

Greek and Albanian in Palasa and Environs: A Report from the Field

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Abstract

We report here on some findings from fieldwork over several years in Palasa, a village near Himara in which the Greek speakers show the effects of long-standing contact with Albanian. We focus on the ethnolinguistic situation, differential borrowing depending on lexical domain, regional ethnobotany, and code-switching in a folk tale.

Keywords: *fieldwork; Greek; Albanian; ethnobotany; code-switching; borrowing*

1. Introduction

In recent years, starting in 2015 and continuing annually since then, we — either together or individually — have made linguistic and ethnographic field expeditions to Palasa, a Greek-speaking village in the Himara region of southern Albania whose inhabitants are all speakers of a local variety of Greek but also a local variety of Albanian. By way of sharing our field experiences more broadly we present here some observations concerning this village and the linguistic and cultural gems that it offers to linguists and ethnographers, and to Albanologists, Balkanists, and Hellenists.

In some ways, Palasa might seem like a dying village, in that most of the 389 inhabitants (Bërxfholi 2006: 233) are older folks, in their 50s and 60s, and the most recent new construction in the village is a home for the care of the elderly. However, from a linguistic and cultural standpoint, Palasa is a vibrant linguistic milieu in which the linguistic productions of the speakers seamlessly flow between two languages in their conversations and daily usage, and in which elements of both Greek and Albanian culture are neatly compartmentalized and accessed by the inhabitants. In this way, it is a monument to Balkan multilingualism and multiculturalism and offers important and interesting insights for anyone interested in Greek dialectology.

Accordingly, as part of an on-going large project on language contact and language use in Palasa and related areas, we report here on some of our findings from Palasa, along several dimensions. In particular:

- a. We discuss general aspects of the ethnolinguistic situation in the region, and the dialectological status of the local Greek variety, locating this ethnolinguistic situation within a more general Greek dialectological context.

- b. We discuss our findings regarding lexical domains, showing a highly differentiated picture in the distribution of loans in different semantic spheres in both languages.
- c. From a more culturological standpoint, though with some linguistic implications in terms of nomenclature, we discuss novel folk beliefs about certain regional plants and their uses.
- d. Finally, we offer an example of code-switching, in this case embedded in a local folk tale.

2. The Ethnolinguistic situation

The ethnolinguistic situation of the region of Himara is best described in terms of the languages spoken in the villages in the area, namely the vernaculars of the Albanian-speaking villages of Vuno, Qeparo, Kudhës and Pilur (Memushaj & Grillo 2009),¹ but also Drymades (Dhërmi in its Albanian name), Palasa, and Himara itself, where, according to Albanian researchers, alongside Albanian, Greek is also spoken (Memushaj 2004: 180, Demiraj 2006, Sotiri 2006: 264).

It is not clear when exactly Greek speakers and Albanian speakers first met in the wider region of Himara, as historical sources do not help to set an absolute date for the beginning of their linguistic contact. But one thing is certain today: after a long coexistence, there is now a culturally special area, with clear distinctions between the two cultures, which have not merged completely but rather are intertwined, and this intertwining is linguistically expressed in a twofold way: three villages (Himara, Drymades and Palasa) use Greek as their language of communication, while the four other villages (Vuno, Qeparo, Kudhës and Pilur) use Albanian. But, because of the coexistence of the two languages and the speakers' communicative needs, Greek-speaking Himariotes learned and use Albanian and, Albanian-speaking Himariotes have learned and use Greek. In the last case, however, we have little evidence for the time before the 1990s, when Greek became very attractive for monolingual Albanians as the language of a more prosperous economic model in the neighbouring country, opening the way to mass labour migrations from the region.

