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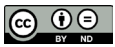
Towards more intentional language policy in higher education: A case study of a Greek University

Universities are institutions for the production and transmission of knowledge; they are also fields of power negotiation between social groups, which is expressed through linguistic policies. The presence or absence of Less Widely Used Languages in this context is interpreted in relation to the social power of dominant languages. This article presents a case study of the linguistic policy of a university in Greece aiming to highlight the role of dominant languages (Standard Modern Greek and International English) in a linguistically complex ecosystem. The marginalization of local languages through hegemonic processes of regulation and imposition of Standard Modern Greek is noted. It is also pointed out that the teaching of certain 'high prestige' foreign languages, which are not considered a threat to the hegemonic status of Greek, is allowed. Since this correlation is reinforced by the lack of a defined policy for linguistic inclusion and the enhancement of linguistic diversity, a series of actions aimed at creating a targeted linguistic policy is proposed.



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Słowa kluczowe: polityka językowa, szkolnictwo wyższe, uczenie się języka, ekologia językowa, status/prestiż języka

1. Introduction

Universities are more than just places where knowledge transmission takes place: they are sites of territorial and ideological struggle between dominant and marginalized linguistic codes and discourses (Holmes et al., 2012). Seen as a site of linguistic contention, a university is a point of contact among the diverse semiotic resources that make up the students', administrators', and faculty's linguistic repertoires. Although such diversity creates the potential of "almost any university [striving] to be a 'multilingual university'" (Bhatt, Badwan, Madiba, 2022: 425), language contact is often typified by power asymmetries between hegemonic and marginalized codes of communication. These asymmetries, which are typically permeated by symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1982), are particularly important in understanding the distribution and role in education of Less Widely Spoken / Less Widely Taught Languages.

In this article, we look critically at the linguistic ecology of a university in Greece, with a view to highlighting the mechanisms of power, cultural erasure and hegemony that are associated with language policy (Skuttnabb-Kangas et al., 2009). We take note of the hegemonic power exercised by English as a global *lingua academica* and by Standard Modern Greek, which is presumed to be a 'natural' or 'neutral' code of communication and instruction. The description of the uniform and unifying linguistic ecology of the university is set against the social backdrop of invisibilised linguistic diversity, and an argument is put forward – echoing MacKenzie et al. (2022) – that uncritically accepted 'neutrality' can, in fact, mask linguistically-driven processes of social injustice (see also Veronelli, 2015). As a counterpoint to such practices, this article rests on the assumption that higher education is an instrument of 'world-making' (la paperson, 2017) and that a purposeful and committed language policy has the potential to deliver not just a 'multilingual university', where Less Widely Spoken / Less Widely Taught languages are more visible, but also more just social orders, where the speakers of such languages are not subjected to epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007; Williams, Stelma, 2022).

The language policy of the university under examination is carried out through the conceptual lens of intentional dynamics theory (Stelma,

Kostoulas, 2021), a theoretical offshoot of ecological thinking (Bateson, 2000). The intentional dynamics model views social activity, such as education, as being part of an ecology made up of heterogeneous elements (ideologies, practices, regulatory frameworks, individual agents etc.). Configurations of these elements produce affordances for action, and activity emerges from them; but all action is governed by reciprocal causation, meaning that it constantly reconfigures the shape of the ecology. This interaction between structure and agency is governed by complex dynamics, meaning that causal loops are non-linear, and tracing effects to specific causes is fraught with difficulty. Rather, the intentional dynamics model proposes adopting a holistic perspective, and focusing on the overall dynamics of the system, which are often associated with specific patterns of activity.

Seen through this perspective, the linguistic ecosystem of the university is embedded in the broader linguistic ecosystem of Greece, and is made up of 'intentional structures': in this case these are practices, management choices and ideological content associated with specific languages (Spolsky, 2004). Activity that emerges within such a system might be: (a) contingent, i.e., consisting of unreflective *ad hoc* responses to developing situations; (b) normative, i.e., associated with authority and past practice; (c) creative, i.e., relatively unconstrained by existing structure; and (d) purposeful, i.e., intended to bring about specific outcomes. Of these four types of activity, the former two contribute towards the resilience of the ecology, and therefore have a relatively conservative influence: in this case, they act to preserve existing structures in the language ecology. By contrast, the latter two are associated with disruption and change, including possibly the generation of new, more equitable configurations of language power.

