GREEK-SPEAKING ENCLAVES IN LEBANON AND SYRIA

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1. Introduction

The Greek language enjoys special prestige in the Eastern Mediterranean area, both as a medium of commercial transactions and as an instrument of upward social mobility. It is a language which allows its users to establish closer relations, for both professional and educational purposes, with a European country, which, nevertheless, is geographically and culturally close to the Middle East.

At the same time, the presence of Greeks in Lebanon and Syria has been noted for many years. The first Greek association, the 'Greek Benevolent Association of Beirut' (according to the Greek Community of Beirut Bulletin, no date: 22) was founded in 1926, long before Lebanon became independent, by permission of the Lebanese government of the time and the French colonial authorities. This was soon followed by the foundation of the 'Urban Greek School' (Astiki Elliniki Scholi), the 'Greek Ladies Union' (Enosi Ellinidon Kirion) and the 'Aetos' Athletic Association, later to become the 'Greek Club of Beirut' (Elliniki Leschi Viritou). Today, Greek language schools operate in Beirut (the capital of Lebanon), Damascus and Halep (the capital and second largest city of Syria, respectively), with teachers on secondment from Greece, while efforts are being made by the Association of Lebanese Graduates of Greek Universities and Institutes and other individuals to establish other Greek schools in Tripoli and El Mina in Lebanon.

This paper presents the main Greek-speaking enclaves of Lebanon and Syria, two countries that are geographically and, in many ways, culturally close to Greece but whose significance as hosts to Greek-speaking populations has not been explored so far. The special religious and political conditions that exist in this region make it both challenging and important to study the bilingual Greek-Arabic enclaves in Lebanon and

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Syria and to suggest possible ways of further maintaining Greek language use in the region. More specifically, the study focuses on the mainly Muslim Greek-speaking group on the border of the two countries, which is of Cretan background. After a hundred years of residence in the coastal regions of Tripoli in northern Lebanon and Hamedye in southern Syria, this Greek-speaking population of about 7,000-10,000 people, of which almost 7,000 live in Lebanon and 3,000 in Syria, remains very much alive, continuing to use their Cretan dialect, even though they are now in the third to fifth migrant generation. After discussing briefly the methodological procedure followed in the undertaken research, I will present the enclaves in question and will move on to investigate the sociolinguistic issues that are involved in the use and maintenance of the Greek-speaking enclaves in the two countries. I will conclude with some remarks on factors that make the teaching of Greek in the region both challenging and important for the future of the bilingual status of the communities.

2. The research

The fieldwork in Lebanon and Syria involved a combination of the research methods of participant observation and interviews (Cameron *et al*., 1992). Participant observation (Tsokalidou, 1992) is a reliable method of eliciting information, involving minimum intervention by the researcher in the practices of the community under study. Participant observation enabled us to gather significant information on the activities of the community and the linguistic behaviour of its members. At the same time, interviews, with open-ended questions, yielded information on the issues of concern to the community, and not those predetermined by a rigidly structured questionnaire. The main issues raised during the interviews were the ethnic background of the group, village life, their relationship and contacts with Greece and Crete, and their use of the Greek language. The research sample was determined through our contacts with official bodies (Greek embassies, organized Greek community groups, the church, universities, organizations and associations) and also through the social networks (Milroy, 1980; Gal, 1979) of the Greek-speaking participants. Finally, it was necessary for our fieldwork to adjust to the different socio-political conditions of Lebanon and Syria, that is the political regime in Lebanon being more liberal and that of Syria more authoritarian.

3. The findings

Records of the settlement in question in the aforementioned region suggest that the community left Crete between 1866 and 1897, on the outbreak of the last Cretan uprising against the Ottoman Empire, which ended in the Greek-Turkish war of 1897 (Zarkadakis, 1995). The last Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Abdul Hamid, provided some of the muslim Cretans with a new home on the Syrian coast, named, Hamedye in his honour (Zarkadakis, 1995). The population was further divided into two groups with the division of the region into the countries of Syria and Lebanon. Since then, the Cretan-background population has been living partly in the south of Syria, in the village Hamedye, and partly in the north of Lebanon, namely in the area of El Mina. I will now present each group and will discuss their bilingual and bicultural identity.

