Standard Koine Greek in Third Century BC Papyri

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The Idea of Standard Koine Greek in the Papyri

The linguistic significance of the Greek non-literary papyri has been recognized since the late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, although valuable work has been done over the last hundred years, it has to be acknowledged that language specialists have still barely begun to exploit the richness of the resource. One result is that papyrological literature is sprinkled with linguistic comment which should be regarded as provisional in nature, and often in serious need of reassessment. A particular problem is that many observations, especially in older editions of papyrus texts, are based on aesthetic judgments, and an unsympathetic view of the post-classical language. We meet, for instance, numerous statements concerning "ungrammatical" usage, "bad" Greek, and so on, such as the representative examples from the pen of the great C.C. Edgar in (1) below. Note too that the authors mentioned there all have Egyptian names. The perception of bilingual interference looms large over interpretation of texts from such authors.

(1) The idea of "bad" Greek in third century BC documents

The grammar here becomes as hopeless as the plight of the petitioners.

(Edgar, P.Cair.Zen. II 59291 [to Zenon, Harmais and Teos], n. to lines 6–8)

One of the most ungrammatical pieces in our collection, and the meaning can only be guessed at.

(Edgar, P.Cair.Zen. III 59490 [Pasis to Zenon], introd.)

The text is so mutilated and the Greek is so extraordinarily bad that it is difficult to give a clear account of what Petosiris means to say.

(Edgar, P.Cair.Zen. III 59499, introd., on lines 84 [recte 85]–101).

But what is "good" Greek in the times and places illustrated by the evidence of the papyri? What should be our point of comparison for linguistic analysis? There has been a natural enough, but increasingly unsatisfactory tendency to interpret these texts in relation to literary prose of the classical period. Sven-Tage Teodorsson compared them to Attic inscriptions of the fourth century in The Phonology of Ptolemaic Koine, but that material too is remote in place, time, genre, and registers, and has restricted value for analysing many linguistic categories.

The argument of this short paper is that a more apposite point of comparison is available among the papyri themselves. The focus is mid-third century BC documents from Alexandria and the Fayum.
preserved in the Zenon archive. Within this richly varied corpus, which includes nearly 40% of all known Greek papyri from the third century, we find many documents from educated authors. And once again we can look to Edgar for suggestive comment, quoted in (2).

(2) The idea of "good" Greek in third century BC documents
Artemidoros [the doctor] writes in lively, idiomatic Greek, which it is a pleasure to read.
(Edgar, P.Cair.Zen. II 59225, introd.)
A gracefully written note.
(Edgar, P.Cair.Zen. III 59408 [to Zenon from Asklepios], introd.)

My contention is that the archive’s letters from Apollonios, the finance minister of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, and from Apollonios’ circle provide a key sample of the standard Egyptian Koine of the time and a crucial "control" for assessing substandard language.

Sentence-Connective Particles and the Proposed "Control"
To illustrate the way these documents can sharpen our understanding, I want to consider some aspects of a single feature, the use of connective particles in the papyri. This is a complicated topic, and because of space-considerations I shall have to offer a cursory view here. In addition, of the different types of connection made by particles in Greek,3 I shall be restricting my comments mainly to sentence-connection. Nevertheless, I hope this limited inquiry will highlight the much broader issues.

Let us begin from (3) below, a transcription of a well-known papyrus letter held in the University of Michigan's collection at Ann Arbor. It is written with an Egyptian brush and the stated author is a widow with the Egyptian name Senchons.4 Among many other features of linguistic interest, the document is notable for its distribution of connective particles. Of the seven sentences making up the body of the message (after the greeting formula), only the fourth, fifth, and sixth contain connectives. These are καὶ, δὲ, and a peculiarly spelt ὅν respectively (all shown in bold type in my transcription).

(3) P.Mich.Zen. 29 (docketed 13–21 July 256 BC)

Ζῆμωνι χαίρειν Σενχώνις ἔνοτυ[χ[ου]
σοι περὶ τῆς ὄνου μου ἣν ἔλαβεν Νίκαι[α]ς.
ι μοι ἔγραψα περὶ αὐτῆς, ἀπέστι[ια]

4 ἀν ὑπὸ, αὐτῆς. ἢ σοι δοκεῖ, συντάσσει ἀποδο[ῦ]-
ναι αὐτῆς, ἵνα τὰ ζυμένεα μεταγ[ά]-

3 The different types are summarized at J.D. Denniston, The Greek Particles (Oxford 1954) xliii: "As a general rule, Greek sentences, clauses, phrases, and single words are linked by a connecting particle to what precedes. Connexion is, on the whole, not often omitted in verse, still less often in prose." (Denniston goes on to acknowledge and describe the use of both "formal" and "stylistic" asyndeton in classical Greek literature.)

