

LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND IDENTITIES: SNAPSHOTS FROM GREEK CONTEXTS

INTRODUCTION LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND IDENTITIES IN GREEK CONTEXTS

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Introduction

Since the early 90s, Greece has witnessed an unprecedented population movement: Members of indigenous linguistic minorities have moved from the periphery to urban centres and large numbers of people have moved to Greece, primarily from the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. This “flow of bodies” (Appadurai 1990) has disrupted the country’s monolingual and monocultural image (even if, in historical terms, this was in itself a construction) and in its place an awareness and sensibility of a multilingual and multicultural society has emerged. At the same time, this population movement to/within Greece has been compounded by the growing movement of Greek capital and businesses outside Greece, thus revitalising and expanding existing diasporic communities and trans-national ties but also creating new ones. These processes of demographic and socio-cultural change are by no means specific to Greece and tend to be seen by analysts in connection with issues of globalisation and of the recent explosion of information and communication technologies. Whether novel and late modern or not, the fact remains that, to echo Pucholar, they raise interesting questions about “the way in which language is implicated in these processes by virtue of its traditional value as symbol of national identity, its increasingly central position in the economy and its insertion in processes of technological development” (2007: 74). To give one example: The status of the Greek language seems to be gradually changing from one of Europe’s “lesser taught” languages to a regional “strong” language in the context of the Balkans (Koutsogiannis 2007).

The above processes of transformation are calling for a critical re-examination of issues of culture-specificity and language use in Greek that have informed a volume of earlier discourse-pragmatic studies. At the same time, they are opening up new possibilities for research on language, discourse and identities in Greek contexts. In line with recent advances within social pragmatics, discourse studies and sociolinguistics, particularly with regard to the turn to identity (cf. Bucholtz & Hall 2005), Georgakopoulou (2004: 60) has singled out the following elements of a required paradigm shift within socially oriented linguistic studies of Greek:

- An increasing acceptance of social constructionist approaches to language and identity that are premised on the assumption that social selves are produced in interaction through processes of contestation and collaboration;

- An emphasis on language, culture and identity as emergent in social practice through dialogic processes among speakers rather than prescribed, homogeneous and territorially based;
- An understanding of the new social realities (see discussion above) and how these macro- processes provide affordances or constrain linguistic practices and identity options;
- An attention to details of talk and text and close linguistic analysis of specific data in specific contexts.

Our aim in this Special Issue is to bring together work broadly aligned with these new ways of looking at Greek language and discourse and to showcase some of the directions that this work is taking. The inclusion of the papers has thus mostly been done on the basis of representativeness and illustration of coverage and on the understanding that, far from producing an exhaustive and coherent account, the intention here is to provide ‘snapshots’ of a new agenda that will cater for a language and society that have experienced profound changes in the last twenty years. To this end, the papers employ a variety of data from a variety of contexts, ranging from text-messages and email to newspapers and magazines, school-based interactions amongst children and dinner time conversations in North London. In similar vein, they draw on a range of analytical traditions: e.g. interactional sociolinguistics, narrative analysis, corpus linguistics, linguistic anthropology, computer-mediated discourse analysis, etc.

Despite this available breadth and diversity, when putting together this collection, we were acutely aware that in the discourse-pragmatics world, the Greek case remains under-represented: The proliferation of studies from young and established scholars alike is offset by the lack of dedicated forums that will register this critical mass and in this respect, this Special Issue, is seen as providing one such focal point, hopefully for many more to come. To this effect, our aim here is also to provide productive points of entry into identity work in comparative perspective (across contexts and modes of participation in Greek) that will engage with issues such as the following:

- 1) The role of specific linguistic and other semiotic resources within specific genres and social practices in identity construction;
- 2) The interplay between different aspects of personal and social identities associated with gender, ethnicity, youth as well as linguistic and peer group affiliations and social roles;
- 3) The relationships among broader extra-situational categories (e.g. social discourses, ideologies, interactional histories), situated meaning-making and identity management in talk and text;
- 4) Power differentials and hegemonies involved in discursive constructions of ‘self’ and ‘other(s)’, ‘we’ and ‘them’ and ways of challenging, deligitimizing or putting forth counter scripts in local contexts;
- 5) The kinds of affiliations or disaffiliations in terms of self- and other- identity positionings and displays occurring in ethnically, culturally or linguistically rich environments and the specific ways these can be addressed analytically.

