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Charting sociolinguistic inquiry in contemporary Greek contexts

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In this overview of the dynamic field of MG sociolinguistics in the last four decades, we show the decisive move of the field, in the spirit of sociolinguistics in general, toward permeable boundaries with other areas of linguistics that set out to investigate language-as-action and language-in-context, as well as toward synergies with other disciplines invested in the study of society and culture. The studies we discuss show how researchers have been documenting a changing, diverse society, considering different resources and environments where language is used, and with a growing focus on digital media. These studies also reflect a shift towards sociolinguistic research that addresses social justice issues and recent socio-political crises in Greek society.

Keywords: Modern Greek sociolinguistics; language, identities and culture; context(s); digital media; crisis discourses

Introduction

In 2001, Georgakopoulou, one of the authors of this contribution, co-edited, with Marianna Spanaki, the first *Reader in Greek Sociolinguistics*. The aim was to bring together previously dispersed work in various journals and, in the process, to capture the priorities of a developing area. Looking at the contents of that volume from a current standpoint is revealing of how far the area has come, both in terms of disciplinary breadth and scope and in terms of productive synergies with other fields, within and beyond linguistics. For instance, the then dominant focus on diglossia and

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the relationships between formal and informal varieties in Greece, in the aftermath of the abolition of *Katharevousa* as an official language in 1976, has given way to a multi-faceted research on linguistic and multi-modal resources in a variety of contexts, particularly digital contexts (see section 2.1 below). Similarly, the study of language maintenance or shift of Greek as a minority language in different countries (e.g. USA, Australia) has been superseded by a flexible view of multilingualism as a default state in different contexts. This approach is suitable for exploring how speakers move fluidly across different language resources, especially in contexts characterized by superdiversity, where there is a high mix of different ethnic and cultural groups in societies (see sections 2 and 3 below).

Modern Greek (MG) sociolinguistics has evolved, then, in alignment with the broader field of sociolinguistics, becoming a cross-disciplinary area situated at the core of studying language and other forms of communication in use. In particular, the boundaries between various sub-areas of sociolinguistics (for instance, interactional sociolinguistics) and those of discourse analysis have become more permeable, and there are currently fruitful synergies with other areas, such as sociology, cultural and media studies. In addition, the focus of sociolinguistic work has gradually shifted from linguistic and textual aspects, such as micro-level variations in language (e.g. phonemes, morphemes), to a more holistic approach that connects language with identities. These identities are, in turn, defined flexibly, with consideration of their context-sensitivity, rather than statically and demographically as predetermined properties of speakers. This shift has led to a focus on impactful work, with sociolinguists addressing the big issues and contributing to discussions about social justice in Greek society (see section 3).

These conceptual and analytical shifts have been prompted, in part, by profound socio-political changes in Greek society in the last two decades, most notably the deep and ongoing financial crisis, the waves of new migrants and refugees, and the widespread integration of social media into ordinary people's lives. Greek society has had to grapple with various (re)formations of the complex interplay between local and global dynamics and to navigate equally complex cultural shifts. The sociolinguists' reflexes, as a result, have been about reconfiguring and expanding traditional areas of inquiry, re-imagining tools and approaches that do not carry a bias of anachronism: that is, of a homogeneous language and society, where everyday communication is mostly conducted in confined, face-to-face settings and amongst people who inherently share norms, attitudes and even language resources. There is an impressive critical mass of such sociolinguistic inquiry, conducted in Greek, English, German, and other languages, by colleagues based in Greek universities but also abroad, in several prestigious institutions, especially in the Anglo-American world. It would be impossible to do justice in this short piece to all this multi-faceted work and its different strands of inquiry. Instead, our more modest goal is to highlight specific key areas of investigation and tease out key insights from a growing body of intellectual output. We approach this task with full awareness of our positionality, acknowledging potential biases and

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preferences. As Greek sociolinguists/discourse analysts based in the UK,[1] we work in linguistics programmes that do not include the teaching of MG. However, we have a significant historical connection to MG Studies in the UK and were involved in developing the teaching and research of MG sociolinguistics at King's College London in the 1990s and 2000s, as lecturer and PhD student respectively.[2]

