CHAPTER 9

Rewriting the history of the optative in the postclassical Greek papyri and literary texts (III BCE–VI CE)

Persistence, formulae, and innovation

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Abstract

In this chapter, I rewrite the received history of the optative and redefine the role that it may play in describing the history of postclassical Greek (III BCE–VI CE). First, I identify the main problems faced by the different histories of the optative (e.g. problems of teleological and unrepresentative description) and suggest that these problems reflect wider issues in describing the history of (postclassical) Greek. Second, I outline the persistence of the potential optative in postclassical Greek papyri and literary texts, in contrast to existing accounts which take the 'decline' perspective. I also pay particular attention to the role played by formulae in the data, both in form and functional distribution, as these formulae are mainly limited to the papyrological

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evidence. Third, I briefly contextualise the changes in use and distribution of the wish optative within the wider reorganisation of the wish system in postclassical Greek. Fourth and finally, I describe the formal and functional specialisation as well as persistence of the wish optative in postclassical Greek papyri and literary texts.

9.1 Rewriting the history of the optative and postclassical Greek

In histories of Greek, one of the most stable elements in descriptions of postclassical Greek (III BCE–VI CE)[1] is the mention of the loss or decline of the optative mood (Adrados 2005, 194; Browning 1983, 30; Horrocks 2010, 102; Meillet 2009, 315; Thumb 1901, 249). Though often repeated, the real corpus evidence for such a loss or decline has remained rather specious (see also la Roi 2025d). To illustrate, the most common 'evidence' for the decline of the optative has been to point to the New Testament, where it is used more sparsely than in classical Greek (cf. Bianconi and Magni 2022, who summarise several reasons for this 'decline'). For example, Meillet had already made exactly this point in 1930:

> **En grec moderne**, il ne subsiste que le subjonctif, et la disparition de l'optatif est **un fait relativement ancien. En effet, dans le Nouveau Testament** où les occasions de l'employer ne manquaient pas, **l'optatif est une rareté**; et c'est chez Luc, l'auteur qui a **le plus le caractère littéraire, qu'on en trouve le plus d'exemples**. L'optatif avec ἄν **a disparu**. (Meillet 2009, 275, from the reprinted edition of 1930; my emphasis)

This statement in my view reveals at least three deeper problems for the description of the history of the optative in postclassical Greek as well as for the description of postclassical Greek within the history of Greek more generally:

- Modern Greek is the *teleological* reference point for any change as well as continuity in postclassical Greek, thereby disregarding any continuity or change which does not fit the picture from Modern Greek;
- the New Testament, despite being heavily influenced by written language contact from the Septuagint (see la Roi 2025d), is treated as a fully reliable reference point for a period of nine centuries;

- the use of the optative is seen as directly related to an author's level of style, even without contrastive corroboration with other authors.[2]

In fact, with regard to the third point, only if one assumes a very early loss of the optative does it make sense to say even that early postclassical Greek texts by Menander or in the Septuagint show a 'retarded' process of loss (Evans 2022, 9; Horrocks 2010, 102).[3] Put differently, if one joins Meillet and others in viewing the optative through a perspective of 'decline' or 'loss' (e.g. of at least the potential optative with ἄν by the time of the New Testament, an idea which is refuted by the corpus evidence given later in this chapter and in earlier studies), one puts oneself in the unwanted position of then having to explain every *presence* of this construction as an 'unexpected' resurrection from the dead or as an Atticism (cf. the points made by la Roi 2025d).[4]

I would like to offer a more charitable and holistic perspective on the history of the optative in postclassical Greek (III BCE–VI CE) here by reassessing both the continuity and change of the optative in postclassical Greek papyri and literary texts. By combining the evidence for the optative from papyri, literary texts, and secondary literature, I aim to give a more representative picture of its continuity and change than the views offered mainly on the basis of a small selection of the corpus such as the Septuagint, the New Testament, or a selection of papyri.[5] To gather the corpus evidence, I have applied three different methods: I used advanced proximity searches in the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (viz. for the optative alone, and ἄν and the optative with a distance of three words); I exported and analysed all optatives in documentary papyri from Trismegistos Words; and I checked the counts given in secondary literature against current views on the development of the optative in postclassical Greek. For the literary texts, I am currently unable to offer the same detailed statistics as I do for the papyri, because I did not exclude any literary texts, the TLG search yielded many false positives, and, as discussed later in this chapter, I focused primarily on the question whether specific usages from the papyri also occurred in the literary texts or not.

The chapter is structured as follows: Section 9.2 describes the persistence of the potential optative in papyri and literary texts and the factors motivating its persistence; Section 9.3 outlines the different morphosyntactic and distributional changes which have reorganised the wish system in postclassical Greek; Section 9.4 subsequently traces

the functional specialisation of the wish optative across different document types in the papyri as well as in literary texts; and Section 9.5 presents some concluding remarks.

9.2 The persistence of the potential optative in postclassical Greek papyri and literary texts

As in classical Greek (la Roi 2019), the potential optative was used in postclassical Greek to express that something may be the case without the speaker taking subjective epistemic responsibility for it (contrast e.g. *Ah that must be John*). It was used in main clauses, prototypically with the modal particle ἄν (see la Roi 2022b for an overview of obligatory and optional uses of the modal particle), and in subordinate clauses (generally with the modal particle in non-conditional subordinate clauses and without it in conditional subordinate clauses). For examples from middle postclassical Greek, see (1) and (2), from Epictetus.

(1) Epict. 1.17.10

εἰ δ' οὖν καὶ τοῦτο **δοίη** τις, ἐκεῖνο ἀπαρκεῖ ὅτι τῶν ἄλλων ἐστὶ διακριτικὰ καὶ ἐπισκεπτικὰ καὶ ὡς **ἄν** τις **εἴποι** μετρητικὰ καὶ στατικά.

'but if one **would grant** even this, it is enough to say in defence of Logic that it has the power to discriminate and examine everything else, and as one **might say**, to measure and weigh them.'[6]

(2) Epict. 4.11.5

ψυχῆς δ' ὡς σώματος μὲν ἀκαθαρσίαν οὐκ **ἂν εὕροις**, ὡς ψυχῆς δὲ τί **ἂν** ἄλλο **εὕροις** ἢ τὸ παρέχον αὐτὴν ῥυπαρὰν πρὸς τὰ ἔργα τὰ αὑτῆς;

'But you **would** not **find** the same impurity in a soul as you would in a body, and as being soul, what else **would you find** impure about it than that which makes it dirty for the performance of its own functions?'

