

GREEK HERITAGE SPEAKERS

IN THE USA:

AN EXAMINATION OF LANGUAGE
AND IDENTITY

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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 → 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 20th century

Who speaks Greek today?

- Greece & Cyprus → only two countries who count Greek as the (or an) official language¹
- 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:
 - ▣ Spanish¹
 - ▣ Chinese²
 - ▣ Russian¹

1. Polinsky & Kagan, 2007

2. Meyers-Scotton, 2006

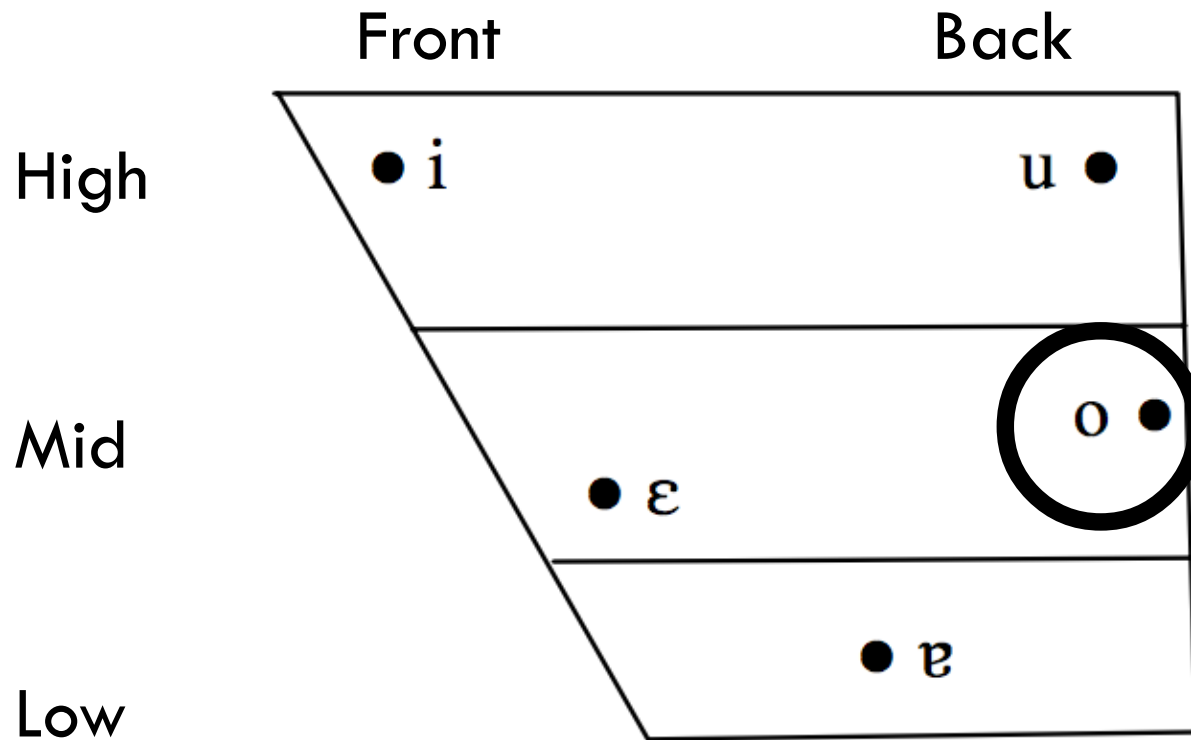
The Greek Sound System: **consonants**

	<i>Bilabial</i>		<i>Labiodental</i>		<i>Dental</i>		<i>Alveolar</i>		<i>Palatal</i>		<i>Velar</i>	
	VL	VD	VL	VD	VL	VD	VL	VD	VL	VD	VL	VD
Plosive	p	b					t	d	c	ɟ	k	g
Nasal		m		ɱ				n		ɲ		ŋ
Trill/flap								r				
Fricative			f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ç	ʝ	x	ɣ
Approximant		w								j		
Lateral								l		ʎ		
Affricate							ts	dz				

VL: voiceless

VD: voiced

The Greek Sound System: vowels



* / ϵ / often transcribed as /e/ and / α / often transcribed as /a/

The Greek Sound System: palatals

The palatals [j], [ç] and [ɲ]

- 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

[ç]



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 → 1,344 total Greek words transcribed
 - Main focus:
 - rhotic consonants
 - realization of vowel /o/
 - Palatalization
 - φωτιά [fotʃá] (fire)
 - Βαθιά [vaθʃá] (deep)

