

Language practice in Greece

The effects of European policy on multilingualism

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Abstract

Greece accords a high importance to the maintenance of the Greek language and culture, and has traditionally affirmed the monolingual and monocultural nature of the country. As Greece has engaged more closely with wider European values, it has developed a stronger awareness of the values of multilingualism. Key factors in this area have been European integration, increased migration and the development of Greece's relationships with the neighbouring Balkan area. The teaching of Greek as a foreign or second language has been developed and the learning of major foreign languages has been strongly pursued and strengthened in primary and secondary education. And there is emerging recognition that ethnocentric attitudes towards less highly regarded languages also need to be challenged.

Keywords: Greece, multilingualism, Europe, language policy, education, Balkans, migration

A quick overview of language policy in Greece at the start of the twenty-first century reveals two tendencies. One is the development of policy concerning multilingualism and multiculturalism that results from the increased integration of Greece into the EU, as well as from the changing political and socio-economic situation in the post-socialist Balkan area. The EU has come out very strongly in support of European multilingualism (Council of Europe 2003, Commission of the European Communities 2003). The aim is to loosen the grip of nation-state thinking, to help promote ever-closer union in economic, monetary and political terms, to unify European legal systems and to intensify cross-border contacts. For this very reason, on the other hand, a rather conservative approach to the language question prevails in Greece; it is apparent in public discourse and deploys a range of arguments in reaction to the increased significance of multilingual and multicultural policies. Hence, academics give central importance to the need for a clear conception of language policy. Certainly, in this context educational and language policy questions recur constantly in political discourse. However, it should be noted that the positive consequences of a multilingualism policy are not securely underpinned. But it is precisely

attitudes to language policy that form the basis for the sociolinguistic position of the Greek language at home and (above all) abroad, as they do also for the sociolinguistic position of foreign languages and that of speakers of other languages. It follows that any argument about future developments can only conceptualise the conditions and consequences of language policy decisions in the light of a diachronic discussion of questions thrown up by new findings about the nature and challenges of Greek society.

A survey of the language policy situation in Greece

Along with religion, language represents one of the most important core values (Smolicz 1981) that make up Greek national identity and strengthen its inner stability. At the same time, a feeling of national arrogance, especially towards Greece's Balkan neighbours, predominates – arrogance derived from a nation-state consciousness based on the millennium-long coherence and consistency of Greek language, religion and culture (Fragoudaki 2001). Greek has existed for thousands of years in contact with other languages. In many areas it was always the dominant language, even if the language of administration varied from time to time. Linguistic and cultural contacts have been ensured by the mobility of small or large ethnic groups, particularly within the Balkan region, as commonly in earlier times as in the more recent centuries of Ottoman rule: substantially, idioms with Balkan-wide linguistic characteristics are still in use today in northern Greece (Tzitzilis 2000: 16). Since the Greek state was founded in 1824, it has never embraced multilingualism, and within the ideological framework of nation-state building in Europe, it proclaimed itself monolingual and homogeneously Greek-speaking. Although the legitimacy of the language was derived from ancient Greek, in practice the Peloponnesian variety of Modern Greek prevailed as the official language of the new state. However, this version of the continuity of the Greek language was interpreted in differing ways by the influential educated classes on the one hand and the ordinary population and freedom fighters on the other. These differing perceptions, with all their social and education-policy consequences, led to diglossia. The diglossic opposition of Katharevousa (elaborate, 'pure' language) versus Demotike (language of the people) was only resolved in 1974 with the adoption of Demotike as the sole legitimate standard language (Fragoudaki 2001).

Greece extended its borders early in the twentieth century (Balkan wars, 1912–17) (Clogg 1992) by annexing territory to the north, where extraneous languages were spoken by a significant part of the population. Nonetheless, for

decades the widespread tendency to ignore multilingualism on home soil had an impact on language policy, and supported continuous efforts to promote linguistic homogeneity. Driven by circumstances in the 1920s, which were as crucial for Greece as for other countries (military defeat in Asia Minor in 1922 and the mass displacement of ethnic Greeks and other bilingual or multilingual populations from these areas; see Clogg 1992); and under pressure from international treaties, there was a short-term move towards a compensatory language policy in favour of linguistic minorities. In the long term, however, the reality of policy reverted to the familiar entrenched and extensive discrimination against minority languages and dialects and their speakers (Kiliari 2002). It is only after 1990, under the influence of Europe, that we find the academic debate about multilingualism and multicultural moving forward and gradually helping to shape policy.

