

# "The teaching of the Greek language, as a second language, in the Pomak region in Western Thrace, Greece (case studies)"

Nikolaos Th. Georgitsis

(Teacher of Greek language), PhD cand. of the University of Ioannina

Ioannina-Greece

*e-mail: ngeorgits@gmail.com*

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**Abstract:** The present study draws on the subject of my teaching experience as a teacher in the above minority areas and the teaching of Greek as a second language in the Pomaks of Western Thrace (Greek territory).

I will briefly refer to the particular linguistic characteristics of this minority population in the Balkans, based on the historical and geographical circumstances that shaped it, but also on the principles and necessity of teaching the Greek language in contemporary reality.

The issue of the Greek language in the region highlights the great importance that the Greek language now plays in the wider region of Pomak (Rhodopi area).

**Keywords:** education, intercultural, language, Muslim minority, Pomaks, Western Thrace.

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## 1. THEORIES AND TERMS

The role of education is particularly important for assimilation a minority group to the dominant group of shared identity (as the example of Brittany) or, in reverse, for retention of minority identity. As the term "minority" can be considered either ethnic or religious or linguistic -cultural. About the linguistic scope, then the native, first, second or foreign language terms should be specified. It is therefore necessary to conceptualize the complexity of bilingualism, in order the relationship between the mother language, the second and the foreign language be clarified.

The Triarchi - Hermann (2001) considers language as the first language (C1 or L1 ) "that conquered the person in the early years of his life through his contact with the faces of his environment". The terms first language and mother language are often used as identical or synonymous because most of the time the first language of the person is his or her mother tongue.

Chili (1999) argues that native language is considered the language known by native speakers without systematic teaching. The role of the mother tongue is considered crucial in the learning of other languages, because the speaker initially uses the logic and grammar of his mother tongue, from which he will convey the concepts to the other language.

Baker (2001), in turn, argues that the term first language mentioned sometimes in the first language we learn, sometimes the most used language, sometimes in stronger language. The term "strong" language describes the language in which the greatest dexterity is observed, while, other people consider that it is the language that is familiar to most speakers ( lingua franca ).

The reference to "bilingual education" term, refers to teaching in two languages, which are the means to achieve specific teaching objectives in the educational process. It does not mean that bilingual education always focuses on developing the linguistic proficiency of people in both languages. Instead, the bilingual educational programs, which are applied in various multicultural environments abroad (mainly), aim to promote the language of the upper cultural group , through the

mother tongue. An example is the "Transitional Bilingual Education Program " applied in the United States of America for children of cultural minorities. For these children, teaching in two languages is provided until the knowledge in English is considered sufficient to be able to attend the regular school program (Nicholaou 2005).

In fact, the "bilingual education" term is used in its literal meaning when it refers to programs that have been created to promote the bilingual skills of students throughout their education so that they evolve into bilingual individuals with excellent knowledge of both languages. Examples of bilingual educational programs are the second-language" Embedding Programs" applied in Canada, as well as the "Bilingual Education Bidirectional Programs" or "Bilingual Developmental Bidirectional Programs" applied in several parts of the United States of America. In the above-mentioned programs, the teaching of languages focuses on the first grade, exclusively in the minority language, the use of which is then reduced to 50% of the total teaching time (Haugen, 1956).

About bilingual education in Greece, mother tongue teaching is practiced exclusively in Thracian minority schools where bilingual programs in the Greek and Turkish languages (to a lesser extent in Jewish and Armenian schools) are applied. However, smaller groups such as the Pomaks, who have a distinct cultural and racial identity as well as a different language compared with the rest of the Muslim minority in Hellenic Thrace are not concerned.

## **2. INTRODUCTION – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR THE POMAKS**

Pomaks live in the mountainous area of Rhodope, which is about 240 kilometres long, about 96 kilometres wide and is spread over about 15,000 km<sup>2</sup>. 80% of this small area belongs to Bulgaria and 20% to Greece. The Pomaks living in Bulgaria number about 270,000 people, while those in Greece, according to unofficial data, about 36,000 people (this means they comprise one third of the Muslim minority in Greece). Currently, in Turkey lives a small number of Pomaks as a result of various immigrations. The Ottoman administration passed on them a religious (Islamic) ethnic identity. They speak a Slavic language resembling the Bulgarian, which has borrowed many words from the Greek and Turkish language as well.

As regards their origin, many theories have been formulated by Greek, Bulgarian and Turkish researchers, since they live in Thrace.

By the place name "Thrace" we refer to the area expanding in southern Bulgaria (northern Thrace), northeastern Greece (western Thrace) and European Turkey (eastern Thrace).

