

Griko and Modern Greek in Grecia Salentina: an overview

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1. The Greek-speaking language island of Grecia Salentina

Griko is a language related to Greek, spoken by about 20,500 people in the southernmost edges of the regions of Apulia and Calabria, in southern Italy. Griko is considered both a dialect of M. Greek (Greek perspective) and a minority language (Italian view). The present study deals with the situation of Griko in Grecia Salentina in the Apulia region.

The Greek-speaking enclave of Grecia Salentina, located in the sub-peninsula of Salento, is made up of nine villages (Calimera, Castrignano dei Greci, Corigliano d'Otranto, Martano, Martignano, Melpignano, Soletto, Sternatia and Zollino) which cover an area of 143.90 km². The total population of Grecia is 41,500 inhabitants, nearly half of whom are believed to be Griko-speakers². Most Griko-speakers are elderly people, pointing to a language in strong regression, which has in fact already died out in Melpignano and Soletto.

2. Origins and history of Griko

A long-standing debate over the origins of Griko has produced two main theories for the origins of Griko. According to the first theory, developed by Giuseppe Morosi in 1870³, Griko originated from the Hellenistic koine when, in the Byzantine era (around 1000 AD), waves of immigrants arrived from Greece in Salento. Some decades after Morosi, G. Rohlfs⁴, in the wake of Hatzidakis (1892)⁵, claimed instead that Griko was a local variety of Greek evolved directly from the Ancient Greek spoken in the colonies of Magna Graecia.

¹ The collaboration on this research topic between Angeliki Douri and Dario De Santis dates back to 2010, when she was preparing her Master's degree thesis at the Albert Ludwigs University in Freiburg im Breisgau (Germany) and he had just completed his studies at the Università degli Studi di Bari (Italy). They are now employed as language instructors respectively at the Sismanoglio Megaro General Consulate of Greece in Istanbul and at the Istanbul University (Turkey).

² A. ROMANO, P. MARRA, *Il griko nel terzo millennio: «speculazioni» su una lingua in agonia*, Parabita (LE), Il Laboratorio, 2008, p. 51.

³ G. MOROSI, *Studi sui dialetti greci della terra d'Otranto*, Lecce, Editrice Salentina, 1870, *passim*.

⁴ G. ROHLFS, *Scavi linguistici nella Magna Grecia*, Galatina, Congedo, 1974, *passim*.

⁵ G. HATZIDAKIS, *Einleitung in die neugriechische Grammatik*, Leipzig, Olms, 1892, *passim*.

3. The linguistic repertoire of Grecia Salentina

In order to describe the linguistic repertoire of Grecia Salentina, Romano and Marra adopt the expression «triglossia without trilingualism»⁶, that is, when there is a potential polyglossia in a community but no one is able to master all the codes. In Grecia Salentina, there is an interplay among three codes: (regional) Italian, Sallentinian (the local Romance dialect) and Griko. The diagram below, devised by Romano and Marra⁷ illustrates the structure of the linguistic repertoire of the three generations (N=elderly people/grandparents; G=adults/parents; F=young people/children).