Linguistic uniformity has increased in recent decades as a result of factors such as the flood of Greek immigrants abroad since the 1950s, internal migrants from the northern regions particularly, compulsory schooling, and the powerful influence of television. The global spread and domination of English have also served to strengthen the standardisation of the Greek language. At the same time, Greeklish (Greek/English) has increasingly taken hold in certain areas of usage, especially among the younger generation, and the importance of traditional minority languages and regional dialects has diminished. However, even today we can still distinguish typologically a good dozen dialects, as well as languages spoken by minority ethnic communities (Tzitzilis 2000: 17).

International political developments in 1989 triggered a massive voluntary emigration, particularly from the wider Balkan area to Greece. Although this unlooked-for 'acquisition' of a few hundred thousand immigrants certainly supplied plenty of unskilled labour, especially in the agricultural and building sectors, it also had demographic and social consequences (I.ME.PO 2004). These effects are also to some extent discernible on the linguistic level. The palette of languages vying with each other in Greece has been further broadened by the return of many diaspora Greeks who are more or less bilingual;¹ the domination of the major EU languages (English, German, French, Italian); and other factors to do with the internationalising of the labour market.

In this context, foreign languages have been able to maintain their tradition-

1. The Greek diaspora (i.e., almost five million people) is characterised by marked internal differences. In addition to the many Greek communities in the traditional lands of emigration such as the USA, Australia and Germany, there are communities formed by former refugees from the civil war in the northern Balkan states and in Russia, as well as original communities in most of the post-Soviet republics around the Caspian Sea, and in southern Italy.

al standing. Most Greeks learn foreign languages in state schools, and obtain qualifications at all levels in the major EU languages.

In the last decade there have been further advances in the promotion of foreign languages. Starting from this point, what follows is an attempt to examine the present-day linguistic situation in Greece in the framework of European cultural-linguistic pluralism.

Language policy practice in the light of multilingualism

The effect of European multilingual and multicultural policies on language policy in Greece can be described as far-reaching. After years of neglect and strenuous efforts to impose linguistic homogeneity on traditional or newly settled ethnic communities speaking other languages (Tsitselikis 1996; Milios 1997; Christopoulos 2002), it was only from the mid-1990s that linguistic questions began to be raised (especially regarding education policy) that placed multilingualism in a more European context. These developments have shifted the terms of the debate. On one hand there is a stress on the advantages of the multilingualism and multiculturalism that are a constant feature of everyday life. On the other, concern with national identity and the impact of immigrant foreign workers means that public and political discourse still displays ethnocentricity (Christidis 1999; Kiliari 2002).

Greek society thus tends to be antagonistic, especially when immigrants from the Balkan fringes and from the Third World are inclined to insist on retaining their own, poorly regarded languages. However, Greece's new position within the Balkans and in the EU is making Greeks better disposed towards contacts with other cultures, and reinforcing the traditional Greek aspiration to learn foreign languages. Various European and other languages are being studied more intensively, and partially put to use. The cultural contacts of choice are mostly geared to the major European languages. Nonetheless, there is room for interest in the culture of more distant and marginal languages,² since nowadays the reasons for engaging with foreign languages and cultures are to do with practical objectives, or with meeting particular needs.

In compliance with the EU principle that all European citizens should have three languages (Council of Europe 2001: 168; 2003: 8; Commission of the European Communities 2003), English is taught as the compulsory first foreign language in Greek state schools from the third year in primary school onwards

2. In this context, there is an increasing tendency to offer courses such as Arabic and Chinese.

(i.e., from age nine), and pupils must choose to study either French or German as their second foreign language from their fifth primary year until the end of secondary school I.³ Recently (in the 2008/09 school year), and on a trial basis, Italian, Spanish, Russian and Turkish have been introduced as further choices at secondary level I. At secondary level II, however, foreign languages taught at primary school and at secondary level I are offered only on an elective basis, with the result of a massive drop in take-up. In addition, the state universities and technical colleges offer optional courses, mainly in the major European languages, to enable students of all faculties to acquire the appropriate specialist linguistic skills.

Most of the public are sceptical about the effectiveness of school foreign-language teaching, which has led to concomitant language-tutoring in the private sector, starting at an even younger age than language-teaching in the public sector. As ever, in most cases the first foreign language is the dominant language of 'universal' communication, English, while others, mainly the major European ones such as German, Italian, Spanish, and French, are acquired later.⁴

Conflicting language policy and social conclusions arise from this context, which actually run along two separate tracks. One tendency is to point out the 'impoverishment' of young people's Modern Greek, supposedly caused by the invasion of foreign languages. Against that, at various levels most Greeks have some command of foreign languages, something that continues to be highly respected, and a key to employment. Unfortunately, despite this strong pro-foreign language bias, regional multilingual competence is not appreciated, and the languages of Third World immigrants or of Greece's Balkan neighbours have no standing. It is notable in this connection that measures based on European multilingualism and multiculturalism (including an ambitious initiative on the part of the education ministry, supported financially by the EU and entitled 'The education of foreign and returning school students'),⁵ which is designed, among other things, to encourage mother-tongue competence among the children of immigrant workers, have hardly broken through into school practice, or have done so only with difficulty. It is therefore obvious that Greek language policy favours certain languages, and that this policy reflects the high esteem these languages and their cultures enjoy.

