indo-European studies has generated significant opposition among more traditional scholars, both in the West and in India. According to Edwin Bryant (2005: 470), tensions grew so pronounced that it became ‘increasingly difficult for scholars of South Asia to have a cordial exchange on the matter without being branded a ‘Hindu nationalist’, ‘western neocolonialist’, ‘Marxist secularist’, or some other simplistic and derogatory stereotype’.”

4 A “Pelasgian” origin that associates Greeks and Albanians appears in later publications as well, cf. Kollias (1983), in which Ancient Greek words are etymologized through Albanian as both belonging to a common proto-family.

5 Interestingly the national-socialist Golden Dawn party that supports the idea of a common ‘Aryan’ nation feels more at ease to adopt the IE theory, still considering Greek as the “most perfect” of the IE languages, cf. <https://tinyurl.com/y767kq3q>.

Along with these publications, there have been several magazines promoting the ‘Pelasgian’ origin of the Greeks. The most interesting case was Δαυλός (‘Torch’), a cult publication that represented vehemently anticchristian, neopaganistic and extreme hellenocentric concepts, although it opposed modern racial nationalism. Titles like “Sunk city 9500 years old in India with Greek script!” (Daulos 243, March 2002) were frequent.

2.3 "In the name of Zeus"

The list of books above is of course not exhaustive and should be considered in conjunction with abundant posts and sites that reproduce similar ideas. A fairly popular misconception that is circulated on the internet pertains to the etymology of Ζεύς, which in Attic (Classical) Greek exhibits a synchronically irregular stem alternation (Nom. Zeύς, Voc. Zeῦ versus Gen. Διός, Dat. Διί, Acc. Δία) that is however easily explainable diachronically through regular phonological change (cf. Beekes 2011: 199). The fact of regular change however did not hinder several para-linguistic analyses to rise. Based on the following excerpt in Plato’s Kratylos (396a–b), the phenomenical irregularity is attributed to a paretymology that is tinged with esoteric interpretations:

“And his father [of Tantalos] also, who is said to be Zeus, appears to have a very excellent name, but it is not easy to understand; for the name of Zeus is exactly like a sentence; we divide it into two parts, and some of us use one part, others the other; for some call him Zena (Ζῆνα), and others Dia (Δία); but the two in combination express the nature of the god, which is just what we said a name should be able to do. For certainly no one is so much the author of life (ζῆν) for us and all others as the ruler and king of all. Thus, this god is correctly named, through whom (δι᾽ ὅν) all living beings have the gift of life (ζῆν). But, as I say, the name is divided, though it is one name, into the two parts, Dia and Zena […].”

Examples of this kind are abundant on Greek sites.

3. Historical and IE linguistics in the Greek educational system

3.1 IE scholarship in Greece

In Greece, comparative linguistics were introduced by Georgios N. Chatzidakis who was appointed initially at 1885 as an Adjunct Professor and since 1890 as a Full Professor of the Faculty of Linguistics and Indian Literature. His contribution has been of great importance not only in Greece but internationally. Other Greek scholars that conducted comparative research were the pioneer Indologist Demetrios Galanos (1760–1833), who delivered an important but unfortunately largely unpublished
work (cf. Katsikadeli, Fykias & Sampanis 2014) and Konstantinos Theotokis (1872–1923), writer of a history of Indian literature.

Nowadays, in Greek universities we find three categories of lecturers who deal with IE linguistics: (a) There are only a few permanent academic members whose topic has a focus on IE (chiefly at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki); (b) in some cases, elements of IE linguistics are taught within the framework of courses of historical linguistics; whereas (c) in most cases, there is only a short treatment of core IE theory, while other languages than Greek and Latin are barely offered. There are certain original publications in Greek language (e.g. Simeonidis 1999; Giannakis 2011; 2015) as well as translations of international works (e.g. Mallory 1999; Beekes 2004); however, it is questionable if these reach a wider, non-linguistic public.10

3.2 Elements of IE linguistics in instructional handbooks

Along with a quite poor representation of IE linguistics in Greek universities, the instruction of Greek at school does not seem to provide enough information about the IE origins thereof, although language is supposed to be a vital part of the education process.

An older handbook (Tompaidis 1982) about the history of Greek (that is not systematically taught) offers minimal elements of IE linguistics: page 10f is dedicated to the Indo-European origin of Greek while p. 12f makes a reference to Pre-Greeks. There are neither comparative tables or any systematic explanation of how exactly Greek is associated with other IE languages nor maps or detailed information about any other IE language.

A more straightforward reference to the IE family is traced in a recent school dictionary of Ancient Greek (Simeonidis, Xenis & Fliatouras 2009) in which etymological information goes back to Proto-Greek reconstruction and cognates from other IE languages are provided. For example, in Table 1 under the lemma ἐγώ, the Proto-Greek *εγωμ- is introduced along with the Ancient Indian (ahám) and the Latin (ego) cognates.