This dual character of the region and its inhabitants is expressed not only linguistically, but also ethnologically and historically: one can read references to Greek soldiers in the West (see e.g. Sathas 1885) who spoke Albanian. Many Greek-speaking people call themselves "Albanians", giving the term *Albania* a geographic content with a diverse ethnological composition. On the one hand, we have Greeks from Albania (such as the Himariotes, but also Delvinians, Dropolites, Rizioties, etc., further south in Albania) labelling themselves as "Arvanites", while on the other hand we have Albanians identifying themselves in a wider European context as "Greek" (as "*stradioti*", Balkan mercenary companies in the 15th – 18th centuries; see Sathas 1885). There are instances where the terms "Epirotes" and "Epirus" are confused or identified with "Albanian" and

¹ The village of Vuno was selected by Albanian dialectologists to represent the idioms of the area in the Albanian linguistic atlas (Gjinari et al. 2007).

“Albania” respectively; for instance, the *Dictionarum latino-epiroticum* of Franciscus Blancus translates in Albanian as *Fjaluer ltinisht-shqyp* [*Latin – Albanian Dictionary*]).

Linguistic and other studies about the Himara region have followed the academic tradition of the Balkans to support one or another national character of the region. In 2006, the Academy of Sciences of Albania issued a collective publication of 25 articles and studies under the title *Himara në shekuj (Himara diachronically)*. There is no text in this edition about the Greek dialect of Himara.

Studies of the Greek dialect(s) of the Himara area, except for lexicological research and descriptions of certain phonological facts, have not proceeded to the grammatical level. The examination of a possible relationship with the Greek dialects of Mani or of Southern Italy and their position within the Modern Greek diasystem was a leading issue for a time, while their relationship with the respective Albanian dialects of the region was not studied at all. The bilingual situation, which features the speech of the speakers of the dialect, and helps to explain the state of affairs both in the Greek and Albanian dialects of Himara, had not until recently been a subject of study.

There is interesting linguistic and dialectal material evident, which explains more clearly the situation concerning bilingualism of Palasa, Drymades/Dhërmi and Himara, which together constitute a narrow zone of Greek-Albanian bilingualism in the region. Himara itself has served as the center of the region, and is the emerging point of communication patterns for the wider region. This has ensured the prestige of Greek (in its dialectal form), which nevertheless has undergone strong pressures and influences from the Albanian dialects of the Albanian-speaking Himariotes and the adjacent Lab dialects.²

The conservative Greek dialect of Himara has been the target of pressures from various types of Greek, from the language used in the church to influences of linguistically innovative settlements, such as Ioannina and Corfu. Moreover, Palasa is more exposed to the pressure and influence of the Albanian language than is either Drymades/Dhërmi or Himara.

Greek has been used as a “regional koine” from early times throughout the historical period (that is to say, the time of written historical sources). Here we refer to historical evidence such as the letters of the inhabitants of Himara addressed to Greek and non-Greek recipients, where, despite the attempt to cast the written discourse in a common variety of Greek, several dialect forms of Himariote usage slip in, such as a 1pl medio-passive ending *-μεσταν* (versus, e.g., Standard Modern Greek *-μασταν*), or the accentuation *χωρίου* (versus SMG *χωριού*), or the *ε*-vocalism in *πλερώση* (versus SMG *πληρώση*), to name just a few features that are striking from the perspective of Greek dialectal variation.

However, with the introduction of Albanian as the official language of the state, the image of Greek presence in the region changed. Its status was downgraded, and from a status as a prestigious language, it was restricted to minority-language status and then — initially with King Zogu’s first attempt in 1934 to ban schools and then in 1946 with the prohibition of minority status by E. Hoxha’s Communist regime — it became a forbidden language.

This situation is reflected today in the cemeteries of the three settlements of Himara, where the majority of the inscriptions are written in Albanian. This is the absolute rule until the 1990s, when the Greek language reappears in a small number of graves.

² According to Albanian thinking, all Himariotes are Labs, as Himara is part of Laberia.

However, considering, for example that cemetery location of Palasa was changed four times, one may come to the conclusion that the change of location may have been used as a reason for ending the tradition of using Greek in the grave inscriptions.

