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## *Performing Griko beyond ‘death’*

### **Abstract**

*This article examines the ways in which Griko, a ‘dying’ language of Greek origins, may ‘live’ despite its limited use as a medium of daily communication and the death of its speakers. It argues that, while its use as a vehicle to convey information has progressively faded out, its performative and artistic use has increased, rendering Griko a cultural and social resource. This shift in the language ideology of the locals would have not occurred without the legacy of a variety of local actors and activists, which keeps allowing for Griko to be a performative post-linguistic vernacular, despite the death of its very speakers.*

**Keywords:** *Griko; language ideologies; language practices; performative post-linguistic vernacular.*

Not far from my house in Soleto, you can find a nice B&B called *Oli mia* (‘All together’). When Uccio, one of my informants in his early 80s, first saw it, he stopped, read it twice and said, switching between Salentine and Griko “*When I was young, we had to sleep all in one single room: our house was just one room. All together in one room, so it was life then! And now? Do you see? Do they know what Oli mia means, at least?*”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Cuandu era picciccu iu, daveru erame dormire tutti intra la stessa stanza, ca la casa na stanza era. Oli mia, iu ìane i zoi toa! ce àrtena? torì? Scèrone ti èrkete sto pi, àrmenu?”

Griko is a language of Greek origins still spoken by the elderly population, in the southern Italian Province of Lecce (Grecia Salentina). While no one knows its exact ‘date of birth’<sup>2</sup> its ‘date of death’ has been less controversial. Griko is considered to be a ‘dying’ language. Paradoxically, it has been considered on the verge of disappearing ever since it was discovered by scholars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In what follows, however, I will not focus on the “moral panic” (Cohen 1979: 2; Cameron, 1995) surrounding ‘language endangerment’, i.e., the sense of insistence - from academics and lay people alike - over the ‘looming threat’ to Griko. This article aims, instead, to explore two interconnected issues; in the first part, I examine the ways in which a language may ‘live’, despite its limited use as a medium of daily communication. In the second part, I reflect on the question of how a language can ‘live’ when its speakers ‘die’. What will emerge is that the performative functions of a language may keep it ‘alive’ (to use this terminology), despite locals’ limited resort to it and despite the death of its speakers.

### *Language ideologies*

As the brief vignette hints to, what Griko means, meant or is meant to mean, changes according to people and their age. Locals, in fact, do not share the same phenomenological experiences of this language and thus they confer to it multiple identities. These socially inscribed views, perceptions and

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars have tried to establish the origins of the Greek dialect enclaves of Southern Italy, alternatively looking for evidence to relate them to the Magna Graecia colonies or to the Byzantine Empire. See Pellegrino, 2015, for a discussion of this “language ideological debate” (Blommaert, 1999) in which linguistic facts are adduced only to confirm the underlying ideologies (see also Herzfeld 1997: 355). Not incidentally, Italian philologists have tended to support the Byzantine thesis, whereas Greek scholars, influenced by a Romantic Hellenism, have argued for the Magna Graecia thesis.

feelings about a language fall into the category of Language Ideologies. This fairly recent body of scholarship highlights the relationships between language, politics, and identity (Silverstein 1979; Kroskrity, Schieffelin and Woolard 1998; see also Hill, Gal, Irvine, Jaffe, Kulick) and points out how they are “not about language alone, but they envision and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and epistemology” (Woolard 1998: 3).

As cultural frames, ideologies about ‘language’ continuously transcend it and emerge out of various domains of social life; at the same time they act upon them, by affecting the very setting in which they originate. Griko-speakers have indeed shifted their ‘ideas’ about this language by interpreting and reacting to situated social changes which, as a consequence, have impacted their ideas about themselves, about their language and its use. Moreover, as Cameron stresses, language ideologies are not “*mental* constructs which «belong» to individuals, but rather, *social* constructs” (2003: 447). As such, they “are no less complex, contested, differentially distributed, and historically produced than other dimensions of social life” (Briggs 1998: 232)

