500 years of Greek grammar in the Low Countries: An homage to Adrien Amerot’s Compendium (1520)

In the new “Ad fontes” feature of Adendros, I want to offer English (work) translations of short source texts or text excerpts from the history of (Greek) language studies which struck me as particularly interesting, enlightening, or enticing.

Today: the preface to the first full-fledged grammar manual of Ancient Greek to be written in the Low Countries. On October 15, 1520, today exactly 500 years ago, Thierry Martens finished the _Compendium Graecae grammatices_ in his Louvain workshop. The grammar’s author was the Franco-Flemish Hellenist Adrien Amerot (Hadrianus Amerotius; ca. 1495-1560) from Soissons, who was teaching Greek in private at Lily college, a humanist bastion in the university city of Louvain, and later became professor of Greek at the Louvain Collegium Trilingue. A humble scholar, Amerot dedicated his manual to prince Antoine de la Marck, to whom he also explained why he composed his handbook and what his guiding pedagogical principles were. He argued that grammar teaching should be concise and transparent and felt forced to defend the utility and validity of Greek letters, which he regarded as the foundation of all learning. But let Amerot speak for himself! I have tried to render his meandering Latin into understandable English below, while sticking rather close to the original flow of the text.

_To the utmost illustrious Prince, Antoine de la Marck, Count of Beaulieu and Archdeacon of Brabant, Adrien of Soissons sends his best regards._

(Original text from the KU Leuven copy)

