

PRISCIANO Y EL BILINGÜISMO GRECORROMANO:  
UN EJEMPLO DE ANÁLISIS INTERLINGÜÍSTICO  
EN LAS DE CONSTRUCTIONE (INST. GRAMM. XVII)  
DE PRISCIANO

*Priscian and the Graeco-Roman bilingualism:  
an example of cross-linguistic analysis within Priscian's De  
constructione (Inst. gramm. XVII)*

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**Resumen**

En este trabajo, nos proponemos examinar un tipo específico de comparación y contraste entre las lenguas griega y latina, realizado por Prisciano en el Libro XVII de las *Institutiones grammaticae* (siglo VI d.C.). Consideramos tanto el contexto sociocultural en el que este tratado fue hecho, para justificar un presunto bilingüismo, como también la comparación de las estructuras sintácticas y el contraste entre el griego y el latín. Como ejemplo tomamos el tratamiento dado a los artículos por Prisciano.

**Palabras clave:** lengua griega - lengua latina – bilingüismo - comparación

**Abstract**

In this paper, we aim at examining a specific kind of comparison and contrast between Greek and Latin languages, carried out by Priscian in the Book XVII of his *Institutiones grammaticae* (6<sup>th</sup> century AD). We consider both the sociocultural context in which this treatise was composed to justify a presumed bilingualism, and the way syntactical structures are compared and contrasted between Greek

and Latin language. As an example we take the treatment given to the articles by Priscian.

**Keywords:** greek language - latin language – bilingualism – comparison

## Introduction

In this paper, we aim at examining a specific kind of comparison and contrast between Greek and Latin languages, carried out by Priscian in the Book XVII of his *Institutiones grammaticae* (6<sup>th</sup> century AD). Dealing with Latin syntactical phenomena, this book is traditionally referred to as *De constructione*, and, besides presenting many aspects of Latin language, it also displays a wide range of comparisons and contrasts with the Greek language, as a means of explaining syntactical topics in Latin.

By the systematic comparisons between phenomena codified in Latin and Greek, as well as the exemplification given in both languages, we recognise a high level of cross-linguistic reference as a discursive and explanatory strategy within this technical treatise. We will focus here on a specific way by which the interplay between these two languages happen in Priscian's treatise: the explanation of a single phenomenon in Latin through the exemplification of similarities and differences in relation to Greek language – henceforth we refer to this procedure as 'cross-linguistic' analysis.

Considering that a cross-linguistic analysis involves social and cultural perspectives, which point to issues of identity, in this paper we are restricted to the discussion of the linguistic features concerning contrastive analysis. The interplay between language facts in Latin and Greek, within Priscian's *De constructione* seems to derive from

(i) the fact that Priscian, producing a Latin grammar in Constantinople, must have taken into consideration that most of his audience could hardly master Latin as a mother tongue. For this reason, Priscian may have approached this language comparatively for teaching purposes; and

(ii) the concept of a sort of unity between both languages, present in many ancient grammatical treatises, the ‘theory’ of *utraque lingua* (Fögen, 2003) – even though Priscian, quite frequently, intends to highlight and explain the differences, not the similarities, of Latin with regard to Greek, such as the absence of articles and the relatively fewer participle forms.

In this paper, we follow the theoretical principles of Historiography of Linguistics (Swiggers 2012, 2013), especially applied to classical studies (Fortes 2016). For this, we have followed Martin Hertz’s edition of Priscian’s *De constructione*, within Heinrich Keil’s larger compilation of the *Grammatici Latini* (1855-1880 [1981]), whose homogeneity we assume, not considering so far the problems regarding text transmission, which can be otherwise seen at Krehl (1820); Gibson (1992), Holtz (2009).

