

Morphosyntactic variation in the past tense verbs of Modern Greek

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I examine the usage pattern of two key dialectal features in the speech of Greek immigrants to Canada during the period 1945 to 1975 in order to determine whether these patterns provide evidence of dialect contact among the population of these new communities. I investigate the variation between the presence of the unstressed past tense prefix (/e/) (non-standard) and its absence (Standard Modern Greek, SMG, cf. Ralli, 2005). I also investigate the variation between two imperfective past stem markers of the active voice occurring in the IC2 verbs (Holton et al., 2012).

The dataset for this study is based on a corpus of 443 recorded sociolinguistic interviews (Anastassiadis et al., 2017). I examined 165 of these interviews (over 1,100,000 words), which have been fully transcribed, are balanced in terms of the sex of the speaker (82 females and 83 males) and represent 8 of the major Modern Greek varieties. The speakers were born mostly between 1935 and 1955 and moved to Canada when they were young adults (median age of 22 years old).

The past tense prefix is added to the stem of verbs in order to form the past tense (perfective or imperfective). For example, the imperfective past of /'fevyo/ 'I leave' is /'efevya/ 'I was leaving'. In the standard variety, this prefix is deleted if it is not stressed and this interacts with a stress assignment rule that requires that the stress is placed on one of the three final syllables (Kaisse, 1982). For example, the imperfective past of /psi'fizo/ 'I vote' is /'psifiza/ 'I was voting' and not */e'psifiza/. However, there are dialects which maintain the prefix in tetrasyllabic or larger forms, such as those of Cyprus, the Ionian islands, the Peloponnese and Crete (Kontosopoulos, 2001).

I extracted (23,705) tokens of past tense verb forms which can vary between a form without the unstressed prefix /e/ and one in which the prefix is maintained. The analysis shows that speakers of varieties that maintain the unstressed prefix do so at a low rate (10 - 20%) suggesting that they have adopted the SMG pattern. At the same time, there are examples of usage of the non-standard form by speakers of varieties that delete the unstressed /e/. I hypothesize that the elevated use of the SMG pattern is evidence that, at the time of immigration, the synthesis of the common vernacular had already begun (Horrocks, 2010). I also suggest that the use of the unstressed /e/ by speakers of other non-standard varieties is based on it being a feature of Peloponnesian Greek whose speakers form the majority population in Greek-Canadian communities (Chimbos, 1980) and is considered the most prestigious dialect due to its resemblance to SMG (Browning, 1983; Horrocks, 2010). The convergence of these two factors (preponderance and prestige) may have led some speakers from other dialects to interpret its use as an acceptable variant of the Standard.

For the imperfective past stem markers, I extracted 2971 tokens of imperfective verb forms. The preliminary data shows that speakers of dialect regions thought to use the non-standard form are using the standard form as well. For example, speakers from the Peloponnese and Ionian islands, which are expected to use the /ɣ/ variant, are using the /us/ variant approximately 49% of the time. Additionally, speakers who are expected to use /us/

categorically show some usage of /γ/. These results support the earlier stated hypothesis that the synthesis of the common vernacular had begun prior to the immigration of the informants.

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