Table 1: Simeonidis, Xenis & Fliatouras 2009, s.v. ἐγώ ‘I’

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10 Needless to say that there are Greek scholars dealing with IE out of Greece but their contribution usually remains within the limits of Academia. Moreover, the impression that one gets is that IE studies are chosen by a small part of Greek linguists in comparison to other domains of the field.
What is questionable in this case is whether the student (or even the instructor/teacher) are aware of how these cognates are relatives. In fact, even the authors of the dictionary admit the following: “For economy reasons etymology is given as brief as possible and is not always easy to be understood by the student because it presupposes the knowledge of elementary rules of Ancient Greek historical grammar, which unfortunately is not being taught in secondary Education. Consequently, the etymology is useful to the instructor who can teach it to the student, especially if (s)he consults some basic handbooks that are included in the bibliography. Frequently, reference is made to cognate and parallel forms in other IE languages so that the student becomes aware that Greeks is part of this large linguistic family that covers all Europe and reaches India.” (Simeonidis, Xenis & Fliatouras 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>§ 53</th>
<th>Einsilbige Stämme auf -ου, -αυ, -ευ: βούς Ochse u. Kuh, ναῦς Schiff, Ζεύς Zeus</th>
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<td>Sing. N.</td>
<td>ο, η</td>
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<td>A.</td>
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<td>G.</td>
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<td>D.</td>
<td>ο, η</td>
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<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>(βούς)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plur. N.</td>
<td>βο-ς, βο-ες, βο-ος, βο-α, βο-ας, βο-αι</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>η, ζ</td>
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<td>G.</td>
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<td>D.</td>
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Table 2: Bornemann & Risch 1978: 48

The poor level of incorporation of IE linguistics in the language instruction in Greece is conspicuous when we draw a comparison between German (Bornemann & Risch 1978) and Greek (Ikonomou 1971) grammars of Ancient Greek. In the German grammar, there is an explicit reference to the IE origin of Greek: “Greek [...] is a branch of the Indo-Germanic (or Indo-European) linguistic family, to which most European and certain Asian languages belong. Apart from Greek, other branches were Latin, with its romance daughter-languages, Celtic, Germanic, Lithuanian, Slavic, Iranian and the Indian, moreover Hittite that was spoken in Minor Asia in 2. millennia B.C. These languages are distantly related, i.e. they exhibit an extensive correlation in their structure, that can be explained only if we suppose that they developed from a proto-language that was not directly recorded, namely “Indo-Germanic” [Indo-European]” (Bornemann & Risch 1978: xiv). In the introduction of Ikonomou’s grammar there is nothing referring to the IE linguistic family, whereas the introduction offers general remarks tinged with patriotic undertones, e.g. : “In
antiquity there were developed and cultivated two languages, Greek and Latin [...]. From these two languages, Ancient Greek was the most important since it has been spoken for many centuries and was used by notable authors” (Ikonomou 1971: 9).

As we saw above (Section 2.3), the declination paradigm of Zeus in Classical Greek gave rise to a paralinguistic paraleymology. In Bornemann & Risch (1978: 48) the student is given the variation of the stem and the rule that causes the variation in the declination (cf. Table 2).

On the contrary, Ikonomou presents the declination of ‘Zeus’ under the category “irregular nouns” without any further explanation (cf. Table 3).

| 4) τὸ δόρυ, τοῦ δόρατ-ος, τῷ δόρατ-ι κτλ. – τὰ δόρατ-α, τῶν δοράτ-ων κτλ. (Θ. δορυ-, δορατ-) |
| 5) ὁ Ζεύς, τοῦ Δι-ός, τῷ Δι-ί, τὸν Δί-α, ὡς Ζεῦ (Θ. ζευ-, Δι-) |
| 6) τὸ ἥπαρ (= συκώτι), τοῦ ἥπατ-ος, τῷ ἥπατ-ι κτλ. – τὰ ἥπατ-α, τῶν ἥπατ-ων κτλ. (Θ. ἥπαρ-, ἥπατ-) |

Table 3: Ikonomou 1971: 91

The dictionary of Simeonidis, Xenis & Fliatouras (2009) offers an etymology (Table 4) but, as already discussed, this is never discussed in the classroom, thus the impression that a student gets is that the declination of Ζεύς is an exemption.

| Ζεύς, Διός, ὁ ΟΥΣΙΑΣΤΙΚΟ |
| ο Δίας (κύριο όνομα): Ζεύς Κρονίδης = ο Δίας, ο γιος του Κρόνου. |
| • σε όρκους ή σε προσφωνήσεις νή (τὸν) Δία = μα το Δία. ὄ Ζευ και άλλοι θεοί. |
| ΝΕ Δίας. |
| [*Διεύς, αρχ. ινδ. divāh = ΔιΦός, Διός]. |

Table 4: Simeonidis, Xenis & Fliatouras 2009, s.v. Ζεύς

On these grounds, it is reasonable to argue that the findings of IE studies are not adequately incorporated into the instruction of Greek so that a student be able to recognize and critically turn down pseudoscientific criticisms against the theory.

4. Conclusions

Indo-European linguistics is a well-established research field. Any criticism against it may question certain findings, methodologies and postulations but not the very fact that a large number of languages share a common origin, have numerous lexical and morphosyntactic cognates and display certain cultural patterns of their initial speakers. In Greece, beyond Academia, there is a great mistrust against the IE linguistics incited by hellenocentric pseudoscientific theories about Greek being the mother tongue of all languages and the ‘autochthonocity’ (and racial purity) of
Greeks. Education at all levels does not seem able to remedy the diffusion of misconceptions: The instruction of Ancient Greek at schools is not combined with a sufficient education on historical linguistics. Additionally, in most cases there is no rigorous training in comparative IE methods in Greek universities. Therefore, it seems to be a necessity to reflect more on the role that historical linguistics should obtain in language and linguistic education in Greece.

References


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