In the context of the Greek-Albanian bilingualism of the Himara region, the positions of Greek and Albanian differ with respect to their corresponding diasystems. While the Greek dialect of Himara is conservative relative to other modern Greek dialects, the Albanian dialect, as it is produced by the main Greek-speaking inhabitants of Himara, follows the normal form of the other Albanian dialects of the region (Vuno, Qeparo, Kudhës and Pilur), as well as of the adjacent Lab dialects.

However, the linguistic situation in the region is not that simple. In the Greek dialect, for example, various elements, including influences from the adjacent Greek idioms, such as the areas of Delvino and Agioi Saranta/Sarandë, Dropolis/Dropull and Pogoni, and of Corfu, have been added. These effects are also compounded by the strong pressure from Standard Modern Greek, which began about 30 years ago via passive listening based on the Greek Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) and continues today with the speakers of the most active part of the population. That is, those who are located in the big cities of Greece and have definitely adopted Standard Greek, use the standard language when returning to their homeland, the Himara area, thus rejecting and degrading sociolinguistically the local dialect.³

The degree of prevalence or retreat of the dialect therefore depends on the exposure of its speakers to other linguistic forms. Thus, there is a hierarchy of population ranking which, based on the extent of preservation of the dialect, begins with the elderly women, continues with the elderly men, and ends up with the remaining younger inhabitants in the village. As for the “emigré” Himariotes, they are no longer active speakers of the idiom. This is a rule for the younger generation above all. The consequences of the retreat of the dialect include an overall reduction of competence on the part of speakers, but more specifically an inability to use certain verbal tenses, in both active and passive voice but especially in the passive.

The bilingual situation allows the researcher to quickly detect various language phenomena of interest. It can put one language in a meta-lingual mode by activating the informant's interlingual ability, a situation that we achieved with one speaker during our research, along with the normal conduct of interviews that led to the production of oral texts. That is, we asked the informant ML to translate our sentences from Albanian into the Greek dialect of Palasa. While successful in the majority of cases, ML failed to unequivocally translate the sentence containing verb forms of the Imperfect tense despite an apparent equivalent in Greek, giving several variants, an apparent indication of confusion (e.g. Alb. *laheshit* ‘you have been washing’ ~ Grk. *πλενούσετε/ πλενούστε/ πλενούσετουν* ‘you were bathing’).

The impossibility of producing different verbal forms suggests a restriction of the communicative environments of the dialect, the main reason being the inclusion in a system characterized by the presence of Standard Modern Greek, but more so that of the Albanian language, both in its dialectical form and in the form of the Standard.

As for the interaction between Greek and Albanian dialects of the wider region of Himara, we note first that the protagonist role of Albanian dialects of Himara has changed

³ Something similar can be said about the local Albanian dialect in that it is influenced by Standard Albanian, which is favored due to its status as the official language of the state. This status means that it is the only permissible language in administration and education.

over time. The intensity of mutual lexical borrowing reflects the complex bilingual situation. Still, there is a common semiotic list, consisting of common words of various lexical categories and semantic fields, the presence of which exceeds any simplistic philological interpretation of the lexical borrowing.

Moreover, the assimilation of the consonant cluster [st] to [s] is a known feature of the Greek dialect of Himara; cf. Σέφος < Στέφος, with the reduction found also in the Albanian name *Sevo*. The Greek dialect of Himara serves as the source of this phonological feature, since this phenomenon has been generalized in all three Greek-speaking villages. In the Albanian, however, its extent is limited to those words referring to the real environment of the Greek dialect or its phonological models.

However, there is not always a correspondence of pronunciation of the same common words between the Greek and Albanian dialects. In the phonetic habits of speakers of the Albanian dialect of Himara (above all the villages of Vuno and Qeparo), the pronunciation of the continuants [x] and [ç] has become generalized, instead of the corresponding “normal” pronunciation with [h]. Thus, *ha* ‘eat’ is [xa], and *hedh* ‘throw’ is [xɛð], pronunciations which are regularly observed in the Arvanites of Greece, but is also widely conserved in the Arbëresh speakers of Italy.