Previous research on language shift, ‘obsolescence’, ‘endangerment’, ‘suicide’ ‘death’, ‘extinction’ may be, therefore, fruitfully repositioned taking into account the insights of studies on Language Ideologies. Metaphors are indeed powerful, they, however, may also carry dangerous reductions. Viewing languages as ‘organisms’ which are born and die opens a can of worms: When can a language be proclaimed ‘dead’? Is it dead when the last speaker of such a language dies? Or is it dead when it stops being used as a medium of regular

communication (Sasse 1992: 18)? After uncritical and widespread use of such metaphors scholars have indeed started problematising them (McDonald 1989: 31), arguing that languages cannot be issued birth or death certificates (Chaudenson 2001, Szulmajster 2000, in Mufwene 2004) and that biological metaphors applied to language (death, extinction) entail essentialisation (Jaffe 2007). Languages were then alternatively viewed as ‘species’. Adherents to the ecological approach, or “ecolinguistics” (Mühlhäusler 1996; Crystal 2000; Nettle and Romaine 2000), building on Haugen’s (1972) paradigm of ‘the ecology of language’, highlight notions of competition and selection, and how speakers ‘select’ languages they find more useful to their lives and ‘give up’ others (Mufwene 2004: 218). If, on one hand, this approach seems at first to recognise the agency of speakers, such an emphasis on ‘natural’ processes may overlook the role of socio-political factors in language diversity (Pennycook 2004: 216; May 2001). While admittedly used as a heuristic tool (Fill and Mühlhäusler 2001: 3), Ricento (2006: 46) stresses how this metaphor brings with it dubious analogies. For instance, although processes of language contact, shift and loss have characterised the history of human societies, he argues, they do not entail species extinction. Moreover, according to Jaffe (2007: 68), the ecological metaphor tends to perceive languages as a separate entity from the environments considered to sustain or weaken them.

The scholarship on LI positions, instead, view the speakers and their ideologies at the core of their analysis, rather than privileging the structural effects of language processes. This approach offers, therefore, the possibility to bridge micro-level studies of discourse strategies and studies of macro-historical processes (Gal 1989).

*The past and the present of Griko*

Griko is still spoken today, mainly by the elderly population, in seven villages<sup>3</sup> in the Apulian province of Lecce, in what today goes under the name of Grecìa Salentina. The locals, however, used to refer to the Griko-speaking villages with the expression *ta dekatrìa chorìa*, referring to a past (the 19th century) during which Griko was spoken in 'thirteen villages'. Located next to one another, with the greatest distance between villages being ten kilometers, these villages create a sort of island and represent what is left of a much larger area, which gradually receded. In the 16th century it included 24 villages, towards the end of the 18th century 15, 13 villages in the 19th century, then nine and seven today. The Griko-speaking area can be visualised as a 'puddle' which has dried up progressively, whilst its pool of speakers kept shrinking.

Griko, however, 'survived' in a few villages until WWII, when it came to be internalised as a 'language of shame' in symbolic opposition to Italian, seen as the language of opportunities, of modernity and of the future. *Mas èkanne vergògna*<sup>4</sup>, – "We felt shame", Uccio, from Zollino, born in 1933, told me as many elderly people also say. Under the "symbolic domination" (Bourdieu, 1999) of the national language, Griko came to be perceived as a sign of backwardness

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<sup>3</sup> These are: Calimera, Castrignano dei Greci, Corigliano d'Otranto, Zollino, Sternatia, Martano, Martignano. However, the administrative borders of what today goes under the name "Union of the municipalities of Grecìa Salentina" (*Unione dei comuni della Grecìa Salentina*), constituted in 2001, includes also Melpignano and Soleto, which counted Griko-speakers until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the villages of Carpignano and Cutrofiano, where Griko was spoken until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> Translations from Griko and Salentine are mine. Translation from Italian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

and a handicap to access the future and modernity. This shift in language ideologies meant that the generation born during the socio-economic leap of the post-war years was not taught Griko as their mother-tongue. This is what I call the ‘generation-in-between’.

