

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON THE PLACE OF ARVANITIKA WITHIN GREECE AND THE GREEK ENVIRONMENT

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Θα ήθελα απ' την αρχή να ευχαριστήσω όλους εκείνους που οργάνωσαν το συνέδριο εδώ — τον δήμαρχο, τον ΕΞΑΝΔΑ, τον φίλο μου τον Δουκά Τσιτσιπή, και άλλους, και για τα ζόρια τους στην οργάνωση και για τη φιλοξενία τους.

Θα κάνω την παρουσίασή μου στα αγγλικά, αλλά επειδή είμαι ελληνοιστής, αισθάνομαι υποχρεωμένος να αρχίσω με μερικά λόγια στα ελληνικά.

Ο καθηγητής Χαμπ μιλούσε για την αγάπη που έχουν οι Αρβανίτες για την Ελλάδα, και γιαυτό το λόγο (και άλλους, βέβαια) αισθάνομαι σαν Αρβανίτης.

Έρχομαι εδώ όχι σαν ειδικός στα Αρβανιτικά ή στα Αλβανικά, όπως οι άλλοι προκαλεσμένοι, αλλά, όπως είπα, σαν ελληνοιστής και σαν γλωσσολόγος. Δηλαδή, αγαπώ κι εγώ την Ελλάδα, και αγαπώ τη γλώσσα, σαν γενικό ανθρώπινο φαινόμενο — επίσης, ενδιαφέρομαι βαθειά για την ελληνική γλώσσα, για τη γλώσσα — οποιαδήποτε γλώσσα — στην Ελλάδα, και για τους Έλληνες, οποιασδήποτε καταγωγής.

Έτσι, η επιθυμία μου μ' αυτές τις παρατηρήσεις είναι μόνο να ρίξω λίγο φως στην κατάσταση που αντιμετωπίζουν οι Αρβανίτες με τα Αρβανίτικα σαν γλώσσα στην Ελλάδα και σαν ανθρώπινη γλώσσα γενικά.

There is great linguistic diversity in the world today, with some 6,000 or so languages, according to many estimates. It is an unfortunate truth about this diversity, though, that it is shrinking. Many of these languages are dying, with just a handful of often elderly speakers left, and many more are endangered, in that their most fluent, or in some cases their only, speakers are mostly older than 50.

When a language is endangered, we tend to think about its situation in terms of a loss of speakers within that language's territorial setting. For example, Arvanitika is generally

regarded as an endangered or even dying language, despite the liveliness evident at the November conference in Livadia “Arvanitika and Greek”, since it is losing speakers to Greek, as more and more young Arvanites shift to using Greek exclusively, and as there is less and less interest on their part in speaking and understanding Arvanitika as well as, perhaps most significantly, fewer and fewer opportunities to learn and use it. And, it is natural to think of this process of language death as something that is affecting Arvanites in Greece only, as something that is significant only for the Arvanitika communities here.

However, I would like to suggest two consequences that the endangerment of Arvanitika has that go beyond the local communities where this process is taking place, and then point to some parallels, of various types.

First, the endangerment of Arvanitika means that linguistic diversity within Greece is endangered; as Arvanitika recedes, Greece as a country is taking one more step towards truly being a monolingual nation. What this might mean in the future — and has meant in the past — is a basis for rationalizing the loss of languages in the minds of many citizens.

That is, minority languages within Greece (as in many other nations around the world) have suffered politically and socially at the hands of majority language speakers, and the belief that Greece is, or could be, a monolingual nation — and that a nation should be monolingual — may well have emboldened the majority in its linguistic suppression of minorities. Though perhaps not with such dire consequences as in the Balkans, this is certainly the case in the United States, where a seemingly relentless belief, on the part of much of the citizenry, in monolingualism and its supposed virtues has fueled the passage of laws against bilingual education and against the use of languages other than English on public signs in some towns, for example.