## 1 Language and Culture interactions in Greek and Latin

Produced in Constantinople, where Priscian would have occupied something like a Latin Chair in its prestigious university<sup>1</sup>, the *De constructione* was largely designed to become teaching material for a public, whose mother tongue was most probably some variety of Ancient Greek – not the Latin. In spite of it, for those people, the Latin language still played the role of a very prestigious language in the Roman Empire, being the most accepted vehicle for *ius ciuile* in the Roman institutions<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘university’ here does not stand for the modern concept of university, which can be considered a more recent western development, at least after the transition of Middle Ages to Modern Age. We mean an institution which offered instruction on university-like subjects, founded by Theodosius II, in 425 (Cameron, 2009: 140; Biville, 2008: 39; Oikonomides, 1999: 49). Its scope was to give instruction to an intellectual élite from which the imperial employees came. Therefore, it is not surprising the maintenance of a Chair of Latin in a region where Greek has never been less than the most important spoken language, but where, precisely under Justinian, the most important law code had been written entirely in Latin – the *corpus iuris ciuillis*.

<sup>2</sup> The permanence of a really practical necessity of Latin in Constantinople up to Priscian’s time is debatable. Although the prestige of this language must have been recovered at least from an ideological point of view, after the growing interest of the so-called ‘Latinophile emperors’ (Justin and Justinian) in the West (Treadgold, 1997: 174: "Under Justin, the first native speaker of Latin to rule since Theodosius I, the imperial government took much more interest in the West."), we may question its efficacy in practical use even in administrative contexts.

That is the reason why the Roman citizens who spoke Greek sought to enhance their oral and written performance of Latin, a language that was most probably hardly spoken in western cities like Constantinople (Robins, 1993; Rochette, 2007).

A close interrelation between Greek and Latin can be noticed in the way Priscian's grammatical treatise deals with facts of language. In order to explain syntactical phenomena codified in Latin, Priscian appeals in many ways to the Greek language and culture. As Garcea & Giavatto (2007: 72) states:

“La comparaison systématique avec la langue grecque, la présence des gloses explicatives du latin par le grec, la référence au modèle syntaxique d'Apollonius Dyscole et de son fils Hérodien, ainsi que le recours aux citations tirées de la littérature grecque représentent des indices clairs, chez Priscien, de ce contexte sociolinguistique”.

As a matter of fact, as far as the sociolinguistic environment concerns, it is possible to assume that Latin still had a symbolic value for most Constantinopolitans, in spite of being less and less used as a practical means of communication. Justinian himself, who is remembered as the emperor who tried to reconquer the East, as well as reinforce the linguistic, ethic and aesthetic values of Latin Rome, would have been compelled to abandon his project of publishing texts entirely in Latin, since most people would not have enough knowledge to understand them

“It is hard to say when the eastern empire ceased to be functionally bilingual. Already in the first half of the sixth century Justinian declared that he would not have his *Novellae* written in his 'ancestral tongue' (i.e. Latin), but rather in the 'common language of the Greeks', because he wanted the law to be understood by all, by 'the people'”. (Oikonomides, 1999: 49).

Such remarks challenge us to understand how and why Priscian would write a long treatise on abstract and complex issues concerning Latin syntax, once he lived in a context where Latin would become a language less and less spoken or actively used by most people (despite

keeping its status of a prestigious imperial language). The close reference to a declared Greek model – Apollonius Dyscolus’s *Περὶ συντάξεως* (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) – as well as the coexistence of different cross-linguistic approaches within Priscian’s text may be part of an answer.

In fact, in many passages in the *De constructione*, Apollonius’s text is summarised and contrasted with phenomena codified only in Latin, in order to identify similarities between both languages, as well as to highlight and explain important differences. Furthermore, it is particularly common the presentation of examples in Greek and Latin, as a way of illustrating the theoretical issues addressed, at same time revealing some equivalence between Latin and Greek (in accordance with the *utraque lingua* theory), and underlining idiosyncratic features in both languages, procedure we are calling here ‘the cross-linguistic analysis’. The hypothesis of such analysis to be a sort of didactic method for approaching a ‘foreign language’ cannot be discarded altogether (Holtz, 1981), although in this paper we do not aim at explaining this procedure from this point of view.

