

## **Orientations to Greek in an Australian Greek School**

JULIE BRADSHAW

The University of Melbourne

j.bradshaw@linguistics.unimelb.edu.au

ANDREA TRUCKENBRODT

The University of Melbourne

andreat@netspace.net.au

### **1. Introduction**

The Greek community internationally is reported to be very effective at language maintenance (Tamis et al. 1993) and in Australia the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Greek community has been noted (Clyne 1982, Clyne et al. 1997, Clyne and Kipp 1997a, 1997b, Kipp and Clyne 1998). Kapardis and Tamis (1988:74) attribute this to strong intergenerational ties, however, language maintenance in immigrant communities is also dependent on access to effective language education programmes. This paper reports on a sociolinguistic investigation in progress in a Greek independent school in Melbourne. The school exists partly to maintain the Greek language in the community but this has not been unproblematic. Initial observations in the school suggested that parents and teachers held divergent views and the study was designed to investigate this. Its goal is to identify the orientations of the teachers, management, parents and students towards the Greek language and the way it is taught. In this paper we report on the study of the primary and secondary staff and management in the school.

School A is an independent, co-educational school with classes from Prep. to year 12. It is a relatively small school of 400 to 500 students, and is in suburban Melbourne. Greek language, culture and Greek Orthodox religion are the central pillars of the school's existence. It was created 22 years ago to serve the Greek community in maintaining language and culture, and Greek is taught as a LOTE and is compulsory for all students at all levels from P to 12.

The school is engaged in a curriculum renewal project; attempting to implement mainstream educational practice and the Greek curriculum is one area where the management sees a need for change. However they need to know about the likely reactions to this, and to answer this question the study is building a profile of the stakeholders in the school, their view of Greek and of the Greek teaching in the school.

The school is confronted with a problem of dissatisfaction with the Greek programme in its current form and is seeking to address this issue. Some parents have reported that their children hate Greek. At a parents' evening there was a strong demand for more grammar teaching and discontent was also expressed at the lack of textbooks. Parents wanted more involvement of the so-called "consular staff", a group of primary teachers who have been brought out from Greece by the Greek consulate.

Interviews with the management reveal their dissatisfaction with a declining enrolment pattern going back several years, a low level of positive parental involvement, an outdated curriculum, disruptive student behaviour and resulting classroom management problems, and cross-cultural misunderstandings between consular staff and local staff. One of the aims of the present study is to provide the administration with the information they need to make planning decisions to address some of these concerns.

In approaching this study we saw our task as:

- to understand the nature and structure of the school community,
- to describe language use within the school community,
- to identify the needs, goals and expectations of the stakeholders,
- to analyse the nature of diversity and homogeneity within the school, and
- to elucidate potential points of difference which may be a source of tension within the community.

## 2. Methodology

The first stage of the study involved participant observation in the school. This included taking part in the curriculum committee, running professional development programs for the primary staff, observing classes and school special events and attending parent-teacher consultative committee meetings and a parent-teacher evening.

The second stage was to interview the Principal, the Head of the Junior School and the Head of LOTE in the Senior School. A questionnaire was then administered to the primary school staff, and a revised version to the secondary school staff. In a previous paper (Bradshaw and Truckenbrodt 2001) we reported on the primary teacher data, and looked at pedagogic issues arising from it. In this paper we now have the secondary teacher data and are able to look across the school as a whole, and take a broader focus.

## 3. The staff data

Of the total staff of 47, 38 completed the questionnaires, giving a response rate of 81% (Primary 82%, Secondary 80%). Teachers were given the choice of responding in English or Greek. Five primary teachers and two secondary teachers chose Greek.

**Table 1** Nationality and ethnicity of staff members

	<b>Group 1 Greek Australians</b>	<b>Group 2 Non-Greek Australians</b>	<b>Group 3 Greek born</b>	<b>Other origins</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Primary</b>	7	2	5	0	14
<b>Secondary</b>	8	8	4	4	24
<b>Total</b>	15	10	9	4	38

The staff were asked about their language use, their place of birth and whether they had lived in Greece or Cyprus. On the basis of the data four groups were identified (see table 1). Group 1 were born in Australia of Greek heritage (as identified by names and language use data) Group 2 were born in Australia of non-Greek extraction, Group 3 were born in Greece, and Group 4 were born elsewhere (eg. the Philippines).

