

The Case of Greek as a National Language

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1.0 The Hypothesis

For any non-dominant language to be maintained in a bilingual environment without diglossia at inter-generational level requires the following:

- 1) The existence of a populous base of speakers;
- 2) Adequate function of language use;
- 3) Acceptability within the broader society;
- 4) Stability of the given language.

2.0 The Vitality of Greek as a World Heritage Language

- 2.1 Greek does not simply derive its significance only as a community language or as the norm of the Greek-speaking sector of the Australia community, which is vigorously organised, politically robust and strongly committed to maintenance of its Hellenic Australian identity.
 - 2.2 The significance of Greek for Australia derives principally from *heritage, moral, intellectual, academic, linguistic and utilitarian* reasons.
 - 2.2.1 Moral and intellectual, because Greek is the only extant Heritage Language of the Western World known and used in Australia;
 - 2.2.2 Academic because the Greek language (in its Ancient, medieval and modern variants) is being taught together with Classical studies and the Greek history and culture at over 2,000 universities around the globe attracting more than 300,000 students.
 - 2.2.3 Linguistic because by learning Greek language students and indeed world citizens have the opportunity to learn about and understand better their own language as a very significant percentage of their mother tongue, etymologically is derived from Greek words.
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- 2.2.4 Utilitarian, because of an established presence of a vast number of Greek-speaking residents (currently estimated to 400,000) and of many more thousands of Australians with ancestral, sentimental, professional, cultural and intellectual ties with Greece, Cyprus and the millions of Hellenes in the Diaspora.
- 2.3 Whence, the linguistic World Heritage status of Greek is illustrated by a number of aspects outlined below, which inevitably propagate its importance to be included in the Australian national curriculum of languages other than English:
- (a) Greek is the oldest and sole survival of ancient European languages bearing a linguistic tradition of 4,000 years. It has been the basis of the European civilisation and naturally has fundamentally affected other languages and cultures.
 - (b) Greek remained the language of global civilisation from 480 BC to A.D. 1500 in both oral and written forms and was the official vernacular of the entire Hellenized world from Western Europe to India. Hence, the general use of Greek was of enormous importance to the spread of Christianity.
 - (c) Greek is the sole modern descendant of the Indo-European family of languages, in which fundamental texts of Western Civilisation and Christian scripture were formulated and transmitted through the ages. Even in civilisation Greek-speaking Patriarchates in Constantinople (Istanbul), Jerusalem, Alexandria, Cyprus and Greece commemorate the thousand years of Greek presence in Europe, Asia and Africa.
 - (d) Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodox were the two Christian worlds in Europe and Asia. The entire world of Greek Christians, incorporating the Russians, Rumanians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedoslavs, and Syro-Lebanese used Greek as their official language of liturgy and sermons.
 - (e) Greek is designated as one of the five official languages of the European Union and is rated as a major world-language in spite of the comparatively modest number of its current native speakers.
 - (f) Greek composed by reputed individuals of intellect such as Plato, Aristotle, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, Hippocrates, the Great fathers of the Christian Church, the great hymnographers, philologists, mathematicians, physicians, anthropologists, ethnologists. Naturally, the notions born herein, expressed through the words of the Greek language, pervaded the languages and the civilisations of the world and left an eternal mark on what is known as the European Civilization. Studying the Greek language is not a product of fashion or of utilitarian motives. It has its origins in man's desire to study the great texts about great issues.

(g) Approximately, 28,000 English words including keywords such as *idea, theory, system, analysis, synthesis, category, hierarchy, method, hypothesis, myth, poetry, drama, music, harmony, politics, democracy, thence, machine, episteme, psyche, Eros, ecclesia, Christ, Europe, theology* etc. are all words of the Greek language, this great little language to paraphrase the Noble laureate Greek poet Odysseus Elytis.

(h) It would be a cultural deficit for Australia if Greek is to be confined within its current spectrum and not be accessible nationally, in terms of universal education and culture. Especially, as the Greek language came to be not the exclusive property of the Greeks only, but of the entire humanity.

(i) Every national language constitutes the identity and the physiognomy of that nation. In the case of Greek, the language transmits and creatively enriches all modern western languages as it remains the robust source for new words and concepts for these national languages. To fully understand the meaning and culture of 28,000 English words of Greek origin, it is necessary to know and study the Greek language and culture; otherwise, it would be a Herculean task to understand the meaning of polis, police, politics, democracy, tyranny, tyrant, oligarchy, aristocracy just to mention some words from the field of politics. Whence, the acquisition of Greek is further enhancing the better understanding of English.