2. An overview of the linguistic ecology of Greece

Greece is often presented as a linguistically homogeneous country, where nearly all of the population are speakers of Standard Modern Greek. Although the Hellenic Statistical Authority (www.statistics.gr) does not publish data on the native languages spoken by residents in Greece, it is estimated that approximately 99% of the population speak Modern Greek as a first language (European Commission, 2012).

Standard Modern Greek enjoys the status of the *de facto* official language in the country. In the past, the status of Greek and – perhaps more importantly – the variety that enjoyed official status was encoded in constitutional legislation (e.g., §110 of the 1911 Constitution of the Hellenic Republic). These legislative provisions reflected attempts to solve the 'language

issue', i.e., tensions between the *katharevousa* and *dhemotiki* varieties of the language, which indexed conservative and liberal political orientations respectively. However, as the language issue abated from the mid-1970s onwards, such provisions were made redundant and are indeed absent in the 1975 Constitution and its subsequent revisions. Legislation passed in the 1970s and 1980s (Law 309/1976, §2 and Law 1566/1985, §1.4) affirms Standard Modern Greek (*dhemotiki*) as the official language of primary and secondary education. In this case too, the wording of the laws suggests that the provision is made in juxtaposition with other varieties of Greek, rather than any other languages. The Higher Education Law (Law 4957/2022) does not explicitly define a language of instruction, but allows for the exceptional creation of 'foreign language programmes', which suggests that Standard Modern Greek is tacitly assumed to be the default option (see also, Krimpas, 2013).

Major European languages are also afforded privileged positions in the Greek education system. English, in particular, is intensively taught across primary and secondary education (Kostoulas, 2018) and was recently introduced in pre-school education (Gkaintartzi, Kostoulas, Vitsou, 2023). Other languages that are present in the national curriculum include German and French (and, to a much lesser extent, Spanish and Italian). Greek Sign Language, which is mainly used by the Deaf community, is also present in the education system as well as national television broadcasting, and is nominally afforded the same legal status as Modern Greek (Law 4488, §65).

The prevalence and status of Standard Modern Greek, however, should not mask the linguistic diversity present in the country (for an overview, see Skourtou et al., 2020). Although linguistic minorities are not officially recognised in Greece, a non-signatory to the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992/2024) the Turkish language has a special status as a minority or regional language used by the Muslim minority in the north-eastern administrative region of Thrace (Dragonas, Frangoudaki, 2020), which numbers approximately 120,000 people. As such, Turkish is taught in approximately 100 primary schools and two secondary schools, which follow a bilingual (i.e., Turkish and Modern Greek) curriculum, and are attended by Muslim students regardless of whether they have Turkish-speaking, Pomak-speaking, or Romani-speaking backgrounds.

In addition to the above, multiple other predominantly oral languages are used by larger or smaller groups, even though they are often invisibilised in policy and discourse, an act which is often rationalised on historical and geopolitical grounds by apologists of discrimination. The largest of these groups is the Roma community, whose (non-territorial) language, Romani, is spoken by approximately 250,000-300,000 speakers across Greece (Skourtou,

2020). Another linguistically-othered population, the Pomak community, which overlaps with the Muslim minority mentioned in the previous paragraph, and which is largely confined to isolated rural areas in the Rhodopi mountain range, numbers approximately 30,000-40,000 speakers (Markou, 2002). Armânj, sometimes called Vlach or Aromanian, is spoken as a heritage language in rural areas in Epirus, Thessaly and Macedonia (Katsanis, Dinas, 1990). Estimates about the number of Armânj speakers range from 200,000 (Siguán, 1990) to 50,000 speakers (Trudgill, 2006), the exact number being difficult to estimate due to differences in defining community membership and local suspicion towards outsiders. Arvanit (arbërisht) was mostly spoken in various regions of central Greece (Tsitsipis, 1983) and is currently used as a heritage language by approximately 30,000 to 50,000 mostly elderly speakers (Trudgill, 2006). Lastly, local varieties of Macedonian (dopia, dopika or наш) are spoken by an indeterminate number of speakers in the borders with Northern Macedonia. It should be noted that the numbers of speakers, and indeed the existence of various linguistic groups, are the subject of considerable controversy in Greece, as linguistic minorities are associated in public perception and state policy with irredentist ambitions and threats to national unity and territorial integrity.