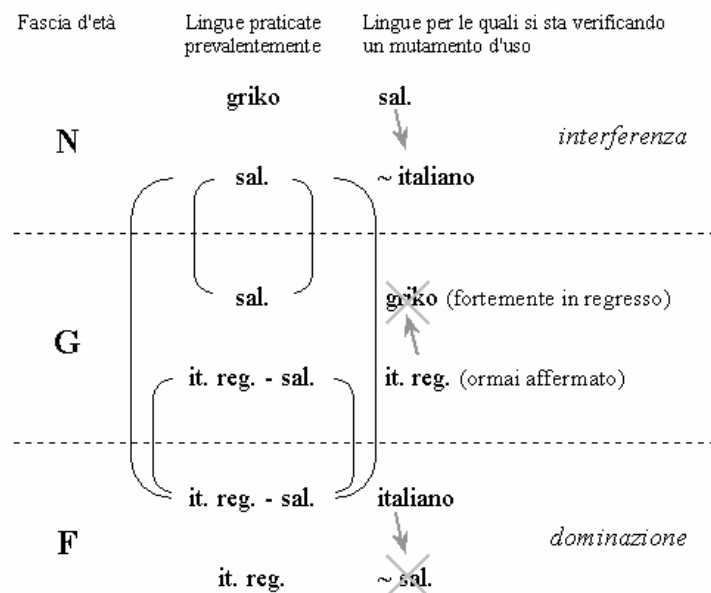


Fig. 1 Scheme of the linguistic repertoire of Grecia Salentina [Romano, Marra 2008: 39].

Elderly people (N) speak Griko among themselves and Sallentinian with the parents (G). With the children (F) they use Sallentinian as well and occasionally Italian, although it must be noted that their knowledge of Italian is incomplete. The parents typically have an incomplete/passive knowledge of Griko, which, however, they use very seldom or not at all. With N they speak Sallentinian (not Griko) and with F mostly a rather regionalized variety of Italian or Sallentinian. Lastly, young people (F) do not speak and do not understand Griko. They

⁶ ROMANO, MARRA, *Il griko nel terzo millennio...*, cit., p. 38 (all translations by the authors of the present paper).

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 39.

communicate with N in Sallentinian, whereas with G they employ either Sallentinian or a form of Italian less regionalized compared to their parents' one. However, it must be noted that this is just a simplification, as the actual linguistic repertoire may vary considerably from family to family depending on several factors (age, social class, personal experiences etc.).

The main cause of Griko's regression clearly emerges from this description: the competition with Salentino, which has encroached on the domains once occupied by Griko. In short, Griko is no longer the language used within the group of peers to guarantee sense of belonging and group solidarity⁸. There is practically no communicative function left for Griko.

The relegation of Griko to a position of subordination to Italian and Sallentinian has been determined by several historical and socio-economic events. People stopped passing on Griko to their children as it was associated with the condition of backwardness and ignorance of most its speakers (poor peasants), whereas Italian was the language of progress, social emancipation and success.

Fortunately, the spread of welfare into the communities has put an end to the negative connotations of Griko. Since the late 70s there has been a renewal of interest in Griko, with many individuals, associations and authorities taking initiatives for the preservation and promotion of this threatened language.

4. Griko at schools of Grecìa Salentina

In order to investigate the position of Griko in the educational system, we conducted a field research made up of a phase of observation, during which we attended several Griko classes, and a series of targeted interviews with the main actors of Griko teaching (Griko teachers, regular teachers, headmasters, students, students' parents)

The most evident and striking pattern that emerges from the research is that there is no unified agreement among the schools about the modalities for teaching Griko, rather, every school acts on its own. The headmasters decide, on the basis of the resources available, whether, how and in which grades Griko courses are held. Normally, Griko should be taught from the nursery up to the middle school, but for some years now, schools are not able to ensure such a continuity of teaching. Griko courses consist of a small amount of hours (typically less than twenty) carried out one hour per week and not even for the whole scholastic year. The shortness of Griko courses is due firstly to the lack of economic resources (financial backing for the teaching of Griko is completely dependent on the provisions of Law No 482 of 15 December 1999), and to a lesser extent to the lack of available hours in the schedule.

⁸ I. MANOLESSOU, *The Greek dialects of Southern Italy: an overview*, in «*Cambridge papers in Modern Greek*» 13, 2005, pp. 103-125.

Although Griko is a compulsory subject at school it is taught by external experts employed specifically to give these courses. None of these experts have Griko as their native language, but most of them have learnt it as a child. The selection of the experts is carried out autonomously by the headmasters, i.e. not by some standardized procedure based on examinations or qualifications. At the time of research (2010-2011), ten years since Law 482 had come into force, only two courses had been organized for the training of Griko teachers.