γωμεν ἐπὶ τὰ νομάς, μέ σοι παρα-
πόλωνται μέτε σοι μέτε τωὶ βα[σι]-
λεί. καὶ ἔαν ἐπιζητῆς τὸ πράγμα,
πεισθήσεις ὅτι χρήσιμοι σοι ἔμεν. κα[ι]
τὸν δὲ πώλου αὐτῆς ἀποστηλῶ [σοι]
αὐτόν. δέομαι ὅν σοι καὶ εἰκετεύω,
μὲ με παραελκύσης. γυνὴ ἵμι χέ[ρα].
eὐτύχι.

To Zenon greetings, Senchons. I petitioned you about my she-ass, which Nikias took. If you had
written to me about her, I would have sent her to you. If it seems good to you, give orders to re-
turn her, in order that we may bring the beehives to the pastures, lest they be lost for you and the
king. And if you investigate the matter, you will be persuaded that we are useful for you. And
her foal too, I shall send it to you. So I beg and beseech you not to keep me waiting. I am a wid-
owned woman. Good fortune.

In the landmark paper "Egyptian Scribes Writing Greek" Willy Clarysse takes this letter to manifest a
fair mastery of Greek particles. He contrasts it with the striking case of Horos' Egyptian-brush letter, (4)
below, where we shall look in vain for even one sentence-connective particle. From a classical perspective
neither writer seems much good at Greek particles. But how do educated contemporary authors use sen-
tence-connectives in their ordinary, everyday communications?

(4) P.Cair.Zen. II 59243 (3 February 252 BC)

Horos to Zenon greetings. There will be 130 arouras of poppies by Choiach 12. If it seems good
to you, come to me to obtain the pleasure. Farewell. Year 33. Choiach 12.

Back: We have a holding to the north. It gives us 20 arouras to plant castor. Let Zenon take
two thirds, and let the owner have the third.

My proposed "control" is a set of texts built around the documents written in the name of Apollonios
the finance minister. Over 70 of his letters have been preserved. Some are too fragmentary to be useful for
the present purpose, but 37 are in good enough condition to be assessed for particle usage, and another
three offer tantalizing additional glimpses. These letters mostly emanate from Apollonios' secretariat in
Alexandria and are characteristically penned in elegant hands.

5 Clarysse, op.cit. (above, n. 4) 199.
I supplement Apollonios' letters with texts from members of his circle. For the present treatment I have examined 16 documents from Amyntas, an administrator in Apollonios' Alexandrian household; seven from Hierokles, who directed a παλαιόστρωτα attached to the same household; five attributed to Artemidoros, Apollonios' doctor; and 18 from Zenon himself, as well as additional sampling. The total is approximately 90 texts assessable for particle usage.

As a group they can in my view be taken confidently as a sample of educated language of the time. While there are individual differences of style, they are generally written in a fluent Greek containing such signs of sophistication as the clause-connective μέν...δέ complex (seen, for example, in (5) below). John Lee has shown that this feature already had a positive stylistic value in the early Koine period.6

(5) P. Cair. Zen. II 59225 (Artemidoros the doctor to Zenon, 25 Jan. 253 BC), ll. 4–6
καλῶς ἀν οὖν | ποίησαι μάλιστα μέν ἀγοράσας μοι παρ᾽ αὐτῶν τὸν ἱπποῦ εἰς ὀχεῖαν, ἐὰν ἤμι μικρὸ τινος | λαβεῖν· εἴ δὲ μὴ ἐστὶν πώλιμος, . . .

So would you please make a particular effort to buy me the stallion from them for covering the mares, if it is possible to get it cheaply; but if it is not for sale, . . .

A systematic analysis reveals that the employment of sentence-connective particles in the "control" group is largely consistent with classical usage. Scholars have often observed the reduction in the number of particles employed in post-classical Greek, but in terms of sentence-connectives the range found in these early Koine documents accords quite closely with, for instance, the results of random sampling from Lysias (Lys. 1 6–26 contains 29 sentence-connective examples of δέ, 13 of καί, 11 of γάρ, and five of οὖν, along with six cases of formal or stylistic asyndeton, for which cf. my notes 3 and 8).

