

Language as Sounds and Images

The Materiality of Griko

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The video *Ce àrtena* (“And Now”) composed here for the *Delphic Preview: The Festival of the Muses*, builds on three poems I wrote in Salentine-Greek—or simply Griko—the language of Greek origins spoken in the Southern Italian province of Lecce, in Grecia Salentina (Puglia); they are accompanied by photographs taken by my friend Daniele Coricciati—who curated the videos—and by instrumental compositions written and played by my friend Palmiro Durante.

Music and photography can be regarded as 'languages' in themselves, languages that speak without words. Yet a language—in its strict sense—is made up of both sounds and images: the sounds it conveys through the very voice of the speaker, and the images evoked through the memory of language use.

If this holds true for any language, this aspect acquires further relevance when dealing with Griko, whose story is long and complex. Transmitted orally from generation to generation, it has long been considered a 'dying language'; in the majority of the Griko-speaking villages it stopped being transmitted as a mother-tongue in the post-WWII period, when locals came to internalize it as 'the language of the past' and of backwardness in symbolic opposition to Italian. Today it is no longer used primarily as a language of daily exchange, but memories of language use are alive and contribute to shaping its use up to the present; in this sense, the material presence of Griko is all around, through its sounds and forms.

Studies investigating language materiality have indeed recently emerged and specifically include semiotic approaches to language, sound, and aesthetics. These interact with the theoretical framework of language ideologies, that is with those cultural frames on which

speakers' conceptualizations, feelings, and perceptions of language structure and use build.¹ The more recent approach to materiality specifically proposes “to view language as a material presence with physical and metaphysical properties and as embedded within political economic structures” – to use the words of the anthropologists Jillian Cavanaugh and Shalini Shankar (2017:1).

Indeed, Griko has 'textures' made up of sounds and forms that are themselves embedded in time. Take my friend Annu (born 1984) who is not a Griko-speaker in prescriptive terms. When she intentionally uses Griko, she builds on memories of her grandmother and father speaking the language. She does more than that: she retrieves words or entire expressions and puts them to use according to the situation at hand, making the most of her limited linguistic resources. She is not the only one of course, although she admittedly is an exception for her age. Others belonging to the younger generations (from the 1970s onwards) and hence who have limited competence in Griko, may engage in this practice, which I call “generational crossing”: the act of citing and re-appropriating words or entire expressions from the stock of the memory by re-contextualizing them in the present. In conceptualizing it, I partially draw on the sociolinguist Ben Rampton's notion of “crossing” which refers to “the use of a language which is not generally thought to ‘belong’ to the speaker” (2009: 287). This allows younger speakers to cross the temporal distance separating them from elderly generations and their experiential world to whom Griko is perceived to belong. Each word chosen, each sound reproduced is the echo of someone else or of a specific moment in time. Indeed, Bakhtin had it right a long time ago. In these instances words are images *of and from* the past linked to locals' experiential memory; words are sounds that remind people of other people, connecting them across time and beyond phenomenological distance. Such use of Griko both performs and is

¹ For the emergence of the Language ideologies theoretical framework, see Woolard, K. A., Schieffelin, B. B., & Kroskrity, P. V. 1998. For the materiality of Language see also Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014; 2012

performative of locals' identification with the elderly and with the cultural repertoire (Pellegrino 2013 and, forthcoming Fall 2020).

Locals may metalinguistically comment with regret that the very linguistic resources offered by Griko are limited for expressing the needs of the present. This is often the case with minority languages whose communicative functions have diminished throughout time due to language erosion and shift. The Griko vocabulary came increasingly to be associated with the peasant world, and Griko itself is largely perceived to describe the world of the past, a world that does not exist any more as remembered. This often generates a number of debates as locals envisage the future of Griko and animatedly discuss the 'form' in which the language should be transmitted. How to transcribe it and whether and how to integrate its limited vocabulary are among a series of "language ideological debates" (Blommaert 1999:9) in which speakers, activists, and local *cultori del Griko* ("Griko scholars") engage. Rather than being contentions about language issues, these are in fact contentions about language ideologies. By debating, for instance, whether to rely on Italian, the local romance dialect, or Modern Greek to 'coin' new words or expressions in Griko people reveal their understandings and projections about the role of Griko in the past-present-future. Language ideologies are therefore connected to locals' memories of the experiential past, as discussed above; but being socially distributed, such ideologies may equally rest on projections of a temporally distant but glorious past, a past which connects Southern Italy and Greece and which in turn also influences language choices and 'tastes'. Since the 1990s, the intensification of contacts with Greece, the availability of Standard Modern Greek courses provided by the Greek ministry of Education, and the interest shown by Greek aficionados of Griko who visit the area have been adding a renewed layer to the unfolding of the Griko 'story' (Pellegrino, forthcoming Fall 2020).