3. Greek schools are divided into three levels: primary: (*Dimotiko*) six years; secondary level I: high school (*Gymnasio*): three years; secondary level II: lyceum (*Lykion*: *Geniko* or *Techniko*): three years. (Primary and secondary level I together make up nine years of compulsory schooling.)

4. In this connection it should be said that languages such as Albanian, which are spoken by more than two-thirds of immigrants (I.M.E.P.O 2004), are deemed to have little functional value. Correspondingly, there is no interest in learning these languages.

5. <http://www.keda.uoa.gr> (accessed October 2008).

Questions about language policy relating to Greek as a foreign language (GrFL) or as a second language (GrSL) have been foregrounded by the return of Greek emigrants and the new position of Greek on the margin of the Balkans. In connection with Greek investment (on the part of, for example, large and medium-sized Greek businesses, banks, etc.) in the near-abroad Balkan periphery, Greek has also acquired a functional value there. Further far-reaching opportunities for cross-border communications and impetus for people in neighbouring regions to acquire Greek as a foreign language have arisen from the constant shuttling to and fro of many emigrants between their homeland and their host country, as well as the increasing numbers of tourists (especially in northern Greece) from the Balkans and from Russia.⁶ Given this scenario, there is much discussion within Greece of the changing role of Greek as the language of technology, the professions, and business (Kiliari 2007).

Greek is also increasing in importance among the world-wide Greek diaspora, whose participants perceive a new function for their mother tongue as a cultural symbol. This pronounced attitudinal trend means that Greek is being taught as a second or foreign language to second-, third-, even fourth-generation and earlier, descendants of the first generation of emigrants.⁷ In addition, taking into account the high percentage of foreign students in Greek schools (8.9 per cent, see Gotowos and Markou 2003), it has been impossible to sustain earlier Greek language policies, which concentrated solely on Greek as a mother tongue at home or abroad and basically ignored the demand for Greek as a foreign or second language. That is why the debate about promoting Greek as a foreign/second language has become prominent both at home and throughout the world. As a result, innovative language-policy thinking is gradually feeding through into educational policy. Early practical experience and positive feedback show that the measures taken are a step in the right direction: but much remains to be done in this respect.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that in recent decades, in response to the position of Greece in the EU and the Balkans, there has been a re-evaluation of traditional concepts of language policy. The new interactive contexts that are taking shape also require the country to accept a certain social responsibility. This rethink must generate the essential social premises for planning creative language pro-

6. <http://www.mintour.gr> (accessed October 2008).

7. Damanakis, 1999, <http://www.uoc.gr/diaspora> (accessed October 2008).

motion in the framework of European multilingualism (Schjerve Rindler 2002: 24; 28). What is needed is not so much a policy of reinforcing the position of the major languages, but one that fosters both Greek and the languages of other ethnic groups settled in the country. Most important, policy should encourage the shedding of all ethnocentricity. Within the framework of European multilingualism, speakers of 'lesser' languages such as Greek should not only strive confidently to maintain their own cultural and linguistic particularity, but, above all, they should evolve a changed view of multilingualism and multiculturalism that respects the identity of all their fellow citizens. In my opinion, the way to create solid foundations for a multilingual future and contribute to a solid European identity lies through the unbiased linguistic interaction of various speech communities and cultures in one's own homeland.

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Résumé

La Grèce s'attache fortement au maintien de la langue et de la culture grecques. Traditionnellement elle affirmait le caractère monolingue et monoculturel du pays. En s'engageant davantage dans la perspective des valeurs européennes, la Grèce a développé une conscience accrue des valeurs du multilinguisme. On constate l'importance de l'intégration européenne, les migrations et de l'évolution des rapports entre la Grèce et la région voisine des Balkans. L'enseignement du grec langue étrangère ou langue seconde a fait des progrès, et l'apprentissage des langues étrangères majeures a été fortement encouragé dans les écoles et collèges du primaire et secondaire. Et l'on s'aperçoit qu'il est nécessaire de faire face aux attitudes ethnocentriques qui ont pesé sur les langues moins considérées.

Mots clés: Grèce, multilinguisme, Europe, politique linguistique, enseignement des langues, Balkans, migrations