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The Language of Hermias, an Egyptian Notary from Pathyris (c. 100 B.C.)

My purpose in this paper is to present and discuss some examples of linguistically interesting Greek which was written by certain Ptolemaic period notaries in Pathyris and its surroundings in southern Egypt. The most prominent, or notorious, figure is Hermias, who was a representative of an agoranomos (ἀγοράνομος) in Pathyris for twelve years in the late 2nd and early 1st century B.C. (109–98). The agoranomos-officials and offices have been studied previously, especially by P. W. Pestman¹, but the language of the documents has not been subjected to detailed examination having only aroused some disapproving comments by the editors. P. B. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, for example, stated — even if a long time ago — that the papyri written by Hermias “... all contain grammatical blunders in greater or less profusion, while the constructions are not infrequently so confused that the legal interpretation of the documents written by him, if they were ever used as evidence, must have been sometimes extremely difficult”².

It has been a ‘tradition’ in philological research for a long time to judge low varieties and substandard registers as ‘bad’ language, but more recently sociolinguistic research has shown that linguistic variation is always context dependent. All varieties of a language are equally ‘good’ as linguistic systems and value judgements concerning their correctness are social rather than linguistic³. Besides the mistakes that have no linguistic explanation, such as mistakes in spelling, which are described as ‘garbage’ in some linguistic studies⁴, the other ‘mistakes’, i. e., linguistic variation is based on real linguistic or psychological explanations. After studying Hermias’ so-called mistakes more closely, I am convinced that they are not ‘garbage’, but that they reveal the working methods of an Egyptian scribe writing in Greek. I will present some instances of the language use of Hermias and some other notaries and offer some possible explanations for what could have been the causes for the varieties of Greek they use.

Previous studies on the agoranomoi in the Pathyrite area have shown quite clearly that there existed a family of notaries, agoranomoi. Hermias as well as his father, uncle and cousin were all notaries who wrote Greek documents. Hermias and his relatives used Greek and Hellenised names when functioning as agoranomoi, but they also had Egyptian names which were used in demotic documents, although the

¹ P. W. Pestman, *L’Agoranomie: un avant-poste de l’administration greque enlevé par les Égyptiens?* in: *Das ptolemäische Ägypten*. Akten des internationalen Symposions 27.–29. September 1976 in Berlin. Herausg. H. Maehler & V. M. Strocka, 1978 Mainz am Rhein, 203–210; Id., *Agoranomoi et actes agoranomiques: Krokodilopolis et Pathyris 145–88 av. J.-C.*, in: *Textes et études de papyrologie greque, démotique et copte*, Pap. Lugd. Bat. 23 (1985) 9–44 and Id., *Egizi sotto dominazioni straniere*, in: *Egitto e storia antica dall’Ellenismo all’età araba*, Atti del colloquio internazionale, Bologna, 31 agosto–2 settembre 1987. A cura di L. Criscuolo & G. Geraci, 1989 Bologna, 137–158.

² P.Grenf. II 25. In P.Grenf. II 26 they say that “... the ambiguous constructions of Hermias make several points doubtful” and in P.Grenf. II 33: “... the construction is more than usually involved, even for Hermias”. Also E. Mayser in his *Grammar* says that some officials show a total lack of basic language skills, so that official documents are full of mistakes. Hermias above all hardly brings one sentence to the end in a normal way and does not control congruence in cases at all. (Mayser, *Grammatik der Griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit* II 3, Berlin, Leipzig 1934, §169c Anm. 1b.)

³ M. Leiwo, *The Relation between Written and Spoken Greek. Remarks from Mons Claudianus*, in: *Ancient Greece at the Turn of the Millennium*. Papers from the 25th anniversary colloquium of the Canadian Archaeological Institute at Athens (forthcoming); P. Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics. An Introduction to Language and Society*. Rev. ed., Harmondsworth 1983, 20.

⁴ See the taxonomy of R. Lass, *Historical Linguistics and Language Change*, (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 81), Cambridge 1997, 61–62.

Egyptian name of Hermias has not survived⁵. The mother tongue of this family was most likely Egyptian⁶. Pathyris, where Hermias worked, was apparently an Egyptian-speaking environment, where there were only few people, apart from Hermias' family, who were able to write Greek⁷.