Of the staff members surveyed, 9 (24%) were born in Greece. The high incidence of Greek born staff in the school is partly attributed to the fact that four of the teachers in the primary school are Greek consular staff. The consular staff have been in Australia for between 4 months and 2 years. They report their English language proficiency as relatively low (one beginner, three intermediate).

#### 4. Comparison of primary and secondary schools

The primary and secondary schools are adjacent and share playing fields and a library. However they operate separately, with separate staff rooms, apart from a small number of staff who teach in both (e.g. the dance teacher) or have shared roles (e.g. the librarian).

Table 2 shows the proportion of staff speaking Greek. The evidence from Tables 1 and 2 suggests that the primary school staff are more homogeneous and more Greek than the secondary school staff. Of the 14 primary staff surveyed, 5 were born in Greece, 7 are Greek-Australians and only 2 are non-Greek (Anglo-Celtic) Australians. Thus 86% of the primary school staff share Greek language and culture. Of the two Anglo-Celts both claim some knowledge of Greek, classifying themselves as beginners. The primary staff seem to be unified in their positive orientation to Greek.

**Table 2** Speakers of Greek

	Speakers of Greek		Non-speakers of Greek		Total
<b>Primary</b>	12	86%	2	14%	14
<b>Secondary</b>	12	50%	12	50%	24
<b>Total</b>	24	63%	14	37%	38

Greek is often spoken in the primary staff room. English is the main language of staff interaction but the Greek Consular staff, who, unlike the regular primary teachers, don't have their own classrooms, have desks in the staff room and do their preparation and correction there. All Greek speaking staff use Greek to include them in the conversation. Bilingualism and code-switching are thus a norm in this staff room.

The secondary staff have a very different profile. Of the 24 who took part, 4 were born in Greece, 8 are Greek Australians, and the remainder are non-Greek Australians or were born elsewhere (India, Colombia, Ireland, the Philippines). Thus Greek language and culture are shared by 50% of the secondary staff, compared to 86% of primary staff.

Unlike the consular staff in the primary school, the four Greek born secondary staff have lived in Australia between 17 and 24 years. Thus they are highly acculturated to Australian society. Two give English as their native language, and Greek as near-native proficiency. The other two, who teach Greek (and have been in Australia 22 and 24 years), claim advanced proficiency in English and native speaker competence in Greek. This is a very different profile from the Greek born staff working in the primary school.

The secondary school is thus less of a Greek environment than the primary school, has far fewer Greek speaking staff, and no consular staff support.

Of the 12 non-Greek secondary staff (50%) none have any knowledge of Greek. They do not even classify themselves as beginners. There is a smattering of LOTE knowledge among them (some Italian, French, German, Latin and Spanish, mostly at beginners level) but no Greek. In a school dedicated to maintaining and promoting Greek language and culture none of the non-Greek staff in the secondary school claim to have made any effort to learn the language.

The only indication of an intention to do so comes from a native speaker of Spanish who says "(w)ell I can see myself learning the language since I speak Spanish. The Greek background is similar to the Spanish. I feel kind of at home" (SJ-109).

An observation underlines this lack of support for Greek. In a conversation in the staff room with two non-Greek secondary staff we asked one of them whether she had picked up any Greek words. She said she knew some swear words, and she knew when they were being mean to each other. The other teacher said she doesn't allow the students to speak Greek in front of her, and the first teacher agreed. The second teacher then went on, "but the teachers are the worst. They get in here and speak Greek to each other. That's where the students get it from". Thus speaking Greek is seen as discourtesy among colleagues and as a sign of potential disrespect among students, and is to be discouraged.

This divergence in perceptions emerges to some extent in the response to the question which asks the teachers to describe how they see the importance of Greek to the school. All the Greek born and Australian Greek teachers said that it was very important, and added comments such as that it was central to the college, and it gives Greek children confidence and pride in their cultural background.

