

# The impact of Greek on the northern Azov varieties of Russian

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## 1. Introduction

This paper represents the initial stage of the project being carried out in the field of diachronic sociolinguistics. The project deals with the history of the Greek speech communities of the Northern Sea of Azov coast, especially that of the port-town of Taganrog [Fig.1]. We focus on the outcome of the Greek-Russian language contact in the area which had been developing since the late XVIII<sup>th</sup> c. to approximately early XX<sup>th</sup> c.



Figure 1: *The Sea of Azov*

A peculiarity and a difficulty of the research consists in the fact that there is no Greek speech community in Taganrog any longer. The local Greeks partly immigrated and partly got assimilated having lost their language altogether. That is why the data to be collected is primordially scanty and is being obtained from the censuses carried out before 1917, very scarce traces of the Greek influence in the local Russian speech, if at all, reminiscences of the old-timers, works of belles-lettres and literary memoirs.

The major aim of the project is to reconstruct the development of linguistic situation in Taganrog from the late XVIII<sup>th</sup> to the early XX<sup>th</sup> c. focussing on the interaction between the Greek and Russian communities. It is supposed to compare the social functions of the languages in question as well as to study the nature of the Greek-Russian language contact and its effect on local Russian.

## 2. Social history

On March 28 1775 Russian Empress Catherine II issued an order acknowledging the Greeks' and Albanians' contribution into the recent victory over the Ottoman Empire. It was also stated that Count Orloff was to organize the settling of Greeks and Albanians in the towns of Kerch and Yenikale in the Crimea as well as in Taganrog on the northern coast of the Sea of Azov [1]. It was not only the considerations of tribute and gratitude to the Greek allies but also the necessity to provide the newly acquired lands with reliable and industrious population that made the Russian authorities to admit the settlers. The settling of these immigrants was by all means desirable for the empire. This incentive also

combined with the long-term plans to re-establish the Greek Empire with its capital in Konstantinopol to be headed by a member of the Russian Royal family.

The Greek and Albanian settlers arrived on board their ships and first started to settle in Kerch and Yenikale as the nearest destination. However the Crimea was not yet under the Russian rule at that time, so the newcomers could not find sufficient land and supplies they needed for a living. Thus, it was decided to settle both Greeks and Albanians homogeneously on the northern Azov coast and to provide them with a considerable amount of money to cover the first needs. Taganrog, which had been re-established in 1769 after being under the Turkish rule and in ruins for 57 years, became the centre of the settlement as the only urban centre in the whole area.

This resettlement started in 1776. The Greeks occupied most lands along the coastline and soon monopolized all the economic activities in the area. That situation was also caused by the fact that the Don Cossacks seized the most fertile lands lying further north of the Sea of Azov thus blocking the way to the sea for the settlers from the inner Russian territories. Therefore Greeks did not have any competitors belonging to other ethnic groups of the area [ibid.].

In the reign of Catherine II Greeks first settled in Kerch and Taganrog and later in Mariupol. However the latter by large became the home for the Crimean Greeks who were mostly the native speakers of the Crimean Tartar language and who acquired the Tartar culture. Only few of the Crimean Greeks were present in Taganrog inhabited by richer settlers of higher social status belonging to military and merchant classes who originated from the Aegean archipelago and continental Greece [See, e.g., Fig. 2]. That majority arrived at Taganrog via Kerch, the poorer of them, mainly fishermen by their occupation, having remained in the Kerch area.



Figure 2: *Ioannis Varvakis (1745-1825) – a Greek national hero, a member of the Filiki Eteria and a distinguished member of the Greek and Russian communities of Taganrog. He spent large amounts of money for construction of Greek Church and Greek Jerusalem Monastery in Taganrog (see below) in the early XIXth c. (unfortunately, both of them were demolished in 1930s).*

The population of Taganrog before 1917, what is quite natural for a port-town, was ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous. Historically the Greek community was an important and authoritative one in economical and social life. The very physical appearance of the town was formed by the architectural tastes cultivated by the Greek population [Fig. 3, 4, 5].



Figure 3: *Greek Church in Taganrog*



Figure 4: *Greek Jerusalem Monastery in Taganrog*



Figure 5: *Alferaki Palace - a mansion built by Nikolay Alferaki (see below) in Taganrog in 1848.*

According to the census of 1872 there were 1807 merchants in Taganrog in those days, among them 334 - Russians and Ukrainians, 481 - Greeks, 242 - Jews, 30 - Germans, etc. The Greek minority gave quite a number of famous tycoons, who made their fortune in and around Taganrog, efficient civil servants, and intellectuals [Fig. 6, 7].



Figure 6: *Alleged portrait of Nikolay (Nikos) Dmitrievich Alferaki, a rich merchant and civil servant (1815-1860).*



Figure 7: Achilles Nikolayevich Alferaki (born in 1846) – Nikolay Alferaki' son; the Mayor of Taganrog from 1880 to 1888.

Judging by the considerable number of local Greeks and the important part they used to play in life of the area it can be taken for granted that there must have appeared numerous Greek-Russian bilinguals in those days. No doubt, this condition was both a result and a motive force of intensive language contact.