To elaborate a bit more, many people see language loss and language death as an outcome of a Darwinian struggle, where the languages compete for ecological niches and the language that “loses” lost because it did not have the competitive advantage or the ability to adapt successfully that the “winner” had. Loss thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy — a

language dies, in this widely held but ultimately incorrect view, because it is unfit for survival, and its unfitness is shown by the fact that it dies — even though language death and endangerment are a matter of the larger ecological, usually economic, setting that the speakers find themselves in rather than of any intrinsic properties of the language itself. That is to say, even though it seems to many people in the public at large to be an attractive way of looking at language endangerment and death, linguists strongly reject such a Darwinian view, and start instead from the view that all languages are inherently equal in terms of their potential and their ability to serve the needs of their speakers.

Second, the endangerment of Arvanitika means that diversity within the overall Albanian world, that is, within the broader set of speakers of some form of Albanian, is being threatened. The loss of Arvanitika would mean a potential loss of the range of diversity within the varieties of speech and language that constitute the whole of Albanian, i.e. Albanian of Albania (what I refer to here as “Shqip”), Albanian of Kosovo, Albanian of Italy, etc., to speak only in geographic terms. This terminology may be somewhat nonstandard, but the point is to distinguish the whole of the Albanian-speaking world from some varieties which might conceivably be called, simply, Albanian.

That is to say, one way of looking at the endangerment of Arvanitika is not treating it as an endangered language but rather as an endangered dialect of a language that is otherwise relatively robustly represented. Without discussing the very difficult theoretical issue of what the difference is between a language and a dialect, it is important to note that most of the attention that has been paid to dying speech forms in recent years has been to whole languages that are threatened, not to marginal dialects of languages that are otherwise thriving. Thus, another way of thinking about the endangerment of Arvanitika is in relation to the rest of Albanian.

To develop this idea a bit further, I start with the observation, indeed the truism, that Arvanitika is not in any sense a “degraded” form of Shqip, the standard Albanian spoken

këndonj	‘I sing’	vs.	këndoj	(in Shqip)
gljuhë	‘language’	vs.	gjuhë	(in Shqip)
gljatë	‘high’	vs.	gjatë	(in Shqip)

and Eric Hamp has pointed to numerous other striking examples involving vowels in his presentation.

Such archaisms are also important since a good many studies of Arvanitika, for instance those by Peter Trudgill, have emphasized ways in which Arvanitika has lost elements and distinctions found in (standard) “Albanian”, often in the direction of a convergence with Greek, as the dominant co-territorial language. While it is certainly true that there are some such cases of loss in Arvanitika, some of Trudgill’s claims may be overstated in the light of the full range of Arvanitika dialect diversity, as Hamp has shown.

What both of these consequences — the loss of diversity within Greece as a nation and the loss of diversity within Albanian more generally — share is a basic assumption that is somewhat like the way biologists and zoologists look at the endangerment and loss of animal species and the effects of such losses on “biodiversity”. Viewed in this perspective, the loss of any language represents a potential loss to our understanding of the full range of evidence that informs us about human language in general and about particular human languages.

In recent work, Salikoko Mufwene has built on and developed this parallel with biodiversity in an interesting way. Biologists and zoologists, when faced with endangered species and potential loss of whole classes of animals and plants, often undertake preservation efforts, attempting to at least document the existence of the vanishing type or if possible altering the conditions in which it is found in the hopes of allowing it to continue to thrive. With languages, there are typically efforts to document endangered “species” (i.e. languages), as seen for Arvanitika in the work of Eric Hamp and Lukas Tsitsipis, as well as attempts to allow interested members of the community to expand the use of the language, e.g. by creating pedagogical materials that will aid in teaching the language to younger generations; the Institute that is planned for Livadia by the Mayor may well help in this regard and is certainly a positive

step in this direction. Some linguists, however, have felt that such efforts are not particularly useful, and that they are rather like asking an endangered frog to change the type of food it eats so it will not be poisoned by toxic substances that have entered the food chain!

Moreover, what we typically do not do is take measures to change the environment in which the language is found and create possibilities for the expanded use of the language by providing contexts in which the language can be used naturally, though with endangered animals and plants, by contrast, biologists, zoologists, and environmentalists often try to change the environment for the endangered species by working to change the human use of the environment!).