3. Lexical Division of Labor: Cattle and Fish Names

Moving on to the lexicon, we note that there is a strong tendency to integrate thematic parts of Albanian vocabulary (lexical groups) into the Greek language of our informants, and vice versa, parts of the Greek vocabulary into the Albanian language. As a result, there is only one set of color terms for cattle for both Albanian and Greek, originating in Albanian, on the one hand. For instance, requesting local Greek words denoting goats of different colours, we received Albanian words as answers, such as *verdha* for a yellow goat; we illustrate this with an excerpt from our field notes:

INFORMANT Ετού[τη τη]ν ηλέγαμε βέρδα [verdha], ελληνικά βέρδα [verdha].
this it we-would-say “verða”, in-Greek “verða”.
‘We would call this “verða”, in-Greek “verða”.’

A.S. Ελληνικά?
‘In-Greek?’

INFORMANT Ελληνικά βέρδα [verdha].
‘In-Greek “verða”.’

A.S. Βέρδα?
““verða”?”

INFORMANT Ναι! Βέρδα [verdha], άντε, και βερ, πρρϋ, πρρϋ, πρρϋ!
Yes “verða” c’mon and “ver, prrϋ, prrϋ, prrϋ!”

Βέρδα τα λέγαμε ελληνικά.
“verða” them we-called Greek

‘Yes “verða”, c’mon, even “ver, prrϋ, prrϋ, prrϋ!”’

“verða” we’d call them in Greek.’

Similarly, on the other hand, there is only one set of fish names (ichthyonyms) for both Greek and Albanian, originating in Greek; for instance, consider the Greek lexical items in these excerpts, instead of Alb. *qefull* ‘mullet’ and *ngjal* ‘eel’:

INFORMANT Ka shumë, por nuk i dimë si quajnë, *qefallo* [κέφαλο],
has many but not them we-know how they-call [k’efalo]
‘There-are many but we don’t know how they are-called,’

ka dhe që *qefallo* [κέφαλο], i themi, ato.
has and that [k’efalo] them we.say those
‘and there-are even those that we call them *qefallo* [κέφαλο]’

INFORMANT *Hela* [χέλια]. *Hela* [χέλια], ato që janë si, si gjalpëri,
those are like like snakes
‘Eels. Eels those being like snakes,’

hela [χέλια] i themi neve
them we.say we
‘we call them *hela* [χέλια]’

Ato kemi patur neve këtu.
those we.have had we here
‘We’ve got like those here.’

Thus, one lexicon emerges, serving the two languages in contact. We can speculate that this one “pan-Balkan-lexicon” tendency might be interpreted as a parallel to the pan-Balkan tendency towards “one grammar”, but substantiating that speculation would take us far afield.

4. Ethnobotanical considerations⁴

We discuss here several plants that figure in interesting ways in the local ethnobotanical scene. Both their uses and their names, along with various associated practices and terminology have particular significance, and speak to an intertwined cultural base for the linguistic communities.

One important plant in the region is *rosmarinus officinalis*, rosemary, of the mint family *lamiaceae*, a plant that is native to the Mediterranean region. In Albanian, it is known as *rozmarin/ë*, *-a*, and in the Albanian dialect of Palasë *lindro lívano*. Greek variants of the name include *τό ροσμαρίνον*, *τό δυοσμαρίνι*, *ή λιβανωτίς*, and *το δενδρολιβανον*, and the name found in the Greek dialect of Himara (Palasa), *λενδρίβανο*,

⁴ On the ethnobotany and relevant terminology of the region, see Sulaj 2013, Kostallari 1980, Lloshi 2010, Novik 2017.

is fairly widespread in the south-west of the Balkan peninsula (primarily on the territory of Albania, Greece, and Macedonia), including the Apennines and the Iberian peninsula.

The residents of the Himara *krahinë*⁵, with a mixed Albanian and Greek population, often underscore the special role of this plant in their culture, giving it almost an exaggerated importance. Moreover, our Greek-speaking informants in Palasa noted that in their village, the word *λενδρίβανο* is “palasikó” (i.e., proper to the local dialect) and that the word *lindro livano* in Albanian originally means “tree from Lebanon”.