The shift away from Griko was indeed mediated by a multiplicity of factors among which the impact of compulsory Italian monolingual education since 1924, migration flows to the North and abroad, and the influence of mass media. The language policies of the Fascist period had in fact the goal of eradicating minority languages and dialects, since they were considered anti-Italian and perceived as deviation, as a “weed to be eradicated” (De Mauro and Lodi 1979:14)<sup>5</sup>. It was, however, in the context of internal migration that the persuasive power of Italian worked at its best.

If until fairly recently, approaches to language shift tended to attribute it to macrosociological factors such as ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’, research within the framework of language ideologies highlights, instead, how it is the speakers’ own interpretations of these macrosociological processes that affect everyday language use (Gal 1978, 1979; Woolard 1989; Kulick 1992). These profound socioeconomic changes undergone in the area, therefore, did not mechanically determine the shift away

<sup>5</sup> This was defined by De Mauro and Lodi (1979: 14) as “dialect-phobia”: the long war against dialects which used the school system as the means of prescribing and enforcing a form of Italian which had to differ as much as possible from the Romance dialects. However, as Tosi (2004) notes, the rhetoric of the Fascist period – broadcast also via the technical innovations of the radio and promptly appropriated by the regime – had a stronger impact on the circulation of language itself, more than the very imposition of the Fascist policy of linguistic purism. The school system succeeded in teaching Griko-speakers the ‘inferiority’ of their own vernacular, while the impact of television in spreading Italian was indeed more effective than any language planning. See also Pellegrino 2015.

from Griko, but mediated a troubled process of negotiation and redefinition of the self and group perceptions, values and goals. It is this redefinition that came to be encoded through language and led Griko-speakers to stop transmitting it. The formulaic expression “the world changed” (*o kosmo kàngesce*) recurrently used by elderly people captures this sense of displacement about this existential shift. They also self-reflexively negotiate its meaning. Uccio, for example, adds: *si, si, kàngesce. Kangèsciamo imì. Imì kangèsciamo*. Yes, it did. We changed, we changed” [emphasis and repetition in the original]. The shift away from Griko was therefore not simply linguistic, but existential: this implied getting rid of what belonged to the ‘traditional’ worldview, language included, promoting the shift to a ‘modern’ worldview, which “affected everyday patterns of linguistic behavior and ideas about language” (Jaffe 1999: 71).

Against any prediction, Griko has been enjoying an unexpected revival in recent years. This is in part linked to its legal recognition by the Italian government as one of the twelve minority languages on Italian soil in 1999, in conformity with the European Charter of Minority Languages. The political economy of the language has since changed drastically, fostering a broader revitalisation of the local cultural repertoire, which enacted ‘in the name of Griko’ spans out into the spheres of music, gastronomy, art and landscape. The popularity of Salento and Apulia has increased generally, attracting growing numbers of tourists and putting what was until recently Italy’s *finis terrae* – land’s end – in the spotlight.

This broader revival, however, has had little impact on language practice itself; those who actively engage in either improving their limited competence or in acquiring it are a

minority inside the minority. In a recent sociolinguistic survey, Sobrero and Miglietta (2010) keep indeed echoing what the Italian philologist Morosi (1870: 182) had concluded almost a century-and-a-half earlier: “The transmission of Griko seems to indicate the last flick of the tale”. Miglietta refers specifically to Factor 5 of the UNESCO charter, which sees TV programmes and new media as fundamental to save endangered minority languages; meaning that, not only old domains need to be maintained, but new ones need to emerge in line with the times. In what follows, I propose to take on Gal’s (1989: 316) suggestion to draw attention to processes of innovation; these – she argues – are only rarely noticed and less well studied within the Western “pastoral” tradition, in search for “unadulterated” and “authentic” speech – a tradition in which certain studies of language ‘death’ are still embedded.