Griko lessons typically revolve around folklore: the pupils learn songs, poems, dances and the traditions related to Griko. Very few lessons are dedicated to the language's structural features and to actual language practice. Consequently, even after several years of Griko, the students' knowledge of the language is restricted to very basic vocabulary and some poems and songs. The lack of a modern, scientifically grounded, method for the teaching of Griko represents a severe obstacle to the learning of the language at school.

5. The teaching of M. Greek in Grecia Salentina

The teaching of M. Greek in Grecia dates back to the 1970s, when some schools started offering comparative courses of Griko and M. Greek. However, it was only in 1994 that the teaching of M. Greek in Grecia became official and systematic. Since then, the Greek Ministry of Education has been sending native teachers of M. Greek to the schools of Salento every year.

Today M. Greek is taught as an optional subject in curricular and extra-curricular time, in some primary and middle schools in the villages of Grecia as well as in other towns of Salento. In addition, some courses of M. Greek for adults are also offered.

It must be noted that the Greek government sends native teachers to numerous foreign countries where there are Greek-speaking communities in order to maintain and foster the Greek language and culture outside Greece. The case of Salento is unique in that in the other countries M. Greek is taught as a second language to communities of Greek immigrants or of Greek descent, whereas in Grecia the teachers must teach M. Greek as a foreign language to people who are not of recent Greek origin and in most cases have never had any contact with M. Greek.

6. Modern Greek, a threat or a resource for Griko?

In the last decades the contacts between Greece and Grecia have become more and more intense. Besides language teaching these contacts include pairings between schools and towns of Grecia and Greece, cultural meetings, excursions, school trips and student exchanges. The intensification of the relations between these two regions can have positive as well as negative consequences for the setting of Grecia. The earnings which come in from the

tourism sector, the development of an intercultural dimension and the opportunity to broaden the intellectual horizons of the communities are certainly positive. It remains to be seen, however, whether and how the coexistence with M. Greek can benefit the position of Griko.

Some schools of Grecia make use of a comparative method Griko - M. Greek. The teachers who have tried out this method claim that it presents more cons than pros and needs much improvement in order to yield good results. Firstly, there is not enough time available for the comparative teaching: the lessons are carried out in only one hour, which means thirty minutes for each language, too little to achieve any significant results. Furthermore, up till now there is no scientifically tested methodology for the comparative teaching of these two languages which could be implemented in the courses. A serious obstacle to the implementation of the comparative method is the fact that none of the teachers master both languages: bilingual teachers of Griko and M. Greek still do not exist. Another comment made by the teachers is that the pupils' poor competence in both languages does not allow them to take advantage of the knowledge of one language to learn the other one. Rather, the incomplete competence makes the pupils confuse the two languages. Moreover, some teachers underline that apart from basic vocabulary, the languages present quite different features (pronunciation, grammar, even the alphabet).

As far as the advantages are concerned, the comparative method stimulates the interest of the pupils who are fascinated by discovering the similarities and the links between their grandparents' language and a foreign language. In addition, the students may reappraise the value of Griko by comparing it with a "more prestigious", national language. On the other hand, the comparison of the two languages presents the opposite risk that students may give preference to M. Greek over Griko, a phenomenon that many informants have already noticed.

The question whether is better to use or to not use the comparative method belongs to a much wider question: whether it is right to teach M. Greek at all in Grecia Salentina. There are two main schools of thought on this issue: those who push for a "restoration" of Griko on the basis of its affinity with M. Greek, and those who push for a valorization of the local minority language, respectful to the peculiar features it has acquired during its natural development including all the contaminations with the neighboring Romance languages⁹. The advocates of the first position argue that without the assistance of M. Greek, the Griko language as it is today has no future and will soon die out. The advocates of the opposite side maintain that M. Greek is a foreign language extraneous to

⁹ A. SOBRERO, A. MIGLIETTA, *Politica linguistica e presenza del griko in Salento, oggi*, in C. GUARDIANO, E. CALARESU, C. ROBUSTELLI, A. CARLI (a cura di) *Lingue, Istituzioni, Territori: riflessioni teoriche, proposte metodologiche ed esperienze di politica linguistica*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2005, pp. 209-226, p. 213.

the reality of Grecia Salentina and that, therefore, it must not be involved in the process of protection of Griko.