For patterns of usage let us now consider some examples. If we take (6) and (7) below, we find no sentence-connectives at all, as in Horos' letter. These documents, however, are very short, consisting of the greeting formula followed by a single sentence. On the other hand, (8) below is an example of a longer text, the letter-body composed of four sentences. Once again there is no connective linking the first of them to the greeting, but each of the second, third, and fourth sentences contains a connective particle: δέ, οὖν, and γάρ respectively (shown in bold in the transcription).

(6) P. Cair. Zen. II 59201 (22 May 254 BC)
Ἀπολλώνιος Ζήνων χαίρειν. Ἀπολλώνιον τὸν | ἑργολάβον ἀποστελοῦμεν πρὸς σὲ συντόμῳ [ως]. | ἔρρωσο. (ἐτούς) λα. Δύστρος κβ. Φαμενώθ κβ.

line 3: edn omits ἔρρωσο, but see Seider, Pal.Gr. III.1, p. 280 or the digitized image via the website of the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents (CSAD), University of Oxford (http://ipap.csad.ox.ac.uk).

Apollonios to Zenon greetings. Apollonios the contractor we shall send to you shortly. Farewell. Year 31, Dystros 22, Phamenoth 29.

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(7) P. Cai. Zen. II 59180 (24 July 255 BC)


Apollonios to Zenon greetings. You did the right thing giving the two hundred drachmas in copper for the binding of the hay. Farewell. Year 31, Daisios 16, Pauni 2.

(8) P. Cai. Zen. II 59202 (23 May 254 BC)


Apollonios to Zenon greetings. You did the right thing arresting the treasurer of the beer-shop. And we have sent to you also Amenneus the brewer in order that the treasurer may confront him before Peton the chrematistes concerning the things of which you wrote that he accused him. So bring both before Peton. For if Ameneus appears really to have said what you wrote to us, he will be trussed and strung up for a whipping.7 Farewell. Year 31, Dystros 23, Phamenoth 30.

This letter (8) displays the typical pattern of distribution. It becomes clear that it is regular to have no particle linking the body of the text to the greeting formula. And this is precisely what we should expect. Greeting and letter-body are discrete elements of the text (a point to which I shall return). But within the letter-body we usually find a consistent string of sentence-connectives.

There are, however, a handful of cases where connectives are omitted within the letter-body. Some represent what Denniston terms formal asyndeton,8 as in (9). After διὰ Ζενὸν does not need a connective particle. But others have no obvious motivation. The case of (10) is a clear example. It lacks a connective in the second sentence after the greeting in the copy of the letter to Nikeratos. Compare line 10 . . . πρὸς σὲ. ὡς ἀν παραγένηται . . . with lines 2–3 . . . τάντιγραφα. | ὡς ἀν οὖν κατασχηθῇ τ[ά]ξιλα (both segments appear in bold type in the transcription of (10) below).

(9) P. Cai. Zen. II 59287 (7 March 250 BC)

Ζήνων Ἰσίγγω χαίρειν. τὰ λῃθέντα παρὰ σοῦ ἔρια Ἀράβια τελέως ἤν | ὑπαρά τε καὶ τραχέα· διὸ ἀπεστάλκαμεν σοι κομίζοντα Ἡρακλείδην. εἰσὶν δὲ πόκοι ις, ὅν όλική μν[ᾶ]ι ηῆ`. | ἔρρωσο. (ἐτοὺς) λε, Τύβι βδ.

8 Denniston, op.cit. (above, n. 3) xliii–xlv.
Zenon to Isingos greetings. The Arabian wool got from you was completely dirty and rough; for this reason we have sent you Herakleides bringing it. And there are 16 fleeces, of which the weight is 18 and a quarter minas. Farewell. Year 35, Tybi 14.

(10) *P.Zen.Pestm. XX 27* (17 December 254 BC)

Απολλωνιος Ζήνωνι χαίρειν. ἀπέσταλκά σοι τῆς πρὸς Νικήρατον ἑπτάκολης τὰντίγραφα. ὡς ἄν οὖν καταχθητι τὴν ξύλα ἐις τήν [ca. 6], παραγενοῦ καὶ σύνταξον παρακομίσαι διὰ τῆς διώρυγος ἐις Φιλαδέλφη[ε]ιαν, καὶ τούτῳ ἐτιμελῶς γενέσθω. ἔρρωσο. (ἐτους) λβ, Ἰπερβερεταίοι ΚΕ, Φαώφι ΚΕ.