3.1. The Cretan community in Lebanon –The Cretan Association

The Cretan Association, 'The Cretan Social and Benevolent Association of Lebanon' ("Φιλανθρωπικός Κοινωνικός Λιβανέζικος Κρητικός Σύλλογος") was founded in 1996 in Tripoli in northern Lebanon. In the Association's charter, its members define themselves as refugees from Crete (late 19th - early 20th century), who migrated to Lebanon and, in particular, to the areas of Tripoli and its port El Mina. The main purposes of the Association are to improve the living standards of their community and carry out social and charitable work. It is a non-profit-making body and has no political objectives.

It is worth noting that in the application procedure to join the Association no mention is made of the candidate's religion. Representatives of the Association stated that because of their religion the community members have been regarded with indifference, and even hostility, by the official Greek authorities. Such an attitude is in direct contrast to their own belief in respect for all, regardless of their religious affiliation. The fact that they live in a society embracing a variety of different faiths has contributed to their own religious tolerance. Despite their isolation, the community has retained a sense of its Cretan identity and a desire for relations with metropolitan Greece. According to statements by the president of the Association, the intensification of their activities over the last year has led to an improvement in relations between the community and the Greek embassy. As far as language is concerned, most of the older community members (over 40) still have a satisfactory command of Greek, while most

of the younger members (those in their 20s or younger) have a passive knowledge of the language. They are all proud to state that the community has preserved Cretan customs and traditions and although they are Muslims, they are monogamous and regard divorce as a disgrace, wishing to indicate thus their influence from certain Christian Greek traditions that their ancestors brought with them from Crete. Until the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon (1975), their community was close-knit and entirely endogamous. The war, however, forced many to migrate and the community was dispersed. They also pointed out that their relations with their Lebanese compatriots have always been excellent.

3.2. Syria –Hamedye

According to some previous researchers (Vranopoulos, 1995; Zarkadakis, 1995), the inhabitants of the Greek-speaking village of Hamedye speak only Greek in their interactions with one another, while they first come into contact with Arabic at school. According to the estimates of the inhabitants of Hamediye, their community numbers 3,000 Cretans out of a total village population of 5,000. From conversation with the villagers we learned that they, too, enjoy excellent relations with their Arab compatriots and that they consciously preserve the customs and traditions that their ancestors brought with them from Crete, mainly the practice of monogamy and a critical attitude towards the denial of education to muslim girls. Their command of spoken Greek, and specifically of the Cretan dialect, is remarkably good and code switching into Arabic or English is quite common as we will see in some of the examples that follow. Their contact with Greece and Crete is maintained through satellite television and their relatives who live in Crete.

Below, we show extracts from the interviews with a middle-aged member of the community (aged 50) and a younger one (30). The latter travelled to Crete and worked there for five months some years ago, while his brother is permanently resident in Crete and has become Orthodox in order to marry a Greek woman. The family complained that they had been unable to attend the wedding because, especially over the last few years, the Greek embassy in Syria has refused to issue them visas.

4. Interview extracts and discussion

The interview extracts are translated into English and bold type is used to denote code-switching into Arabic, since the matrix language in the interactions with Greeks and older members of both communities is Greek. The symbol A1 refers to the middle-aged speaker, A2 to the younger speaker and R to the researcher.

The first four examples are from discussions with inhabitants of Hamedye and express their views on the life in their village, their relations with Greece and their knowledge of the Greek language:

1.

R: *Πόσα χρόνια έχετε που φύγατε από την Ελλάδα;*

(How long is it since your people left Greece?)

A1: *Είναι πάνω από εκατό χρόνια*

(More than a hundred years.)