## 2 Cross-linguistic analysis

As stated before, cross-linguistic analysis stands for the explanations of Latin linguistic phenomena through comparisons or contrasts to Greek language. In Priscian’s *De constructione*, such analysis takes place particularly when explaining topics of Latin language absent in Greek and never dealt with by Apollonius. In order to give an account of such linguistic topics, Priscian appeals to the systematic comparison and confrontation with Greek language.

As an example, we will show the way Priscian addresses the absence of articles in Latin. Through the treatment given to such topic, we shall notice that Priscian highlights the differences between both languages, rather than their similarities, which engenders some difference between Priscian’s and Apollonius’s grammatical account on this subject<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> In accordance to the limited pages of this paper, it is not our goal to give a full account of the differences between Apollonius and Priscian. Partially, we have done it in our PhD Dissertation (Fortes 2012); partially it is also carried out by Schmidhauser (2009).

The absence of articles in Latin was a well-known fact by Latin grammarians<sup>4</sup>, and, in the same way, clearly addressed by Priscian in many parts of his treatise<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, throughout Book I of *Περὶ συντάξεως*, Apollonius Dyscolus has given us an account of Greek articles. These articles were the ones called by him ‘prepositive articles’ (ἄρθρα προτακτικά), (close to what we still call nowadays ‘articles’) and also those he named ‘post-positive articles’ (ἄρθρα ὑποτακτικά) (corresponding to what we nowadays call ‘relative pronouns’).

Since Apollonius is taken as the main source for the syntactical discussions in Priscian, the absence of a category of articles in Latin would impose upon Priscian the need to raise an entirely new discussion concerning it. In other words, the lack of articles in Latin must be made up for something else in the theoretical discussion as we see in Priscian:

“The article brings to the attention, for a second time, the words given before. In fact, if I say ἄνθρωπος ἦλθεν (‘a man has gone’), I present him for the first time; if, otherwise, I say ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἦλθεν (‘the man has gone’), it would be for the second time. Nevertheless, Latin language lacks prepositive articles. The pronoun *hic*, which the grammarians, in

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<sup>4</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 1.4.19: *noster sermo articulos non desiderat ideoque in alias partes spargunt...* (“our language does not claim for articles and, therefore, their functions split up into other parts”). Char. in *G.L.* 1.247: *articulo, id est, τῷ ἄρθρῳ, deficiente supplerent, sed quia uidebant aduerbium esse non posse, segregauerunt...* (“[The Greeks] completed with the articles i.e., τῷ ἄρθρῳ, lacking [among the Romans], but as they saw they could not be an adverb, separated them...”). Don. *Ars* in *G.L.* 4.385, *Latini articulum non adnumerant, Graeci interiectionem...* (“The Latin do not count with the article, the Greek, with the interjection...”).

<sup>5</sup> Prisc. in *G.L.* 2.53.27: *Quidam autem nouem dicebant esse partes orationis, appellationem addentes separatam a nominibus, alii etiam decem, infinita uerba seorsum partem ponentes, alii undecim, qui pronomina, quae non possunt adiungi articulis, per se numerabant. His alii addebant etiam uocabulum et interiectionem apud Graecos, quam nos adhuc seruamus, apud Latinos uero articulum addebant, quem purum per se apud eos non inueniri supra docuimus.* (“However, some say the parts of the sentence to be nine – separating the noun from the others –, others say to be ten – putting the verbs in a separate part –, others say to be eleven – counting the pronouns which can not be joined to the articles. Many of them added still the interjection, which we kept here, existing among the Greeks the category of articles, which as we taught here is not existent per se in Latin”).

nominal declension, put in the place of the prepositive article, never signifies the same as the article in a sentence.