1. Language, identities and culture

The American linguistic anthropologists Bucholtz and Hall (2004) have proposed that, instead of the term 'sociolinguistics', we move to a label that can serve as more inclusive, capturing local preoccupations of scholars with the culture-specificity of the language they work on: that term is *socio-cultural linguistics*. This label makes sense as a broad descriptor of the bulk of sociolinguistic research in Greece which, drawing on models and conceptualizations of culture resonant in linguistics at the time of one's research, has historically attempted to uncover what it means to be a speaker of MG. What sorts of culturally shaped identities are constructed, performed, negotiated, and contested in different contexts, through speaking and writing in MG? What are the main cultural attitudes, norms, beliefs and values that are discursively constructed and articulated through language? And what are the key language forms and choices that either point to these directly or, more often than not, *index* them; that is, evoke them in more or less associative and implicit ways? There is an obvious connection here with well established anthropological work in relation to Greece: we see this cross-fertilization in the work of some linguists, for example in the late Lukas D. Tsitsipis' research on Arvanitika speakers (1998), or in Giaxoglou's study of Maniat laments (2008).

Though we disclaim impartiality, one key area that we single out as having produced a wealth of evidence for the connections between language and culture is that of *politeness research*. Positioned mainly in (social) pragmatics since its inception, but increasingly synergizing with language-and-identities sociolinguistic work, politeness research has uncovered several culture-specific ways in which Greek speakers do relational work with language – that is, show solidarity, friendship, in-group bonding; or, equally, offend and are offended, argue and reconcile, or beg to differ. The name of Maria Sifianou, based at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, has been synonymous with the introduction and further development of politeness studies in Greek. Her seminal book *Politeness phenomena in England and Greece* (1992/1999/2002) has prompted several

1 Hence we mostly cite publications in English.

2 In that period, a number of PhD theses were produced on cutting-edge sociolinguistic topics then under-represented in MG. The authors of those theses (e.g. Anna Charalambidou, Korina Giaxoglou, Valentina Christodoulou, Dimitris Kitis, Vally Lytra, Marianthi Patrona, Philip Tentolouris, Irene Theodoropoulou, et al.) have gone on to make active contributions to the creation of a 'new' sociolinguistics for MG language varieties.

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studies of specific politeness but also impoliteness choices in Greek, often as part of cross-linguistic studies (e.g. Ogiermann and Bella 2020).[3]

In the evolving landscape of politeness studies, there has been a departure from framing Greek culture as solely inter-dependent and in-group-focused. Instead, recent decades have witnessed a shift towards examining the diverse linguistic resources used to perform and contextualize cultural identities. Culture is now understood as a complex entity marked by multiplicity, internal diversification, and the development of small-scale communities of practice with distinct communication norms. Cultural identities intersect with other aspects such as gender, class, and age, making language choices in various contexts indicative of multiple identities.[4] This shift in focus explores not only how Greeks interact but also delves into nuanced categorizations and language choices. For example, research investigates how young students construct in-group identities through their stories, as seen in studies like Saloustrou (2023).

Storytelling has been a key site for examining the discursive construction of cultural and other identities in MG. This is not particularly surprising, given the well-attested power of storytelling for making sense of ourselves over time and for connecting us with others. At the same time, storytelling, as a genre that requires communicative artistry, lent itself well to early work on shedding light on specific language choices, in a language with a long history of oral-based and literacy-based traditions, that were routinely used for performative purposes in MG (see e.g. Georgakopoulou 1997, 2007; Tannen 1986).

The examination of language and semiotic resources in shaping cultural identities extends to public spaces and emplacement, influenced by Linguistic Landscape research. This field explores how semiotic resources in public areas convey communal values, discourses, and identities. In MG and Greek Cypriot contexts, studies reveal how public spaces (and more recently, private homes) are discursively (re)constituted through the deployment of language and semiotic resources, influencing identity formation and social contestation (e.g., Kitis & Milani 2015; Spilioti & Giaxoglou 2021; Canakis 2017; Kitsiou & Bratimou 2023; Themistocleous 2021).

Research on language, identities, and culture related to MG has transcended area studies, contributing to the reevaluation of foundational concepts in broader sociolinguistic domains. The 'Greek paradigm' has served as a counterbalance to the ethnocentric nature of sociolinguistic concepts, prefiguring the current shift towards research from the Global South, which aims to decolonize the field and challenge the dominance of the Anglo-American worldview. Particularly with the advent of social

3 It is impossible to do justice to Sifianou's prolific studies here or to the thriving line of inquiry into im/politeness phenomena across contexts (including online aggression phenomena) by colleagues such as Marianthi Georgalidou (e.g. Georgalidou, Frantzi & Giakoumakis 2020), Aggeliki Tzanne (e.g. 2021), Marina Terkourafi (2001), and many others.