Several years ago, which I devoted to the education of youths, most illustrious Prince, I abridged to a briefer rule certain precepts for Greek rudiments, which were certainly not very large in number; some were gathered from the extensive commentaries of the Greeks, whereas others were furnished to me by the reading of authors, however trifling. Certainly, I did not plan these precepts to be published and to be publicly read by students; rather, I wanted to show my work to the youngsters entrusted to my protection and to help their still somewhat tender talents with a compendious teaching. I thought that I would do something worthwhile, if I showed to the youth, longing for Greek letters, a clear, brief, and convenient way of teaching the Greek principles, having done away with the diffuse digressions of the Greeks – since nothing helps the student in an equal manner, since nothing elucidates and strengthens one’s abilities in such a manner, as purity of reading, cleansed from all superfluous elements, and splendid brevity, favorable to memory. But students only experience its multiple, various, and widely evident use at that moment – oh, grief! – when, after the badly laid foundations of letters and after the unsuccessful spending of several years, they understand that they have lost time and trouble, if only to lose trouble means spending many years in pursuing this thing, which they could acquire in a few months. O lamentable and greatly deplorable condition of students, who don’t know the right way before they have deviated from it, who don’t recognize the snares of their misfortune, unless they are entangled in them, who, lastly, don’t know their mischief; before they have fallen onto it – in accordance with that Hesiodic saying: “παθὼν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω”, namely “once the mischief is suffered, the fool understands”. For if one must deplore a traveler unacquainted with the areas, who, going astray through thorn bushes and slanting courses of roads, in the end barely completes a journey of one day in one month, how much greater compassion is due to someone who fatigues himself one whole year in learning that, which he, by the way, could have reached by having followed the correct teaching through a study of one month. Very grievous is a loss of time, which, once lost, cannot be recuperated in any way. On the other hand, nothing can be more precious than a gain of time; therefore, particular care needs to be taken in every occupation, especially a literary one, in order to avoid that something
goes by without success. But just as there is no state of men, no condition, in which it is of greater importance to arrange the good hours well, than that of students, similarly I see that no other kind of men takes less care of time. In such a contradictory order, human affairs are conducted. A traveler looks for abridgements of roads, so that he arrives more quickly at his destination. A banker has a plan of time, and this only for the sake of a small gain of money, an utmost vile thing, nota bene. Farmers, coachmen, handicraftsmen and other artisans of this kind know how to manage the separate moments of time very skillfully to their advantage. And the professor of letters, will he scorn this in a serious affair, by far the most useful of all, namely the study of literature? For, just as one hopes for a bigger advantage out of this, similarly nowhere one makes a more dangerous mistake. Moreover, who – which blind man, if you will – does not see that a gain of time cannot consist in any other way than in a convenient brevity, completed by all its categories, which needs to be very much observed in teaching all disciplines as well as languages in particular? Certainly, it seems to me that it is either nowhere at all or in teaching the rudiments of the arts that I have to observe that apothegm of Bias’ “μηδ ὲν ἄγαν”, that is, “nothing in excess”. By this, I am without doubt instructed to arrange the plan of precepts in such a manner that I am not teaching anything superfluous and that I am not omitting anything indispensable. Those who neglect these two elements, they usually fall upon the two greatest plagues of letters: that they are saying at the same time too many things, and yet not everything. In this manner, by their troublesome and heavy material, teachers burden, overwhelm, and suffocate the talents of the students, which had to be guided by hand, as it were – just as an immoderate multitude of vicious food does with the stomach, food which is dissolved in bad and harmful humors. To these two evils, the desperation of students is added as a companion, when they see the immense pile of useless precepts exposed to them, out of which pile, however, they could not even attain the entire art itself. But, in order to make it possible to attain it, it happens with such a great trouble and such a great loss of time by that way, that it was by far preferable to devote these hours to more serious disciplines. Certainly, this has scared most men, excellent both in talents and in erudition, from the study of Greek literature. It is proper to believe that for no other reason Greek letters have come to be hated by many men; some lazy professors have behaved themselves so well toward good letters. Just as there is no language more difficult than the Greek, if it would meet with a careless and drowsy explainer, similarly, there is no language easier, if it would be taught with skill and not “παρὰ κωφοῦ διδασκάλου”, that is by a mute teacher. I would dare to solemnly swear that every detail of the eight parts of speech can be entirely learned through a study of three months by a mediocre genius. But I would not want this statement to be seen as something by which I would boast that I have reached my goal, seeing that this too nearly exceeds human powers and that it must seem satisfactory to have deviated not far from it. In fact, I can affirm this, that I have sought for nothing else in this work than a suitable and clear brevity; let erudite men judge whether I have reached this, I have certainly pursued it. And I have not done this out of an eagerness to contend or to emulate anyone of the ancient or more recent scholars. Rather, I have done it in order to incite, for the sake of the students, distinguished geniuses, by way of my example, to offer better material, so that whatever nature has denied to me or diligence has not provided for me, would be corrected by the industry of more erudite men. For the rest, some envious men oppose to this plan of mine and my honest attempts, as they lament without doubt that students can now learn in a short time what they have not yet learned themselves in many years – it is, by all means, worth loving the kind of men who complain about these matters, which they neither have learned nor know. And now they have hired in this matter some futile disdainful chaps to bark at these night-works of mine among the uncultivated multitude of men; surely they are discreet dogs who prefer to bite with other teeth than those of their own. Because this truly is the nature of envy, that it destroys its maker with his own weapon, while he
whom he attacks remains unharmed, I easily contemn it. But if convenient brevity deserves some praise, I am so far from pursuing any that I would not even publish a book, unless plainly forced. A witness to this matter can be Nicolaus Buscoducensis, a most learned man, rector of the Antwerp school, who incited me to publication two years ago; a witness is also Pascalius Berselius, a man not only remarkable for his belief, but also second to none in extraordinary brilliance of mind, who plainly urged me to the same publication. Such power Berselius’ friendship had with me; for what could I deny Berselius and such a friend? It was not unclear to whom above all I should dedicate these small first-fruits of my feeble intellect, because they could have been justly claimed by John Naevius of Hondschote, gymnasiarch of the College of the Lily, and Jodocus Laetus of Gavere, most famous doctor of laws, to both of whom I owe so much as I owe to no one among the mortals. During many years now, I have been enjoying the former as a promoter and patron of my studies, the latter as a teacher, and both of them as exceptional friends. And if you would look at both their erudition and their dexterity in supporting good studies and students, you would wholly recognize that they do not superintend the Lily without cause – these men who surpass by far the integrity of the Lilies through the integrity of their minds. But who does not know that the College itself has produced thus far many men who are distinguished by their erudition as well as their virtue, who are very successfully in charge of directing public affairs, and who manage very wisely this world of ours? And about the college you could truly say this, which Homer sings about the ocean: “Ἐξ οὗπερ πάντες ποταμοὶ, καὶ πᾶσα θάλασσα, καὶ πᾶσαι κρῆναι, καὶ φρείατα μακρὰ νάουσιν”, that is, “Out of which all rivers, and an entire sea, and all springs, and deep wells flow”. Nevertheless, I was incited to dedicate this first work of mine to the highness of your name, most honorable prince, by Berselius and Master Jacob Rocquius, your most loyal secretary and – if I may judge the lion by his claws – worthy of the love of all good men. I protested, of course, because I knew for sure that this work does not correspond to your dignity, neither by elegance of speech (for, as it is written for boys, similarly it is also composed in a boyish style), nor by erudition. But why say more? Berselius has vanquished and made me shameless in a twofold manner. For, on the one hand, I have badly edited a bad book and, on the other, I have dedicated that same book improperly to the most excellent of princes. Nevertheless, I preferred to be branded with the mark of shamelessness rather than with that of ingratitude. So, accept with cheerful appearance, worthiest of princes, the little gift that indeed is below your dignity, but has come from a sincere mind that is utmost devoted to you. Let it in your name also be accepted by young students, for whom I have toiled on this work. Whereas they already regard you as an example and an ideal of all virtues, let them also consider you the spokesman of this teaching. Let them be fortunate both by imitating your virtues and by studying Greek letters, since there is indeed no shorter road to good fortune than erudition that is joined as a companion with reverence for God. Farewell, ornament of princes. At Louvain from the Lily. In the year AD 1520, October 15.

(Image taken from KU Leuven Libraries’ Teneo platform, available as open data)