‘The Language of My Enemy is My Mother Tongue’: Turkish in the Community of Pontic Greeks in Cyprus

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Pontic Greeks in Cyprus constitute a particular interest from a sociolinguistic perspective. After the conquest of their homeland, Pontus, which is located in today’s north-eastern Turkey, by Ottoman Turks in the 15th century, a considerable outflow of Pontic Greeks towards Georgia and/or Russia was observed, especially in the 18th-19th centuries. The majority of Pontic Greeks were Turko-phone at the time of their settlement on the new land, since very few of them managed to retain their ancestral language - the Pontic Greek Dialect. Out of 43 villages Pontic Greeks established in the Tsalka (in Georgia) only 3 were Pontic Greek-speaking. In Russia, Pontic Greeks settled mostly in the Krasnodar and Stravropol regions. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, made it possible for ethnic minorities residing on its territory to migrate back to their ‘historical’ motherland. As a result, thousands of Pontic Greeks moved to Greece/Cyprus – the two Greek-speaking countries.

The present paper examines the linguistic behavior of Pontic Greeks (from Georgia and Russia) based on the internalized linguistic ideologies in Cyprus. The predominantly Turkish-speaking community of Pontic Greeks (at the time of its settlement in Cyprus in early/mid 1990s) has seen a rapid linguistic and cultural transformation. This occurred because the local ‘ethnic brothers’ (i.e. Greek-Cypriots) were reluctant to recognize the Turkish-speaking Pontic Greeks as Greeks. Furthermore, the community was negatively perceived in light of the broader context of the Cyprus problem (almost half of the island was occupied by the Turkish Army in 1974).

In order to manifest their Greek identity, and their allegiance to the Greek culture, Pontic Greeks have shifted to the Standard Modern Greek (SMG). This is indicative in parent-children communication patterns where not only in public but also within the home domain SMG was reported to be the preferred language. However, even though the Turkish language is negatively perceived within and outside the community in question, it is still used by the older generations who stress the fact that they are Greeks by blood but are obliged to speak the language of the ‘enemy’ as it is their dominant language. In this study, I will analyze the factors that contributed to the rapid language shift and show what indexical means are employed by the members of the Pontic Greek community to be ‘legally’ considered as Greeks on the island. Likewise, I will argue that some Pontic Greeks’ attempt to preserve the national traits of the country of origin, led them to the dilemma of a hybrid identity and disorientation in their sense of belonging.

Data come from 247 questionnaires and 44 (4 group and 40 individual) interviews.