### *The alternative ‘lives’ of Griko*

Although Griko lacks a ‘standard’, lately it has been enjoying a ‘renewed’ life in its written form thanks to the activity/contribution of local scholars and lay people alike<sup>6</sup>. I argue that the shift from an oral to a written mode is to be considered a ‘new domain’. Apart from the proliferation of Griko grammar books since the 1990s, my ethnography has, indeed, recorded a general promotion of writing in Griko. This refers in part to the efforts by local language activists: among them, the publication of the journal *Spitta* (“spark”) since December 2006, which was initially linked to the virtual association *Grika Milùme* (We speak Griko) and the mailing list

<sup>6</sup>Until the 15th century the Greek alphabet was utilised, but once contacts between Salento and Greece receded, Griko survived predominantly as an ‘oral language’ and became increasingly associated with the peasant world. Towards the end of the 19th century, the exponents of circle of Calimera started writing again, utilising a transliteration in Latin characters.



“Magna Grecia”. Contributors go beyond the boundaries of the territory, as members include people from outside of Italy, mainly Greeks living abroad (USA, Belgium, Australia). This is how Giuseppe De Pascalis from Martano, one of the editors of the journal, refers to this initiative.

*Spitta* represents the only testimony of the real Griko, of today's Griko. Although there are many publications of poems in Griko, in these instances the language is sought and refined... Whichever its limitations, *Spitta* is instead a snapshot of today's Griko.

Popular reception of this journal indeed ranges from enthusiasm to open criticism<sup>7</sup>. Those enthusiastic proudly claim that *Spitta* is a proof that Griko is ‘alive’, taking the tone of ‘revenge’ against the scholars who had predicted its death, the politicians who had long not invested in it, all those people who wanted to forget Griko and those who did not hand it down to their children. It is a cry of joy and an outbreak of anger. Moreover, since 2007, the cultural association *Kaliglossa* (“good language”) from Calimera has organised an annual Griko-Hellenic Festival: a poetry, music and theatre contest which promotes written Griko as its primary goal. The following is an excerpt from the association’s website:

[The association] is aware of the difficulty of proposing today’s Griko as a language of common use and communication. Yet it tries to foster its knowledge through adequate acquisition strategies and through the circulation of written texts. In this regard, it strives to stimulate and

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<sup>7</sup> One of the strongest criticisms refers to orthography, as the articles published do not conform to the same orthographic conventions and present a wide variation. The ‘politics of orthographic representations’ is indeed a highly contested terrain, which has been arousing the passions of local activists. The proposal to go back to using the Greek alphabet is put forward by Prof. Sicuro and Prof. Filieri-Scordari, but it does not find many advocates, on the ground that this would alienate the speakers themselves.

encourage the writing of new texts (poetry, music and theatre).

My ethnography, however, shows what I want to call – playing with Stewart’s (2003: 492) terminology – “an epidemic of writing”<sup>8</sup>, which interests elderly mother-tongue speakers and also those who lack full fluency (‘semi-speakers’)<sup>9</sup> alike, and which goes beyond the efforts of language activists, such as those mentioned above. For instance, when I met Giglio Pellegrino from Sternatia, he invited me to join him and his neighbours whenever I wanted, so that I could improve my Griko. During the long and hot summer nights, they sit on straw-bottomed chairs, in front of the doorstep of their house. Then another neighbour joins them, and she arrives and leaves without notice. They gather and quite simply talk or recite poems they have written: “the poets’ street”, as I like calling it. The group usually consists of two old couples and two widows in their 80s, two men in their 50s and a young couple, in their late 30s; occasionally also a young lady with her toddler join the gathering. When I attended, Giglio often chaired the conversation, prompting them one by one, to say a poem or a

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<sup>8</sup> With ‘epidemic of dreaming’ Stewart (2003) refers to the outbreak of dreams among schoolchildren on the Greek island of Naxos in the 1930s; this continued a tradition of dreaming of buried icons which began a century earlier, at the time of Greek independence. See also Stewart 2012. My creative paraphrase of Stewart’s expression intends strictly to refer to the ‘contagiousness’ of the writing activity in Griko.