4 There is a well-established line of inquiry into the connections of language with different aspects of identities (e.g. gender and sexuality) through the prolific work of linguists such as Marianthi Makri-Tsilipakou, Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou, discussion of which is beyond the remit of this brief overview.

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media, studies on language and identities reveal the dynamic reworkings and transformations of globally circulating linguistic resources in the context of MG, as discussed below.

1.1 Language and identities in digital media contexts

In the early 2000s, Greece appeared to be lagging behind other countries, such as Germany, the UK, and the USA, in terms of overall internet use and access. Nevertheless, the penetration rate of other digital devices, such as mobile phones, in Greece was among the highest in Europe. It is thus not surprising that the first PhD (at least in the UK), on text-messaging written by one of the authors of this contribution, was based on MG language data and aimed at charting this new digital genre in terms of its norms and practices of use; a topic that reflected the then fascination of the broader field with potentially new language forms, functions, and practices of digitally mediated communication.

Early MG sociolinguistic research in the area is characterized by a focus on text-based interaction, driven to a large extent by the technological affordances of the digital media of that time (email, instant messaging, text-messaging). One feature that attracted both scholarly and public attention concerned the software constraints that allowed the input of a pre-determined set of initially only Roman characters in a text format. Against this backdrop, we note the development of a rich critical mass of sociolinguistic work that has examined the potential for identity work of primarily code-centred choices, including Standard Greek, English, Cypriot Greek, and Greeklish (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2009; Georgakopoulou 2011; Spilioti 2009; Tseliga 2007; Tsiplakou 2009). At a time when international research on digital language was dominated by studies with an English focus, this line of work played a key role in documenting the 'multilingual internet' through the texts and voices of internet users from the European South. At the same time, it contributed to the consolidation of an approach that examines such code-centred choices in terms of the micro-local context in which they occur, rather than macro-sociolinguistic categories. Informed by interactional sociolinguistics, these studies pointed out how the lack of prescribed linguistic or spelling norms in digital contexts affords fluidity, playfulness, and performance in identity work. But the multiple, often individualized, language and spelling styles were also found to converge, orient to, and index local, group-related, norms, and values (e.g. intimacy in peer group interactions).

In parallel with this line of research on language use, we also trace the development of *language-ideological research* on discourses about digital language, especially Greeklish. Work in the area has shown the ideological positions embedded in such public discourses, where we find, among other things, longstanding views about national identity and MG language as a 'territory' under threat from external influences, such as English, globalization, and digital technologies (Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou 2007; Moschonas 2004; Σπηλιώτη 2009).

With the introduction of social media in the mid 2000s and their takeup by Greek-speaking users both within and beyond Greece, the analytical and conceptual

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scope of MG sociolinguistic research quickly responded to the new media affordances that created more complex multi-semiotic environments, blurred the boundaries between private and public communication and made visible a complex web of local and global digital networks. In line with new sociolinguistic paradigms attuned to fluid, intersecting and multiple identities, attention has been shifting from *code-centred choices* to the wide range of *linguistic and other semiotic repertoires* that members of global – and often diasporic – digital networks mobilize for self-presentation, in interaction with their diverse social connections (Androutsopoulos 2015). These repertoires have been shown to include not only conventional languages, dialects or styles but also fleeting and socially unstable practices of writing, such as *trans-scripting*; for example, Hellenized English, or engreek. In such practices, users creatively manipulate the MG script as a semiotic resource and exploit its visual, aesthetic and symbolic potential, to convey multiple and, at times, ambivalent sociopolitical and moral positions and representations (Androutsopoulos 2020; Spilioti 2019).

Initially, sociolinguistic research on digital media focused on interpersonal communication and identity within local online groups. However, the rise of social media has spurred new investigations into representations of self and others in (semi) public discussions on sociopolitical events, especially those impacting Greece and the world in the past decade. For instance, studies on the social mediatization of the Greek financial crisis reveal how Greek-speaking users utilized (small) stories and im/politeness on platforms like Facebook and YouTube to characterize key social actors and justify their own positions (Georgakopoulou & Giaxoglou 2018; Georgakopoulou & Vasilaki 2018; Georgalou 2015). The multi-semiotic nature of these identity claims is also evident in research exploring national identity through avatar, username, and textual choices in Greek far-right social media profiles (Baider & Constantinou 2017). This shift towards identity claims in politically polarized discourse is reflected in the critical agenda of current MG studies, as discussed in the next section.

