



The Greek Language in Southern Albania

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We all know that being able to speak Greek can be useful outside of Greece. While Cyprus and Southern Italy, and even Astoria and Tarpon Springs are perhaps obvious Grecophone locales outside the territorial limits of the Republic of Greece, it is also the case that some less obvious places, in neighboring countries with which Greece shares a border, have Greek-speaking populations. For the past several years, since 2010, we have been studying one such region, southern Albania, and in particular the areas around Argyrokastró (Albanian Gjirokastër), Agioi Saranda (Albanian Sarandë) and Himara (Albanian Himarë). This general region is known to Greeks as “Vorioiπiros” (‘Northern Epiros’) and there was a strong Greek presence there in ancient times — the World Heritage site of Butrint, ancient



Bouthrotos, provides evidence of this — and parts of the area may well have been continuously settled by Greeks since then.

Language gets intertwined with politics in that part of the world in difficult ways, so in our research we have deliberately shied away from any examination of language in a political context and from any consideration of related issues having to do with the role of language in personal and group identity there. Instead, we have focused entirely on the Greek language itself as it is manifested and used in this region. We report here on some of our findings; more details can be found in Brown & Joseph 2012, Forthcoming a, Forthcoming b.

We went into our research with an idea, formed from the rather limited previous studies of the area, that Greek was more or less monolithic in the region, and one of the most interesting, and for us eye-opening, aspects of our findings was realizing that it was not accurate to talk of the *Greek* of southern Albania; rather we saw that we needed to talk about the *Greeks*, i.e. Greek languages, of southern Albania.

That is, we found that there were a number of different varieties of Greek in the region, occupying what we have come to refer to as different “ecological niches”. We identified five such varieties:

1. remote mountain villages, such as Divri, Theologos and Lesinitsa, near the Greek border, where the mostly older speakers have Greek as their first language; this variety is closest to the traditional dialect of Ipiros (documented in the novels of Sotiris Dimitriou, e.g. *N'akouo kala to onoma sou* 1993) and thus shows affinities to other dialects of northern Greece. One interesting characteristic not widely attested in Greek dialects is the resolution of *rn* combinations into simply *r*, as in *purári* ‘pine tree’, from earlier *purnári*.
2. villages in the coastal Vourkos and in the D(e)ropoli valley near Argyrokastró
3. villages of mixed identification such as Muzinë where both Albanian and Greek are spoken; residents here are bilingual, between Greek and Albanian, and divide their use of the language. Villagers use Greek especially for good wishes, songs, and religious functions, and when addressing Greek speakers, though many speak Albanian to themselves and to others. One commented to us: *imaste tamam Elines* ‘We are Greek enough’.
4. Himara and Drymades region, further north on coast, with a significant percentage of Greek speakers; the local variety has characteristics not widely found elsewhere, e.g. *st* combinations being resolved to simply *s*, as in *si ximara* for *sti ximara* ‘in Himara’
5. two urban environments, district capitals:
 - a. Ayioi Saranda, with an interesting mix among its population of some 30,000 of Greek speakers and Albanian speakers, including Greek villagers from other parts of the region, Albanian speakers from other parts of Albania (Tepelinë, Avlona, etc.), Albanians who have worked in Greece and now live in Agioi Saranda, often with families, including children who lived in Greece, some workers and professionals from Greece, and tourists in summer
 - b. Argyrokastró, an urban environment of a different composition from Saranda, ca. 35,000 residents, including an Albanian majority, Greek first-language speakers and many more who speak Greek, other linguistic minorities (Vlach and Roma), and a university community, with students from various parts of the south of Albania, including students in an active Modern Greek Studies program.

The urban dialects in some ways align more with southern dialects of Greek (e.g. as to their vowels) but are different from, for instance, Standard Greek, in interesting ways, showing, e.g., “ch” sounds where southern dialects have “k” (as in *turchichi ylosa* ‘Turkish language’)

The numbers of speakers are very hard to determine precisely, let alone estimate, but our impression after several visits was that the use of Greek is quite robust, being found in various environments, used by speakers of all ages, children up through the elderly. Thus in the overall Albanian context, Greek may be a minority language, but it is anything but threatened in the south.