Another aspect of linguistic diversity in Greece is the existence of regional varieties of Greek. Some of the most salient ones include Pontic Greek, which is spoken as a heritage variety by descendants of populations repatriated from Asia Minor, Ukraine, and the Caucasus; Tsakonian Greek, which is spoken as a heritage variety in remote regions of the Peloponnese; and Cretan Greek, mainly spoken in the island of Crete. Less prominent dialectal variation includes other regional varieties such as Epirote, Thracian, Eptanesian and others). Although dialectal features are often used as shibboleths by various communities, the general attitude towards linguistic variation seems to be negative, as can be deduced – among others – from the following comments made by the Minister of Education in 2014:

> Please also note that throughout the country, in the primary schools which we visited, in the 6th Form we'd hear children speak without any remaining trace of local language features. The children across the country speak the same kind of Greek. […] This is an accomplishment of their teachers, and they should be congratulated[1]. (Loverdos, 2014)

[1] Modern Greek original (authors' translation): Σημειώστε επίσης ότι σε όλη τη χώρα στα Δημοτικά Σχολεία που πηγαίναμε, στη Στ' τάξη και ακούγαμε παιδιά να μιλούν χωρίς πια τοπικά γλωσσικά ιδιώματα. Τα παιδιά σε όλη τη χώρα μιλούν τα ίδια ελληνικά. […] Αυτό είναι επίτευγμα των δασκάλων και των καθηγητών και τους αξίζουν συγχαρητήρια.

As can be deduced from the above, the linguistic ecology of Greece is dominated by the normative influence of Standard Modern Greek, which is viewed as the unique or most neutral means of communication. This normative pressure is further accentuated by a 'monolithic' (Pennycook, 2010) view of the language, whereby intra-linguistic variation is ignored, stigmatised and replaced by an idealised 'standard'. Modern Foreign Languages associated with Western European countries are generally given space in the ecology, probably because their indisputably foreign character, wide distribution and high prestige add to the speakers' status without compromising the imagined national identity. Deviations from Standard Modern Greek, whether dialectal or associated with ethnic diversity, are excluded from the education system, segregated in linguistic enclaves, and generally invisibilised.

3. The University of Thessaly

The University of Thessaly (Πανεπιστήμιο Θεσσαλίας) is a large state-affiliated university located in central Greece. It is an academic home to approximately 40,000 undergraduate and post-graduate students, who study in a range of disciplines, including Humanities, Social Sciences, STEM, Medicine and Health Sciences, Business Administration, Earth Sciences and more. Since its foundation in 1984, the University has grown organically, and in the process absorbed Technological Education Institutions in nearby locations. This is reflected in its decentralized structure, as the various faculties and academic departments that make up the university are spread out in four towns in the administrative regions of Thessaly and Central Greece, in addition to the main campus in Volos.

In linguistic terms, the University of Thessaly reflects the linguistic ecology of Greece. As is the case with the entire country, Standard Modern Greek seems to play a hegemonic role, by virtue of being the sole language used in teaching and administration. This is, in part, a product of normative structures in Greek legislation. The status of the university as a state entity means that it has little autonomy in planning language policy, except in the limited sense of 'corpus planning'[2], i.e., suggesting or prescribing preferred language forms. This is done, for instance, through the introduction of guidelines for the use of gender-neutral language in teaching materials and administrative documents. Such forms of language planning, which are generally intended to promote inclusion, fall short of promoting linguistic

[2] For the distinction between 'status' and 'corpus' planning, refer to: Kloss (1969).

diversity or even acknowledging the existence of less widely spoken/less widely taught languages.

3.1. The linguistic landscape of the University

Languages other than Standard Modern Greek are generally not visible on campus, despite the presence of incoming Erasmus students and international collaborations. A notable exception to the above is English, which is salient in many domains, including academic literature, cultural artefacts, directional and advertising signage, academic websites and more. Other Modern Foreign Languages, such as French and German, have limited visibility e.g., in the form of posters advertising cultural events.

When present, languages other than Standard Modern Greek are generally only used in clearly delimited spaces. For instance, the Department of Language and Intercultural Studies, which offers specific language courses as part of its mandate, also has limited information in its website in Arabic, Japanese, Spanish and Chinese (Mandarin). Other collaborations with linguistically-othered communities, such as work carried out by the Department of Primary Education in educationally disadvantaged Romani-speaking communities,[3] and links between the Department of Special Education and the Deaf community, do not have discernible traces, such as signage, announcements or public events, on the linguistic landscape of the campus.