One of the non-Greek Australians described it as vitally important, another as the fabric of the college, a third described it as having an enormous role and two described it as important or quite important. However others were more restrained:

Very (important) in complimenting contemporary and global education, but not so important that it overshadows other learning areas. (SJ-117)  
Greek language is not as central to [School A] as the cultural side - however in many cases, it is the parents, not the students who are interested in the Greek aspects of the school. (SJ-116)  
At the moment—not very. It is taken for granted and not something special. (SJ-111)

In an earlier paper (Bradshaw and Truckenbrodt 2001) we claimed that "(t)he status of LOTE in School A is unquestioned, and unparalleled in other schools – it appears to enjoy the total support of the school community in a way that is untypical in the wider Australian context." This was the position as we saw it based on our interviews with management, and questionnaires and extensive interactions with the primary staff. In the light of the discussion above we need to suggest that some secondary teachers are a little more diffident about the centrality of Greek. Some have also suggested concern at the number of hours devoted to it in the curriculum. It seems that while the primary school is very cohesive and strongly supportive of the Greek program, the views of the secondary staff are more varied. Cleghorn and Genesee (1984) in their study of a French immersion school in Quebec, report that staffroom dynamics reflected the tensions in the wider society rather than modelling the bilingual goals of the immersion program. Staff maintained the illusion of harmony by avoidance of interaction, and by using the dominant language, English, in intergroup interaction. A similar pattern appears among the secondary school staff in this study, however while the English teachers in Cleghorn and Genesee's study maintained a fiction of unilingualism, this appears to be the reality for the non-Greek teachers in the Greek secondary school.

In the primary school study we reported that:

"all teachers lament the lack of suitable materials and books for Greek language teaching. Books supplied from Greece by the consul are considered culturally inappropriate. The school is trying to develop materials and a project in Greece is also working on materials for the Australian cultural context" (Bradshaw and Truckenbrodt 2001).

Resources were only of concern to one of the secondary teachers (a teacher of Greek), and to the librarian who serves both primary and secondary schools.

## **5. Linguistic insecurity**

Apart from the value placed on a shared religion (cf. Smolicz 1988), and the importance of Greek, and a concern for the lack of resources, there was one other area where common perceptions were shared across the primary school. This concerned what constituted good Greek.

There was a belief among the Greek Australian primary staff and the parents that the Greek consular staff have better Greek than the Greek Australian staff, particularly in terms of their spoken language. We suggested four possible reasons for this: metalanguage, registral restrictions, regional variation and code-mixing. Consular staff have studied Greek at tertiary level and are more likely to be familiar with appropriate metalanguage. Tamis et al. (1993) report that Greek Australians may have a more restricted range of domains within which they use the language, using it principally in family and domestic domains. There may also be an identifiable Australian variety of Greek (cf. Tamis 1991, Tamis et al. 1993, Papademetre 1994a, b). This may be the reason that one teacher reports:

We also have no frequent contact with Metropolitan Greece, and whenever we do it smacks of great irony and sarcasm. (translated from Greek).

Furthermore, Greek Australians are likely to use a number of English words in their Greek. Some of these may have the status of loan words in Australian Greek. This is an area we hope to investigate in future research.

Linguistic insecurity did not manifest itself in the same way among the secondary teachers. One Greek-Australian secondary teacher mentions the consular staff as one of the strengths of the program but the negative view of their own Greek proficiency among the Australian Greeks is not articulated among the secondary staff. One reason for this difference may be the different roles. In the primary school, Greek language is taught by Greek-Australian staff in Primary to year 2, and by consular staff from years 4 to 6. Five Australian born Greek speakers teach Greek. In the secondary school, of the four Greek teachers we have data on, two were born in Greece and came to Australia as adults, the other two are Australian born Greeks with degrees in Greek and Greek language teacher training. The other Greek-Australians in the secondary school are not teaching Greek, so their perceived language proficiency is less critical.

## **6. Divergent cultural orientations to teaching**

The school is engaged in a process of changing teaching practices in the school. At the moment there are divergent cultural orientations to teaching, and to language teaching in particular. This has also been noted by Tamis et al. (1993). Problems of conflicting cultures of teaching have been reported in other language communities too (cf. De Courcy 1997 and Santoro, Kamler and Reid 2001). De Courcy in her work on a Chinese immersion class in Australia calls for more investigation of the divergent teaching cultures in Australian schools (1997:255).