The term "minority" is used internationally to determine the population of a country that differs from the majority of its citizens as regards its racial origin, national consciousness, language, religion etc.

## **3. LIMITS OF THE PROBLEM**

As mentioned above, this research will examine the teaching of the Greek language to Pomak-speaking populations of Thrace (elementary school) mainly from 1998 until today. The reason why research is focused on this particular period is because the period from 1998 until today is a period of change for minority education.

## **4. INTERCULTURAL AND MINORITY EDUCATION**

The choice of the subject is importance as the need to change the educational landscape in the population of Pomaks is evident both at the level of Greek-speaking education and also in the field of institutionalization of the Pomak schools or better of the Public Schools in the area where they live. First, in relation to the above, is the need to protect the minority-language group, or / and teaching in their own language. Thus, teaching through this (special ) minority language is the cornerstone for the continuation and promotion of cultural and linguistic identity in relation to the collective consciousness of the minority group (Livani L., 2000).

At this point, it is worth mentioning that the right to mother tongue is not always acquired for every group of the population. This right is upheld by the laws of each state or by internal rules, as well as by international rules. The same rights applies and in the case of the Muslim minority, for which there is already a institutional framework for its education. However, this right is not used for the Pomak population separately but it is implemented as a whole (Muslim minority).

Finally, it was chosen the field of research to be limited only to primary education because at this level, language education is the starting point for shaping not only the performance of pupils in secondary education but also for the continuation of them or not at school.

In summary it could be said that a successful educational policy within the primary education is one that helps to the support of the education and proved worthy of the purpose of teaching of the language – learning courses for the Pomaks as well. The DEPPS (2003) states: "The teaching of the Language Course in the Elementary School is aimed at developing the ability of the pupils to handle written and spoken words responsibly, efficiently and creatively, in order to participate actively in school and their society".

## 5. GENERAL INFORMATION - EDUCATION

In Thrace, Greece, there are 235 minority schools of primary education. Teaching takes place in both Greek and Turkish, as stipulated in Part 5 (or E) "on protection of minorities" of the Treaty of Lausanne signed in 1923. At these schools work 440 Muslim teachers, 260 of whom are graduates of the Special Educational Academy of Thessaloniki, 82 are graduates of the secondary education (senior high schools and madrasas, namely religious educational institutions), 90 are graduates of Turkish teacher's training colleges and 9 are non-tenured teachers from Turkey, pursuant to bilateral agreement on education.

The most recent information shows there are 200 minority schools, of which 19 are located in Evros, 130 in Rhodope and 51 in Xanthi with 6,411 students in total. In rural areas, there are few-teacher schools, mostly two-teacher schools. School directors are Muslims, while deputy directors are Christians. The class schedule and syllabus of minority schools were laid down by ministerial decision in 1957, taking into account the schedule already in effect for Greek primary schools.

At the present time, in the syllabus set out for minority schools, there is a distinction between Turkish-speaking and Greek-speaking lessons, which are taught by Muslim and Christian teachers respectively. However, there is discontinuity between the Turkish-speaking and Greek-speaking syllabus as well as between education of minority and majority schools and thus minority and majority students, although they live in the same city, are not accustomed to cultural differences. Despite the taking and application of the abovementioned decisions, the minority education remains religious and the minority's language is still Turkish. Nonetheless, this fact is a breach of the Treaty of Lausanne since it has been laid down in articles 40 and 41 that: "Muslims of western Thrace are entitled to use their own language in teaching and learning, and their religious activities."

Obviously, the false step of the Greek State is that "as language" of the Muslim Greek citizens and particularly, the Pomaks, was regarded without exception the Turkish language, no matter what their mother tongue has been. As a result, this led to the development of a Turkish national identity (Chidiroglou 1989). It is worth mentioning that the common feature of the population comprising the Muslim minority of western Thrace is their common religion. There has been a distinction regarding their racial and language origin even before the signature of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923).

This distinction remains quite obvious until the present day, despite strong efforts put at times by Turkey to present this population as a Turkish minority. Characterisation of the Pomaks of western Thrace by Turks as a "Turkish minority" disregards their racial, language and cultural specific features (Minaidis 1990, p. 74).

Quite interesting is the Greek language status of the Pomak children, since most of them have no substantial contact with the Greek language prior to their primary school education. In general, the absence of physical contact with members of the broader community implies lack of language communication concerning the way the rest of society expresses itself. It applies mostly in the case of mountainous population of the Pomaks. This racial group of the Muslim minority is the one resisting to Turkification by all means (Georgitsis 2003, Centre for Interdisciplinary Research & Innovation, p. 40). For this reason, we should all contribute to its support mostly morally, but also in any legal way.