Only one compound pronoun is found among us: the pronoun *idem*<sup>6</sup>, which recovers the meaning of a same person. This pronoun is taken among the Greek through the phrase with the article: ὁ αὐτός. In addition, among them, it corresponds to two parts of a sentence: ὁ, which is a prepositive article, and αὐτός, which is a relative pronoun. Among us, however, it is a part compounded by *is* and *demum*, which, by apocope, becomes *dem*, in the same way we take *exin* for *exinde* and *den* for *deinde*".<sup>7</sup> (Priscianus, *Inst. gram.* XVII, GL III, 124,14-125,3)

Not only did Apollonius's theoretical remarks on the articles give account of what we call nowadays 'article' (the determinants ὁ, ἡ, τό), but they also comprehended what we still refer to as 'relative pronouns' (ὅς, ἡ, ὅ), given the striking formal resemblance between both forms in Greek. As we have just seen above, Priscian observed that the lack of such articles in Latin had been compensated in the grammatical tradition by the first person demonstrative pronoun (*hic*), which however, according to Priscian, could not be taken to cover every usage of Greek articles. Such observation puts in evidence a very refined cross-linguistic analysis, beginning with the exposure of particularities of the

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<sup>6</sup> The Latin text displays the Greek definite article τὸ before the Latin pronoun *idem*. In fact, the grammarian seems to make use of Greek words in the Latin sentence, especially articles. Since our purpose here is not to analyse such occurrences, for the sake of clarity, we opted not to translate such examples of code-switching.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Articulus secundam notitiam suppositorum demonstrat. Si enim dicam ἄνθρωπος ἦλθεν, primam notitiam ostendo; sin ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἦλθεν, secundam. Deficit autem praepositiuis articulis lingua Latina. Nam pronomen 'hic', quod grammatici in declinatione nominum loco praepositiui, ut dictum est, ponunt articuli, numquam in oratione sensum articuli habet.*

Vnum solum pronomen compositum inuenitur apud nos, τὸ 'idem', quod secundam notitiam eiusdem personae significat, cuius interpretatio apud Graecos cum praepositiuo articulo relatiuum pronomen habet, ὁ αὐτός. Et apud illos quidem duae partes orationis sunt ὁ αὐτός, ὅ, quod est articulus praepositiuus, et αὐτός, quod est pronomen relatiuum, apud nos vero una pars est composita ab 'is' et 'demum' per apocopen 'um', quomodo 'exin' pro 'exinde' et 'dein' pro 'deinde'.

articles in both languages and revising, in a critical way, the own Latin grammatical tradition.

Once stated the parallelism between the Greek prepositive articles and Latin demonstratives, Priscian presents some explanation on the post-positive articles in Latin and Greek, as we see in the following passage:

“*Qui*, which can be translated as ὅστις (a post-positive article with an indefinite noun, among them [the Greeks]), among us is a simple and single part, corresponding to the interrogative and indefinite *quis*, it can be taken in the place of the post-positive article, in the same way as the Greeks, likewise, use very frequently ὅστις in the place of the post-positive article ὅς, except in partitive phrases, in which neither we use *qui*, nor they use ὅστις”<sup>8</sup> (Prisc. in *G.L.* 3.125.4-9).

In this extract, Priscian keeps examining the differences between Latin and Greek languages. Even though Priscian does not deny entirely the identity between both languages (for instance, the correspondence he makes between the phrases *qui*/ὅστις), his analysis gives way to perceiving the idiosyncrasies: while *qui* is a simple, single-formed word, ὅστις is a compounded word). This same comparative method, which we are calling here ‘cross-linguistic analysis’, is patent in the sequence of Priscian’s reasoning:

“Yet, they make use of the post-positive article, while we either use pronouns, or nouns, like, instead of saying: τῶν ἀνθρώπων οἱ μὲν εἰσιν ἀγαθοί, οἱ δὲ πονηροί (‘out of the men, some are good, some are bad’), we say: *hominum hi sunt boni, illi mali* (‘out of the men, these are good, those are bad’), or *alii sunt boni, alii mali* (‘some men are good, others are bad’). Instead of saying: τῶν δύο Αἰάντων ὃς μὲν Τέλαμωνος, ὃς δὲ Ὀϊλέως υἱὸς ἐγένετο (‘out of the two Ajax, one was the son of Telamon, the other, son of Oileus’), we say: *duorum Aiacum alter Telamonis, alter*

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Qui uero, quod interpretatur ὅστις (quod est subiunctiuus articulus cum nomine infinito apud illos, apud nos uero una pars et simplex, quae relatiua est τοῦ quis infiniti uel interrogatiui, potest subiunctiui loco articuli accipi, quomodo et Graeci τὸ ὅστις frequentissime ponunt loco ὃς articuli subiunctiui, nisi in diuidendis: in illis enim nec nos qui nec illi ὅστις ferunt.