The first question we asked ourselves with regard to this topic is why the Greek government does not address its efforts (and financing) to the safeguard of Griko rather than to the promotion of M. Greek. The answer is that the long struggle for the standardization of M. Greek still leads the Greek government to adopt language policies firmly against the local varieties and dialects. Besides, it is very likely that Greece foresees more economic and political advantages in the spread of the Greek language into Salento, rather than in the protection of a threatened language, which, although related to M. Greek, remains a foreign language to the Greeks.

Glossing over these considerations, we believe that a proper use of M. Greek can benefit Griko in many ways. First of all M. Greek can contribute to solve the problem of the incompleteness of Griko vocabulary which make this language inadequate for communication in a modern society.

It has been observed that some fluent Griko-speakers who attend M. Greek courses, make regular use of M. Greek terms to fill the lexical gaps of their native language. This occurs in a natural way, without any constriction or encouragement to do so. In addition, it is likely that Griko would be more exposed to assimilation if the lexical borrowings came from the Romance languages than if they came from M. Greek. Another point in favor of a restoration through M. Greek is that Greek elements, thanks to their linguistic features, are more suitable for lexical integration in Griko than Italian and Salentine elements. Unfortunately, at the moment just a few Griko-speakers also know M. Greek to such an extent so as to combine the two.

7. Reversing Language Shift in Grecia Salentina

This section will deal with the issue of reversing language shift (RLS) in Grecia Salentina, with the ultimate goal of providing recommendations on the actions to take on behalf of Griko. In doing so, we will refer chiefly to Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS)¹⁰, attempting to adapt this model to the particular situation of Griko.

Before getting to the heart of the matter, some preliminary remarks are needed. Any RLS program is destined to fail if it is not supported by the community's will to maintain its ancestral language. With reference to our case, the community of Grecia, although well-disposed towards the minority language, is still lacking a strong motivation to return to speaking the language. The prerequisite for saving Griko is the rise of a Griko identity among the

¹⁰ J. FISHMAN, *Language maintenance, language shift, and reversing language shift*, in T.K. BHATIA, W.C. RITCHIE (a cura di) *The handbook of bilingualism*, Oxford [i.a.], Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 406-446, p. 427.

inhabitants of the area: people must speak Griko in order to feel themselves integrated into the community¹¹. Instead, today this function is fulfilled by the Salentine dialect.

The function of the GIDS is twofold as it constitutes a framework that assesses the status of vitality and endangerment of the language and at the same time prescribes a sequence of necessary steps to be undertaken in order to ameliorate the current status of the language¹². The scheme below¹³ displays the eight stages of reversing language shift. Read upside down, it indicates the severity of intergenerational dislocation.

Fishman's GIDS scale:

- III. Educational, work sphere, mass media and (quasi-) governmental operations in Xish at the highest (nationwide) levels.
 - IV. Local/regional mass media and (quasi-)governmental services in Xish.
 - V. The local/regional (i.e. non-neighborhood) work sphere, both among Xmen and among Ymen*.
- 4b. Public schools for X-ish children, offering some instruction via Xish, but substantially under Yish curricular and staffing control
- 4a. Schools in lieu of compulsory education and substantially under Xish curricular and staffing control
- II. RLS-efforts to transcend diglossia, subsequent to its attainment?
5. Schools for Xish literacy acquisition, for the old and/ or for the young, and not in lieu of compulsory education
- V. The organization of intergenerational and demographically concentrated home-family-neighborhood efforts: the basis of Xish mother-tongue transmission.
 - VI. Cultural interaction in Xish primarily involving the community-based older generation (beyond the age of giving birth).
 - VII. Reconstructing Xish and adult acquisition of XSL.
- A. RLS to attain diglossia (assuming prior ideological clarification)?
- * Y=Majority language, X=Minority Language, XSL=Minority Second Language

¹¹ ROMANO, MARRA, *Il griko nel terzo millennio...*, cit., p. 88.