The agoranomos-document was signed by the agoranomos responsible for the document, and the name of the agoranomos was also mentioned inside the text.

(1) Indication of the agoranomos (a) or his representative (b) at the beginning of the document, after the date.

- a) e. g. ἐν Παθύρει ἐφ' Ἡλιοδώρου ἀγορανόμου
- b) e. g. ἐν Παθύρει ἐφ' Ἐρμίου τοῦ παρὰ Πανίσκου ἀγορανόμου⁸

(2) Signature of the agoranomos (a) or his representative (b) at the end of the document.

- a) e. g. Πάνισκος κεχρη(μάτικα)
- b) e. g. Ἐρμίας ὁ παρὰ Πανίσκου κεχρη(μάτικα)

These signatures offer very valuable information because, after comparing the handwriting and also taking into account the language situation in Pathyris, I think that it is highly probable that the notary who signed a document also wrote it in his own hand. If some of these documents were written by an apprentice and signed by the agoranomos, the agoranomos was still in charge of the language, which can be considered his idioscript. Idiolect is not a valid term here since we are dealing only with written material. Thus, the signature provides us with a quite secure identification of the actual writer of a certain text. This kind of information is very exceptional and rarely found.

The agoranomos-documents are sales and loans, making all the texts very similar to each other because they follow the patterns of the document type. Due to this, there is little syntactic variation. The grammatical flaws of Hermias concern almost exclusively congruence. He seems to know all the grammatical cases, but does not use them correctly, i. e., does not write the correct cases in grammatically correct places. After examining these 'mistakes' in detail, an impression was gradually growing that they did not yield to categorisation; they were not logical, at least from a standard grammatical point of view. Hermias did not always make the same mistakes in similar places or in the same phrases, but he could actually write the same thing correctly in one place and incorrectly in another, sometimes even within the same document. Some of Hermias' errors could be explained by phonological variation and changes in pronunciation that were occurring at that time⁹, but actually in many places the language of Hermias and other agoranomoi shows very little evidence of uncertainty in orthography caused by phonological change.

First, uninflected use of personal names is the most common feature of scribes whose first language (L1) is Egyptian¹⁰. Hermias' language also has this feature. He sometimes leaves the personal names in the nominative case, sometimes inflects them incorrectly, and sometimes correctly. This can be clearly

⁵ W. Clarysse has discussed the question of double names of officials and it seems that whether an official used a Greek or an Egyptian name depended on the nature of the office he held: if the office was considered to be Greek in character, the official used his Greek name and if Egyptian, he used his Egyptian name, no matter what his ethnic origin. See W. Clarysse, *Greeks and Egyptians in the Ptolemaic Army and Administration*, Aegyptus 65 (1985) 57–66.

⁶ Pestman, *Egizi* (s. n. 1), 148.

⁷ See, e. g., a copy of a testament (126 B.C.), where four out of five witnesses wrote their statements in demotic, "since there were not enough persons able to write Greek in the vicinity": οὗτοι οἱ τ[έ]σ[σ]αρες . . . τοῖς ἐγγχωρίοις [] γράμμασιν διὰ τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἐπὶ τῶν τόπων τοὺς ἴσους Ἕλληνας (Pap. Lugd. Bat. XIX 4 18–21, now re-edited as P.Dryton 3). The fifth witness, who wrote in Greek, was Ammonios, agoranomos, a cousin of Hermias. In 123 the situation had, however, changed. Five persons wrote their witness-statements in Greek: one was again Ammonios, the other was Hermias, the third was Esthladas, son of Dryton, who was a Greek from Ptolemais, and the fourth was Ptolemaios, son of Asklepiades, probably the brother of Hermias. The name of the fifth witness has not survived. SB XVIII 13168 (= P.Caire 10 388, Archiv 1 [1901] 62–65). See also Pestman, *L'Agoranomie* (s. n. 1), 206–207.

⁸ In fact, the name of the representative was not necessarily mentioned at the beginning of the document. This practise was followed mainly by Hermias and his cousin Ammonios and it could imply that the power of the office of Pathyris was increasing in the time of Hermias and Ammonios, see Pestman, *Textes* (s. n. 1), 11.