In addressing the above issues, the papers bring to the fore the different kinds of linguistic and other semiotic resources that speakers or writers of Greek nuance, inflect, or rework in order to manage self- and other- identity positionings having to do with

gender, age, ethnicity, and/or a variety of social and relational roles, such as membership in a peer-group, addressed member of the public, etc. (e.g. Archakis & Tzanne, Georgakopoulou & Finnis, Goutsos & Fragaki, Lytra, Tsiplakou). At the same time, they show how local (interactional) contexts interact with broader ideological forces and social processes to shape language use and identity options (e.g. Giaxoglou, Goutsos & Fragaki, Tsitsipis). In the process, the papers point to different ways in which “Greekness” and “Greek-specificity” can be talked about and factored into a discursive approach to identities (e.g. Archakis & Tzanne, Georgakopoulou & Finnis); also how Greek as one of the available ‘codes’ with culturally shaped meanings operates in contact situations and in the new media (Spilioti, Tsiplakou).

Goutsos & Fragaki start off with the ‘big’, ‘transportable’ (Zimmerman 1998) identity of gender that has frequently formed the object of inquiry of sociolinguistic and social anthropological studies (e.g. Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1995) of Greek. In this paper however, the focus is on how language forms (in this case gendered noun pairs; e.g. man – woman) can act as more or less subtle markers of identity meanings and associations. A corpus analysis of newspapers and men’s and women’s magazines, arguably material that has played a role in propagating specific gendered asymmetries, brings to the fore stereotypical associations between men and achievements in public life and derogatory meaning distinctions in relation to women (in line with language and gender research on other languages too, e.g. see Cameron 1992). In the gender-oriented sources however, the men are linguistically represented in more fixed or determined ways whereas women are viewed in a wider range of associations ranging from oppressed to powerful, perhaps indicating the co-existence of older stereotypes at work with new meanings converging around the category of ‘womanhood’ that indicate women’s increasing participation in public life and juggling of domestic and professional roles.

Archakis & Tzanne build on previous work on Greek storytelling (e.g. Tannen 1989, Georgakopoulou 1997) that has attested to its sociocultural aspects and focus on stories told by members of a peer-group in the presence of a researcher-moderator. Their study focuses on the co-construction of tellings in ways that resonate with studies of narrative in other communities and cultures (e.g. the provision of parallel narratives; cf. second stories, Sacks 1992). Mindful of previous normative accounts of the relationships between language and culture in Greek (cf. discussion in Georgakopoulou 2004), Archakis and Tzanne refrain from attributing the markers of in-group membership that abound in the stories of their data solely to cultural factors; they do however consider their frequency against the background of previous studies that have attested to the salience of positive politeness choices in Greek conversations (e.g. Sifianou 1992). At the same time, their study shows the importance of local participation roles for the ways in which stories are told, including in this case the researcher-researched relationships.

The papers by Tsiplakou and Spilioti move the focus to language choices in genres enabled by new technologies, namely email and text-messaging in particular. Both papers align themselves with the so called ‘second wave’ of (computer)-mediated studies, which have moved away from posing one-to-one mappings between language forms and contextual variables and by the same token interpreting language choices solely on the basis of the medium. In similar vein, the question of what the relationships between the medium and spoken and written language are is no longer addressed in dichotomous terms but through nuanced accounts of language use in context. More

specifically, Tsiplakou combines quantitative with qualitative analyses to show the functions that code-switches between Greek and English fulfil in the email messages of Greek and Greek Cypriot friends; also, to examine wider participant attitudes to and perceptions of code-switching. In line with previous work on email (in Greek too), Tsiplakou's analysis reveals extensive style-shifting as part of the participants' persona management. This style-shifting performatively subverts the literate face of the participants' public identities while crucially indexing the 'literate' identity to be subverted. What is also notable in Tsiplakou's paper is the distancing of the participants from moral panics and 'phobic' attitudes towards the use of English on email.