A2: *Παρατήσαμε την Κρήτη κι ήρθαμε εδώ πέρα. Γιατί; Ήταν κάτι που έχει να κάνει με το **civil war**, τον πόλεμο στην Κρήτη, δηλαδή, ναι, την εποχή που ήρθαμε στο Χαμεντιέ οι Κρητικοί, δηλαδή, ήταν διακόσια με εκατό χρόνια, δηλαδή πριν ελευθερωθεί η Κρήτη.*

(We left Crete and came here. Why? It had to do with the **civil war**, the war there was in Crete, I mean, yes, at the time we came to Hamedye the Cretans, I mean, it was from two hundred to a hundred years, I mean before Crete was liberated.)

2.

A1: *Είμαστε πολύ καλά, είμαστε. Τα σπίτια μας καλά, τα παιδιά μας καλά... Καλά είμαστε, να φάμε, να πιούμε, η υγεία καλά, τα παιδιά καλά...
Τα τραγούδια της Κρήτης όλα τα έχουμε.*

(We're fine here, really. We have good houses, our children are fine … We're fine, we eat and drink well, we have good health, our children are well… We have all the songs from Crete.)

R: *Εσείς κάνετε προξενειό στην κόρη σας;*

(Do you find your daughter's husband for her?)

A1: *Εγώ θα τση πω αν είναι καλός ή δεν είναι καλός; Όχι! Μόνη της. Άμα είναι καλός άνθρωπος, γιατί όχι;*

(Do I tell her if he is good, or no good? No! She decides on her own. If he's a decent man, why shouldn't she?)

R: *Νέα έχετε από την Κρήτη;*

(Do you get news from Crete?)

A1: *Εφτά το βράδυ βάλαμε την τηλεόραση και έρχεται η Ελλάδα όλη.*

(At seven in the evening we turned on the TV and all of Greece comes here.)

3.

R: *Αυτοί που πάνε στην Κρήτη τι δουλειές κάνουν;*

(The people who go to Crete, what jobs do they do?)

A1: *Στις οικοδομές δουλεύουν. Εγώ το παιδί μου τώρα στην Κρήτη πέντε χρόνια είναι, πέντε χρόνια στην Κρήτη…Έκανε πολλές δουλειές στην Κρήτη.*

(Construction work. My own boy's been in Crete five years now, five years in Crete… He's done many jobs in Crete.)

A1: *Θέλουμε να μας δώσουν βίζα.*

(We want them to give us visas.)

A1: *Αγαπούμε την Ελλάδα…Στην Κύπρο είναι καλύτερα από την Ελλάδα, που είναι η μάνα μας, η πατρίδα μας. Στην Κύπρο πηγαίνουμε, καλώς ορίσατε. Είναι καλύτερα για μας. Στην Ελλάδα τίποτε, τίποτε. Ούτε από τον Λίβανο, ούτε από την Συρία.*

(We love Greece…In Cyprus things are better for us than in Greece, which is our mother, our mother country. We go to Cyprus and they make us welcome. It's better for us. In Greece nothing, nothing. Not from Lebanon, not from Syria. [referring to the issuing of visas])

A2: *Οι καλύτεροι φίλοι που γνώρισα στον κόσμο είναι αυτοί που γνώρισα στην Κρήτη…Βρήκα φίλους που μου δώκανε ό,τι βοήθεια ήθελα, πιάσε από χρήμα, πιάσε από γνώμη, οτιδήποτε δηλαδή.*

(The best friends I've made anywhere in the world were those I met in Crete … I made friends who gave me any help I needed, money, advice, whatever.)

4.

A1: *Μιλούμε τα κρητικά, τα μιλούμε από τους παππούδες μας, απ'τους πατεράδες μας…*

(We speak Cretan, we learned it from our grandfathers, our fathers…)

R: *Ξέρετε να γράφετε ελληνικά,*

(Can you write Greek?)

A1: *Έχουμε έναν γιατρό που γράφει ελληνικά.*

(We have a doctor who can write Greek.)

