

The Current Bilingual Transitional Developments in the Southern region of Gjirokastra

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Abstract

The southern region of Gjirokastra, a historically significant area for the Greek minority in Albania, has historically been characterized by bilingualism in Albanian and Greek. However, recent developments show a transitional language change, driven by generational replacement, educational processes and the effects of globalization. The older generations tend to be fluent in both languages, while younger generations increasingly have started to prefer English and view Greek as primarily a heritage language. This shift between generations is supplemented by the role of education, Albanian being the dominant language of study in schools and growing importance of English as an international language. With English becoming the door to educational and professional success, it also diminishes Greek further from the public sphere. The change in the language in this region has serious cultural implications. With the younger generation favoring English, Greek and Albanian are slowly being pushed to migrate to home and cultural settings only and its future can be at risk. This trend works against the continuation of Greek traditions and cultural practices, which have always been communicated via the Greek language. The future of the Greek minority bilingualism will hinge on the capacity of the people to reconcile social integration with cultural conservation of the Greek language and heritage so that cultural identity is sustained in the face of globalizing forces.

Keywords: *Greek language, Albanian language, English language, bilingualism, minorities.*

1. Introduction

The southern region of Gjirokastra in Albania, holds a significant place in the country's historical and cultural landscape. As one of the primary regions where the Greek minority has lived for centuries, Gjirokastra has long been a space of coexistence between the Albanian and Greek languages. Bilingualism has been a key characteristic of daily life in this area, shaping not only communication but also identity, cultural practices and social relations.

However, over recent decades, this bilingual balance has been undergoing a transformative shift. New social, educational and economic dynamics-driven by

generational changes and the pervasive forces of globalization are pushing the region toward a different linguistic reality. While older generations remain fluent in both Greek and Albanian, the younger population is increasingly favoring English over Greek. This transition is reshaping the cultural and linguistic landscape of Gjirokastra in profound ways.

This article explores the dynamics of language shift in southern Gjirokastra, examining the roles played by generational change, educational policies and globalization. It assesses the cultural consequences of this shift, evaluates the current status of Greek in the region and explores possible strategies for reconciling cultural preservation with social integration in a rapidly globalizing world.

2. Historical background of Greek-Albanian bilingualism in Gjirokastra

2.1. The origins of bilingualism

The roots of bilingualism in southern Gjirokastra can be traced back centuries, to a time when the region was part of the Ottoman Empire. Greek-speaking communities have lived in southern Albania for generations and the Greek language served not only as a means of daily communication but also as a medium for education, religion, and trade.

With the shifting borders and political structures of the Balkans during the 19th and 20th centuries, the Greek minority in Albania became increasingly concentrated in the southern districts, particularly in Gjirokastra, Dropull and Saranda. Despite political pressures during the communist era, many Greek-speaking families maintained their language and cultural practices in private, with Greek often spoken at home and in community settings.

2.2. The post-communist reawakening

The fall of communism in Albania in the early 1990s brought significant changes to minority rights and language use. With the loosening of state controls, Greek language schools and cultural institutions began to re-emerge. The Greek Orthodox Church also regained visibility, reintroducing Greek as the liturgical language in many communities. During this period, many Greek-Albanians and Albanians also emigrated to Greece in search of economic opportunities. This migration reinforced Greek linguistic competence among returnees and their families, contributing to a renewed bilingual identity during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, this revival would soon face challenges from new social and global dynamics.

3. Generational shifts and language preference

3.1. The role of generational replacement

A key factor in the ongoing language shift is *generational replacement*. Older generations who grew up in bilingual environments typically possess high fluency in both Albanian and Greek. For them, Greek is not only a language of communication but also a core part of their identity, intertwined with religious practices, family traditions and community events.

In contrast, younger generations are growing up in a different linguistic and social environment. Increasingly, Greek is being replaced by English as the second language of choice, particularly among youth in urban and semi-urban areas of Gjirokastra. Many children learn Albanian as their mother tongue and acquire English through formal education, media consumption and online interaction.

3.2. English as a language of opportunity

The rise of English is not accidental. In Albania, as in many other countries, English is increasingly seen as “*the language of economic and educational advancement*”. Proficiency in English is associated with better job prospects, access to higher education, international mobility and social prestige.

This utilitarian perception of English often leads parents and educators to prioritize English instruction over Greek, particularly in settings where resources are limited. For children and teenagers, English represents the modern, global future, while Greek is increasingly relegated to the realm of familial or ceremonial use.

4. Educational systems and language policy

4.1. Albanian as the dominant language of instruction

The educational system in Albania plays a pivotal role in shaping language use. Despite constitutional guarantees for minority rights, Albanian remains the dominant language of instruction in public schools, even in regions with large Greek-speaking populations. Although there are Greek-language schools and bilingual institutions in some parts of Gjirokastra and the surrounding areas, these are limited in number and often under-resourced.