⁹ See, e. g., S. T. Teodorsson, *The Phonology of Ptolemaic Koine*, Gothenburg 1977, and G. Horrocks, *Greek: A History of the Language and its Speakers*, London 1997, esp. Chapter 4.

¹⁰ See Pestman, *L'Agoranomie* (s. n. 1), 205 and *Egizi* (s. n. 1), 150–151.

seen from many documents from the so-called Peteharsemtheus-archive which mostly deal with business matters of the brothers Peteharsemtheus, Petesukhos, Fagonis and Psennesis. For example:

(3) τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς Πετεσοῦχος καὶ Φαγῶνις καὶ Ψεννήσις (P.Grenf. II 25, 103 B.C.)

(4) Πετειαρσεμθεῖ καὶ Πετεσοῦχος τῶν Πανοβχοῦνιος (P.Grenf. II 27, 103 B.C.)

(5) Πετειαρσεμθεῖ καὶ Πετεσοῦχῳ καὶ Φαγῶνις καὶ Ψεννήσις, τοῖς δ' τῶν Πανοβχοῦνιος (P.Grenf. II 29, 102 B.C.)

No. (3) has the dative in the defining word: “to the brothers” but the names are left in the nominative. In (4) the first name is inflected in the dative, but the second one is not. (I will not deal with the problem of τῶν here.) Similarly in (5) the first two names are correctly inflected in the dative, the last two are left in the nominative. The writer has probably thought that if the intended case was visible in one word, there was no need to inflect the rest of the words that belong to the same group or entity. The first word matters, the rest is parenthetic. Quite logically, Hermias sometimes inflected personal names correctly — when it was necessary. There is an example of this in (6), where Horos, son of Horos, has lent grain to Horos, son of Nekhutes, so the names of three different persons named Horos needed to be inflected correctly to avoid confusion. (On the recto, though, a mistake has occurred in the second patronymic, which was not, however, a cause for confusion.)

(6) recto: [Ἐδάνεισεν Ὀρος] Ὀρου Ὀρωι Νεχούτωι

verso: Ἐδάνεισεν Ὀρος Ὀρου Ὀρωι Νεχούτου (P.Adler 15, 100 B.C.)

A notary of Memnonia, Apollonios, also inflected personal names oddly. He formed genitives using an inflectional morpheme from the wrong declension, possibly because the genitive morpheme of the third declension (-ος) is the same as the nominative ending in the second declension. See examples on no. 7:

(7) a) ἱερεὺς τοῦ Πανοῦ θεοῦ (PSI IX 1019, 2)

b) Εὐπατόρου pro Εὐπάτορος (PSI IX 1022, 12; UPZ II 181 col. 2, 4)

c) Φιλοπατόρου pro Φιλοπάτορος (PSI IX 1018, 8)

(7) a) should of course be read as Πανὸς θεοῦ. The incorrect genitive Πανοῦ could alternatively be explained as a graphic analogy caused by the previous article τοῦ and the following noun θεοῦ (both correctly in genitive). In (7) b) and c) Apollonios has formed genitives Εὐπατόρου and Φιλοπατόρου from the epithets Εὐπάτωρ and Φιλοπάτωρ, as if the nominatives were Εὐπάτορος and Φιλοπάτορος. The correct genitive forms of the third declension would be Εὐπάτορος and Φιλοπάτορος. In PSI IX 1018 there is, however, the correct genitive Εὐπάτορος used on the line 7. There are also other examples showing that the ending -ος has been confusing, but I will not deal with them now.

Secondly, many agoranomos-documents have a warranty formula in the end which has been very prone to errors in congruence. The basic formula is as follows:

(8) Προπωλητῆς καὶ βεβαιωτῆς τῆς ὄνης N.N. ὁ ἀποδόμενος, ὃν ἐδέξατο N.N. ὁ πριάμενος. “Negotiator and warrantor of the sale is the seller N.N., whom the buyer N.N. accepts (namely as negotiator and warrantor)”.

Sometimes the beginning is longer: Προπωλητῆς καὶ βεβαιωτῆς τῶν κατὰ τὴν ὄνην ταύτην πάντων ὁ ἀποδόμενος (N.N.) ...