Besides the fact that such and other examples from Epictetus (e.g. Epict. 1.8, 1.11, 1.13 or 2.14) or contemporaries are difficult to explain away as preserved 'relics'[7] or as a form of 'Atticism' (e.g. Horrocks 2010, 146 hails Epictetus as one of the authors who comes closest to displaying 'colloquial speech'), we lose out on noticing important *continuities* when we take only the 'loss'-perspective.[8] Synchronically, the use of

the optative for a wider variety of functions, for example wishes as well as potential statements, is a form of so-called *layering*, referring to the coexistence and interaction of two or more functions of a structure (Narrog and Heine 2021, 46). From a diachronic perspective, the continued use of the optative mood into postclassical Greek can be viewed as a form of *persistence*, which refers to the fact that polyfunctional forms carry their history with them when their form and meaning change over time (Hopper 1991, 28; Narrog and Heine 2021, 46). The optative had already developed a potential use in Archaic Greek (see la Roi 2022a for the historical background), and its use with a large range of verbs spread widely to different clause types in classical Greek (see la Roi 2022b, 130 with further references). This use persists in papyri as well as literary texts, although its use undergoes some specific changes especially in the papyri (which are discussed in Subsection 9.2.2). Yet, when we assess the brief histories of the optative that are given in the secondary literature, we find not only internal inconsistencies between them but also a reliance on normative statements rather than corpus evidence. To illustrate these problems and review the functional persistence of the potential optative, I first contrast several secondary literature sources, subsequently present the evidence collected for the potential optative in the papyri, and finally integrate the evidence from literary texts.

9.2.1 The metahistory of the postclassical Greek optative

Below I assess the metahistory of the optative, that is, the scientific discourse on the history of the optative itself. To do so, I contrast the following statements on the history of the optative from secondary sources on the papyri (respectively Mayser, Gignac, and Mandilaras) to those with a wider scope (namely Turner and Evans). I have emphasised significant phrases which appear to be particularly problematic in describing the history of the optative in postclassical Greek.

- 'Der Gebrauch des Optativs **ist stark im Rückgang begriffen**; **auch bieten Inhalt und Stil der Urkunden weniger Gelegenheit zur Anwendung dieses Modus**.' (Mayser 1970, 87)
- 'The optative, despite its gradual loss in postclassical Greek, **is by no means rare in the papyri of the Roman period**, and **becomes quite common** in the Byzantine period.' (Gignac 1976, 359)

- 'In general we see that **the optative does not hold a real position in the language of the papyri**. The use of it in classical Greek is sometimes reflected in compositions showing influence of Atticism. **Its disappearance must be seen in light of the general trend of Hellenistic Greek to get rid of the optative because this mood, with its distinct vowel system, could not accommodate itself to the morphology of the other moods**. Since the notion of the optative could **be perfectly expressed by other verbal forms, such as the future indicative, the subjunctive, and the imperative**, it was a matter of course that these verbal forms undertook all the functions of the optative, which thus was left to fall into disuse.' (Mandilaras 1973, 287)
- 'The mood was **declining during the last three centuries BCE**. It is still used **fairly widely** to indicate a wish in the papyri, LXX and NT, in spite of the popularity of the imperative, in curses as well as requests. **It was probably never used much in conversation, even in Athens; Xenophon was addicted to it** but it is scarce in Attic inscriptions. **The figures per 100 pp. are approximately** Alciphron (Letters) 109, Xenophon (Mem.) 350, Plato (Phaedo) 250, Strabo 76, Polybius 37, Diodorus Siculus 13, Callimachus 49 (in 49 pp.), Aratus 94 (in 46pp.). Even Dionysius of Halicarnassus (30 BCE) and Diodorus Siculus (I BCE) who maintain the Attic tradition tend to dispense with it. In fact, the fut. optative, never more than a substitute in indirect speech for the future indic., is quite extinct in Hellenistic Greek. The aor. opt. proved toughest, lasting until VIII CE. **The optative to express a wish (volitive) was the most persistent, surviving particularly in set phrases like** μὴ γένοιτο; whereas **the potential optative, in main and conditional clauses, was rare in the Ptolemaic, and almost extinct and awkwardly used, in the Imperial papyri. The reason for the decline probably lies in the "syntactical weakness" (Schwyzer II 337) of the optative. No one can or could quite define its essential function. The two chief functions, volitive and potential, were too dissimilar to give a unity to the mood, and the subjunctive was always at hand for a substitute for either.** Moreover, **the refinements inherent in the use of the optative were beyond the powers of uneducated Greeks and most barbarians. Those later writers who sought to revive the mood found it difficult to recapture the ancient subtleties**. Horn has demonstrated that the optative did gain a new lease of life in

the Byzantine period, usually in set phrases or interchangeably with the subjunctive, and its revival in II CE in the vulgar texts merely followed the earlier learned reaction against its disappearance. **Literary writers, especially the Atticists, affected it.** Even the II–III CE papyri follow suit and the scribes of some NT MSS favoured it.' (Turner 1963, 118–19)

- 'The postclassical **desystematization of the optative is well documented. As a category of the verbal system it becomes steadily rarer and disappears by the early medieval period.** The optative's various functions decline at different rates, **being replaced by the subjunctive and by periphrastic constructions.** Of its two basic types, **the potential optative appears to be lost relatively early in the Koine period,** while **the volitive optative, expressing wishes for the future, persists longest of all.** It is eventually restricted to fossilized expressions of an increasingly lexical, rather than grammatical, character.' (Evans 2003, 71)

There are at least five issues in the representation of the history of the optative by these (and other) authors, which I summarise briefly below. Generally, however, we can already observe that the same evaluations from earlier literature are often repeated, as is also reflected by the references to other authors who make the same or similar problematic points.

- *Conflicting trends for the papyrological evidence*. Comparing the first four statements, we see a clear opposition between those who suggest functional limitation and see no 'real position' for the optative in the papyri (Mandilaras) or only in 'awkward' use (Turner) and those, like Gignac, who emphasise that the optative is actually by no means rare. In the discussion in this section and in Section 9.3, I reassess the continued role of the optative in the language of the papyri.
- *Normative ideas about the reasons for using the optative*. While Mayser tentatively suggested that the use of the optative is not at home in papyri (but see Subsection 9.2.2 for many counterexamples), Turner takes this line of thought to another extreme by making mutually contradictory and normative statements on the use of the optative in both classical and postclassical Greek: on the one hand, he says that only the ancients could grasp the subtlety of the use of the optative,

which is why later Greeks could not use it; yet, on the other hand, he states that the optative was probably not used much at all in classical Greek and had a weak place in the verbal system. The counts taken over from Meillet (without reference) and slightly modified do not suffice to show what he claims and also contradict the counts provided in recent studies on the potential and wish optative in Aristophanes and Euripides (la Roi 2019, 2020a). Moreover, the counts do not seem very reliable; Reik (1907, 88–89, 190–91) had observed that there are 212 occurrences of the potential optative in Polybius, with 70 occurring in the main clause, and 401 potential optatives in Philo, with 194 occurring in the main clause.

- *Ad hoc suggestions about diachronic replacements.* Evans (like others, e.g. Horrocks 2010, 130) follows a long tradition from grammars (Blass and Debrunner 1990, 311; Radermacher 1925, 160; Schwyzer and Debrunner 1950, 338; Turner 1963, 119–20) to point to alternative strategies as a reason for the 'loss' of the optative (e.g. subjunctives, periphrastic constructions, or imperatives), but nobody has actually demonstrated that these constructions are *equivalents*, or at least equivalent enough in specific morphosyntactic contexts to replace each other. As discussed in Section 9.3, though there are cases where, theoretically, a replacement could replace the optative in certain morphosyntactic contexts, viz. performative wish clauses in the first person with εὔχομαι 'I wish' in the papyri, those types of instances are rare in the corpus evidence.
- *Allusions to systemic changes in verbal system.* We also find the idea of a systemic change to the verbal system in postclassical Greek as an 'explanation' for the alleged loss of the optative. Apart from phonological effects on (mis)writing optatives in the papyri, no other supporting evidence is adduced for this, but reference to a vague general process of change is used.
- *Unquantified relative statements of diachrony.* On the one hand, it has long been common practice to use implicit quantitative terms, such as 'rare' and 'relatively early', to characterise changes in postclassical Greek,[9] but as shown in Table 9.1 it is safer to quantify such statements, since the numbers themselves do not have this subjective slant (cf. Jenset and McGillivray 2017, 50).[10] On the other hand, even ideas of a relative diachrony by which the potential optative is actually lost do not agree with the corpus evidence, as I show in Subsection 9.2.2.

