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The texture of a linguistic environment: new perspectives on the Greek of Southern Albania

Christopher G. Brown & Brian D. Joseph
The Ohio State University
brown.2853@osu.edu // joseph.1@osu.edu

1. Introduction

Our goal in this study is to study the Greek of Southern Albania in its many synchronic varieties through an approach we call the "ecology of language" (drawing on works such as Mufwene 2001, 2005, 2008). "Ecology" here is a cover term for various factors external to languages that affect their evolution and development. These include factors relevant to the communal life of specific populations, to patterns of socialization, to ways of interacting, to economic activities, to geographic relations, to effects of other ambient languages, to attitudes to other populations and their traditions, to political structures in which the speakers live, and to religion, to name a few. "Ecology of language", therefore, as an approach, goes beyond typical sociolinguistic factors, such as age, gender, socio-economic status, prestige, and the like, and takes in the whole of the environment in which the language resides and is used.

A few key points need to be emphasized here: we say "Greek varieties" because anything that counts as Greek, that speakers themselves recognize as Greek -- in some form -- is relevant for understanding the role of Greek in the local linguistic ecology. History is certainly relevant for getting the language to this point, but our approach is synchronically focused. The presence of other languages is important, and interesting, as we can see how Greek in southern Albania functions in a characteristically multilingual Balkan environment, with linguistically mixed marriages, multilingual towns, and multilingual interactions in varied settings; but contact with other languages itself is not our focus.

Rather, in taking an "ecology of language" approach, we explore all varieties of Greek as they are used in the region, without any special interest in their prehistory or dialectological status.

2. Setting

In accordance with the dialectological maxim that "mountains divide, rivers (and highways) unite", we note first that this mountain region shows unusual language diversity; as Winnifrith (2002: 22) puts it, "The eastern area of the district… is one where

there are more languages than lakes". Besides Greek and Albanian, also to be found in the region are Aromanian (Vlach) speakers and Romani speakers, and there is also dialect diversity to be found, as noted below for both Greek and Albanian. Continuing geographically, it is to be observed that in the western part of southern Albania, where it borders on Greece, there is no obvious physical border separating the Albanian region from Greek Epirus. In terms of the historical setting, there is the presence of notable monuments in many Greek-speaking villages in the form of schoolhouses that go back to the activity of St. Cosmas the Aitolian, an itinerant who promoted instruction in the Greek language.

Our observations about the Greek of the region were made during three trips to southern Albania, in September/October 2010, September 5-12, 2011, and March 21-22, 2012. During these visits we interviewed a wide range of Greek speakers, with representatives of at least five different language environments.[1] What follows is a description of these five discrete environments, a classification that does not pretend to be exhaustive.

A) Τα ριζά

The first environment includes older, generally Greek-identifying speakers in remote mountain villages near the Greek border (τα ριζά), such as Divri, Theologos, and the δασκαλοχώρι Lesinitsa. In past generations some residents did not know Albanian. In these villages most speakers have Greek as their first language (L1). The traditional regional dialect is still widely spoken in this region; it is close to the Thesprotian dialect used in the novels of Sotiris Dimitriou (e.g. Δημητρίου 1993).

Though marked by a long diaspora tradition, these villages seem to be dying out; Lesinitsa, for example, has a winter population of about 60. The younger generation of Greek speakers has moved to Greece and elsewhere since 1990, and villages are populated mostly by retirees. There are signs, however, that, in the wake of the economic crisis in Greece, some people with roots in the area are returning, mainly retirees but also some families in Lesinitsa, and in Divri there was even talk of *spitomania*, a construction boom. It will be interesting to see what linguistic features these returnees bring to the area.

B) Bilingual Orthodox villages

A second environment is that of villages such as Muzinë on the mountainous road from the Vourkos to D(e)ropoli, where both Albanian and Greek are spoken. As elsewhere, emigration and demographic decline have reduced this village to a fraction of its earlier population. Residents of Muzinë are bilingual, identifying as Greek speakers and

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Orthodox. Albanian is the L1, for the most part, but residents are fluent in both languages and freely switch languages depending on their interlocutors. Speakers use Greek especially for good wishes, songs, and religious functions, and when addressing Greek speakers. One informant reports that curses used to be in Greek but are now Albanian. Children generally speak Albanian at home. Attitudes towards Greek and Albanian identity are complex and vary among individuals, but generally profession of Greek identity does not conflict with loyalty to the Albanian state. One speaker commented, είμαστε ταμάμ Ελληνες.

