GREEK HERITAGE SPEAKERS IN THE USA: AN EXAMINATION OF LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Christiana Metaxas, Binghamton University

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Yulia Bosworth
Goals:

- To identify the role that Greek language plays in the Greek-American identity
- To identify sociolinguistic factors that may contribute to heritage language competence
- To investigate Greek heritage speakers’ attitudes towards Greek as a heritage language
- To identify variation in realizations of a subset of phonological contexts: the rhotic consonant, vowels/diphthongs, and palatals
A History of the Greek Language

- Linguistic continuity from Antiquity \(\rightarrow\) Standard Modern Greek (SMG) spoken present day

- European language with most longstanding linguistic tradition

- Diglossia; the linguistic divide (Ferguson, 1959)
  - Katharevousa & Demotic
  - Acceptance of Demotic Greek by end of 20\textsuperscript{th} century

(Horrocks, 1997)
Who speaks Greek today?

- Greece & Cyprus \(\Rightarrow\) only two countries who count Greek as the (or an) official language\(^1\)

- The Greek or Hellenic Diaspora:
  - USA
  - Australia
  - United Kingdom
  - Canada
  - Etc.

1. UNESCO; BBC
The Greek Language in Linguistics

- Greek language → main constant throughout more than 3,000 years of Hellenic tradition

- "Phonetics is often equated with phonology, and the two terms have often been used as quasi synonyms, particularly in the realm of Greek linguistics" (Arvaniti, 2007)

- Little research exists on Greek language phonetics & phonology (Arvaniti, 2007)
  - Greek philological tradition
  - SMG derives from two linguistic codes; more academic attention given to written code
Heritage Languages in the USA

- Greek immigration to USA
  - 1880s and on

- Little research exists on heritage language phonetics and phonology (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007)

- Pioneering heritage language studies:
  - Spanish\(^1\)
  - Chinese\(^2\)
  - Russian\(^1\)

The Greek Sound System: consonants

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<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Labiodental</th>
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<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
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<td>Affricate</td>
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VL: voiceless  VD: voiced
The Greek Sound System: vowels

* /ɛ/ often transcribed as /e/ and /ɐ/ often transcribed as /a/
The Greek Sound System: palatals

The palatals [j], [ʝ] and [η]

• Palatal allophone of phoneme /x/

• Derived from /i/ when unstressed & following voiceless consonant

• Result of fusion of /x/ and unstressed /i/ when followed by vowel
Method

- Online survey – 150 Greek-American college students or recent graduates

- Optional audio recording section at end of survey
  - Self-record speaking 24 predetermined Greek words out loud

- 10 Qualitative interviews with Greek-Americans of varying age and gender
Method

- Analyze **survey results**
  - Compare sociolinguistic factors…
    - Parent & grandparent birthplace
    - Greek language education
  - …to language attitudes & competence
    - Self-assessment of speaking, listening, reading, writing
    - Self-assessment of overall language competence
    - Engagement with Greek language activities (reading books, listening to music, etc.)
  - …to heritage attitudes
    - Importance of Greek heritage
    - Involvement with Greek cultural, linguistic, educational, social events
Method

- Transcribe **word lists** (IPA)
  - 47 audio files from surveys + 9 audio files from interviews
  - 24 Greek words in list $\rightarrow$ 1,344 total Greek words transcribed

- Main focus:
  - rhotic consonants
  - realization of vowel /o/
  - Palatalization
    - φωτιά [fotζá] (fire)
    - Βαθιά [vaθζá] (deep)
Method

- Analyze interviews
  - Compare sociolinguistic factors...
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Observations (phonology)

RHOTIC realization

- Most Greek-Americans pronounced the Greek rhotic consonant (trill/flap)

28 Greek-Americans reported both parents coming from Greek families
- 26 pronounced the Greek rhotic 8 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhotic 7 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhotic 6 out of 8 times