Handbooks referring to the Greek-speaking education until 2000 were those of the public schools. Teachers of the Greek-speaking programme had to deal from the very first moment with insurmountable problems as regards the Greek language; even basic communication has been tough (Androutsou 2005).

In minority schools in general, books serve the teaching of Greek language, so that language competence level of minority children determined as low (Tzevelegkou 2004) be improved. As a result, the books are divided in language teaching books and those of other subjects taught in Greek; they are aimed at students learning the Greek language as a second or foreign language.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Educational work in general and particularly, teaching of Greek language, which has suffered great injury, have been obstructed. Causes are numerous and are triggered on the inside... leading to negative consequences for the State and most importantly, for the teaching of Greek.

The absence of State, the insufficient or sometimes even non-existing single educational policy for the area of the villages inhabited by the Pomaks and the Pomak population in general contributed to the support of homogeneity of the Muslim minority (at national-language level) by political circles. This was achieved in two ways: a) interior propaganda and loss of the mother language (Pomak language), a language structurally related to Greek and b) by making the Greek language weaker (as mentioned above).

Teaching the Greek language to the said community has been inhibited by the Muslims up to the present day; it has been turned into a dry and dehydrated religion-oriented Turkish-speaking teaching, which has become strong in the context of confusion and obscurantism thanks to apparent incapacity of the Greek politicians for essential changes. However, in the past years, there has been a shift in the way education is viewed concerning the Pomaks. The necessity that the Pomak-speaking people are taught the Greek language is stressed. Of course, this change of attitude has been further supported by respective readjustments of the framework of admission of minority students to higher education and the partial change of Greek language handbooks.

Pomak-speaking students have received and still receive all negative effects of political-educational pressure and changes always at the expense of their mother tongue, but also of Greek as secondary language. They suffered at first a deliberately imposed social isolation, which led them to cultural and language isolation, non-attendance of school and non-learning of the Greek language. Most recently, they have been “bombed” by their teachers (both Muslims and Christians) at a multi-language level and therefore they feel confused. For example, the children at schools I served as a teacher for six consecutive years had as their base (mother tongue) the Pomak language; then they were taught Arabic, Turkish, Greek, English and maybe one more language (German or French)...

It is easily understood that their position is quite unpleasant and both their mother tongues, namely the Pomak language, and Greek, as the official language of the Greek State, have been useless.

I personally believe that the success of the goals and the work of the Greek-speaking programme is a result of a wider multiannual and painstaking effort, and it is closely related to the social and interpersonal skills of the teachers of the Pomak students. Furthermore, it is related to the way these teachers deal with this problem as individuals. Admittedly, the description of their job as that of a “common civil servant” should not be regarded accurate and sound.

More specifically, in my opinion, depending on the “living resources” and their knowledge as well as experience, teachers have to adjust the class schedule and the teaching method to these specific students, since it is not possible that a single teaching formula be applied. Quite often, they have to experiment and some other times, they have to change their educational practice. Teaching principles, which a teacher should adopt and at some point, are supported by the new books, encourage firing of queries and connection of knowledge with the cultural environment to form a new language, so that students learn through familiar subjects. For instance, I taught Greek by translated Quran verses many times. As a result, I managed to draw their attention and urged them to learn Greek willingly.

Intervention of any teacher should be discrete and organisational, aiming at fostering critical thinking, contact with various people and cultures and development of language competence and skills, so that active learning is promoted by the Greek schedule. Moreover, it is imperative that self-motivation and dynamic interaction of participants of the learning process (students – students, students – teachers etc.), as well as the communicative – learning necessity of the Greek language as the language of citizens, are stressed. As a matter of fact, preparation of Greek language teachers demands much time at home, besides that spent at school, and very good planning and organisation of the syllabus.

In conclusion, the most important success factor of the educational policy on Greek language apart from the abovementioned factors is the State. The State has to lay the right foundations for an all-time educational planning, unaffected by petty party politics and objective regarding the actual educational needs. It should also be responsible for the selection of the proper “enablers” of this planning, namely the teachers.

## 7. PROPOSALS

According to the above it is understood that the Greek language education should be adapted. Of course, it should be mentioned that the Greek Ministry of Education is obliged to implement minority (religious) education on the basis of international treaties as well as bilateral protocols. However, it is possible to change the way of teaching the Greek language according to the modern needs of Pomaks as a particular minority group. Their voices should be taken into account for a more timely and modern approach that will enhance Greek-speaking education and public school as most of the Pomaks want.

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