C) Villages in the coastal Vourkos and the D(e)ropoli valley near Argyrokastro

In these areas Greek-speaking villages are nestled next to Lab Albanian, some Çam Albanian, and Vlach (Aromanian)-speaking villages, as well as Roma settlements. Despite significant diaspora migration these villages are more demographically stable than the mountain villages. In these villages, Greek is widely spoken as the L1, although some informants report that the local dialect is being lost.

D) Himara and Drymades region

Greek identity and language are most politicized in the city of Himara and surrounding villages further north on the coast; in these areas the minority status of the Greek language is not recognized by the state. In the homeland of Spyros Milios, a hero of the Greek war of independence in 1821, many Greek-speakers prize their Himariote identity. Linguistic and community tensions contributed to the murder of Aristotle Gouma, a Greek-speaking resident, in July of 2010. A Greek-speaking informant from Himara reported that the town is 60% Greek speaking, although this number is hotly contested by some Albanian-speakers.

E) District capitals

District capitals in the area represent distinct urban linguistic environments. Ayioi Saranda (in Albanian, Sarandë), formerly a mainly Greek-speaking town of some 15,000, is now largely Albanian speaking but with an interesting mix among its current population of approximately 30,000, including: long-standing, mostly Greek-speaking, residents; one longtime resident refers to more recent arrivals as *hondrochoriates,* a play on the expression *arhondohoriates*; villagers from the Vourkos who have migrated to the city; Albanian-speaking migrants from other parts of Albania (Tepelinë, Avlona, etc.); Albanians who have worked in Greece and now live there, often with families, including children who lived in Greece; some workers and professionals from Greece; and, in the summer, tourists, especially from the Greek island of Corfu. While Ayioi Saranda has grown, the inland town of Delvino, with a linguistically mixed population, has lost about a third of its population since 1991.

Gjirokastër is an urban environment of a different composition from Sarandë, with about 35,000 residents. With an Albanian-speaking majority, and minorities for whom Greek, Vlach, and Roma is the L1, many residents speak Greek. The university community draws students from all over southern Albania, including students in an active

Modern Greek Studies program. These students are mostly L1 Albanian speakers who are perfecting their Greek.

3. Observations on the language ecology with representative case studies of the region and its speakers

What follows are four case studies of representative speakers encountered during our travels in the region.

A) An L1 Albanian speaker, an engineer born and raised in Ayioi Saranda, he grew up in the Hoxha period when, he claims, speaking Greek was forbidden so that his mother, a native Greek-speaker, did not speak to him in Greek. He now travels to Ioannina and Arta frequently, presumably for business/work, and is comfortable in Greek as a *lingua franca.*

This speaker uses forms such as επιστρεύουνε for Standard Modern Greek (SMG) επιστρέφουνε 'they return', οικοτζένεια for SMG οικογένεια 'family', πητζαίνω for SMG πηγαίνω 'go'. In these last two forms, he has taken the (highly fricated) Greek palatal approximant represented by <γ> as equivalent to the Albanian palatal affricate represented orthographically in Albanian by <gj> (which is "softer" than that represented by <xh>).

B) His friend, a native Albanian speaker, gained a reasonable command of Greek over ten years working in Greece. One feature of his Greek usage is his pronunciation of όχι 'no' as *óki*, showing interference from Albanian, which lacks a velar fricative [x].

He is representative of a new population of competent (but non-native) SMG speakers in the region and throughout the country: migrant workers who have returned to Albania after living in Greece for some time and acquiring the Greek language.

C) A third case study—really several at once—was presented by our meeting with students from the Modern Greek program of the Eqrem Çabej University of Gjirokastër illustrated the range of Greek language use in the region:

• all are speakers of SMG, but showed familiarity with the Epirote dialect, and many seem to use the language in e.g. village and family situations.

• two students were of Muslim background, one of whom had learned Greek while living in Greece.