### 3. Language facts

Urban dialects can be seriously affected by either cultural or economical predominance of some social elements over the others. The prestige of a dominating ethnic group's speech may cause imitation on behalf of other ethnic groups. Illustrating this phenomenon A.A.Shakhmatov (1864-1920) mentions some peculiar language developments within the regional varieties of Russian. Thus he mentions that in South Russia, namely in the towns of the Northern coast of the Sea of Azov and in Taganrog in particular, one could come across the examples of transition from affricate [ts] to sibilant [s] in the words like Rus. *tsar'* (czar) pronounced as [sar'] instead of common Russian ['tsar'] [2].

This and other phonetic changes can be attributed to imitation of the Russian speech of the Greek population, which used to dominate the economic life of the area for about a century. In the case of the Northern Azov coast varieties of Russian we deal with an example of mixed urban dialect constituted by the idiom of a quantitative majority (i.e. Russians) on the one hand and that of a minority (i.e. local Greeks) on the other. As is known the local Greeks found it difficult to pronounce the Russian hushing sounds substituting them by sibilants thus producing a "lisp" effect, this feature being sometimes used as a label by the Russian authors (e.g. Anton Chekhov) making the speech of their Greek characters more verisimilar.

From "**The Wedding**" by A. Chekhov (translated into English by Julius West)

#### **CHARACTERS**

- EVDOKIM ZAHAROVITCH ZHIGALOV, a retired Civil Servant.
- HARLAMPY SPIRIDONOVITCH DIMBA, a Greek confectioner

**The scene is laid in one of the rooms of Andronov's Restaurant**

**ZHIGALOV** [To DIMBA] ...And do you have tigers in Greece?

**DIMBA.** Yes.

**ZHIGALOV** And lions?

**DIMBA.** And lions too. In Russia Zere's nuSSing, and in Greece Zere's everySing – my faZer and uncle and broZeres – and here Zere's nuSSing.

### (Russian version)

**Жигалов** (Дымбе). А тигры у вас в Греции есть?

**Дымба.** Есть.

**Жигалов.** А львы?

**Дымба.** И львы есть. Это в России ниЦего нету, а в Греции все есть.

Там у меня и отец, и дядя, и братья, а тут ниЦего нету.

In Dimba's speech in the original Russian version the correct Russian /tʃ/ is substituted by /ts/, while the English translator substitutes /θ/ by /s / and /ð/ by /z/.

The imitation of this "Greek Russian" variety caused some obvious changes both of consonants and of vowels (to a less extent) in the speech of the local Russian population. The most conspicuous changes are as follows:

- 1) some consonants, which are usually hard in other varieties of Russian, in the Russian speech of the Greek community get palatalized as in *pyshka* ['pʲɪʃka] (Eng. *a puff; a bun*) – ['pʲiʃka ]; *rynok* ['rɪnək] (Eng. *a marketplace*) – ['rʲinək]; *ryba* (Eng. *fish*) ['rɪbə] – ['rʲibə];
- 2) hushing sounds are substituted by sibilants as in *krysha* (Eng. *roof*) ['krʲɪʃə] – *kryssa* ['krʲɪsə]; *Masha* (diminutive of *Mariya* – a female name) ['mʲaʃə] – *Massa* ['masə], etc.

### 3.1. Summing up Phonetic Features

According to the available data some peculiarities of the variety of Russian language, which used to be spoken by the Greeks of Taganrog and some other Southern Russian towns are as follows:

- 1) soft post-alveolar affricate /tʃ/ (represented in Russian by letter «ч») turns into hard alveolar affricate /ts/ (represented by letter «ц»);
- 2) hard alveolar affricate /ts/ (represented by letter «ц») turns into hard alveolar voiceless fricative /s/ (represented by letter «с»);
- 3) hard post-alveolar voiced fricative /z/ (represented by letter «ж») turns into hard alveolar voiced fricative /ʒ/ (represented by letter «з»);
- 4) hard post-alveolar voiceless fricative /ʃ/ (represented by letter «ш») turns into hard alveolar voiceless fricative /s/ (represented by letter «с»);
- 5) Russian close central vowel /ɨ/, which indicates hardness of the previous consonant is substituted by close front /i/ indicating palatalization of the previous vowel;
- 6) Palatalization might occur also in certain contexts.

### 4. Conclusion

The collected evidence shows that at one time South Russian town-dwellers, especially women, might have started to imitate the abovementioned phonetic features of the local Greeks' speech considering it prestigious. These features spread in the varieties of Russian all along the Northern Azov coast as well as in the Cossack towns of the Lower Don area [3]. Quite soon the features in question turned into characteristic peculiarities of the local accents, i.e. they were not mere imitation any longer.

In the late XIX c. some Russian scholars considered the said features to be the direct heritage of the local language contact during the Greek colonisation in the ancient times. However, this hypothesis seems to be hardly probable as language continuity in the Southern Russian steppe region had been broken intermittently because of massive migrations and long periods of devastation and abandonment.

In future it is supposed to carry on a retrospective study of age, sex, and occupational variation as regards the features of Russian attributed to the Greek influence. An approximate estimation of the time by which this accent had formed would also be quite tempting. These goals are quite a challenge as most peculiarities under consideration are extinct by now.

## References

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