(j) Greek as a Heritage Language, besides of aspects of use and utility, possesses another aspect, the moral one. Hence, the learning of Greek, apart from professional improvement in terms of income or social prestige etc., can provide a better, more direct, profound and essential understanding of the people who speak it, who exist immersed in it.

(k) The significance of Greek for Australia's external trade resides both in the actual and potential links with the European Union via Greece and Cyprus and via connections between Greece, Cyprus and the Greek-Australian community and in the fact that, among others, the Greek merchant marine transports the largest quantity of Australia exports across the globe.

(l) As a result of the *National Policy of Languages* (1987), Greek was categorised as a "Language of Wider Teaching" and was protected as a second language by the Commonwealth and State Governments among eight other languages for teaching purposes. In September 1991, the Commonwealth of Australia identified 14 "priority languages" including Greek. Under *the Commonwealth's Priority Languages Incentives Scheme* education systems, the State and Territories selected eight languages each as the basis of funding support they received from the Commonwealth. Again Greek was defined "Priority Language" in South Australia, NSW, New South Wales and Northern Territory, as well as a *Tertiary Entrance Language* subject in

all states and Territories, attracting approximately 41,000 students, of whom 32% were of non-Greek-background (Tamis, 2001 and 2008, 2010).

(m) The Greek and Cypriot Australian communities remain exceedingly generous in their support of Greek language teaching at all three levels of education, endowing schools and tertiary institutions with bequests and financially priming for the establishment of Greek teaching and lectureships in Western Australia (Notre Dame); Northern Territory (University of Darwin); NSW (Sydney, NSW and Macquarie Universities); Victoria (La Trobe and RMIT Universities) and South Australia (Flinders University).

(n) Greece is arguably the only home country of Australian citizens that contributes so generously and supports multifaceted types and schemes of language learning and teaching.

2.4 The aforementioned specifics build the notion that it is imperative for the Commonwealth Government, in full alignment with its national policy on languages since 1987, to continue to consider Greek as a priority language within its new National Curriculum Policy on languages, given its role and paramount importance:

- As a world heritage language;
- As a source language for other world languages;
- As a morally ideological as well as linguistically practical cornerstone for Australia;
- For its communal and inter-communal role in Australia as a wider spoken, taught and learned language not only by students of Greek ancestry but also by non-Greek-background students (32%);
- For its international economic role for Australia, since Greek is an official language of the European Union;
- As the Australian language which is heavily and supported in an unparalleled fashion by the home country for the educational welfare of Australian citizens.

3.0 The Significance of Greek

3.1 There are currently approximately 40,000 students attending Greek language classes in Australia provided by the following sectors:

Ethnic Schools:	21,000
Government Schools:	12,200
Saturday Schools of Languages:	2,000
Greek Daily Schools:	4,000
Independent Schools:	450
Tertiary Institutions:	950

- 3.2 Greek language and culture is the most popular language within the Ethnic Schools sector in Australia.
- 3.3 Greek is the fourth most popular taught language within the Saturday School of Languages.
- 3.4 Greek is the sixth most widely taught language in Government schools.
- 3.5 In 2010, almost 33% of the students in government and Greek Daily schools are of non-Greek language background.
- 3.6 Greek language possesses the strongest retention rate amongst students in government schools from Preps to Grade Six (92%) and from Year Seven to Year 10 (72%), compared with any other language.
- 3.7 Greek is the third most popular home language in Australia at inter-generational level.
- 3.8 Greek has the strongest language maintenance rate in Australia at an inter-generational level. The language shift from Greek to English among 1st generation speakers is almost zero; the language shift for second generation is 8.6% and for third generation Greek Australians 24%.
- 3.9 Until 2009, Greek was also the language of an additional 135,000 Australian citizens who live permanently in Greece. Greece is the second most popular destination country for Australian citizens after United Kingdom with 240,000 Australian citizens.
- 3.10 Greek has a utilitarian role in Australia because of an established presence of 400,000 Greek-speaking Australian citizens and many more thousands of Australian with ancestral, sentimental, professional, cultural and intellectual ties with Greece and *Cyprus*.
- 3.11 Greece is arguably the only home country of Australian citizens that contributes so generously and supports multifaceted types and schemes of language learning and teaching. Greece's sound and unparalleled contribution is estimated at approximately AU\$10,000,000.00 annually. This generosity deserves the reciprocal attitudes of the Australian Commonwealth Government by including Greek as one of the languages in the national curriculum policy.
- 3.12 Australia's interest in enhanced trade and investment arrangements with the European Union and the sensitive Eastern Mediterranean region and its burgeoning economy, as well as its potential links with Europe could be better implemented via a role of the Greek language in establishing and maintaining Greek-speaking experts in European capitals including Athens and Nicosia.