A2: *Όλοι ήρθαμε εδώ πέρα και ξέραμε μόνο τα κρητικά, δηλαδή δεν ξέραμε άλλη ξένη γλώσσα. Αν είχαμε άλλη καταγωγή, θα ξέραμε κι άλλη γλώσσα…*
Μόνος μου έμαθα ελληνικά.

(All of us came here only knowing Cretan, I mean we didn't know any other foreign language. If we'd come from somewhere else, we'd know another language…
I learnt Greek on my own.[He means written Greek])

It is clear from the recorded extracts that the people of Hamedye have a very good command of spoken Greek, but when it comes to reading and writing there is a high degree of illiteracy. Their spoken proficiency is due to the strong tradition in the use of spoken Greek, while the illiteracy can be attributed principally to the lack of Greek schools, a consequence of their rejection by the Greek authorities.

It is our belief that the issues concerning the bilingual character of the two Greek-speaking communities in Lebanon and Syria need to be approached in a different manner to that concerning the majority of the Greek diaspora. The insistence

encountered in the literature (Lykoudi-Semantaraki, 1997) on the importance of personal choice in the maintenance of the ethnic language and identity in the diaspora does not apply to the communities in Lebanon and Syria. The level of knowledge of Greek of those people of Greek descent living abroad, and the composition of the communities that these people organise, are matters closely linked to both their own socio-economic environment and official Greek foreign policy. Although the Cretans of Tripoli and Hamedye remain keenly interested in their Greek origins, they are denied the opportunity to improve their Greek through regular trips to the country of origin.

In this light, the bilingual identity of the communities in question, through the maintenance and use of the Greek language along with Arabic in the everyday interactions of the community members, becomes even more significant. Moreover, as in most bilingual communities, the simultaneous use of the two languages, that is code-switching, expresses the coexistence of communicative and identity needs in the two languages and cultures in contact.

I will now give some examples of the use of code-switching between the two languages from discussions with members (mainly, fourth generation) of the Cretan community in El Mina, Lebanon. They come from two Greek-speaking women (F1 and F2) in their 60's:

> 5.
> F1: *Προτού οι άνθρωποι ήταν **mabsoutin**. Εμείς χαέρια δεν έχουμε **abadan** πράμα.*
> (Before people were **happy**. We have no good situation **at all**.)
>
> 6.
> F2: *Τηλεφώνησε **inu** στις πέντε του μηνός πρέπει να είμαι εκεί.*
> (He called **that** on the 5th of this month I have to be there.)
>
> 7.
> F2: *Τραγουδάει **yunenika**… Τον εξέρουνε οι **yunenides** και τον εθέλουνε.*
> (He sings **yunenika** (greek)… **Yunenides** (Greeks) know him and want him)

It is interesting to note that the words "yunenika" (Greek) and "yunenides" (Greeks) (example 7) are made up from the arabic root word "yunen", which means Greece, and the greek suffixes "ika" and "ides", while the standard Greek forms of the two words would be "ellinika" (Greek) and "ellines" (Greeks), accordingly. These are examples of the contact between the two languages that make up the linguistic repertoire of the bilingual communities in question, which, along with the overall,

unmarked code-switching that can be observed in the speech of the community members (examples 5-7), testifies to their bilingual and bicultural reality. The significance of the switch from one language to the other does not lie in the specific words that are used from either language, but in the overall composition of their speech with linguistic and cultural elements from both Greek and Arabic. Overall code-switching is the demonstration of the continuous switch of the linguistic and cultural priorities of the bilingual speakers and the interaction and convergence between their linguistic and social identities (Myers-Scotton, 1988).

However, this interaction between identities in the case of the Greek/Cretan-speaking communities of Lebanon and Syria becomes even more complex due to the special sociolinguistic factors that hold in the specific communities. The study of these communitites makes it necessary to consider not only the socio-political conditions of the two countries, as we mentioned earlier, but other possible factors that influence or determine the contact between the enclaves in question and Greece. Thus, we need to consider their ethnic identity, not only in terms of their bilingual behaviour, but also in relation to their religion.