<sup>9</sup>Dorian (1982: 26) was the first to introduce the term “semi-speaker”, now widely used to define “individuals who have failed to develop full fluency and normal adult proficiency in East Sutherland Gaelic, as measured by their deviation from the fluent-speaker norms within the community”. I avoid an extensive use of the taxonomy mentioned above (when I do I usually used inverted commas), since, although widespread, the label of ‘semi-speakers’ seems to me to ‘amputate’ them in comparison to a full-bodied abstract ideal speaker. I prefer instead to point out the age-range of the speakers, as age is one of the decisive factors in their heterogeneity of competences.

story in Griko. Some of them were popular poems or stories, either in Griko or dialect.

At one of these gatherings, Uccia De Santis<sup>10</sup>, for instance, enjoyed herself thoroughly and congratulated herself after having recited one of the poems she had written. I report below the first of four stanzas of her poem *Spitàcimu palèo*, “My little old house”, which Uccia dedicated to her neighbours when she moved to her new house, in the perpendicular street, just 200 meters away. She has written more than ten poems, whose topics range considerably: one is about her eldest son who lives in the north of Italy, a few are a sort of religious compositions. I will not focus on the structure of the poem and the lexical choices in this paper. I’d rather draw attention to the fact that she carefully selected words to create a rhyme.

<i>Posso mu fènete òrio o spiti o protinò</i>	How nice my first home seems to me
<i>Apò motte jùrise mapàle is se mena</i>	Since when it came back to me
<i>Iciumpì echi o jeno pu agapò</i>	There are the people I love
<i>Ce pao panta na tus vriko oli mera</i>	And I always go to visit them I feel happy to see
<i>Icherèome na kanoniso cittes kambarèddhe</i>	those small rooms Which are old like I am
<i>ka ine paleè kundu 'se mena</i>	I remember when they were young
<i>Môrkete stennù motte ìmosto chlorèddhe</i>	And I would sing day and night
<i>Ka ikantàlizza nitta ce mera</i>	
[Griko from Sternatia]	

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<sup>10</sup> Uccia is the sister of Cesarino De Santis, to whom I will return later in this article.

Giglio then told me that he had edited a small book (2003) financed by the municipality in which he had collected poems written by elderly people of Sternatia. The authors are invited to recite their poems during the yearly *Festa degli anziani* (“Celebration of the elderly”). He also introduced me to Vincenzo Reale, “the poet”, who lives in the same street, a cheerful youthful man aged 90, whose poems have been published by a Greek schoolteacher from Corinth (Christos Tártaris).

The literate engagement of the elderly with writing Griko is indeed an interesting phenomenon, even more so if we take into account that these are people who are not accustomed to writing in general, who attended school for a few years and who never ‘needed’ to improve their written competences either. Despite that, or perhaps because of that, their engagement with the written form acquires an important value. With their shift from an oral to a written mode of communication in Griko, the elderly seem to ideologically reclaim a place of authority. At the same time, by producing a long-internalised dominant language ideology – that a tongue becomes a language when it is written – the elderly are rightly claiming for the recognition of Griko as a language<sup>11</sup>.

Writing is, however, an activity that engages also ‘the generation-in-between’. Anna-Maria is a Griko ‘semi-speaker’ in her early 50s. Her father, from Sternatia and her mother, from Zollino, were Griko mother-tongue speakers. She spoke Griko with them, but since they died, she is even more engaged in the language; she therefore looks for opportunities and people to

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<sup>11</sup> Cici Cafaro from Calimera is a well-known local poet.

practise it. For this purpose, she often goes to find Paolo, a Griko mother-tongue speaker in his early 80s. This is one of her poems which her son, Fabrizio, put into music in 2000 and performed with his band Athànatos, (“immortal”) formed by (then) teen-agers.

<i>'En itela na fiko mai i chora</i>	I would not ever want to leave
<i>pu jenittimo</i>	the village where I was born
<i>'en itela na fiko na pao a'tto</i>	I would not want to leave the
<i>spiti</i>	house
<i>pu istika mi' mmànamu</i>	Where I lived with my mother
<i>'en itela na fiko patèra</i>	I would not want to leave my
<i>stin anglisìa</i>	father
<i>'en itela na fiko i kiaterèddha</i>	in the church
<i>mia</i>	I would not want to leave my
<i>ma, iso choma ene agrikò,</i>	daughter
<i>ce 'na prikò sciomì</i>	But, this land is bitter
<i>nghizzi na pao pleon ambrò.</i>	and bitter is the bread
<i>ma afitisòmme isu ce</i>	I need to keep going
<i>prakalìse ton Kristò</i>	But help me and pray God
<i>ja ivò 'en itela na fiko tinò</i>	Because I would not want to
	leave anyone