• four students speak mainly Albanian at home, two mainly Greek, three speak both languages at home, and one speaks Vlach (Aromanian); three reported that they talk exclusively Greek to themselves, one Albanian, three both languages, and one both Vlach and Albanian.

• a strong identification with the Greek language was the motivation for most; most want to become teachers of Greek, another finds it required for office work, and another hopes to work in translation.

The existence of this Greek language program at the university in Gjirokaster reflects a change in the status of Greek in the area. Greek speakers and Orthodox Christians in general are now economically privileged, many receiving pensions from the Greek government. Many are beneficiaries of Greek infrastructure investment and church or business contacts; this seems to be reflected in increasing self-identification of Greek-speakers and Orthodox Christians as Greeks.

D) Finally, a fourth case study is that of a taxi driver in Ayioi Saranda recently expelled from Greece; originally from the region, he migrated to Greece with his family, where he adopted a Christian name and embraced Orthodoxy. His family remains in Athens, and his children have married Greeks and raise their children as Greeks. Although Albanian is his L1, people like him are part of the Greek language picture in this area. Many Albanians working in Greece have converted to Orthodoxy; this may affect the religious demographics of the region if they return.

4. Contact Effects

From our interviews with these and other speakers in the area, it became apparent that ongoing contact between speakers of Greek and speakers of Albanian in this area is yielding many effects on the languages. In some instances of course the "speakers" involved here are one and the same person, in that, as noted above, most speakers of Greek have some familiarity with Albanian and many speakers of Albanian have some familiarity with Greek. We note here some aspects of the Greek that appear to be the result of influence from Albanian.

Phonological effects include pronunciations such as [ε]κονομικὴ κρίση instead of οικονομική κρίση 'economic crisis', quite likely due to the Albanian word *ekonomik* meaning 'economic'. Likewise the Greek language is often called ελλ[ε]νικά instead of ελληνικά, again likely because of the Albanian word *elenik* 'Hellenic' (though the language is typically referred to in Albanian as *greqisht*). The word for 'tooth' is often heard as δ[ε]ντούρα, by contrast with δ[ο]ντούρα elsewhere in southern Albania, and δόντι elsewhere in Greek, with [ε] likely from the Albanian word *dentar* meaning 'dental'.

Lexical effects may include the use of αγαπάω in questions regarding one's wishes, as in τι αγαπάς να ξέρεις 'What do you want to know?' (= literally "what you-love that you-know"), or τι αγαπάτε? 'What would you like / what do you want (to drink)?' (= literally "what you-love?"). Although this latter usage is found sporadically elsewhere in Greek, e.g. in Mytiline, and may have been characteristic of Athenian usage of the 1950s, its (continued) use here, and the former usage with a complement verb, likely shows influence of the Albanian verb *dua*, which means 'want' but also 'love'.

5. Conclusions

In taking account the linguistic ecology of a region, the basic question that needs to be addressed is who counts as a speaker of a given language. In the region of southern Albania, is the term to be confined, as in traditional linguistics, to native speakers of Greek, or to speakers for whom Greek is now the dominant or primary language? Do only "pure dialect" speakers—to the extent that such a notion makes sense even—count, by contrast with transplanted standard Greek speakers? In a region marked by tourism and commercial travel, do only residents count as local speakers? Are only adults to be counted, even though there may be children who may speak a different form of the language from their parents?

An ecology of language approach recognizes the many kinds of Greek speakers in the area. The number of users of Greek for whom the language is a secondarily acquired language, perhaps even in adulthood, seems to reflect the increased status of the Greek language in the area since the end of Hoxha era. The many children speaking standard Greek suggest the form that the language will take in the region in the future, while older, "dialect" speakers show the form the language has taken in the past (what might appear to be "living history") and offer rich material that many non-"dialect" speakers are aware of and even interested in. Local native speakers who have spent time in Greece are bringing aspects of the standard language back to the region, while Greek tourists offer occasional exposure to other dialects (and are another, albeit small, conduit to the standard language.) An ecological approach suggests that the patterns of language use and bilingualism that led to the formation of the Balkan *Sprachbund* during the Ottoman period may once again, or in some instances still, be present in the region.

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