The issue of the connection between ethnic identity and religion has been of general concern in the case of multi-religious societies (Salibi, 1988). This may refer to the case of Arabic and Islam, as there is a considerable number of Arabic-speakers that are not muslim. On the other hand, the relation between ethnicity and religion becomes also critical in cases where there is a strong mono-religious tradition, such as Greece and the majority of the Greek diaspora. The discrepancy between the religious identity of the communities of Lebanon and Syria and the mainstream religion of Greece has resulted in an indifferent or negative attitude towards the former, as expressed through the official Greek embassies in the two countries. In this context, the study and promotion of these communities takes on political and ideological dimensions, especially as we look for ways to strengthen and promote the maintenance of the Greek language in the next generations.

Our belief is that a negative official Greek policy cannot diminish the significance of the bilingual identity of the communities in question but we need to interpret the bilingual and bicultural issues raised with care and sensitivity to both sides, especially if we intend to take measures that involve the assistance of official bodies. As we have already mentioned, in our analysis of the Greek-speaking diaspora, we cannot

ignore religion as one of the major aspects of contemporary Greek ethnic identity. The theory of core values (Smolicz, 1981, 1984) may prove to be especially helpful in our approach towards the ethnic identity of the communities under study. According to this theory, each ethnic group has central core values, such as language, religion, family, or even customs and everyday rituals, that are indispensable to its ethnic identity. Research in the Greek-speaking diaspora around the world has shown that the maintenance of the Greek language is regarded as the primary core value for the majority of the Greek-speaking communities (Clyne, 1982; Smolicz & Secombe, 1985; Tsokalidou, 1992). Elements such as religion, Greek traditions and other values complement that of the maintenance and use of the Greek language. Thus, it becomes obvious that the bilingual communities in question cannot be underestimated within the overall context of the Greek-speaking diaspora, mainly due to the fact that they have maintained a high level of Greek language competence and use after many migrant generations in the countries of Lebanon and Syria. Let us not forget that, as Fishman (1989) has noted, language is the most potent means of maintenance or rejection of ethnic identity, insofar as it condenses and gives expression to all the other elements, historical and symbolic, of which our ethnic identity is composed.

5. Conclusions

Taking all the above into consideration, we propose that the Greek-speaking communities we have presented deserve a great deal more attention and support in order to further maintain their bilingual status in the generations to come (Τσοκαλίδου, 2000). This can be achieved through socio-political and educational measures.

On the socio-political level, we can encourage official bodies to recognise the communities as part of the Greek-speaking diaspora, despite religious barriers. This would result in members of the communities being able to visit their relatives in Greece freely or participate in exchange or host programs provided to other Greek-speaking communities in the world, while Greece would gain more access to neighbouring countries which do not need to be convinced of the importance of learning the Greek language. Contact between official Greek bodies and the region can, of course, result in many other positive outcomes in terms of commerce and finance for all countries involved.

On the level of education, we can support the efforts of the communities to maintain their second language by assisting the development of appropriate teaching programs. Our assistance can be moral and practical at the same time, through co-operation with members of the communities who have already taken initiatives towards this direction and through the reinforcement of the necessary educational infrastructure. Once we are convinced of the importance of the cause, we can find unlimited ways to work towards its realisation.

To conclude this presentation, let us share the agony of a late Greek-Lebanese man who was one of the protagonists in the struggle of his community to further maintain its ethnic identity and language. He said *"Εμείς νομίζω είμαστε οι τελευταίοι που κρατάμε τη γλώσσα. Η κόρη μου, ο γιος μου εντάξει, τα παιδιά τους όμως;"* (I think that we are the last people to keep the language. My daughter, my son, ok, but what about their children?). Thanks to the enthusiasm and energy of this man and the rest of the community I became even more aware of the riches we gain through bilingualism, not on an intellectual and philosophical level, but in the relations we form with our communities, in the feelings we have for our languages, in the songs we sing to express our desires, in *being* bilingual. Once we have experienced this, we cannot go back.

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