*Olei filius fuit*’ ou *’hic Telamonis, ille Oilei filius fuit*”<sup>9</sup> (Prisc. in *G.L.* 3.125.9-14).

If we sum up the three parts of Priscian’s argumentation present in the previous extracts, we would say:

firstly Priscian offers the Apollonian definition of articles, exempting the Latin language from owning them;  
 (ii) secondly, he provides us with some explanations on words and phrases conventionally assumed to play the same role of the Greek articles in Latin. He acknowledges, however, the differences between them and makes a criticism to such assumption;  
 (iii) finally, he examines a more specific angle of the use of articles: their occurrence in partitive phrases in both languages, adding examples to this in Greek and Latin.

This sketch reveals thereby, in a very small scale, the procedure of macrotextual construction of Priscian’s treatise: it begins with quite general statements, is followed by further developments on particular issues and, finally, ends with examples taken from both languages<sup>10</sup>. Such an outline allows Priscian to deal with either the similarities between Greek and Latin, or their differences, highlighting, at the same time, their common identity and their idiosyncrasies, whenever necessary.

### **Concluding remarks**

Priscian bases his account of the Latin syntax on a systematic procedure of comparison and contrast between Greek and Latin grammatical topics. This cross-linguistic approach not only renders his

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Sed illi articulis subiunctiuis utuntur, nos uero pronomiibus uel nominibus, ut τῶν ἀνθρώπων οἱ μὲν εἰσιν ἀγαθοί, οἱ δὲ πονηροί; nos dicimus ‘hominum hi sunt boni, illi mali’ uel ‘alii sunt boni, alii mali’; τῶν δύο Αἰάντων ὃς μὲν Τέλαμῶνος, ὃς δὲ Ὀϊλέως υἱὸς ἐγένετο, ‘duorum Aiacum alter Telamonis, alter Oilei filius fuit’ uel ‘hic Telamonis, ille Oilei filius fuit’*

<sup>10</sup> It is also necessary to carry out a ‘micro-textual’ analysis, considering intrinsic elements from the text, such as the recurrence of certain words and their relationship with grammatical concepts. Partially an analysis of such type may be found in Biville (2008).

treatise a unique example of a grammatical text produced in a bilingual sociolinguistic context, but also it reveals to be a powerful tool for underpinning the identity between Greek and Latin syntactical systems, without quashing their eventual differences.

Broadly speaking, the mere juxtaposition of Greek and Latin elements in the body of Priscian's *De constructione*, as well as their joint appraisal in many parts of this text, are enough to point out the fact that both languages were considered somehow 'sibling languages' – according to the hypothesis of *utraque lingua*. However, as long as we look into the details of such linguistic interplay, we notice quite an effort made by Priscian to explain the differences between Greek and Latin.

Thus, the cross-linguistic analysis within the *De constructione* does not deny entirely the theory of *utraque lingua* – the general assumption of one as perfectly corresponding to the other, like 'sibling languages' – but puts in evidence idiosyncratic topics of Latin which seem to culminate in the development of a Graeco-Roman Latin syntax, rather than a 'Latin' or a 'Greek' grammar. Therefore, Priscian's treatise on syntax results from the intersection between the two languages motivated by a specific sociolinguistic and pedagogical context, which aims at underlining the identity and difference between them, as well as reinforcing the variety and unity of a complex Empire, symbolically represented by the very synthesis of two different languages in the same grammatical project.

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