3.2. Teaching and learning languages at the University

Within the University, the responsibility for language education is shared by multiple entities. Some departments have dedicated staff among their ranks, who are tasked with delivering language courses, typically English for Academic or Special Purposes. The Foreign Language Centre (Κέντρο Ξένων Γλωσσών) offers English, French, German and Italian courses, including Languages for Academic / Special Purpose courses, for the departments that do not have resources to offer them. The Bureau of International Relations is responsible for providing Greek as a Second Language courses for Erasmus+ students during their academic mobility visits. In addition, affiliated entities,

[3] For instance: Υποστηρικτικές παρεμβάσεις σε κοινότητες ΡΟΜΑ για την ενίσχυση της πρόσβασης και μείωση της εγκατάλειψης της εκπαίδευσης από παιδιά και εφήβους στην Περιφέρεια Θεσσαλίας [Supportive interventions in Roma communities for improving [educational] access and reducing school attrition among children and adolescents in the region of Thessaly], <https://ee.uth.gr/project-detail/6465>.

such as the Centre for Life-Long Learning (ΚΕ.ΔΙ.ΒΙ.Μ.) and the recently established (2019) University of Thessaly Confucius Institute (色薩利大學孔子學院; https://confucius.uth.gr/en) provide language courses for members of the general public. The Confucius Institute has also taken on responsibility for delivering Chinese language courses in the Department of Language and Intercultural Studies.

With regard to the human resources associated with language education, courses are generally delivered by language specialists and / or contingent staff. Language specialists, technically designated Specialist Scientific Staff (Ειδικό Επιστημονικό Προσωπικό) have a minimum of BA education in a Foreign Language and Literature Department, and often hold advanced qualifications. Contingent staff, who are typically employed to teach Less Widely Used / Less Widely Taught languages, have more diverse profiles and they are often selected on the basis of linguistic competence. Native-speaking teaching assistants are not generally employed by the university as a matter of policy.

As ascertained in a number of interviews with teaching staff and administrators, which we conducted in early 2023, there is no comprehensive language policy or coordination for the various language courses on offer; rather, the structure, aims, and methods used in these courses are within the purview of departments and individual teachers. Statements of intended learning outcomes in course outlines are phrased in broad terms, which allow for considerable freedom in interpretation, albeit at the expense of consistency across different departments and different cohorts of students.

Unlike larger universities such as the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the University of Thessaly does not offer programmes of study focusing on specific foreign languages and literatures. This means that most of the provision for teaching foreign languages is embedded in other academic specializations, and it often has the form of Languages for Academic / Specific Purposes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most widely offered language is English. Courses in Academic English and English for Specific purposes are offered in all the departments, whether as required courses or as electives. English is taught at all levels of linguistic proficiency, ranging from A1 to C2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). Other languages which may be offered as electives include French, German and Italian. Students are typically expected to attain a B2 level of linguistic proficiency or lower, depending on the number of semesters studied. Notably, not all languages are on offer in all the campuses of the university, and the availability of courses in languages other than English does not appear to depend on academic considerations. Students at the Department of Languages

and Intercultural Education have access to a broader range of languages, subject to the availability of qualified teachers. These options include Arabic, Japanese and Spanish, which are offered at levels ranging from A1 to A2; also, Chinese (Mandarin) courses, organised in collaboration with the Confucius Institute, are offered up to B1 level. Lastly, students at the Department of Special Education are expected to attend two semesters' courses of Greek Sign Language, reaching the approximate equivalent of B1 level of linguistic proficiency.

Students who come to the University of Thessaly from abroad, as part of exchange or mobility programmes, are provided with the opportunity to learn Standard Modern Greek as a Second language. These programmes are fairly undemanding: usually, participants attend 26 hours of tuition (one semester); occasionally, they could span two semesters. The expectation is that, when coupled with the immersion experience, these courses should help students attain an A1 level of linguistic competence in Standard Modern Greek. Although these courses are only available to students participating in the Erasmus+ student mobility programme, opportunities to learn Standard Modern Greek are sometimes informally organized for people with a refugee or migrant status by student volunteers, with or without staff supervision. Notably, there is no structured programme in place to facilitate language learning for incoming faculty, who might be speakers of languages other than Standard Modern Greek.

In addition to the language courses offered as part of structured programmes of study, a limited range of language classes are available for students and the general public at the University and affiliated institutions. Chinese language lessons are offered, free of charge, by the Confucius Institute. These courses cover the full range of linguistic proficiency (A1 to C2) and lead to certification through externally administered examinations, such as the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) or the Youth Chinese Test, for which an examination fee is levied. Short (75-100 hour) fee-paying courses in Arabic and Turkish are offered by the University of Thessaly Centre for Life-Long Learning. These starter-level (A1) courses lead to certification by the University. Such programmes cover a specialised niche in the local linguistic ecology, as they offer learning and certification opportunities in languages which are not taught by either the school system of local education providers.