Text messaging in Griko can be also accounted among the new domains of Griko. Monica, from Zollino is 44, the daughter of a mother-tongue speaker, Ucciu, who died in the summer 2011, says she understands everything, but that she cannot put a sentence together. Actually, she underestimates her own knowledge and since I started my research she has been sending me text messages in Griko. I report a sample of them below:

<i>sozzo erti sesena sti Grecia?</i>	Can I come to [see] you in
<i>prin se filò depoi se mbrazzèò</i>	Greece? First I kiss you and
	then I hug you
<i>puru ca stei larga isù mu stei</i>	
<i>panta ambrò st' ammàddia</i>	Although you are far away, I

*su arizzo na pakko asce friseddhe? su ndiazete, de?* see you always before my eyes

Shall I send you some “frise”?<sup>12</sup> You need it, right?

I have received similar text messages in Griko sent by Griko experts and Griko aficionados alike, regardless of their language competences.

Equally important to note is the resort to Griko when writing emails to the “Magna Grecia” newsletter. My seven months online ethnography shows that 50% of the emails written exclusively in Griko are Easter wishes; in the rest of the cases resorting to Griko is restricted to greetings and salutations. However, consider the following e-mail:

<i>ettase feonta,sa spitta fse lumera,</i>	[the journal] arrived, like sparkle from fire
<i>ettase puru 'sse mena ti steo macrea poddhi atti Calimera.</i>	It reached me far away from Calimera
<i>sas xeretò poddhi aderfia grica,</i>	I send you all my regards Griko brothers
<i>nzigno na meletiso,</i>	I start reading
<i>kuntento, sia ti steo sto paraiso.</i>	Happy, as if I were in heaven

[Griko from Calimera]

The author here clearly looked for rhymes and produced a semi-poetic email, to share his joy for having received the journal *Spitta* at his house “far from Calimera”. (From other e-mail exchanges we learn that he lives in the north of Italy).

These examples highlight the resort to Griko as a “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1991) and point to its performative use for

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<sup>12</sup> Typical hard bread served with tomatoes and oil.

the representation of a rediscovered cultural identification and self-understanding. Griko - the ever 'dying language' - has had, indeed, many 'lives'. It has moved from being considered a 'bastard language' because of the interference of Salentine and a 'language of shame' under the symbolic domination of Italian, to a 'language of pride' and an invaluable resource for social and cultural redemption into the future (see Pellegrino 2015).

The revival has, indeed, enhanced self-awareness and restored prestige to the language and to the culture attached to it, despite the fact that it is not used as a medium of daily communication and despite the limited number of people actively engaged in either improving their limited competence or in acquiring it. Elderly mother-tongue speakers enjoy this moment and their engagement in writing attests they want to participate in it. As for the non- Griko-speaking generation the permeability of the 'pride' discourse is multilayered: for some the pride over Griko has a 'discursive currency' but does not translate into practice. Here language ideology fails to transform the reality it comments upon; this 'failure' is, however, linked to the emotional attachment to Griko, which in turn depends largely on the varying degree of personal exposure to the language. Those who have limited exposure and who show a weaker personal sensitivity to the topic of cultural heritage, do not invest much energy in 'performing Griko'.

One could argue that the examples above do not prove Griko 'vitality' as a medium of communication and that they have any statistical relevance. It would be a fair argument. My data confirm indeed the lack of a critical mass of Griko mother-tongue speakers and of 'competent' speakers. I argue, however, that the disregard of the afore-mentioned communicative

practices taken from linguistic survey and analysis of the ‘vitality’ of Griko would lead to a partial snapshot of the current languagescape. An approach to “language-as-code” (Jaffe 2007: 61-67) would highlight only the formal functions of Griko and dismiss these instances. I have opted instead for a “language-as-practice” (Jaffe 2007: 70) approach in order to highlight the cultural functions of Griko: this points to the performative function of languages and builds on the basic premise that language is multifunctional and that its referential function is one of many (Jakobson 1960). Malinowski (1923) long ago talked about the “phatic function” of language, as performing a social task, as opposed to conveying information<sup>13</sup>. However, as Kroskrity (2000: 7) notes, the nonreferential functions of language are often neglected aspects of language which need to be acknowledged.