¹² J. FISHMAN, *Language maintenance, language shift, and reversing language shift*, cit., pp. 426.

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 427.

The author of the model specifies that the undertaking of any RLS measures must be preceded first by a comprehensive study of the socio-linguistic setting of the minority language¹⁴, something that has not been done yet for Griko and hence constitutes the most pressing priority. With regard to the degree of endangerment, Griko places itself at the last stage (8th): the language «has lost its native speakers to such a degree that it must first be learned as a second language before further socio-functional repertoire expansion can be envisioned for it»¹⁵. Moreover, the Griko language needs to be reconstructed since its vocabulary is too poor to allow one to fully express oneself in the whole set of situations of modern society.

The reconstruction of Griko demands in first place the creation of a Griko koine out of the several varieties of the villages and the codification of a unified system of transcription of the language, measures apt to put an end to the current fragmentation. The creation of a written standard variety must be carried out with care taking into account insofar as possible the actual local parlances.

The linguists who will carry out the operation will be called on to take a series of choices. In my opinion, the alphabet should remain the Latin one, since the employment of the Greek alphabet would just distance the language from its speakers and to make the learning more difficult for the students. As lending language we would recommend M. Greek for several reasons: thanks to the similarity of its linguistic features with Griko, M. Greek is more suitable for integration than the Romance languages; the employment of a close kindred lending language make the process of integration seem more natural and thus more justifiable and acceptable by the speakers themselves; in addition, using M. Greek reduces the risk of assimilation of Griko to the lending language. In fact, whereas a massive presence of Italian and Salentine terms would drive speakers to switch code from Griko to the languages that they master, this would not occur with M. Greek which is a foreign language to them.

The method devised by Fishman is bottom-up, as it aims to restore the usage of the language in the minority group starting not from the institutions and the institutionalized space but rather from the community and the informal space. Indeed, the most important role in the process of RLS is assigned to the cluster home-family-community: it is in this informal linguistic domain that the intergenerational Xish mother-tongue transmission must be based. Referring to the eight stages, stage 6 «may be viewed as the dynamic fulcrum of a field of forces. If stage 6 is not attained and vigorously retained, the RLS efforts concentrated at other stages will be less contributory to the intergenerational continuity of Xish»¹⁶.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 426.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 427.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 428.

The failure of all the efforts made on behalf of Griko so far seems to lie in the negation of this basic principle affirmed by Fishman that the home and the community are the linchpins of RLS. Rather, the authorities have always concentrated their actions on the last four stages (4 to 1), neglecting the first four which constitute the bottom of the process. The notorious Law 482 represents the most striking example of a faulty minority language policy insofar as it limits itself to enforce language rights which in some cases, e.g. in Grecia, virtually nobody can exercise. Apparently the legislator misses out the fact that the straightforward enforcement of language rights does not suffice to spread or safeguard a language.

A serious mistake that the government's minority language policies very often commit is that of delegating the greatest responsibility for fostering the endangered language to the educational system. By doing so, the school substitutes the home and community as the main catalyst of language transmission. Fittingly, Fishman states that «intergenerational mother tongue transmission is a function of the childhood intimacy and spontaneity that characterizes home-family-neighborhood life»¹⁷, hence, schools cannot fulfill the duty of a natural mother-tongue language transmission.

It is undeniable that the core of RLS lies in the “home-family-neighborhood life”. Nonetheless, J. Fishman is the first to wonder «whether the attainment and maintenance of stage 6 (in weak RLS movements) is at all susceptible to planning»¹⁸.