Apollonios to Zenon greetings. I have sent you the copy of the letter to Nikeratos. So when the wood is brought down to the . . ., be there and give orders to deliver it via the canal to Philadelphia, and let this be a matter for careful attention. Farewell. Year 32, Hyperberetaios 25, Phaophi 25.

To Nikeratos. We have ordered (our people) to put the wood which has been bought for us by Phanesis into boats and send it to you. When it arrives give orders to unload it, and let it be a matter of careful attention for you that it be watched. For we have ordered Zenon to deliver it via the canal to Philadelphia. Farewell.

Perhaps the lack of connective in (10) is simply a copying mistake. It cannot be conclusive in itself. But then we find Amyntas leaving out the clause-connective δὲ (in a μὲν . . . δὲ complex) in (11) below, and having to insert it above the line⁹ – he probably wrote this letter himself.¹⁰ I wonder whether connective particles were becoming easy things to forget. These two cases may be showing us that even for educated third-century writers particles already have a "learned" or artificial quality. In fact Denniston's comment that "In contrast with . . . stylistic employment of asyndeton Andocides and Xenophon often omit connectives in narrative with a certain naive awkwardness, and without any apparent rhetorical

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⁹ For the process of decay of the μὲν . . . δὲ complex in post-classical Greek see again Lee, *op.cit.* (above, n. 6) 1–6; this papyrus letter shows an early stage of the development.

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justification"\(^{11}\) suggests there is already a "literary" character to consistent use of particles in the classical period, and that we should not think in terms of a uniform "classical" practice.

\(^{11}\) Dennistone, *op.cit.* (above, n. 3) xlv.

\(P.Cair.Zen. I 59044\) (Amyntas to Zenon, docketed 26 March 257 BC), ll. 29–30

\[\text{άργυριον mēn ὁ[ refunded ] ὡκείχομεν | αὐτῷ προχρῆσαι, ποτηρίδια δὲ ἐχρῆσαμεν . . .}\]

So we were not able to lend him money, but we lent drinking-cups . . .

**Some Conclusions**

In the light of all this it is easy to agree with Willy Clarysse's assessment of the particle usage in (3) above. There is much that may seem strange in Senchons' letter, but the control over sentence-connectives is not so bad. The writer or dictator knows they need to be there, and remembers to include them in half the appropriate places.

On the other hand, the complete absence of sentence-connectives in (4) above seems remarkable. It may well reflect bilingual interference, as Clarysse concludes. But here I want to introduce a caveat. A note of caution is in order because of possible stylistic transfer from other document types. The nature of the text is important with regard to the use of sentence-connectives. They belong in a letter, while in something like a list we should not necessarily expect them. Yet a list, say of agenda items, may be expanded into a text of letter-type, and a document with the formal features of a letter may adopt the characteristics of a list.

The document transcribed below as (12), another Michigan papyrus, is a memorandum from Zenon's agent Iason. He instructs one Hermon to report to Zenon on a series of six matters. These are set out as a list, each matter linked asyndetically to what precedes. Three of them are developed by means of a dependent clause, and the last is extended by a further explanatory clause, connected by γάρ. There is nothing abnormal about the omission of particles in the earlier elements of the text. In the last sentence the document is simply turning into a letter-type composition as Iason decides to elaborate. We ought to consider whether an author of limited education, for example Horos from (4) above, may lack sensitivity to this difference between the requirements of a letter and those of a list-type text.

\(P.Mich.Zen. 86\) (not dated)

\[\text{Memorandum to Hermon from Iason. Report to Zenon about the sheep, that they are shorn; about the bear; about Herieus the stone-cutter, that he has not paid back the 30 drachmas; about Noumenios the slave; about Demetrios the vine-dresser; about the receipt to Herodotos, to send it; for he has measured out the barley.}\]
One more specific observation ought to be added here. Substandard usage in the matter of sentence-connective particles is not just about leaving them out. We have seen that a linking particle is inappropriate in the first sentence of the letter-body, immediately after the greeting formula. The only exception in my "control" group occurs in (13), where an extended greeting formula merges into the body of the message.