12 Greek-Americans reported one parent coming from a Greek family
- 9 pronounced the Greek rhotic 8 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhotic 3 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhotic 2 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhoti 0 out of 8 times
Observations (phonology)

DIPHTHONGIZATION

- Most Greek-Americans pronounced Greek /o/
  - 10 out of 53 Greek-Americans pronounced at least one /o/ sound as diphthong [oʊ] i.e. for [pijέnο]

28 Greek-Americans reported both parents coming from Greek families
- 5 pronounced 1 or more /o/ sounds as diphthong [oʊ]
- 23 pronounced all /o/ sounds as [o]

12 Greek-Americans reported one parent coming from a Greek family
- 3 pronounced 1 or more /o/ sounds as diphthong [oʊ]
- 9 pronounced all /o/ sounds as [o]

1. Πηγαίνω; I go
Observations (phonology)

- Mispronunciations of a word with orthographic similarity to American English written code
  - 5 out of 53 Greek-Americans pronounced the rhotic /r/ as [p] in ρολοί [rolój] (clock)
  - 11 out of 53 Greek-Americans did not pronounce ending diphthong [oj] in [rolój] (clock)
Observations (phonology)

PALATALIZATION

- 2 out of 53 Greek-Americans pronounced both φωτιά [fotça] and βαθιά [vaθça] with Greek palatalization
  - 12 palatalized φωτιά as [fotçá]
  - 3 palatalized βαθιά as [vaθçá]
- 39 absence of palatal [ç] in both words
  - → presence of semi-vowel (repair strategy) [ja]
- 1 Greek-American pronounced vowels [fotía] [vaθía]
Observations (sociological & sociolinguistic)

1. Greek-Americans generally are proud of their heritage

- “Greek music is a part of my upbringing and my soul.”

- “My Greek heritage is my identity. It’s who I am. I’m very passionate about that.”
2. Greek-Americans view the Greek language as a major component of their heritage

3. They want to preserve their heritage

□ “I’ve always encouraged my children to continue Greek school.”

*Study abroad programs to Greece and Cyprus now exist, but were not available to previous generation of Greek-Americans*
4. Greek-Americans are often ashamed of knowledge gaps in their Greek language ability

- “I feel that I am not as proficient as I should be.”

- “My reading and writing is really on a second grade level and I’m embarrassed to say that.”

- “I don’t have the command of the language where I can read Greek, but I do understand the language.”
5. The Greek Orthodox Church serves as a main vehicle through which many Greek-Americans practice and celebrate Greek traditions

- “Mostly through the church. I belong to Lady’s Philoptochos. We’re always not only looking to provide assistance to the needy... but also to enhance our... ethnicity and our Hellenic culture.”

*86 out of the 89 survey respondents who attended Greek-afternoon school did so at a Greek-Orthodox Church*
“My father was born in Greece in Constantinople.”

“Growing up, we would, after church, go to a Greek movie every week and we would see two movies: a comedy and a tragedy.”

“It was 400 years from like the 1400s to the 1800s that Greek was not spoken, religion was not talked about, everything was κρυφτό, under the moonlight, and it’s a shame that one generation of separation [can make you] lose a language, when it was held together for 400 years.”

1. [kriftó] = hidden
Conclusion

- **Language** and **Religion** emerged as 2 dominating factors of Greek-American identity
  - Greek heritage speakers place value on being able to speak Greek
  - Church represents opportunity to embrace heritage without having to be proficient in Greek
  - Overlap of language and religion

- Higher emphasis on educating second (American-born) generation in Greek language, particularly in reading & writing
  - Further removed Greek-Americans seek more engagement with Hellenic community in order to acquire same level of language & heritage proficiency
  - More educational opportunities; removed from immigrants’ need to assimilate to English & American culture

- Phonological study
  - Overall native-like pronunciation; rhotic trill/flap and vowel /o/
  - Non-native realizations in palatalization, possibly due to lack of awareness in educational setting
  - Orthography further supports use of palatal glide in lieu of palatal fricative
Select References