This plant, *lendrivano*, grows on rocky mountainsides. The collection of the plant is traditionally considered to be women’s work. Recent decades have seen changes in this process: teenagers of both genders collect rosemary, which they rely on for a certain amount of income.

During our 2015-2017 expeditions to Himara, we established that local women have practically stopped going into the mountains to collect plants, for this activity has become unprestigious. The niche for this work has been taken over by residents of neighboring villages (as the informants say, from “behind the mountain”), mainly from Albanian-speaking Dukat (Alb. *Dukát, -i*), a village that is part of the Laberia *krahinë* (Alb. *Labëri, -a*), but others as well.

In the *krahinë* of Himara, *lendrivano* was traditionally used in a variety of situations: as spice for meals, as medicine, as aromatic, and as garden plant (mainly in the last few years), etc. In any case, local residents sometimes attribute the wide use of rosemary to its preventative properties against all possible ailments.

The second botanical of interest here is “mountain tea” (*Sideritis Herba*, fam. *Labiatae* L.), ironwort, of the lip-flowered family; the Albanian variants of the name are *çaj máli, çáji i málit*. The Albanian name in Himara (and Dropul) is *çaj máli*, while the Greek is *τσάι*, or *τσάι του βουνού*. The residents of the Himara and Dropul *krahinë*, with a mixed Albanian and Greek population, often underscore the special role and exaggerated importance of this plant in their culture.

In the Himara region, *çaj máli/ τσάι (του βουνού)* was traditionally drunk for various reasons at various times. In summer, it was drunk as a tonic which concluded the meal and facilitated digestion and in winter, it served as a warming beverage, and as a medicine for a cold or some other minor illness. Local residents attribute the wide use of “mountain tea” to its preventative properties against all possible ailments. The Greek-speaking population in Palasa says that the word *τσάι* originally denoted a drink prepared from this very mountain plant, and only later broadened its meaning that it came to mean black, green, or herbal tea.

A third botanical worthy of attention here is medicinal sage, *Salvia officinalis* L., of the lip-flowered *Labiatae* family. The Albanian name for this plant is *sherbél/ë, -a*, but in Himara and Dropul it is *sherebél*. The Greek name is *φασκόμηλο*; interestingly, some speakers could not produce the Greek dialectal variant for this plant and either used the Albanian name *sherebél*, or borrowed the Albanian and adapted it to a more Greek form, *σερεμπέλ(ι)*.

In southern Albania, sage grows on mountainsides. Unlike “mountain tea,” local residents use it most frequently for medicinal purposes such as for colds (the flu, angina), various respiratory infections, digestive issues, anxiety, impaired judgment, depression, and diverse “female” ailments. However, some local residents drink a brew made from

⁵ Alb. *krahinë/ë, a*, ‘region, ethnohistorical region’.

this plant also as an alternative to “mountain tea”—that is, to conclude almost any meal. The use of sage is observed for both the Greeks and the Albanians of Himara region.

In the Western Balkans, there is a fairly stable culture of use of hot drinks, primarily coffee, and in regions such as Kosovo and Western Macedonia, also black tea. “Mountain tea” and sage have successfully occupied a niche in this tradition of coffee or tea consumption. This is thanks, primarily, to their availability and cheapness. These two plants have been organically incorporated into the system of customary practices and etiquette, and also into the rather stable hospitality customs characteristic of many different ethnicities, ethnoreligious and local groups in the Balkans. These practices have hugely facilitated the solidification of the roles of “mountain tea” and sage in the cultural codes of a number of regions (e.g. Himara and Dropul). Also, though, in conditions with limited resources for healthcare, “mountain tea” and “sage” have become an inextricable component of the medical practices of doctors and healers, and are perceived by many as an effective and unquestionable cure-all.