9.2.2 Tracing potential optatives in the postclassical Greek papyri

As shown by Table 9.1, the potential optative is present in all periods under investigation, disproving any removal of the category from the verbal system. NRO stands for normed rate of occurrence, that is, the occurrence of the construction every 1,000 words.[11]

Table 9.1: The potential optative in the postclassical Greek papyri (III BCE–VI CE)

Period	Potential optative		Total
	Main clause	Subordinate clause	
Early postclassical Greek	417 (0.471 NRO)	57 (0.064 NRO)	474 (0.535 NRO)
Middle postclassical Greek	71 (0.030 NRO)	128 (0.053 NRO)	199 (0.083 NRO)
Late postclassical Greek	20 (0.020 NRO)	494 (0.491 NRO)	514 (0.511 NRO)

Yet, many more observations can and should be made, not only about these numbers (also in comparison to wish optatives; see Section 9.4) but also especially about the data behind the numbers.

First of all, there is a substantial decrease only in the main-clause usage of the potential optative from early to middle postclassical Greek, but much less so for subordinate clause usage of the potential optative. These numbers and examples such as (3) and (4) thus contradict an early demise of the potential optative in early postclassical Greek, whether in the matrix or first in the subordinate clause:

(3) P.Cair.Zen.3.59308. 4–5, 250 BCE (private letter)

σὺ δέ μοι ἀντέγραψας **ὅτι γείνοιτο** αὐτῶι εἰς τὸν ἐνιαυτὸν (δραχμαὶ) ιβ. οὐδεὶς οὖν ἀποδίδω[σι]ν οὐδέν.

'You, in turn, wrote me back that **it would be paid** to him in the amount of 12 drachmas. Well, nobody has paid anything.'[12]

(4) P.Tebt.3.1.703, 49–51, 210 BCE (official letter on inspection of crops)

ὅταν δὲ διεξακθη(l. διεξαχθῇ) ὁ σπόρος, **οὐ χεῖρον ἂν γίνοιτο εἰ** ἐπιμελῶς **ἐφοδεύοις**

'When the sowing has been completed **it would be no bad thing** if **you were to make a** careful **round of inspection**' (Bagnall and Derow 2004, 166)

Similarly, examples in subordinate clauses from middle postclassical Greek such as (5) and (6) show that the potential optative was still used as it could be before, that is, in potential purpose or relative clauses.

(5) P.Berl.Moeller.10, 32–34, III CE (private letter)

πλὴν **ἵνα μὴ δοκοίην** ἀμελεῖν, γράφω σοι, ὅ[τ]ι

'Besides **so that I would** not **appear** to be negligent, I write to you because …'

(6) Sb.22.15708, 46–47, 75–125 CE (private letter)

λαλῶν τὰ ψεύδη ἃ οὐδ' **ἂν** κατήγορος **εἴποι**

'Speaking lies which not even an accuser **would say**'

Secondly, we should consider the role of *formulaicity* in the textual data. Formulaic expressions or formulae can be defined according to at least two dimensions (Corrigan et al. 2009, xiii–xiv): restricted form and restricted distribution. Restricted forms are formulae that 'are not amenable to lexical and structural re-formulations' (Corrigan et al. 2009, xiv); restricted distribution refers to the fact that 'formulae tend to occur in particular styles of language tied to particular communicative situations' (Corrigan et al. 2009, xiv). In the case of the potential optative, we can immediately observe that there are restrictions in form in the different periods under investigation here for the papyri. In the data for main-clause usages of the potential optative, an incredibly high number of potential optatives concern the use of the politeness formula καλῶς ἂν ποιήσαις 'you would do well' with the requested action formulated after (e.g. in a conditional clause or a participial clause), as in example (7). (For further literature on the use of this formula, see Dickey 2016 and Leiwo 2010.) However, this formula

is restricted to early postclassical Greek, occurring 204 times there (43 per cent of main-clause optatives in early postclassical Greek), and a surprising 203 out of 204 occurrences belong to the third century BCE, thus showing that this formula also had a very restricted distribution diachronically.[13]

(7) P.Gur.5, 17–18, 215 BCE (petition)

καλῶς ἂν π[οιήσ]αι̣ς ἀναγκάσας αὐτὸν

'You **would do well** if you forced him'

Another formula limited to early postclassical Greek is εἴη ἂν ὡς 'it would be as' + [I/we want], to indicate that a certain situation (e.g. the health of the addressee) is in accordance with the wishes of the writer(s), as in example (8). It occurs 43 times in early postclassical Greek, making up 10 per cent of the cases of potential optatives in the main clause in early postclassical Greek.

(8) BGU.6.1301, 1–3, II–I BCE (private letter)

χ[α]ίρει[ν. εἰ μὲν περὶ τῆς ἡμετέρας] μητρὸς καὶ τῶν ἐν οἴκωι τἆλ-
λα(l. τὰ ἄλλα) κ̣α̣τ̣ὰ̣ γνώμην ἐ[σ]τίν, **ε[ἴ]η ἂν ὡς εὔχομαι**

'Greetings. If concerning our mother and the rest of the household everything also is as thought, **it would be as I wish**'

Furthermore, there are 86 occurrences of the potential optative in the main clause in early postclassical Greek of the formula 'it would be good', which may be expressed as εὖ ἂν ἔχοι (e.g. P.Mich.1.58.3–4) or καλῶς ἂν ἔχοι (e.g. Chr.Wilck.223.2). Functionally, it is similar to the previous formula, since it is often used to say 'if the addressee's health is good, it would be good'. This formula makes up about 21 per cent of the main-clause potential optatives in early postclassical Greek. In other words, these formulae make up almost 75 per cent of the usages of the potential optative in the main clause in early postclassical Greek. This serves as a reminder of the complexity in describing the history of the optative mood: though the potential optative is persistent in this period, it still undergoes distributional changes with respect to earlier periods. In fact, one could argue that the numbers should be reinterpreted in the light of formulaic uses; if one takes out the formulaic uses of the potential optative in the main clause mentioned above in early and middle postclassical Greek, the distance between the two groups

becomes much slighter: 41 occurrences in early postclassical Greek and 39 in middle postclassical Greek, with a respective NRO of 0.046 and 0.016. Thus, the relative stability of the potential optative, though affected by formulaicity in form and distribution, may explain why even in late postclassical Greek we find—with apologies for the normative term—'normal' uses of the potential optative in main clauses, such as example (9).[14]

(9) P.Oxy.17.2133, 308 CE (petition)

ὁ δὲ τούτου οὐκ ἂν **εἴποιμι** ἀδελφὸς ἐμοῦ δὲ κατὰ πατέρα θεῖος Ἀοῖσεις τουνομα (l. τὸ ὄνομα)

'I would not call him my brother but uncle through my father, with the name Aeoiseis'

By contrast, the impact of formulaicity is, contrary to what has been stated in previous studies, much less direct on subordinate clause usage of the potential optative. A way to measure the impact of *formal* formulaicity is to establish the proportion of unique lemmas per period for subordinate clause occurrences of the potential optative (i.e. an approximation of *type* frequency, instead of just token frequency). For this, see Table 9.2.