A similar disjuncture between popular representations and participants' actual use of new media is reported in Spilioti's study of the alphabet choice and code-switches in Greek SMS. Contrary to media representations, Spilioti found that the digital, non-standard practice of Roman-alphabetized Greek (cf. Greeklish) was a rare choice and that writing Greek in the Greek alphabet was definitely the norm. Also, that the use of English was restricted to cultural loans and did by no means qualify as extensive or systematic code-switching. This finding is at odds with the code-switching that Tsiplakou reports on email and shows the need to discover empirically the complexity and heterogeneity of norms in the new media as opposed to presupposing homogeneity. In addition, as Spilioti points out, such findings confirm the contextualized nature of literacy choices.

The focus on hegemonic discourses and ideologies is a central theme in Giaxoglou's, paper which illustrates the benefits of re-visiting the folkloristic tradition of Greece with recent tools from linguistic anthropology.' The paper looks at folklore practices and the associated language ideologies in the collection and publication of oral traditions as developed in Greece in the 1930s. Drawing on archival data collected by a graduate philologist engaged in the collection of vernacular forms in a Maniat village (Southern Peloponnese), the paper investigates processes of entextualisation by focusing on four interrelated practices (practices of selection and organization of collectables, extraction, resetting and editing). The paper shows how orthodox practices of folklore text-making were localized and adapted, through the examination of features of orthopraxy in the aforementioned practices (see Blommaert 2003). These orthopractic local reproductions of orthodoxy are shown to serve as acts of local identity making that need to be situated in the context of the on-going Modern Greek nation-building project. To this effect, the paper demonstrates that these orthopractic practices did not challenge the hegemonic language ideologies of the time but sought to further legitimize them.

Indigenous linguistic minorities in interaction with majority Greeks have been a recent focus of language minded research in Greece (cf. Lytra 2007; Tsitsipis 1998; Sella-Mazi 2001). Tsitsipis' paper deals with the code-switching practices of bilingual speakers (in Greek and Tosk, the southern dialect variety of Albanian). Drawing on interviews which occurred as part of an ethnographic study of members of Arvanitika-Greek communities over time and space, he illustrates how through these practices participants negotiate multiple and shifting identities (e.g. oscillating between a national "we" Greek identity and an Arvanitika ethnic "we" identity). The paper argues for the need to locate these discursive identity constructions in powerful hegemonic discourses coming from both the national centre and its agents (e.g. schools, the media) as well as within the Arvanitika-Greek communities themselves and it shows how these pervasive discourses have shaped participants' subjectivities.

The different ways in which linguistic and other semiotic resources are used for social differentiation is an important theme in this collection. Lytra focuses on the use of teasing as a socially recurrent activity by members of a multilingual, multicultural peer group in an Athens primary school. Combining participant observations and interactional data, she explores how children construct academic hierarchies in peer talk. The paper shows how the children reproduced powerful institutional discourses of academic success and failure in circulation in the school to discursively position one of their peers as a “poor” pupil and themselves by extension as “good” pupils. At the same time, it illustrates how children go about challenging this peers’ unfavourable identity positionings at a local interactional level by proposing alternative identity options that were closer to their peer concerns. She argues that through teasing routines children sometimes conformed to and other times contested these dominant institutional discourses.

Georgakopoulou & Finnis shift attention away from binary oppositions “us” and “them” in their paper on language and ethnic/cultural identity in a diasporic context. Drawing on insights from an ethnographically informed study of a bilingual (in Greek Cypriot and English) youth organisation based in North London as well as a larger study of the North London Cypriot community involving interviews and questionnaire data, they show how participants juxtaposed English and “London Greek Cypriot” (LGC) in a set of genres. These genres included narrative jokes, ritual insults, hypothetical scenarios and meta-linguistic instances of mock Cypriot and were taken up as humorous discourse. They argue that these uses of LGC point to a relationship of ambivalence, a “partly ours partly theirs” code which allowed participants to claim a third space for themselves that went beyond established ethnic categories. Moreover, their habitual and conventionalised language choices suggest the creation of a particular “style” that participants exploit to negotiate shifting loyalties, affiliations and disaffiliations.

In documenting more or less subtle links between language choices and inscribed or inhabited identities in a variety of contexts, the papers in this Special Issue consolidate the recent departure from any previous homogenizing accounts of Greek language and culture, stressing both the routine in everyday practices and their multiplicity, discontinuities and disjunctures. In this way, they are contributing to the more general move within Greek studies away from narratives of linguistic exceptionalism and uniqueness to painstaking and situated analyses that place Greek language and discourse in sociolinguistic frameworks committed to shedding light on language and cultural diversity.

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