In the primary study we reported that:

the consular staff were anxious for greater collaboration with their Greek-Australian colleagues, and with all other parties. They felt it would be helpful to sit in on other teachers' classes to learn the ways of the school.

They saw a need for much more parental involvement, and wanted parents to use more Greek with their children. They were concerned about the attitudes of the students, finding them unwilling to learn Greek, and disruptive in class when they did not understand. They had problems with making the teaching as demanding as they would like, and with creating a love of the language. They commented on the children's different mentality. They felt a need for professional development to harmonise their way of teaching with that used in Australia (Bradshaw and Truckenbrodt 2001).

The consular staff use traditional Greek teaching methods. These are teacher centred, whole class teaching methods based around a textbook. According to the principal:

The curriculum that has been taught until recently has been from textbooks which have been supplied by the Greek government, generally for free, and the teaching has been very much, here is a year 2 book, a book that we've used in Greece and we'll use it here too because that implicates that we are with the appropriate standard and the same with year 3, year 4, year 5, year 6 and so on so the textbooks that were used for language teaching have been the textbooks that were used in Greece, and the kids worked through those almost at the same rate as they would ... in Greece without recognizing the fact that our learners were different, ... that it wasn't a first language, it was a second language and therefore a lot of the kids ... struggled with the work.

Tsounis (1974) and Tamis et al. (1993) have reported this problem but nothing has changed. The Greek consular staff, meanwhile, see it as a problem for their teaching that the students consider Greek their second language.

Management and some staff see discipline problems in the school stemming from the methods used by consular staff. The consular staff are aware that they have problems with the cultural milieu and seem open to change. Resistance to change appears to come from a small minority of non-language teachers and some parents.

The pressures on the school then, come firstly from expectations shared by parents (or at least some of the vocal ones attending parent-teacher meetings), some consular staff and some of the Greek-Australian staff who are not involved in teaching the language, that the school will conform to traditional Greek teaching practice and stay in line with schools in Greece. Secondly, some non-Greek staff in the secondary sector are concerned that too much time is devoted to the Greek language in the curriculum. Teachers report student dissatisfaction with the methods used in the Greek program, and behavioural problems resulting from this, spreading into other classes. Primary staff in the Prep to 2 classes have developed new methods and new materials which seem to be working well but there is hostility to this from some teachers who want more traditional forms of learning, or who are critical of the students' language skills (e.g. poor spelling by children leaving Prep was mentioned). Some consular staff want to acculturate to Australian teaching practice but have not had opportunities to do so.

Lave and Wenger (1998) propose a social theory of learning which sees learning as participation "in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities" (1998:4). They argue that "practice defines a community through three dimensions: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire" (1998:152). In a community of practice we develop ways of interacting and behaving that are sanctioned by others in the community, and this forms part of our identity. By engaging in an enterprise we

gain a way of looking at the world and we become accountable to that enterprise." As an identity this translates into a perspective. It does not mean that all members of a community look at the world in the same way. Nonetheless, an identity in this sense manifests as a tendency to come up with certain interpretations, to engage in certain actions, to make certain choices, to value certain experiences - all by virtue of participating in certain enterprises" (Lave and Wenger 1998:153).

We believe that the school sits at the intersection of three communities of practice. One is the traditional Greek community of practice, with its language norms and teaching practices. Another is the mainstream Australian educational community with its more learner-centred methods. A third is the Greek-Australian community which is a distinct group but one which has not yet resolved the tension between the other two groups with which it overlaps. Isaacs (1981) notes this tension in the Greek community and sees Greek Saturday schools as shock absorbers between the mainstream community and the Greek family. Individuals may differ, and as Bottomley (1979) notes, Greek-Australians may be socialized to different degrees into the available communities, and experience these tensions differently.

## 7. Conclusion

This project is in its early stages, and planned data collection with the parents and the students will add to the picture we are building. Ultimately this is a project about change. The school is implementing change but needs information about the present orientations in order to anticipate problems and find ways of changing the school culture(s) and practices without damaging the relationship between parents, students, teachers and the school. The principal and his close advisors are trying to create a new community of practice which will blend contemporary approaches to language teaching with a respect for the continuity of Greek tradition, to provide a context for the revitalization of Greek teaching in the school. What we are observing is the engineering of a new culture.

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