Table 9.2: Formal formulaicity in subordinate clause potential optatives in papyri

Period	Total number of lemmas	Unique lemmas	Proportion
Early postclassical Greek	63	36	57%
Middle postclassical Greek	142	62	44%
Late postclassical Greek	495	110	22%

In the table, a substantial decrease can really only be observed for the late postclassical Greek period. At the same time, the table shows that unique lemmas hold an important position in the usage of the potential optative in subordinate clauses across periods. To illustrate, contrast examples (10) to (12) of conditional clauses with the potential optative which have different lemmas and can host a variety of lemmas across the different periods.[15]

(10) UPZ.1.146, 37–38, II BCE (private letter)

σὺ δὲ **εἰ**/(corr. ex η) **μεταλάβοις** ὡς τόπον αὐτοῖς μερίζων, ἴδιος ὢν οὐκ ἂν λυπηθείης.

'But you, **if you would take part**, as if dividing the place for them, you, being the boss, would not be hurt.'

(11) P.Hamb.1.29, 13–15, 94CE (reminder)

[ἄ]λλως οὐ δύνανται λέγειν τὴν δίκην, εἰ μὴ **λάβοιεν** τὰ βιβλία παρὰ τῶ[ν] ἐπιτρόπων

'Otherwise they cannot plead cause, if **they would take** the books from the guardians'

(12) P.Muench.1.4_5v, 33–34, 581 CE (contract of sale)

εἰ δὲ **ἀσθενήσαιμι** περὶ τὴν τοῦτου καθαροποίησιν

'If **I would get** weak with regard to the cleaning of that'

Nevertheless, there are some minor groups of lemmas which have formulaic *distribution*, thus combining both dimensions of formulaicity. For example, we find the lemma βούλομαι, which, in addition to being used in conditionals specifying the addressee's wishes (cf. εἰ δὲ βουληθείης in P.michael.26, 7, 300 CE, private letter), almost exclusively occurs in contracts from the late postclassical Greek period to specify certain conditions of the contract, as in the temporal clause in example (13).

(13) Stud.Pal.20.114, 21, 421CE (contract)

καὶ ἀποδώσω **ὁπότε δ' ἂν βουληθείη**

'And I will give **whenever he would want**'

Other lemmas have a similarly formulaic distribution, as they often occur in the same morphosyntactic context, for example εἰ δὲ ἀπολειφθείη 'if it were left', εἰ δὲ εὑρεθείη 'if it were found', εἰ συμβαίη 'if it would happen', or εἰς ὃ τύχοι 'to which it would happen'.

By contrast, some formulaic uses may actually be formulaic *innovations* that function as novel paraphrases of earlier formulae (cf. the discussion of middle postclassical Greek χαίροις in Section 9.4), such

as the 'so you could know' formula in example (14). This is an illocutionary use of this ἵνα subordinate clause, meaning that it specifies the appropriateness under which the speech act in the matrix clause may be uttered (cf. la Roi 2024).

(14) P. Oxy. 6.891, 294 CE (business letter)

ἵνα τοῦτο εἰδέναι **ἔχοις** ἐπιστέλλεταί σοι, φίλτατε.

'**So that you may know** it is sent to you, my dear.'

This formula is based on the '(just) so you know' formula in the subjunctive that we know from earlier periods of postclassical Greek. Yet, example (14) is the earliest use of the optatival form of this formula,[16] suggesting that this innovation stems from the third century CE.

To sum up, the potential optative is, contrary to what is stated in earlier studies, remarkably persistent in the papyri, in its main clause as well as its subordinate clause usage. Even when we account for the influence of formulaic usage patterns of the potential optative, which leads to formulaicity of forms and distributions as well as innovations, the potential optative, to rephrase Mandilaras' words, had a real position in the language of the papyri.

9.2.3 Tracing potential optatives in postclassical Greek literary texts

Next let us integrate the persistence of the potential optative in literary texts. To do so, I will answer three questions before integrating the evidence from secondary literature which is often overlooked or misinterpreted:

- In which syntactic contexts is the potential optative persistent?
- Do the uses of the potential optative reveal formulaicity in form or distribution?
- Are the persistent patterns limited to higher-register text types?

As for the first question, the potential optative continues to be used in both subordinate and main clauses, as exemplified in (15) to (17) in their respective order from early, middle, and late postclassical Greek.

(15) Pol. 1.31.7

οἱ δὲ Καρχηδόνιοι θεωροῦντες ὅτι καὶ γενομένοις αὐτοῖς ὑποχειρίοις **οὐδὲν ἂν συνεξακολουθήσαι βαρύτερον** τῶν τότε προσταγμάτων

'As it was evident to the Carthaginians that even if they became subject to the Romans, they **would be in no worse case** than if they yielded to the present demands'

(16) J. *AJ.* 12.401

πλείω δὲ **γένοιτ' ἄν**, εἰ μὴ **προκαταληφθείη** καὶ δοίη δίκην δυνάμεως ἐπ' αὐτὸν ἰσχυρᾶς ἀποσταλείσης.

'And the injuries (*sc.* κακά) **would become** still greater unless Judas **were** first **caught** and brought to punishment by having a strong force sent against him.'

(17) Bas. *Ep.* 25.2.24

Λύσαις δ' ἂν ἡμῖν τὴν ἀμηχανίαν αὐτός, **εἰ ἐθελήσειας** τὰ κινήσαντά σε πρὸς τὴν καθ' ἡμῶν λύπην φανερῶς ἐξαγγεῖλαι.

'**You would** yourself **relieve** us of this perplexity, **if you should be willing** to proclaim openly what things have stirred you to be so offended with us.'

Furthermore, I was not able to find the same degree of formulaic usages of the potential optative in the literary texts,[17] which demonstrates that the impact of formulaicity on the potential optative is predominantly a phenomenon from the papyri from Egypt.[18] As such, this finding serves as an important methodological caveat that the language as found in the papyri cannot always be put on the same footing as the corpus evidence from the literary texts.

As for the third question, we can find minimal pairs from texts which contrast in style or register but use the same potential optative, as shown by the minimal pair from Epictetus and Lucian in examples (18) and (19),[19] or in examples (20) and (21) from the late postclassical Greek historians Zosimus, who adopts a lower style, and Eusebius, who does not.

(18) Epict. 1.11.26

Εὔξαιο δ' **ἂν** οὕτως στερχθῆναι ὑπὸ τῶν σαυτοῦ …;

'And would you pray to be so loved by your own that …?'