5. Code-Switching in a Folk Tale

Finally, in keeping with the more ethnographic orientation of the previous sections, we offer a fragment of a folk tale, interesting in its own right as a piece of local folk culture and folk lore, but also because it contains a code-switch. Code-switching, definable as “alternation of multiple languages within a single discourse, sentence, or constituent ... by fully proficient multilinguals” (Myslín & Levy 2015), typically occurs for one or more of various reasons, sociocultural factors such as the construction of identity, the modulation of social distance or affiliation, and accommodation to other speakers; psycholinguistic factors such as lexical accessibility, triggering by sound-alike “trigger words”, lexical cohesion, and language-internal collocational strength; and discourse-functional factors such as clarification, emphasis, qualification of information, topic of discussion; predictability of meaning, and individual speaker choice.

In this regard, the telling of the ‘Old Woman of March’ Legend (Plaka e Marsit) is of particular interest. Here is how the story was told to us:

P. M.: Η γρεά βγήκε το ... βγήκε το χειμώνα...
the old-woman went.out the went.out the winter
‘The Old.Lady ascended in winter’

F. M.: Όχι το χειμώνα. Είχε φύγ’ ο χειμώνας.
not the winter had left the winter
‘Not in winter. Winter had passed.’

P. M.: Κι ευτή λέει, *do më falni*. Τα κατσίκια μου γεράσαν, λέει.
and she says *will me you.forgive*. the goats my they.aged says
‘And she says, you will forgive me, my kids (kid-goats) grew up,
she says,

Τα αρνιά μου [cere] πιάσαν, λέει. *Dhjefsha... Dhjefsha buzë marsit...*
the lambs my horns got says I.defecated defecated edge March

‘my lambs got horns, she says... *I defecated ... I defecated in front of March*’

A. S. Ακόμα μια φορά, që nga fillimi
Still one time from the beginning
‘Once again, from the beginning’

- P. M.: Ναι. Τα κασίκια μου γεράσαν. Τα αρνιά μου [cere] πιάσαν. Και...
μετά ευτή έρχεται, έβαλε τον καιρό. Παίρει... παίρ’ τν
comes put the weather takes takes the

κούπα... με το γάλα, τν επάει μακριά. *Dhjeftsha buzë marsit*, λέει...
vessel with the milk it takes far

Τα κασίκια μου γεράσαν, λέει. Τα αρνιά μου [cere] πιάσαν, και... κι
ευτή πνήκε...
suffocated

‘Yes. My kids (kid-goats) grew up. My lambs got horns. And after she came [to the mountain], the weather deteriorated. [The wind] takes the vessel with milk and brings it far away. *I defecated in front of March*, she says. My kids (kid-goats) grew up, she says. My lambs got horns and... and she suffocated...’

In this case, the matrix language for the folk-tale is Greek but we see switches into Albanian in a few instances (indicated by italics)⁶ that are followed by switches back into Greek. These switches are interesting for three reasons. First, we might not expect to find code-switching at all in a folk-tale, as that would seem to be a type of discourse where one language would prevail, given that folk-tales often have a somewhat fixed nature. Second, none of the conventional reasons for switching seems to be relevant here, other than the “catch-all” reason of “individual speaker choice”. Thus in this case, we have a seeming unprovoked, and therefore unexpected, and interesting, switch. The third reason is that the code-switch to Albanian language in the citation of the protagonist’s direct speech can tell us about the Lab roots of the legend, which could be a cultural borrowing to the Greek-speaking part of Himara.

6. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we simply note that the language situation in Palasa demonstrates that intense contact between speakers of different languages in the Balkans, of the sort that gave rise to the Balkan sprachbund, is alive and well, at the village-dialect level at

⁶ We write ‘horns’ (based on a Greek word (cf. Standard Greek κέρατο) but with Albanian phonetics for the initial consonant) as [cere], using the International Phonetic Alphabet, indicating the simultaneous use of both languages in bilingual speakers, who can go to fragmentary parts of the systems in a complementary and eclectic way in order to fill their communicative needs.

least. In Palasa, we see on-going effects of the continued co-existence of Greek and Albanian.

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