2. Critical approaches & (crises) discourses

Over the last two decades, we also note a body of work that aligns with some of the premises of critical sociolinguistics: a commitment to not only understanding sociolinguistic processes but to interrogating and challenging the systems of dominance and hegemony these processes interact with (Coupland 2016: 9). While we do not claim that the aforementioned studies do not engage with such themes, we turn our focus here to research that more explicitly subscribes to a critical agenda, is influenced by Critical Discourse Analysis, and is, to whatever extent, committed to social intervention and change.

Such work has placed under scrutiny the range of dominant discourses and ideologies that were mobilized and circulated in polarized debates during the consecutive crises of the last two decades: in particular, the financial crisis and discourses regarding the place of Greece in the European Union. For example, one of

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the earliest special issues by Wodak and Angouri (2014) combined a focus on the negotiation of crisis discourses and narratives in different local contexts in the light of national historical traditions. Based on methodological synergies between corpus linguistics and (critical) discourse analysis, Hatzidaki and Goutsos' volume (2017) shifted the focus to the mechanics of crisis rhetoric, as documented in both dominant discourses and discourses of resistance voiced within Greece. In line with the development of CDA work in MG (Μπουκάλα & Στάμου 2020), the study of how particular discourses and viewpoints, circulated by media but also by political figures, are legitimated, is central in this strand of research.

In political discourse research, the study of populism in MG contexts is expanding. Recent work, like that of Serafis (2023), delves into the multi-semiotic nature of such discourses. Attention is given to how populism is jointly constructed by journalists and politicians, becoming normalized in specific media, like televised news interviews (e.g., Kantara 2022; Patrona 2020). The migration crisis, alongside the financial crisis, sparks polarized debates on identity politics amid mobility and globalization. In Greece, migration affects the country in two ways: as a destination for migrants and refugees due to its geopolitical position, and as a source of outward migration ('brain drain') of skilled Greeks to other EU countries, the USA, and Australia. Critical discourse studies have revealed discriminatory and polarized rhetoric in public discourses, particularly in right-wing contexts, shaping and being shaped by racist ideologies (e.g. Assimakopoulos et al 2017). Recent research (Archakis & Tsakona 2024) highlights instances of liquid racism, allowing discriminatory discourses to infiltrate seemingly antiracist texts.

Studies on language and identity within refugee communities in Greece and Cyprus, as well as neo-migrants in the Greek diaspora, are influenced by new critical paradigms emphasizing the intricate translingual practices of plurilingual speakers (Garcia & Li Wei 2014). This paradigm shift involves employing qualitative and ethnographic methods to capture the nuanced nature of language and identity work in transnational contact spaces. Such spaces often manifest in educational contexts, both within and outside Greece. Responding to the evolving challenges and opportunities in these settings, a growing body of work critiques conventional pedagogical practices for a more comprehensive approach to language teaching in Greece, Cyprus, and diasporic communities globally (Chatzidaki & Tsokalidou 2021; Ioannidou et al 2020; Κουτσογιάννης et al 2024).

Conclusion

We started this brief and inevitably partial overview of the dynamic field of MG sociolinguistics in the last four decades by claiming the decisive move of the field, in the spirit of sociolinguistics in general, toward permeable boundaries with other areas of linguistics that set out to investigate language-as-action and language-in-context, as well as toward synergies with other disciplines invested in the study of society and culture. The panorama of studies presented above has shown, we hope, the consolidation of specific lines of inquiry that document MG language in society and

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culture as multiple, multi-semiotic resources in specific environments of language use that come with their own historicized normativities. In such an approach, it is a 'challenge to uncover the historical dimensions entangled in a single discourse moment' and 'to produce intelligibility about historicity in social action' (Fabricio & Moita-Lopes 2020: 85), but it remains necessary. At a time of profound global crises, when social media algorithms are driving the homogeneity, templatization and replicability of communication genres but also social stances and identities that are associated with them, across languages and cultures (Georgakopoulou 2022), the strengthening of a critical sociolinguistics agenda is imperative for research in MG. Within the broader framework of calls for decolonizing sociolinguistics, such research will be well-placed to address long-standing questions about the historically shaped role of the ever-evolving Greek language in the contemporary (post)-digital world.

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