(19) Luc. *An.* 29.16–17

ἐροίμην ἄν σε ποτέρῳ **ἂν** ὅμοιος **εὔξαιο** γενέσθαι

'I would ask you which of the two you would pray to be like'

(20) Zos. 4.42.1

διενοεῖτο παραλῦσαι τὸν νέον Οὐαλεντινιανὸν τῆς βασιλείας, εἰ μὲν δύναιτο, πάσης, εἰ δὲ τούτου διαμάρτοι, μέρος γοῦν αὐτῆς, ὅσον **ἂν** οἷός τε **γένοιτο**, οἰκειώσασθαι. '

'He planned to rid the young Valentianus from his kingdom, if he would be able to, in its entirety, but if he would fail to do this, at least a part of it, **as far as he would be able to** make his own.'

(21) Eus. *Ecc.* 5.3.1

Ἡ δ' αὐτὴ τῶν προειρημένων μαρτύρων γραφὴ καὶ ἄλλην τινὰ μνήμης ἀξίαν ἱστορίαν περιέχει, ἣν καὶ οὐδεὶς **ἂν γένοιτο** φθόνος μὴ οὐχὶ τῶν ἐντευξομένων εἰς γνῶσιν προθεῖναι·

'The same document of the aforementioned martyrs contains also another story worthy of memory, and none **could grudge** our bringing it to the knowledge of those who are about to study.'

Finally, I would like to point out that the picture of a persistent potential optative that I presented here has actually been anticipated in the literature, but this information has not managed to make its way into the received history of the optative. As mentioned before, Reik (1907, 88–89, 190–91) had observed that there are 212 occurrences of the potential optative in Polybius, with 70 occurring in the main clause, and 401 potential optatives in Philo, with 194 occurring in the main clause. For late postclassical Greek, we possess detailed statistics (from Dickinson 1926; Fives 1937) of the productivity of the potential optative in the authors John Chrysostom and Theodoret; they record respectively 2,703 uses of the potential optative in the main clause and

1,808 in conditions for John Chrysostom, and 380 uses of the potential optative in the main clause and 356 in conditions for Theodoret. Once one combines these numbers with the data from the papyri and from the contrastive analysis of literary texts, we have to conclude that the potential optative is persistent across postclassical Greek periods and cannot be explained away, as it were, as a mere ('revived') Atticism or feature of literary style.

9.3 The reorganisation of the wish system in postclassical Greek papyri and literary texts

In order to determine the role of the wish optative in the wish system of postclassical Greek, we need to be aware that the wish system is undergoing several changes that reorganise the roles played by different wish strategies in postclassical Greek. Here I briefly outline the major changes with respect to earlier periods, provide further references, and discuss how they impact the role played by the wish optative.

First of all, as discussed by la Roi (2021), Ancient Greek had developed a rich set of so-called insubordinate wish strategies out of previously conditional subordinate clauses, and in postclassical Greek we find that these wish strategies are innovated in various respects. For example, we find innovative insubordinate structures such as εἴθε γάρ in example (22) or infinitives which are used to perform wishes as greetings, as in example (23) (cf. la Roi 2025c).[20]

(22) Diod. Sic. 9.25.1

Εἴθε γάρ τις πείσειε νησιώτας σὺν ἵπποις παρατάξασθαι Λυδοῖς.

[Croesus:] '**Would that someone could persuade** the islanders to fight against the Lydians on horseback!'

(23) BGU.14.2419, 1–2, 1 BCE (business letter)

Ἀρτεμίδωρος Ἀλεξάνδρωι τῶι ἀδελφῶι **χαίρειν** καὶ **ὑγιαίνειν**

'Artemidoros **greets** his brother Alexander and **wishes** that **he is well**'

Secondly, there are modal verbs whose use in counterfactual wishes, though minor before, increases in postclassical Greek, as shown in example (24) (la Roi and Tsolakidis 2024).

(24) BGU 2 384, 6–9, II–IIICE (private letter)

ἤθελον καὶ πέμψε(l. πέμψαι) σοί τι ἄλλο, καὶ οὐδεὶς λαμβάνε[ι] ὅ[πω]ς σοι κομισθῇ.

'**I would have wanted** to send you something, but nobody is taking it so as to bring it to you.'

Third and finally, there are performative wish clauses with εὔχομαι or βούλομαι which become especially frequent in middle postclassical Greek. Occurrences such as example (25) are in the pragmatic literature normally considered an *explicit performative* version of the illocutionary force that the wish optative expresses in example (26). Yet, the occurrence in example (26) is actually very rare and is found only once in my data.[21]

(25) SB.10.10278, 2, 114–119 CE (contract)

χαίρειν. πρὸ πάντων σε **εὔχομαι** ⟦σε⟧ **ὑγιαίνειν**

'Greetings! Above all **I wish that you are well**'

(26) P.oxy.17.2107, 9, 262CE (receipt)

ἐρρῶσθαι ὑμᾶς εἴη

'**May it be that you are well**'

Thus, apart from the wish optative featuring new insubordinate constructions, the true impact of these alternative wish strategies on the use of the wish optative seems to have been rather limited. This may explain why the wish optative has its own specialised functions in the papyri but seems mostly unaffected in the literary texts (apart from μὴ γένοιτο).

9.4 The persistence and specialisation of wish optatives in postclassical Greek papyri and literary texts

As mentioned in Subsection 9.2.1, there are conflicting ideas about the wish optative in postclassical Greek. Though some have suggested that the wish optative occurs 'usually in set phrases (where the mood survived longest)' (Turner 1963, 120) or is effectively replaced

by imperatives and modal verbs which also introduce counterfactual wishes (for this view, see for example Radermacher 1925, 160), I argue here that the wish optative is persistent in the different postclassical Greek periods, yet shows some effects of formal and functional specialisation (cf. Evans 2003 on the development of μὴ γένοιτο). With specialisation, I refer to Hopper's notion:

> (w)ithin a functional domain, at one stage a variety of forms with different semantic nuances may be possible; as grammaticization takes place, this variety of formal choices narrows and the smaller number of forms selected assume more general grammatical meanings. (Hopper 1991, 22).

As in Section 9.2, I first discuss the evidence from the papyri (Subsection 9.4.1), after which I integrate the evidence from literary texts (Subsection 9.4.2).

9.4.1 Tracing wish optatives in the postclassical Greek papyri

As shown in Table 9.3, the wish optative is persistent across the different periods. It even displays an increase in usage in late postclassical Greek.

Table 9.3: The wish optative in the postclassical Greek papyri

Period	Frequency of the wish optative
Early postclassical Greek	102 (NRO 0.115)
Middle postclassical Greek	336 (NRO 0.139)
Late postclassical Greek	276 (NRO 0.275)

As with the potential optative, there is more to say than simply these numbers. There is a demonstrable impact of formal formulaicity on the wish optatives: of the total number of 716 recorded lemmas only a surprising 90 are unique, which covers only about 13 per cent of the total occurrences. The major reason for this is that the verb εἰμί 'to be' is responsible for 508 of the 716 occurrences of the wish optative, comprising 71 per cent of the occurrences. In fact, nearly all of these occurrences also belong to a restricted set of formulae, and these already

play a dominant role in early postclassical Greek. Already from early postclassical Greek onwards we find the following formulae being used for a specific set of functions, as illustrated by the following examples. Note that I added extra context in translation in example (28) within square brackets.