4.2. The marginalization of Greek in formal education

The lack of systematic support for Greek education leads to a gradual marginalization of the language in formal learning environments. Greek is often learned at home or through community networks, but this is not enough to sustain high levels of literacy or fluency. Moreover, the increasing emphasis on English in the national curriculum and society places further pressure on minority languages. Schools often prioritize English in order to align with international standards, leaving less time and fewer resources for Greek instruction.

5. Globalization and its linguistic impact

5.1. Media, technology and cultural exposure

Globalization has brought sweeping changes to the way individuals access information and culture. In Gjirokastra, as in other parts of Albania, digital media consumption is a major driver of language preference. Television, movies, social media platforms and online games are largely consumed in English, reinforcing its dominance in the minds of young people.

Greek, by contrast, has a more limited presence in the media consumed by youth. While Greek television and internet content are available, they do not hold the same appeal or relevance as global (often English-language) content from the US, UK, or broader European Union.

5.2. Migration and transnational networks

Migration has also played a complex role. While emigration to Greece helped sustain Greek linguistic identity among earlier generations, younger generations are now more likely to seek education and employment in English-speaking countries or in Albania's own urban centers, where Albanian and English are more useful. The growing Albanian diaspora in countries like the US, UK, Canada and Germany further amplifies the importance of English and other dominant languages. As a result, Greek is increasingly seen as a "heritage" or "ancestral" language rather than a functional tool for social and economic integration.

6. Cultural implications of the language shift

6.1. The erosion of Greek cultural practices

Language is more than just a means of communication; it is a carrier of culture. In the Greek minority communities of Gjirokastra, many traditional customs, songs, oral histories and religious practices, are closely tied to the Greek language.

As Greek retreats from the daily lives of younger generations, there is a growing risk of cultural erosion. Rituals such as religious festivals, weddings and community gatherings that were once conducted in Greek are now increasingly influenced by Albanian or even English language intrusions. Without a living connection to the language, the cultural depth and authenticity of these traditions may be lost over time.

6.2. Identity and belonging

The weakening of the Greek language also affects ethnic and cultural identity. For many young people in Gjirokastra, especially those born after 2000, Greek identity may feel less lived and experienced. This can create tensions within families and communities, as older generations struggle to pass on their values and cultural heritage in a language their children speak fluently but not at a very academic level.

At the same time, bilingual and bicultural identities are evolving in new ways. Some young people may identify as Albanian-Greek-English hybrids, reflecting their diverse linguistic repertoires and cultural influences. These hybrid identities may offer creative opportunities but also pose challenges to traditional notions of cultural continuity.

7. Preserving bilingualism: challenges and opportunities

7.1. Institutional support and language planning

To sustain Greek-Albanian bilingualism in Gjirokastra, institutional support is essential. This includes investments in bilingual education, teacher training, curriculum development and access to quality Greek-language materials. Government policies should not only protect minority languages but actively promote their use in schools, media, and public life. Community

organizations, NGOs and cultural associations also have a role to play. Grassroots efforts to document oral traditions, promote Greek-language theater or literature and host intergenerational events can help keep the language alive.

7.2. Family and community involvement

The family remains a central domain for language transmission. Parents who speak Greek at home and encourage their children to use it can counterbalance the dominance of Albanian and English. Intergenerational dialogue through storytelling, cooking, music

and religious observance can create meaningful spaces for Greek language use. Community centers, churches, and local initiatives can also foster language learning in informal, culturally rich settings. Greek language summer camps, heritage programs and youth exchanges with Greek communities abroad may offer additional incentives for language maintenance.

7.3 Embracing multilingualism

Rather than framing the issue as a competition between languages, there is a need to embrace multilingualism as a valuable asset. In a globalized world, being fluent in three or more languages is increasingly advantageous. Encouraging children in Gjirokastra to see Greek as an added strength alongside Albanian and English, may help revitalize interest in heritage language learning.

8. Conclusion

The language shift unfolding in southern Gjirokastra is emblematic of broader trends affecting minority languages across the globe. Driven by generational change, educational priorities and the powerful forces of globalization, Greek is facing a critical juncture in this region.

While older generations continue to uphold bilingual traditions, younger people are navigating new linguistic terrains, often favoring English for its utility and global reach. This transformation presents both challenges and opportunities. If not addressed thoughtfully, it may lead to the gradual disappearance of Greek from the public and private life of Gjirokastra's communities.

However, with proactive policies, community engagement and a reimagined approach to multilingualism, it is possible to preserve the rich bilingual heritage of the Greek minority in Albania. The future of Greek-Albanian bilingualism will depend not only on resisting language loss but on reweaving the threads of cultural identity into a new, globally connected fabric one in which heritage languages are celebrated, not sidelined.

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