Writers of this formula are liable to commit errors, because there is a relative construction and the subject changes in gender and number from document to document: the seller or the sellers are male or female as well as the buyer or the buyers. Mistakes occur in the number of the verb δέχομαι and in the number and gender of the relative pronoun. It seems to be unclear to Hermias with what correlate the verb and pronoun should agree: the subject of the main clause or the subordinate clause. Examples (9), (10), (11) and (12) show this confusion.

(9) Προπωλήτρια καὶ βεβαιώτρια τῶν κατὰ τὴν ὄνην ταύτην Θαίβις ἢ ἀποδομένη, οὓς ἐδέξαντο Φίβις καὶ Ὀρος οἱ πριάμενοι (P.Mil. I 2, 104 B.C.)

The relative pronoun οὓς (masc. pl.) should be ἥν (fem. sing.), correlating with the seller, a woman named Thabis. But Hermias is obviously already thinking of the following persons, the two buyers, Phibis and Horos, since the pronoun is in the masculine plural. The case, of course, is correctly the accusative.

(10) Προπωλητῆς καὶ βεβαιωτῆς ... Πεταρσεμθεὺς ὁ ἀποδόμενος, (vac.) οὗς ἐδέξατο Ἐτπεσοῦχος καὶ οἱ σὺν αὐτῷ ὄνουμένου οἱ πριάμενοι (SB XX 14393, 100 B.C.)

Example (10) has a similar mistake with the relative pronoun; the pronoun should be singular ὄν instead of plural οὗς. The verb is also in the wrong number as it should be in the plural: ἐδέξαντο. However, earlier in the same document the verb ἐπρίατο is in the singular with the same subject as here: Ἐτπεσοῦχος καὶ οἱ τούτου ἀδελφοί. There is also a mistake in the participle ὄνουμένου, which should be in the nominative — ὄνούμενοι — as the following words are: οἱ πριάμενοι. Hermias has obvious problems with the number. He understands the subject to be singular even though it consists of several persons, but still confuses the pronoun's number. All this makes one doubt if Hermias understood the meaning and function of the pronoun at all. This could be due to the relative clause constructions of demotic language¹¹.

(11) Σιεπμοῦς ἡ ἀποδομένη, ἃς ἐδέξαντο Πεταρσεμθεὺς καὶ Πετσοῦχος καὶ Φαγώνιος καὶ Ψεννήσις (P.Stras. II 88, 105 B.C.)

Interestingly, in (11) the number (plural) for the pronoun has been selected according to the subject of the subordinate clause (four persons), but the feminine gender according to the right subject, the seller Sierpmus.

Hermias is not the only one who makes these kinds of mistakes. For example, the verb δέχομαι is in the singular instead of plural in a document, which was written under the supervision of agoranomos Heliodoros, possibly by himself or some representative.

(12) ἐδέξατο Πανοβχοῦνις καὶ Κοβαετήσις οἱ πριάμενοι (P.Lond. III 879 p. 5, 123 B.C.)

Hermias' cousin Ammonios succeeded to write the warranty formula correctly at least twice. In general, Ammonios made similar mistakes to Hermias in his documents, but not so often. See (13) and (14) for the correct versions by Ammonios.

(13) Προπωλήτρια καὶ βεβαιώτρια Ταθώτις ἡ ἀποδομένη, ἣν ἐδέξαντο Ταελολοῦς καὶ Πεταρσεμθεὺς οἱ πριάμενοι (BGU III 994, 113 B.C.)

(14) Βεβαιωτῆς Ἀρκοννήσις ὁ ἀποδόμενος, ὃν ἐδέξατο Ναομῆσις ἡ πριαμένη (BGU III 995 col. III. 9, 110 B.C.)

Thirdly, Hermias easily confuses feminine case endings. See examples (15) and (16).

(15) ἀπέδοτο ... [τὴν] ὑπάρχουσα[ν οἰ]κίαν ᾠκοδομημένην καὶ τεθυρωμένην καὶ [τῆς] προσούση[ς ἀύλης] τῆς οὔσης ἐν τῷ ἀπὸ βορρᾶ μέρει Παθύρεως ἥς γείτονες ... (BGU III 998 col. I, 101 B.C.)