(25) UPZ.1.36, 21–22, 161 BCE (petition)
σοὶ δὲ **γίνοιτο** ἀνθ' ὧν πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ὁσίως διάκ[ει]σαι
'**May it happen** to you according to what is divine to perform piously'

(26) P.Fouad.18, 54 CE (contract)
εὐορκοῦσι μὲν ἡμῖν εὖ **εἴη**, ἐφιορκοῦσι δὲ τὰ ἐναντία
'They who swear honestly towards us, **let it be** well for us; but they who swear falsely, let the opposite befall them'

(27) P.Wisc.2.80, 114 CE (account)
μηδὲν διεψεῦσθαι ἢ **ἔνοχος εἴην τῷ ὅρκωι**
'to deceive in no way or **may I be found guilty of breaking the oath**'

(28) P.Wisc. 1 7, III CE (lease)
ἐὰν δέ τις, **ὃ μὴ εἴη**, τῷ ἑξῆς ἔτ̣[ει] ἄβροχος γένηται …
'If, **which I wish not to be the case**, in the following period of time the land is not reached by the flooding of the Nile [the leaseholder must needs irrigate at his own cost and expense two thirds of the land which he would have had to cultivate in case of inundation by the flooding of the Nile]'

Whereas example (25) is a formulaic way to wish someone well, the wishes in examples (26), (27), and (28) use a wish to align commitments with contracted parties; this happens with reference to oaths in examples (26) and (27), whereas in example (29) the speaker uses the wish to show sincerity in committing to the contract by explicitly evaluating a negative outcome as a negative one.

The distributional formulaicity becomes even more apparent in later periods of postclassical Greek.[22] In middle postclassical Greek, 300 of the 336 instances fall into three distinct formulaic groups: contractual formulae such as examples (26) to (28), wish greetings with χαίροις (discussed later in this subsection), and formulae of health (of the speaker or hearer). Moreover, a large majority of these, viz. 244 of 336 (73 per cent), are contractual formulae. These have a clear specialised function, as they appear only in document types in which certain contractual agreements are made such as contracts (sale/lease), declarations, accounts, and administrative registers/reports. In diachronic terms of specialisation, the number of choices in the use of the wish optative decreases in middle postclassical Greek.

However, we should not take these observations to mean that the wish optative has become completely formulaic from that point onwards or already was before, especially considering the data from late postclassical Greek. In this period, 141 of the 276 wish optatives (51 per cent) belong to this contractual group, but we continue to find 'free' uses of the wish optative for other communicative goals, as shown in examples (29) and (30).

(29) SB.14.11666, 16, 300–325 CE (letter)

εὐδαιμονοῖς.

'**May you be prosperous**.'

(30) PSI.1.49, 2, VI CE (private letter)

ὀπίου, **θεὸς μοι μαρτυροῖ**, πάνυ ἐζητησεν (l. ἐζήτησα)

'Which, **may god be my witness**, I inquired about a lot'

We similarly find such free uses of the wish optative in earlier periods, as illustrated by examples (31) and (32):

(31) P.Zen.Pestm.50, 6, 257 BCE (business letter)

αὐτὴ δέ σοι **δοίη** ἐπαφροδισίαν πρ[ὸς τὸν βασι]λ̣έα

'**May she give** elegance towards the king'

(32) SB.14.11694, II–VI CE (mummy label)

ἀείμνηστος **εἴης** Τανγοραυς Ἀπολλωνίου

'**May you be** always remembered Tangoraus of Apollonius'

In fact, the wish optative is also used in innovative patterns with respect to earlier periods, in particular the use of the wish optative to make greetings, χαίροις. This novel pattern in the papyri (but not in literary texts; see Subsection 9.4.2) first occurs in papyri from middle postclassical Greek. Since this use appears in a greeting structure, which is part of the social conduct that people are expected to display, I would like to suggest that the origin of this structure lies in the need to find a polite form for what is essentially politic behaviour. This interpretation can be supported in two ways. On the one hand, we find many examples in the papyri where the greeting is used in an exchange with some kind of social superior. Compare example (33), where an unknown writer uses it to greet the strategos Apollonius and combines it with several other politeness strategies (which I have put in bold in the example).

(33) P.Brem.19, 1–12, 113–120 CE (private letter)

> **χαίροις, κύριέ μου Ἀπολλώνιε**. περὶ οὗ σε παρεκάλεσα κατ᾽ ὄψιν, **τειμιώτατε** (l. τιμιώτατε), καὶ ἐκ τύχης Ἁρπ[ο-]κρατίωνος ἐλθόντος πρὸς Δεῖον, συνέβαλ\ον/(<corr. ex) \αὐ/[τῷ] καὶ ὑπερεθέμεθα εἰς τ[ὴν] σὴν διάγνωσιν, ἵνα (=ἵνα papyrus), ὃ ἐπιδικαιώσῃς, τοῦτο γένηται. τὸ μὲν φανέν σοι, κύριε, δηλώσεις [μο]ι. (hand 2) **ἐρρῶσθαί σε εὔχομαι, Ἀπολλώνιε τιμιώτατε.**
>
> '**Rejoice, my lord Apollonius**. Regarding what I requested of you in person, **most honoured one**, and with the arrival of Harpokration by chance before Deion, I have discussed with him and we have agreed to present it to your judgement, so that, if you deem it worthy, it may come to pass. The visible matter, **my lord**, you will reveal to me. (hand 2) **I pray for your good health, Apollonius, most honoured one**.'

On the other hand, there seems to be some quantitative support for the politeness interpretation of this politic structure, as most occur in connections with address forms that signal a superior, for instance κύριέ μου as in example (33) (cf. P.oxy.6.933) or superlatives such as τιμιώτατε (cf. P.Princ.2.71). In sum, the wish optative, though used in formulaic patterns, is also used in free composition as well as to create innovative patterns in the different periods of postclassical Greek (cf. la Roi 2025b).

9.4.2 Tracing wish optatives in postclassical Greek literary texts

As with the potential optative in the evidence from postclassical Greek literary texts, the types of formulaic usages that we find in the papyri generally cannot be found in the evidence from literary texts. Instead, three main observations can be made: the wish optative enjoys formal and functional freedom across the different periods; the wish optative is used in innovative patterns which develop on their own (e.g. insubordinate wishes or the shorthand μὴ γένοιτο); and the creation of the polite politic greeting χαίροις was already anticipated in early postclassical Greek literary texts.

To illustrate the formal and distributional freedom of wish optatives from the different periods, I cite a variety of examples here. In example (34) we have a curse, whereas in example (35) we find one of the few uses of a wish to perform an oath in this period, which is recorded by Polybius.

(34) Men. *Dysc.* 220–21

ἀλλά σ', ὦ Κνήμων, κακὸν
κακῶς ἅπαντες **ἀπολέσειαν οἱ θεοί.**

'Knemon, **I hope** that all **the gods will damn** and blast you for your sins!'