(13) \textit{P.Cair.Zen. II 59251 (14 April 252 BC), ll. 1–2}

Άρτεμιδώρος Ζήνων χαίρειν. εἰ ἔκρουσαί, εὖ ἂν ἔχοι ἔρρωμαι δὲ καὶ ἐγὼ καὶ Ἀπολλώνιος ὑγίαινεν καὶ | τάλλα ἦν κατὰ γνώμην. ὅτε δὲ σοι ἔγραφον, . . .

Artemidoros to Zenon greetings. If you are well, it would be good; and I too am well, and Apollonios was well, and the rest was according to plan. And when I wrote to you, . . .

Something stranger is happening in (14). There we find Egyptian authors, pigs in danger, and an example of οὖν in the first sentence of the letter-body. This is definitely bad Greek. The particle is misplaced. And again the explanation may lie simply in educational level. The person responsible was familiar with the characteristic insertion of οὖν into the expression δέομαι σου or δέομεθα σου, common in petitions and shown in (15). It usually occurs toward the end of the message, after the basis for the petition has been stated. In (14) the appeal for help comes right at the start, and the οὖν (shown in bold type), now logically meaningless, has come with it.

(14) \textit{P.Cair.Zen. III 59495 (not dated)}

Ζήνων χαίρειν Πετενούρις Σαμώνος οἱ ύπορβοι. δέομεθα | οὖν σου, ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς. ὅπερ ἡμᾶς ἵππον τ[ε]τιμωρήμεθα | θαύμα συνεχείς γάρ ἀναμάρτητος ἐστίν  ἵνα μὴ τά ἱερέα κατὰ θαραῤῥ ἡμῶν ἐγγεδούτων. οὔ τὸν πείραν λαβὲ ἡμῶν. γινώσκω \textsuperscript{5} σκεις ἀρ' [ο]ὔ ἦκαμεν ἔδη τρίτη[ῆ] κατὰ [ε]κεσθή ἐστίν ὡκ ἄφιες ἡμᾶς | ἐργάζεσθαι ἢ ἄπελθείν ἐπὶ τά ἱερέα, ἵνα μὴ παρατόλησαι ἡμῶν. | ἐν φυλακῇ ὀνήμον. οὔ γάρ ἔχομεν τῶν δεόντων σοῦ. | ἄλλα παραπολλύμεθα ὡδε. | οὔ οὖν ἔπισκεψει ἐὰ σοι δοκεῖ | ἄφεναι. οὔ γάρ ἔχομεν οὖθεν κύριον ἄλλα σὲ. πρὸς σὲ οὖν \textsuperscript{10} κατασφυγγάνουμεν, ἵνα ἐλεησοῦσίς τύχωμεν. | εὐτύχει.

lines 3–4: κατὰ θαραῤῥ, edn κατὰ θαραῤῥ.

To Zenon greetings, Petenouris and Samoys the swineherds. So we beg you, have pity on us—for we have been punished for our wrongs; for no one is blameless—in order that the pigs should not perish in our hour of need. So you, take stock of us. You know, since we have come, it is already the third day; you are not letting us go to do our work or to go away to the pigs, in order that they should not die while we are in prison. For we have none of the necessities, but we are dying here. So you, consider whether it seems good to you to let us go. For we have no master but you. So to you we turn for help to obtain pity. Good fortune.
(15) *P. Cair. Zen. III 59351* (to the king, Zenon, after 2 June 244 BC), ll. 3–4

δέομαι | οὖν σοι, εἰ σοι δοκεῖ, προστάξαι Ἀγήνορι τῷ στρατηγῷ . . .

So I beg you, if it seems good to you, to give orders to Agenor the *strategos* . . .\(^ {12}\)

What I have tried to demonstrate here is that systematic analysis of educated writing from the Zenon archive allows us our surest basis for assessing substandard usage in documents of the same place and time. I have examined a single feature in very brief order, and it will be obvious that I am merely sketching a richly textured scene. The last impression I would wish to convey is the appearance of a simple dichotomy between standard and substandard usage. The picture is much more complex. But by dwelling on the general nature of "good" Greek in third century BC papyri we can ward off the tendency to equate oddities too readily with bilingual influences, and take into full account the question of the levels of education reflected in our texts. My essential point is that we should be building our understanding of an emerging standard language in non-literary papyri from this internal evidence much more than from the practices of classical literature.

\(^ {12}\) Cf. δέομαι οὖν σοι in (3) above, line 11, where Clarysse attributes the odd dative σοι to bilingual interference, *op. cit.* (above, n. 4) 198.