In my view, a straightforward implementation of the GIDS cannot succeed in rescuing Griko. This language is indeed at such a weak stage that it cannot start in families without it also being institutionalized. In Grecia Salentina, the bottom-up approach must be combined with a top-down one. The state and the local authorities must strive to involve the community in the process of RLS to make the people protagonists for the safeguard of their own language. A good provision could consist in granting economic incentives to Griko-speaking families who take care of passing on the ancestral language to the children.

The revitalization of the minority language within the community must be reinforced by the education system whose role and strategies need to be revised. School and community must be always linked and work in close cooperation in order to foster the minority language successfully. The school for its part must teach the minority language in such a way that it can be actively used outside the classrooms' walls and come back into the community. Only the establishment of this linkage «enables the threatened language to become a first language of a new generation and [that] enables the school for children to be

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 431.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 431.

more than constantly (intergenerationally) a second language teaching institution»¹⁹.

8. Final recommendations and remarks

We would like to conclude this article with some recommendations specific to the RLS efforts in Grecia Salentina. Firstly, the revision of the national law and/or the issue of a regional law on the protection of the minority language are needed. The legislation has to take into account the current situation and the actual needs of the Griko minority and to allocate sufficient funds to this purpose. The main aim of the authorities at any level must be to enhance the people's commitment to maintain their minority language. This could be done relying on the rise of a Griko identity based on the uniqueness of the Griko language.

The reconstruction of the language should be carried out in such a way as to ameliorate the prestige of Griko and its suitability in modern society. The standard written variety created must not be perceived as foreign by the native speakers.

As far as the education system is concerned, various improvements are required. Firstly, a scientific method and appropriate didactic material for the teaching of Griko have to be devised. Courses of Griko for adults should be held on a large scale. The study of Griko should be continuative and intensive throughout the scholastic period, from nursery school to high school, for all the children of Grecia.

The nursery school should make use of Griko as language of instruction, drawing also on the large amount of games, stories, lullabies and children's rhymes of the Griko tradition. Such a use of Griko in early infancy would not require a great competence in the language and perhaps the parents might also be able to speak some Griko to their children at home.

The study of Griko should continue in primary schools, either as medium of instruction alternating with Italian or as a subject but for a considerable amount of hours. The lessons should focus on the active use of the language through language immersion situations. The participation of elderly fluent speakers into the classes would be a welcome contribution and compensate for the non-fluency of the teachers. As for these last, they should be trained to teach Griko through specific university courses and their skills regularly upgraded and refreshed.

In middle school, the teaching of Griko might be carried out through a comparative method with M. Greek. The learning of M. Greek would both give an additional motivation to study Griko and provide them with a foreign language to use in their future. The high schools specialized in classical studies

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 15.

of Salento could combine the study of Ancient Greek with that of Griko. In this way middle school pupils would not underestimate the discipline of Griko because it does not continue in the following levels of education.

As a basic principle, the minority language ought to be taught combined with the interests of the pupils of each school level in order to keep their motivation high. Moreover, the folklore should not be the final goal of instruction, rather the medium of access to the language.

It is desirable that the academic world and in particular the University of Salento also commits itself to the RLS efforts, providing the necessary expertise, training teachers and staff and above all promoting research in this field.

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In alto a sinistra: Santo con cartiglio nel complesso pittorico della chiesa di San Mauro di Gallipoli (il testo greco è solo parzialmente leggibile dopo il tentativo di asportazione di ignoti). In alto a destra: Santa Barbara nella chiesa di Santa Maria della Croce di Casaranello (Casarano). Oltre che per la picchettatura, l'affresco è compromesso lateralmente da incisioni in greco bizantino datate (e oggi linguisticamente preziose). In basso: esempio di segnaletica bilingue (italiano e greco moderno) a Calimera [Foto di A. Romano, 2004].

