[Classical and Koine on “New” (Monday with Mounce: Repost)](http://www.koinoniablog.net/2011/08/classical-and-koine-on-new-monday-with-mounce-repost.html" \t "_blank)

Posted: 01 Aug 2011 06:22 AM PDT

Language changes. It is one of the undeniable, universal truths of reality. Events can slow the development of a language down, like the King James version or Luther’s version of the Bible. But time marches on, and language changes.

Language changes for many reasons. Forms simplify. Influences come from other languages, immigration, war. I saw a statistic yesterday that there are 540,000 words in English today, and in Shakespeare’s day there were only 180,000. Apocryphal or not, it is certainly generally true as all of reality is speeding up to internet speed. See the video below for a fascinating look at the current pace of change.

The problem comes when we assume that language doesn’t change, that vocabulary is stagnant, and that grammar is written in stone.

Take for example my favorite English grammatical construction: the split infinitive. When the Latin grammarians started dictating how English should be spoke 150 years ago, the split infinitive became a sin, not because it misconstrued meaning in English but because it was bad Latin grammar.

In English, everything is proximity. Why would I say “quickly to tie” when the adverb “quickly” is related to “tie,” not to “to”? According to “English” rules you should say, “to quickly tie” and let the Latin purist grumble. Check out “Writing with Style” for an excellent discussion of how to write English well. It even lets me occasionally start a sentence with “and,” a fact that every powerful writer understands.

Vocabulary also is in a constant state of flux. Words just move. Maybe not quickly; sometimes slowly, but they always move. The problem is when we assume that a word has the same meaning today that it had hundreds of years ago.

This problem is exacerbated by the type of shift that happened between Classical and Koine Greek. As is so often true, the language lost specificity. After all, what would you expect when a language was thrust on the world of different language and cultures, and it became the language of the world victor? The Greeks came up with the system of accents to help these “barbarians” speak Greek properly, but they couldn’t stop the speed of change caused by the friction of these other languages.

A great example of this is νεος and καινος, two words for “new.” In Classical Greek, καινος and νεος had distinctly different (but related) meanings. νεος meant “new” in terms of time, and so we have new wine and new wineskins (Mt 9:17; Lk 5:39), even “new people” in that they are young (1 Tim 5:11). καινος meant “new” in the sense of “unused,” and so we have a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet 3:13) and a new Jerusalem (Rev 3:12).

Verbrugge gives this definition. “In cl. Gk. kainos tends to denote what is qualitatively new as compared with what has existed until now, what is better than the old. neos, by contrast is a temporal word for what has not yet been, what has just made its appearance. But the longer these words were used, the less strictly was this conceptual differentiation maintained (New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, page 280).

Sometimes you can feel this distinction in a text. Jesus says that “new (νεος) wine must be put into fresh (καινος) wineskins” (Lk 5:38, ESV). Wine that is new in time (i.e., unfermented) must be put into wineskins that are fresh (in that they are unused and therefore still flexible).

However, in the book of Hebrews the new covenant is discussed using in one place καινος (9:15) and in another νεος (12:24). This shows that the words have sufficient overlap in meaning that such that you cannot automatically insist that they always contain the Classical distinction.

How do I know that the distinction is intended in Luke 5:38? It fits the context. When it comes to this type of fine-tuning, it is always the context that is relied on. You look at the range of meaning of the words, see what the possibilities are, and then ask the context what is intended.

But never pull a word out of its Classical context and insist that it is the word’s meaning in a specific biblical context. That just isn’t how words work.

William D. [Bill] Mounce posts about the Greek language, exegesis, and related topics at  Koinonia. He is the author of numerous books, including the bestselling [Basics of Biblical Greek](http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/ProductDetail.htm?ProdID=com.zondervan.9780310287681&QueryStringSite=Zondervan), and is the general editor for [Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words](http://www.zondervan.com/Cultures/en-US/Product/ProductDetail.htm?ProdID=com.zondervan.9780310248781&QueryStringSite=Zondervan). He served as the New Testament chair of the English Standard Version Bible translation, and is currently on the [Committee for Bible Translation for the NIV](http://nivbibleupdate.com/?page_id=57). Learn more and visit Bill's blog (co-authored with scholar and his father Bob Mounce) at [www.billmounce.com](http://www.billmounce.com/).