(35) Pol. 3.25.9

εὐορκοῦντι μέν μοι εἴη τἀγαθά· **εἰ δ' ἄλλως διανοηθείην τι ἢ πράξαιμι**, πάντων τῶν ἄλλων σῳζομένων ἐν ταῖς ἰδίαις πατρίσιν, ἐν τοῖς ἰδίοις νόμοις, ἐπὶ τῶν ἰδίων βίων, ἱερῶν, τάφων, ἐγὼ μόνος **ἐκπέσοιμι** οὕτως ὡς ὅδε λίθος νῦν.

'"If I abide by this my oath may all good be mine, **but if I do otherwise in thought or act**, let all other men dwell safe in their own countries under their own laws and in possession of their own substance, temples, and tombs, and **may I** alone **be cast forth**, even as this stone", and so saying he throws the stone from his hand.'

In examples (36) and (37), from Epictetus, one can notice that γένοιτο, though it develops its own use as a communicative shorthand for 'of course not' in the form of μὴ γένοιτο, the form itself can be

used freely to form other wishes in different contexts.[23] As illustrated by example (38), the same applies for late postclassical Greek.

(36) Epict. 2.2.14

μή σοι **γένοιτο** πληγὰς πολλὰς λαβεῖν καὶ ὕστερον ἀπαγορεῦσαι

'**May it be far** from you to receive many blows and yet at the last give in'

(37) Epict. 1.25.31

'ὕβριν σοι πεποίηκα.' **καλῶς σοι γένοιτο.**

'"I have outraged you." **Much good may it do you.**'

(38) Bas. *Ep.* 17.1.10–12

Ἀνθ' ὧν καὶ **παράσχοι** ὑμῖν ὁ Κύριος πᾶσαν εὐθηνίαν οἴκου καὶ εἰς παῖδας παίδων τὴν εὐλογίαν διαβιβάσαι.

'Wherefore **may** the Lord also **grant** you all well-being at home, and may His blessings pass on to your children's children.'

In addition, though space prevents me from discussing these here (see la Roi 2025c), the wish optative comes to be used in various insubordinate wish patterns, innovative ones (cf. example 20) and ones that persist into postclassical Greek (e.g. Men. *Dysc.* εἴθε μοι γένοιτο 'May this happen for me' or Luc. *Prom.* 20.13 Εἰ γὰρ γένοιτο ὦ Προμηθεῦ, ταῦτα 'May these things happen, Prometheus').

Furthermore, as very briefly described by Evans (2003, 74–78), the use of μὴ γένοιτο is common in middle and late postclassical Greek. What Evans gives less attention, though, is the fact that μὴ γένοιτο starts to occur in specific linguistic contexts, in my view to discard a proposition from the immediate linguistic common ground. In classical Greek examples such as (39), we find μὴ γένοιτο to discount a part of the clause (i.e. having partial clausal scope). As such, it resembles the contractual uses of μὴ γένοιτο (e.g. BGU.7.1651, 5, II CE, contract) or ὃ μὴ εἴη (cf. example 28) that we find in the papyri.

(39) Ar. *Lys*. 146–48

εἰ δ' ὡς μάλιστ' ἀπεχοίμεθ' οὗ σὺ δὴ λέγεις,—**δ**
μὴ γένοιτο,—μᾶλλον ἂν διὰ τουτογὶ
γένοιτ' ἂν εἰρήνη;

'Well, if we did abstain from, uh, what you say—**which heaven forbid**—would peace be likelier to come on that account?'

In postclassical Greek, however, it comes to be used by speakers as a signal to discard a full proposition from the immediate linguistic common ground, as shown by Epictetus' use after a rhetorical question to mean 'of course not'.

(40) Epict. Diss. 1.36

τί οὖν; ἐπειδὴ ἀφυής εἰμι, ἀποστῶ τῆς ἐπιμελείας τούτου ἕνεκα; **μὴ γένοιτο.**

'What then? Because I have no natural gifts, shall I on that account give up my discipline? **Of course not!**'

Those same uses are also found in later authors, beside the compositional uses of γένοιτο mentioned above, as in example (41).

(41) Greg. Naz. *Ep. Theol.* 101.20.4

Καὶ εἰ δεῖ συντόμως εἰπεῖν, ἄλλο μὲν καὶ ἄλλο τὰ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Σωτὴρ (εἴπερ μὴ ταὐτὸν τὸ ἀόρατον τῷ ὁρατῷ καὶ τὸ ἄχρονον τῷ ὑπὸ χρόνον), οὐκ ἄλλος δὲ καὶ ἄλλος· **μὴ γένοιτο.**

'And if it needs to be said briefly, one thing is different and another is the invisible from the visible (if the invisible is not the same as the visible and the timeless is not the same as that subject to time), but one is not different from another. **Of course not.**'

Finally, the evidence for the wish optatives in literary texts confirms that there was already a connection of the politic greeting χαίροις with politeness. Already in early postclassical Greek, we find polite uses of the greeting in Herodas and Theocritus, for example to greet a host of gods in example (42) or to greet the lucky bride and groom in (43). Note in particular the sequence of wish greetings in (42) used to address different gods.

(42) Her. 4.1–11

χαίροις, ἄϝαξ Παίηον, ὃς μέδεις Τρίκκης
καὶ Κῶν γλυκεῖαν κὴπίδαυρον ὤικηκας,
σὺν καὶ Κορωνὶς ἥ σ' ἔτικτε κὠπόλλων
χαίροιεν, ἧς τε χειρὶ δεξιῆι ψαύεις
Ὑγίεια, κὥνπερ οἵδε τίμιοι βωμοί
Πανάκη τε κὴπιώ τε κἰησὼ **χαίροι**,
κοὶ Λεωμέδοντος οἰκίην τε καὶ τείχεα
πέρσαντες, ἰητῆρες ἀγρίων νούσων,
Ποδαλείριός τε καὶ Μαχάων χαιρόντων,
κὥσοι θεοὶ σὴν ἐστίην κατοικεῦσιν
καὶ θεαί, πάτερ Παίηον·

'**Greetings**, Lord Paeeon, who rulest Tricca and hast settled sweet Cos and Epidaurus, and also **may** Coronis who gave thee birth and Apollo **be greeted**, and she whom thou touchest with thy right hand Hygieia, and those to whom belong these honoured altars, Panace and Epio and Ieso **be greeted**, and the sackers of Laomedon's house and walls, curers of cruel diseases, Podalirios and Machaon **be greeted**, and whatsoever gods and goddesses live at thy hearth, father Paeeon.'

(43) Theoc. 18.49–53

Χαίροις, ὦ νύμφα· χαίροις, εὐπένθερε γαμβρέ.
Λατὼ μὲν δοίη, Λατὼ κουροτρόφος, ὔμμιν
εὐτεκνίαν, Κύπρις δέ, θεὰ Κύπρις, ἶσον ἔρασθαι
ἀλλάλων, Ζεὺς δέ, Κρονίδας Ζεύς, ἄφθιτον ὄλβον,
ὡς ἐξ εὐπατριδᾶν εἰς εὐπατρίδας πάλιν ἔνθῃ.

'**Greetings, bride; Greetings, groom, fortunate in your wife's father.** May Leto—that good mother Leto—grant to you both fine children, Cypris—the goddess Cypris—mutual love, and Zeus—Zeus the son of Cronus—endless prosperity, and that it may pass again from noble fathers to noble sons.'