4.0 The Vitality of Greek in Australia

- 4.1 The vitality of Greek in Australia is determined by a variety of factors including the language loyalty efforts of the local Greek community members towards its maintenance

and development, their personal disposition and their desire for continued distinctiveness as a socio-cultural group. Socio-structural factors soundly contributing to the vitality of Greek include:

- a. The existence of more than 360.000 people who know and use Greek as well as the subsistence of approximately 30000 students attending (Modern) Greek language education provisions offered by a variety of sectors, including community schools;
- b. The existence of wide functional areas of Greek language use and reasonable community networks which could elaborate the function of language use, outside and beyond the Greek community-controlled areas, e.g. Church, nursing homes, socio-cultural activities;
- c. Conscientious attempts to promote Greek to the broader society;
- d. Ability to rally institutional support, primarily government agencies and networks;
- e. Accommodating favourable demographic characteristics by creating a language map depicting the socio-demographic mobility of the Greek Australian community members, e.g. Residential concentration;
- f. The degree of international dynamics which could characterise the Greek community in Australia and its ability to promote Greek to the broader Australian society.

5.0 The Negative Trends

- 5.1 A major disincentive at all levels is the erroneous perception in the broader society that serious learning of Greek is the preserve of the Greek Australian community; and even within the latter community, that successful study and certification is the preserve of the elite.
- 5.2 Problems arising out of the format, frequency and limitations of learning contact hours and of staff morale in view of the conditions of appointment and status offered to fully qualified teachers.
 - 5.2.1 Problems of continuity. There is no vision for proper post-primary education in the Greek language and culture.
- 5.3 I suspect the provision of Greek language teaching and learning is primarily based on obsolete demographical patterns characterising the Greek community settlement in Perth forty years ago. The socio-demographic mobility of the Greek community members into new suburbs since the 1980s was not met with relevant provision of Greek language courses in government school within the new suburbs of settlement.

- Australia is lacking a language map targeting potential students of Greek in certain suburbs of concentration and outlining provision of Greek language courses as a matter of continuity of learning between primary and post-primary education.
- Australia is lacking Greek language pre-school centres and Greek-language kindergartens where bilingual immersion classes could be introduced.
- Greek suffers from an image problem as a “community” language in the narrowest sense, despite the fact that most of its students are third and fourth generations English speaking monolinguals.
- Greek is under-resourced at every level of education.
- There are serious problems of linkage between, and continuity within, levels of learning Greek.
- Inflexible curricula and assessment mechanisms, and inability to cope with mixed ability groups using appropriate materials, methods, are inimical to the survival of Greek.
- The plurality and diversity of the current provision of Greek is not necessarily a negative factor, providing effective learning could be assured.
- Retention and attrition are not the sole measures of successful teaching; a greater range of certification of proficiency and entry/re-entry points to learning Greek is needed.

6.0 Recommendations

Sociolinguistic research (Tamis and Gauntlett, 1993; Clyne, 1982; Bianco, 1987; Tamis 2008, 2010 and 2015) demonstrated that to learn Greek you need at least 2,600 contact hours of teaching, that is, almost six contact hours per week. Currently, on average, the teaching of Greek is a minimum of 70 minutes per week. This is a gross inadequacy.

- The required minimum of teaching to be increased to 240 minutes from Preps to Year Six and to 220 from Year 7 to year 10.*
- The frequency of teaching to be increased to two days per week.*
- Schools should implement streaming procedures based on the language competence, language adequacy and language achievement of the students.*
- The establishment of a Greek bilingual immersion pre-school school at St Andrew’s Grammar for working parents.*
- Teachers’ training sessions should be undertaken for all those who are teaching in both primary and post-primary Greek language classes.*
- Teachers and their students should be provided with real opportunities to communicate in Greek both inside and outside their classrooms, utilising the vast community resources.*