Example (15) is a list of sold items, and among the accusatives there is suddenly a phrase in the genitive when it should be in the accusative like the other objects in the sentence: [τῆς] προσούση[ς ἀύλης] τῆς οὔσης should be [τὴν] προσούσα[ν ἀύλην] τὴν οὔσαν. (Of course this example is much restored, but the eta in προσούση[ς] is clear, and it indicates the genitive.) In the same papyrus, in the second column, the mistake is the opposite:

(16) Ὁμολογῆι Ν.Ν. ἀφίστασθαι ἀπὸ τῆς πεπραμένης οἰκίας ... καὶ τῆς προσούσης ἀύλης τὴν οὔσαν ἐν τῷ ἀπὸ βορρᾶ μέρει ... (BGU III 998 col. II, 101 B.C.)

The accusative in the phrase τῆς προσούσης ἀύλης τὴν οὔσαν should be in the genitive: τῆς οὔσης. Hermias makes mistakes in the feminine endings in other documents as well. Sometimes they can be interpreted as anacolutha, sometimes as crystallised formulae. It is also possible that phonological development has caused this: the wordfinal nasal [n] was most probably not pronounced at that time, and the wordfinal sigma [s] was weak¹². One likely explanation is that Hermias has written these documents using some of the previous documents as models and he has picked up the necessary words without always stopping to think which case he should use.

¹¹ See further M. Vierros, *Everything is Relative. The Relative Clause Constructions of an Egyptian Scribe Writing Greek*, in: Grapta Poikila I. Papers and monographs of the Finnish Institute at Athens vol. VIII. Edited by L. Pietilä-Castrén, M. Vesterinen, Helsinki 2003, 13–23. That article was written after the present one.

¹² According to Horrocks (s. n. 9), 113 wordfinal [s] and [n] were weak in Hellenistic and Roman times, especially if a plosive followed.

To conclude, Hermias used cases in ways which standard grammars would consider mistakes, but still I would not agree with the statements of Grenfell and Hunt and others mentioned in the beginning of this paper because misinterpretation of documents as formulaic as the agoranomos-documents is almost impossible. The interpretation of the contents is easy when the outline of a sale or a loan document is familiar to the reader. Hermias used this to his advantage and did not bother with the correct grammar unless it was absolutely necessary. Thus, it is possible that he made conscious decisions concerning what sorts of things he did not have to write correctly. He could have worked using models, for example from previous documents, but decided to inflect only as much as was necessary for the phrase to be understood with some interpretation and leave the rest as it was in the model. This becomes clear with the examples where several personal names were grouped as entities. It was enough that the first words of an entity, a group of persons, were inflected. The Greek of Hermias probably reflects some features of his L1, especially the lack of case categories, but we cannot ignore the fact that he knew all the correct forms of Greek cases. He did not use unintelligible forms.

Hermias' documents seem to be a perfect case study of foreign language attrition or imperfect learning¹³. In studies on second language attrition, though, it is usually important first to define the level which the object of study has reached in learning his second language. That is clearly a problem in this case since we are dealing with a person who lived more than 2000 years ago. We do not know when and how perfectly Hermias had learnt Greek. Moreover, in studies on modern languages, speaking, listening and writing of the language can all be studied, but we have only some writing left by these notaries. One factor, on which modern studies also focus, is how much the person can use the language and in what kind of environment after the learning has stopped. Of this we have some knowledge: the speech community in which Hermias lived and worked was mostly Egyptian-speaking. Therefore, he probably had no stimuli or opportunity to continue to practise his Greek outside the agoranomos-office. So his skills crystallised to only agoranomos-formulas and everything beyond that started to suffer from attrition. In fact, the relatives of Hermias made more mistakes which can be explained by phonological changes and that, in my opinion, reveals that they were likely to have had more occasions to also speak Greek. Hermias probably only used it in writing.

In spite of his poor skills in congruence, Hermias was probably perfect for the job of notary in Pathyris. He could function as the interpreter and the notary at the same time for the Egyptian-speaking people of Pathyris.

¹³ About language loss or attrition, see, e. g., K. De Bot & B. Weltens, *Recapitulation, Regression, and Language Loss*, in: H. W. Seliger & R. M. Vago (eds.), *First Language Attrition*, Cambridge 1991, 31–51 and R. D. Lambert & B. F. Freed (eds.), *The Loss of Language Skills*, Rowley MA 1982.