These debates are indeed deeply embedded in the demands of the present. Speakers of minority languages are often confronted with expectations to reproduce the dominant ideologies at the root of the construction of national languages—together with the attendant challenges—and to conform to the old 'romantic/romanticized' expectations which rely on the same ideological tropes that match 'a language' to 'a people.' Processes of language standardization, renewal, and/or revitalization are entangled in globally shared political and economic dynamics which, however, bring along locally declined implications for minority languages, their speakers, and the wider community. In the case at hand, locals at large value the richness of Griko that derives from the lexical and phonetic variation present among the remaining seven Griko-speaking villages – diatopic variation is the technical term for this. They often comment on it, clarifying differences and preferences, putting the conversation *in Griko* on hold, and turning *Griko itself* into the topic of conversation (Pellegrino 2016b). The general tendency to resist attempts aimed at the standardization, renewal, or revitalization of Griko, reveals locals' language ideologies; it shows, I argue, how their ideas, perceptions, and projections about this language also rest on its materiality, on the experiential 'bond' locals show towards a specific pronunciation or lexical choice, and how the latter build on the affective attachments to the people with whom they associate those very sounds and words. Words are images that evoke the memory of someone who said those very words; through sounds and words the textures of Griko become palpable, so to speak; in these instances affect, morality, and aesthetics converge. But they also lead to power struggle over who holds the 'authority' to determine what is 'right' or 'wrong' for the future of Griko – whether mother-tongue speakers, *cultori del Griko*, or language experts – and what defines it, whether embodied knowledge or philological expertise.

Griko has re-entered the experiential reality of locals in multiple forms that go beyond such debates and the language 'vitality' as a medium of daily communication; it remains present, for instance, in the daily lives of those who write and/or compose in Griko. The shift from the 'traditional' oral communication to the written mode has throughout time built a material legacy on which people rely and to which they continue to contribute. The materiality of Griko likewise reveals itself as it engages people in recalling a story linked to a specific word or expression, as it translates into evoking an anecdote connected to them, into citing someone else's poem or into composing one. Indeed, on the occasions of cultural events dedicated to Griko, the language is itself immersed in a performative aura; locals read or recite their own or others' poems, and more and more often they put together curated performances in which Griko and its multiple pasts are evoked. Moreover, poems may be set to music and songs fill in the material presence of Griko, further enriching it. What I have observed and experienced through year-long fieldwork in Grecia Salentina is indeed how Griko has increasingly been used as a performative resource and for performative ends precisely while its communication function – strictly defined – continued to decrease (Pellegrino 2016a).

When I received the invitation to contribute to *Delphic Preview: The Festival of the Muses*, I was therefore thrilled to show the creative ways in which Griko is and can still be used and how its materiality continues to generate paths to its future. So I shared the idea of this video project with the amazing team who first appreciated my 'Griko words' and published them online in CHS *Classical Inquiries* in April 2020². I take this opportunity to thank Natasha Bershadsky and Agathi Dimitrouka for respectively rendering poetic my English and Greek translations of the poems that you see in the subtitles. Their positive feedback on a first draft

² <https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/three-poems-by-manuela-pellegrino/>

of the video indicated that I had succeeded in sharing the *sounds* of Griko and the images and sounds evoked by and through it by reading a poem.

Let me conclude by saying that it is no coincidence that I myself started writing poems in Griko a couple of years ago; in a similar manner to the anthropologist who embraces the worldview of the people with whom she engages, so did I find myself experimenting with Griko words, embracing them creatively – and more intensively during the Covid-19 lockdown when I wrote these poems. Griko is to me a language of 'familiar sounds,' yet one I set myself the goal to learn when I was twenty-nine years old upon embarking in a PhD in anthropology to trace its story and place its present. Through this project my anthropological research on this language, my artistic (and long repressed) drives, and the echoes of my own life flow into one another. Griko, its people, and the social dynamics associated with it, will continue to be the 'object' of my anthropological investigation; yet, as the grand-daughter and daughter of Griko-speakers whose memory I carry with me, Griko for me is also—and also for me—a *language of sounds and images*.

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