9.5 Concluding remarks on the history of the optative and postclassical Greek

In this chapter, I have proposed an alternative history of the optative in postclassical Greek (III BCE–VI CE), from a story of teleological loss, decline, and Atticism to one of persistence, formulae, and innovation. A key instrument in rewriting the received history was the contrastive evidence from the papyri and the literary texts from postclassical Greek, evidence that could now be compared with the relatively new digital tools of Trismegistos Words and the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae. First, I offered a critical examination of the discourse on the history of the optative, a *metahistory*, to highlight five different problems in the description of the history of the optative which attest to wider issues in the description of the history of postclassical Greek: (i) conflicting trends for the papyrological evidence, (ii) normative ideas about the use of the optative, (iii) ad hoc suggestions about diachronic replacements, (iv) allusions to systemic changes, and (v) unquantified relative statements of diachrony. Second, I showed that the potential optative is persistent in its main and subordinate clause usages across the periods in the papyri as well as literary texts, pointing out that specific formulaic usages only play roles in certain periods (e.g. καλῶς ἂν ποιήσαις in the third century BCE) and are in fact limited to the papyri. Third, I showed that formulaic usages actually made up a larger part of the wish optatives in the papyri, where we found specialised usages in a formal sense (e.g. εἴη) as well as a functional sense (e.g. in contractual formulae). Yet, these changes did not stop the wish optative being used in free composition or, in fact, innovate in the papyri. Moreover, the freedom, as it were, of the wish optative to be used in wishes across the postclassical Greek periods was substantiated by the evidence from literary texts. To conclude, I would like to cite the words by Evans (2003, 70) which reinforce the suggestions that I made in this article to rewrite received histories: 'Greek grammatical scholarship abounds in orthodox observations that reflect received wisdom and are increasingly overdue for reassessment. The sphere of verbal usage is rich in examples.'

Notes

1 I use the periodisation into early (III–I BCE), middle (I–III CE), and late (IV–VI CE) postclassical Greek, as proposed by Lee (2007, 113) and applied in different later works (e.g. Bentein 2016; Evans and Obbink 2010, 10–12; la Roi 2022c).

2 The still common idea that the use of the optative is a trait of Atticistic authors is also already alluded to by Meillet, who explains higher and lower frequencies of the optative in Atticising ('atticisant') versus non- or less Atticising authors (Meillet 2009, 276). As shown by the discussion of the corpus evidence in Sections 9.2 and 9.3, the actual evidence for the Atticism of the optative is very limited.

3 A similar problem occurs when one uses the presence or absence of the optative to characterise different genres over a longer period, as for example done by Bentein (2016, 25–27).

4 Note that for this idea, most authors rely on the observations and counts given by Meillet (compare Meillet 2009, 278 with Bianconi and Magni 2022, 25; Horrocks 2010, 138; Mandilaras 1973, 287; Turner 1963, 118–19).

5 See la Roi (2020b, 229–33) for a discussion of wider issues of representativity in describing postclassical Greek.

6 The translations of literary texts are based on the most recent translations found in Loeb Classics online.

7 Cf. the same uses in classical Greek such as E. *Andr.* 85 πολλὰς ἂν εὕροις μηχανάς· γυνὴ γὰρ εἶ or D. 101.58 εἰ τοίνυν ὡς οἷόν τε μέγιστ' ἠδικῆσθαι δοίη τις αὐτῷ καὶ ἐρεῖν ἅπαντ' ἀληθῆ περὶ τούτων νυνί, ἐκεῖνό γ' οἶμαι πάντας ἂν ὑμᾶς ὁμολογῆσαι.

8 A good illustration of the downsides of this approach is McKay (1993). In his very brief paper, he makes some relevant observations on the continuity of the optative from classical Greek into the papyri, but also repeats the traditional discourse that the optative was used for Atticistic effect and could be effectively replaced by other modal forms.

9 Cf. Horrocks (2010, 102 my emphasis): 'The optative **disappeared quite quickly** in non-literary registers of the Koine, **except in its "core" meaning of expressing a wish,** because its classical use in various kinds of subordinate clause in past time contexts was often semantically opaque, as in reported speech, or already subject to replacement by subjunctives, as in final clauses; various modal auxiliaries were also available to take on the sense of possibility which, in conjunction with the particle ἄν [an], it conveyed in main clauses.'

10 Of course, we should not forget that it was not very easy to quantify such patterns in the past.

11 The total numbers of words for the different periods used are, respectively: 886,198; 2,396,693; and 1,005,421 words.

12 The translations are based on those available at https://papyri.info/, last accessed 4 July 2023. If not, they are my own, except for example (4).

13 This formula is discussed at length in la Roi (2025b), who shows that 88 per cent of its use can be linked to Zenon, suggesting that this might have been a stylistic feature that spread from there. Another formula of this kind which space prevents me from discussing here is the following type: χαρίζοιο δ' ⟦ἄν⟧

μοι στρῶμα ἀποστείλας 'you would please me if you send me straw' (P.Cair. Zen.3.59305, 250 BCE, private letter). This formula occurs 23 times in early postclassical Greek.

14 Another good example is P.Lond.5.1658, 6–7, IV CE, private letter: γὰρ τίς τῶν ἀνθρώπων οὐκ ἂν θελήσιεν (l. θελήσειεν) προσομιλεῖν [σ]οι 'for who from the people would not want to talk with you?'.

15 The suggestions by Mandilaras (1973, 283) that such conditionals are stereotyped expressions or replacements of a subjunctive can thereby be directly refuted.

16 Though we do find slightly earlier uses with the verb in the third person, for example, Stud.Pal.5.97, 9a, 266–68 CE, official letter.

17 The only common pattern that also exists in the literary texts is καλῶς ἂν ἔχοι 'it would be good', but this example does not have the same frequency as in the papyri (with around 90 occurrences in the whole postclassical Greek period), nor does it have the same degree of morphosyntactic formulaicity, because it is not restricted to the same sentence type of 'it would be good' with a condition. Even a usage which occurs more often, such as the 'one may say' formula εἴποι τις ἄν, occurs across periods without indications of further fossilisation (cf. Pol. 39.3.2, D. Chr. 31.20.9, Lib. *Or.* 58.39.1).

18 I leave it for further research to determine whether these formulaic uses occur in inscriptions or not.

19 Another parallel, in the use δοίη 'may he grant' in a conditional clause, is Epict. 1.17.10 and Luc. *Rev.* 12.17. or *Tox.* 42.2.

20 Cf. the origins of English 'Goodbye' as 'God be with you'.

21 Instead, the use of this wish optative in a health wish occurs predominantly in testaments to stipulate a part of the procedure, of the type 'May it be that I in good health X' (e.g. εἴη μέν μοι ὑγιαίνοντι SB.14.11642, 8, 176 CE, testament). See la Roi (2025a) for a detailed history of the forms and functions of this performative wish verb in the postclassical Greek papyri.

22 A more detailed analysis of the different intersubjective functions of these optatival wishes in postclassical Greek is offered in la Roi (2025a).

23 Another contemporary example is Luc. *Gall.* 15.11 οὕτω σοὶ γένοιτο 'may it be so'.

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