Texts in context: *Yassas*!

By Carol Kuniholm
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Yassas! That's Greek for hello, goodbye, cheers, "to you!" And a makeshift "thank you" for those (like me) who can't quite manage *efkharistó* (eff-car-ee-STOH), the official Grecian "thank you."

On a recent trip to Greece, every time I tried to say a proper efkharistó I was rewarded with puzzled looks and general incomprehension. The receptionist at our hotel suggested an easier alternative might be to say "yassas!" when I entered, when I left, and whenever a thank you, or other general greeting, was needed.

Then she tried to complicate things by explaining that yassas, written Γειά σας, geia sas, or yia sas, is plural, or formal, while *yassou*, written γεια σου, gia sou, yia shoe, is singular, or informal. So while I could say yassou to her, or a shopkeeper, or a waiter, she, and they, would need to say yassas to me.

I'm not big on status distinctions (a customer is "above" a shopkeeper or waiter? in what way?) so I finally decided that yassas would work in any situation, and sure enough, a friendly yassas brought an equally friendly yassas (or, sometimes, "Ya!") in return, and sometimes prompted conversations about what nationality I might be (Italiká? Germanós?) Apparently, most Americans don't bother with even simple greetings.

As a native English speaker my understanding of language, of translation, of the interplay of meaning and words, is shaped by my experience as a monolinguist in a world where I have the luxury of expecting literature, media, politics, finance to meet me in my mother tongue.

There are plenty of benefits to growing up immersed in English. Yet, as I talk with friends from smaller linguistic populations who grew up fluent in second, and sometimes third and fourth languages, I'm aware that there are benefits to engaging words, texts, and ideas in unfamiliar linguistic contexts.

There’s interesting research suggesting that our language itself can limit our comprehension. We see and understand what we have words for; we miss the reality that slips by the contours of our language.

A simple example is words for color:

- Latin originally lacked a generic color word for "gray" and "brown" and had to borrow its words from Germanic language sources.
- Biblical Hebrew had no word for blue.
- Navajo has one word for both grey and brown and one for blue and green. It has two for black, however, distinguishing the color of "coal" from that of "darkness".
- Russian, Italian, and Greek have different basic words for darker and lighter shades of blue. Russian has голубой and синий; Italian has azzuro and blu; Greek has γαλάζιο and μπλ.

I wrote earlier this year about the multiple words for love offered in classic Greek: agápe, éros, philía, storgē, ludus, pragma, mania, philautia. Even now, Greek offers more variations on “love” than English. Here’s a fun, slightly puzzling experiment: use Google to translate “love.” Then try to reverse it. The idea of a one-for-one transference quickly disappears.

Thinking about languages, the hazards of monolingualism, and the benefits of multilingualism, I came across an interesting historical discussion: what language did Jesus speak? And what is the original language of the New Testament?

As members of a small nation frequently conquered by the powers of the day, as part of a people group needing a language of trade to do business with the surrounding economies, most Jews of Jesus’ day spoke Hebrew, did business in Aramaic, read classic Greek, and would have known at least a little Latin.

There are some scholars who argue that the New Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and others who posit an Aramaic New Testament. But the general consensus is that the early texts were written in Koine Greek, a “common” Greek used as the regional language throughout the area conquered by Alexander the Great. Even the Romans depended on Koine Greek in administering the Roman Empire, while Latin was the language of the military and the courts.

On our visit to Corinth, our guide, Costos Tsevas, set biblical texts in context: geographic, historic, linguistic. He suggested that the linguistic, even philosophical context of a regional Greek language and habit of discourse enabled the rapid spread of the Christian faith in a way that would not have been possible in other

times and places.

Members of the group were asked to read parts of passages in English, with the warning that they'd be interrupted. "Wait," Costos would say mid-text. "Read what that says again. Now in Greek, it says . . ." and he'd be off, explaining the fuller meaning of a term, showing how translation had flattened, skewed, or in some other way altered an important concept.

Through our guide’s years of reading about biblical texts, and his lifetime of bridging the divide between Greek and English, I found myself seeing and hearing in new ways.

For that I say, yassas!

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