

'Radically new' Greek dictionary on course for completion

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The authors of a dictionary that promises to offer the most comprehensive update and radical reappraisal of Ancient Greek since the 19th century have received funding that will allow them to finish the project.

The Cambridge New Greek Lexicon has already been nearly eight years in the making. But the growing range and sophistication of the project made it imperative to find extra funding, which until now has had to be raised independently of the research grant system, with the help of various benefactors.

The Arts and Humanities Research Council has now awarded the team the maximum grant available under the Resource Enhancement scheme – enough to pay for two of the three lexicographers' positions for another three years. Although funds are still needed to secure the third post, it is hoped that by 2010 the lexicon will be complete and ready to go to press. If so, it should become available to students during the early part of the next decade.

Its compilers have created a huge electronic database which, by searching hundreds of ancient texts, can provide immediate access to all the material they need. The book is also being designed so that students, who at present often have to rely on outdated dictionaries, will be able to use it with ease.

Professor Pat Easterling, chair of the lexicon's management committee,

said the book would have a “two-fold mission”.

“It is going to be a portable lexicon, meant for readers of all sorts,” she said. “One aim is to provide the student with something more user-friendly and up to date. The other is, we hope, to produce something that is valuable to scholars looking for entries composed according to modern methods of semantic analysis, as in the new Oxford English dictionary.”

New lexicons are needed as new research into the Ancient Greek language is carried out. Our understanding of Ancient Greek is changing constantly, as new words are discovered and existing sources are read and re-read in greater detail. Further modifications need to be made as the teaching and study of Greek and the meanings of English words change over time.

The project to create a new lexicon was begun in 1998 by Dr John Chadwick, a Cambridge academic distinguished for his collaboration with Michael Ventris on the decipherment of Linear B. His initial aim was simply to revise the intermediate edition of Liddell & Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, a student version published unchanged since the end of the 19th century. However, once the inadequacies of the work became clear, the decision was taken to start afresh.

To achieve this, the Cambridge team entered into collaboration with Perseus, an American digital library with a huge databank of Classical texts. From it, a database has been created large enough to fill 30 CD-Roms, which enables them to find each occurrence of an individual word in the original Greek texts.

“We are doing something that is radically new, not based on existing lexicons but going back to the original sources,” Professor James Diggle, the lexicon's principal reader, said. “Because our database enables us to see each word in its context, we don't have to go to our shelves and take

down each book, as we would have had to do in the past. And that gives us a unique opportunity to produce something far more radical and innovatory. It has allowed us to jettison the classifications that exist and start again.”

The completed lexicon will be published in print form by Cambridge University Press and will also be available for consultation online as part of the Perseus Digital Library.

Source: University of Cambridge

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