4. Discussion

A salient characteristic of the linguistic ecology of the University of Thessaly, as described in the previous sections, is what appears as a lack of cohe-

sion in linguistic policy. Existing legislation provides some normative pressure regarding the role and use of Standard Modern Greek, and its relation to heritage and minority languages, including non-standard varieties of Greek. This pattern of activity, which Stelma and Kostoulas (2021) define as *normative dynamics,* is shaped by the historicity of the ecology (i.e., how things have always been done) and by top-down authority (i.e., how things should be done). Normative dynamics are generally associated with predictable outcomes and the reproduction of existing power structures. These normative dynamics, however, do not extend to the provision for teaching Modern Foreign Languages. In this case, practice appears to be shaped by *ad hoc* adaptations to existing situations (i.e., the availability of suitably qualified teachers, policy decisions in specific departments, marketing considerations etc.). Such 'contingent' (Stelma, Kostoulas, 2021) activity is arguably associated with flexibility, but generally aims at preserving the stability of the ecology, by avoiding large-scale changes and discouraging reflective engagement with the givens of a situation. Taken together, the two patterns of activity that are visible in the ecology suggest that the linguistic ecology of the University has evolved in a way well suited to protecting the status of Modern Greek, while allowing limited space for the teaching of languages which do not appear to pose a threat.

These normative and contingent dynamics are permeated by asymmetrical power structures which privilege dominant languages. On a local level, Standard Modern Greek is afforded a legislatively privileged position, by invisibilising other languages that are present in the ecology. The limited opportunities to engage with heritage and/or minority languages, either as academic subjects or as linguistic resources, and indeed the way Standard Modern Greek is viewed as a default option that does not even need to be named in policy documents, all reflect the hegemonic position that the language enjoys. At the same time, the lack of an explicitly articulated language policy for the teaching of Modern Foreign Languages affords space for the exercise of power by English as a global *lingua academica*. This is well reflected in the preponderance of English courses in the curricula of the various academic departments, and the general visibility of the English in the linguistic landscape, as the 'default foreign language'.

Challenging such a deeply ingrained system, and especially one that is supported by such workings of power, can seem like a daunting task. The suggestions that follow are, therefore, not intended as a template for restructuring the linguistic ecology, but rather as a set of steps that can provide a clearer focus of the language policy of the university - on the understanding that purposeful activity, informed by a critical outlook, has the potential to challenge unjust orders (Stelma, Fay, 2019).

One aspect of a more purposeful language policy focuses on the teaching of languages other than Standard Modern Greek, which could be undertaken by the Foreign Languages Centre. This existing entity could be reconstituted as a 'Language Centre' or 'Centre for Language Planning and Learning', reinforced with staff with expertise in language teaching and curriculum design, and invested with authority to coordinate the language education provision across diverse university entities (e.g., academic departments, affiliated institutes). This would allow the latter to focus on the academic tasks that are at the core of their mandate. The provision of foreign languages in the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula, which is currently subject to contingent dynamics, could be more intentionally planned using needs analysis so that it better reflects local needs, and that there is a more equitable balance between dominant and less widely spoken/used languages. Distance learning methods and international partnerships can be deployed to address limitations pertaining to the local availability of suitably qualified teachers. Furthermore, thought can be given to extending the language teaching provision to heritage languages and non-standard varieties of Greek. In doing so, the language centre could evolve in a knowledge production node, where expertise in teaching methodology and materials development can be brought to bear on the teaching of less widely spoken/ less widely used languages.

A second aspect of the proposed language policy relates to the provision for teaching Standard Modern Greek. This activity could be brought under the responsibility of the Foreign Language Centre, on account of its methodological expertise in the language teaching, as well as its proposed role as a coordinator of international partnerships. The existing Standard Modern Greek courses, which are only available onsite for Erasmus+ students, could be delivered online, both as pre-sessional courses for prospective incoming students, and as part of international partnerships for language education. Such partnerships would likely increase the visibility of Standard Modern Greek in contexts where it is a Less Widely Spoken / Less Widely Used Language, as well as promote such languages locally.

The suggestions outlined above need not be viewed as an exhaustive or a necessary list of actions to be implemented. Rather they are intended to illustrate how a university can take purposeful steps in order to structure an inclusive language policy that is responsive to the particularities of its local linguistic ecology, consistent with principles of social justice, and which aligns with what is possible in an international context that is both globally interconnected and diverse.

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