Mufwene's views are interesting, and I do not mean to paint a picture of hopelessness here, suggesting that there is nothing to be done about what is happening to Arvanitika. Still, I do think it is important to place the current situation with Arvanitika within an "ecological" context; the comparison with biodiversity at least makes for a powerful metaphor through which to think about language endangerment.

There are other comparisons that can be made, more specifically linguistic in nature. In particular, there are situations, both within Greece and outside of Greece, that are somewhat parallel to the case of Arvanitika endangerment; these parallels are not exact, and the differences are in some ways as interesting to consider as the similarities, but they are worthy of our attention nonetheless.

For example, Tsakonian, the variety of Greek spoken mainly in the eastern Peloponnesos is so different from the rest of Greek, or at least it was, that it might well be called a separate language rather than a dialect of Greek. As recorded in the early 20th century, for instance by Hubert Pernot, it was strikingly different. In more recent years, most Tsakonian speakers are now fluent users of Standard Greek and we find that Standard Greek features are entering Tsakonian. For instance, the negative particle was once the highly archaic form < o >, from ancient Greek οὐ, but increasingly in the 20th century it has given way to Standard Modern Greek δεν. In a sense, Tsakonian is both an endangered language and an endangered dialect,

just like Arvanitika, and its loss will be a loss for the Greek language and for Greece as a nation.

Further, there are parallels in the United States, where English is certainly not endangered, but where certain dialects of English are threatened. One that has been well-studied in recent years, especially by Walt Wolfram and his associates, is the dialect of various islands off the coast of North Carolina, in the southeast of the US, including that of Ocracoke Island. In these cases, the isolation of the islands has allowed a particular dialect of English to flourish, but changes in the environment, such as bridges to the mainland for some of the islands as well as ferry service and increased tourism, have led to a situation where the local distinctiveness of speech, as shown by some unique vowel pronunciations, various words and phrases, and the like, is now in danger. Here, efforts by linguists (Wolfram and others) to preserve the Ocracoke dialect by at least raising awareness about it, via media projects that involve the local inhabitants, have been successful, but the forces of change are powerful and perhaps can never be overcome.

Both of these cases differ from the situation with Arvanitika in that the threat is from a coteritorial dominant language variety that is quite closely related (possibly in both cases, as dialects of a language are related to one another), whereas with Arvanitika, the threat is from a coteritorial dominant language that is related but not closely so. Still, the threat in each case is real, and it perhaps does not matter to the speakers what the relationship is between the language they are shifting to and the language they are shifting away from.

In a sense, change is inevitable for language, as for most human institutions, and contact with other speakers is an inevitable part of the processes which bring about change. What is to be lamented is when change occurs without any notice and without any chance of recapturing past states. The value of increased attention to and awareness of situations of change — as with Arvanitika and as with this conference — cannot be overestimated, even if the eventual outcome of those forces cannot be altered.

Συγκριτικές Προοπτικές γύρω από τη θέση της αρβανιτικής γλώσσας μέσα στην Ελλάδα
και το ελληνικό περιβάλλον

Μπράιαν Δ. Τζόσεφ, Πανεπιστήμιο της Πολιτείας του Οχάιο

Εδώ συζητούμε το γεγονός ότι τα Αρβανίτικα παίζουν δυο ρόλους — σαν διακλιδυνευμένη γλώσσα μιας μειονότητας στην Ελλάδα και επίσης σαν διάλεκτος της Αλβανικής. Κάνουμε παραλληλισμό μεταξύ απ' τη μια μεριά διακλιδυνευμένων φυτών και ζώων και απ' την άλλη διακλιδυνευμένων γλωσσών, και τον θεωρούμε σαν μεταφορά για την κατάσταση με τα Αρβανίτικα. Και άλλοι πιο γλωσσολογικοί παραλληλισμοί εξετάζονται, δηλαδή η κατάσταση με τα Τσακωικά στην Ελλάδα και εκείνη με αγγλικές διαλέκτους στην Αμερική.

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