Method

□ Analyze **interviews**

□ 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

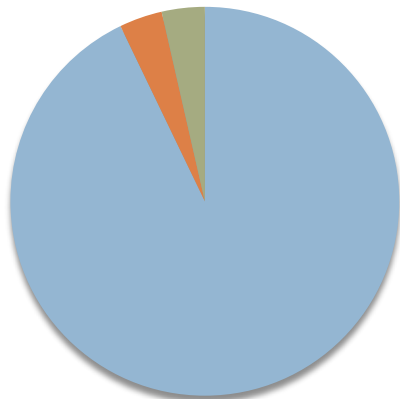
- Importance of Greek heritage
- Involvement with Greek cultural, linguistic, educational, social events

Observations (phonology)

RHOTIC realization

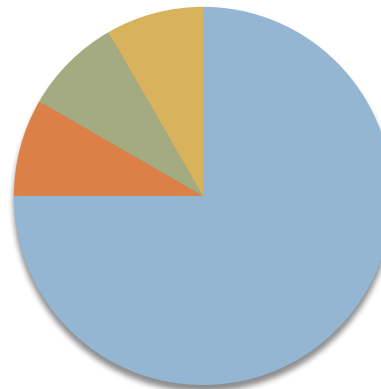
- Most Greek-Americans pronounced the Greek rhotic consonant (trill/flap)

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



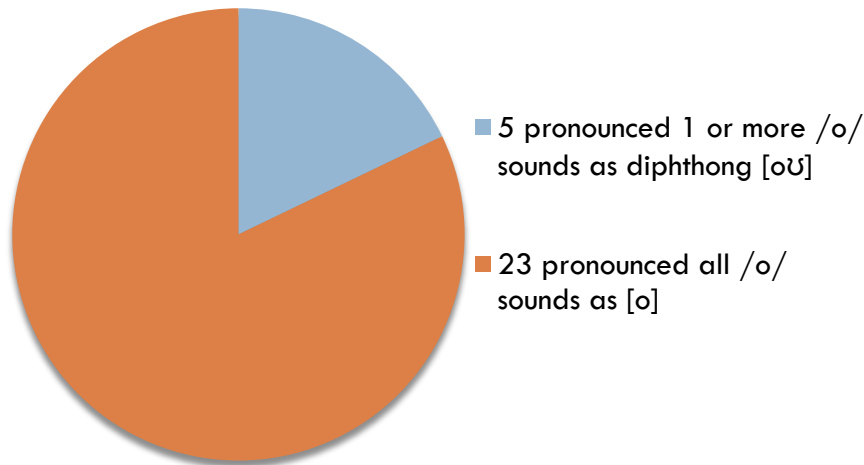
- 9 pronounced the Greek rhotic 8 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhotic 3 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhotic 2 out of 8 times
- 1 pronounced the Greek rhotic 0 out of 8 times

Observations (phonology)

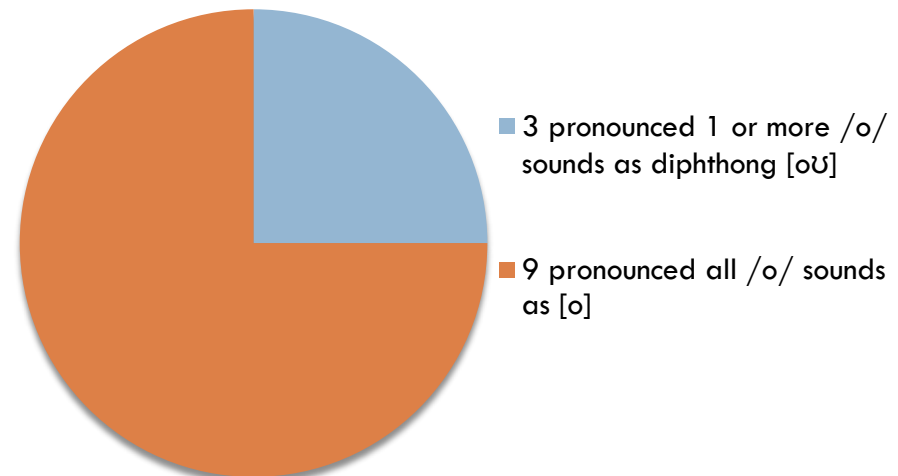
DIPHTHONGIZATION

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

28 Greek-Americans reported both parents coming from Greek families



12 Greek-Americans reported one parent coming from a Greek family



1. Πιγαίνω; 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 [rolóɟ] (clock)
 - 11 out of 53 Greek-Americans did not pronounce ending diphthong [oɟ] in [rolóɟ] (clock)

Observations (phonology)

PALATALIZATION

- 2 out of 53 Greek-Americans pronounced both φωτιά [fotʒa] and βαθιά [vaθʒa] with Greek palatalization
 - ▣ 12 palatalized φωτιά as [fotʒá]
 - ▣ 3 palatalized βαθιά as [vaθʒá]
- 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

6. Hellenic history plays important role in Greek-Americans' identity

- “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 κρυφτό¹, 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

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