To this end, Shandler’s (2004: 22) notion of “postvernacular Yiddish” is crucial to address the performative nature of this use of Griko. With this term, Shandler refers to the contemporary use of Yiddish in the United States post WW2. Following the decline of vernacular Yiddish after the Holocaust, Yiddish has in fact acquired a new significance which transcends ‘pure’ communicative purposes thus becoming a form of cultural communication. He writes: “[I]n postvernacular Yiddish the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered, if not more so” (2006: 22). Therefore “[i]n this new semiotic mode for the language, every utterance is enveloped in a

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<sup>13</sup> This notion was further developed by Jakobson. As Duranti (1997:284) summarises, Jakobson then extended the range of metalinguistic functions to include the referential, poetic, metalingual, conative and emotive. Moreover, also Voloshin, Bakhtin, Austin and Wittgenstein viewed language as “action” and “performance”.



performative aura, freighted with significance as a speech act quite apart from the meaning of whatever words are spoken” (2004: 20). What prevails in the case at hand – as Shandler argues for Yiddish – is the deliberateness with which Griko is used, when used.

Moreover, in the case of Griko, its performativity goes beyond utterances themselves, acquiring a ‘visual’ dimension. Griko has indeed re-entered the experiential reality of the locals in a renewed form. One “sees” Griko more than one “hears” it. This is attested by the spreading of the use of Griko for names of restaurants, taverns, bars, B&B’s, associations, projects<sup>14</sup> etc. Griko becomes, this way, iconic of a recent re-appropriation and reassessment of its value: a performative post-linguistic vernacular, as I define it.

My data, ultimately, show that whereas fewer people speak Griko as the older generations pass away, the language continues to have a vital presence in the area through this performative dialectic process.

### *Beyond death*

“*Pos pame, kiaterèddhamu?*” (How are you my little girl?) This is how Gianni would dearly greet me when we met. Throughout my field research, he spent hours and hours teaching me Griko and recalling the events leading to Griko’s current revival, generously sharing his memories, thoughts and dreams *of and in Griko* with me, from which I enormously benefitted. Gianni De Santis dedicated his life to sharing his love and knowledge of Griko; he was one of my key informants

<sup>14</sup> *Olo kalò*, (“Everything is good”): tavern; *Bar Litari*, (“Stone Bar”), B&B *Charà*, (“Joy”), B&B, *Nghetonia* (“Neighbourhood”), Zollino, Hotel *Grikò*, B&B *Cherùmeno*, (“Joyful”), Travel Agency *E pu pai tour* (“And where do you go tour), Martano; *N’agapisi* (“to love”), cultural association, Zollino, *Fonè*, (“voice”) cultural association, Zollino;

and one of the most refined connoisseurs of this language of Greek origins spoken by the elderly population in the southern Italian Province of Lecce (Grecìa Salentina). By then he had become a friend, of whom I was very fond. Gianni died on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November 2015. Sadly enough, he was not the only “informant” of mine to die since I finished my doctoral field research<sup>15</sup>.

Gianni de Santis wrote extensively in Griko and his production includes theatre texts and poems; together with his brother Rocco, he set up in 1991 the cultural association *Avlèddha* (“Little courtyard”). This is also the name of their musical band through which they specifically re-proposed the local music repertoire in Griko and Salentine and added new songs, whose lyrics were mainly written by Gianni, whereas Rocco would write the music. From their father, Cesarino De Santis, a poet and strong believer in Griko, they inherited his passion for the language and followed his footsteps<sup>16</sup>. They also set to music some of their father’s and siblings’ poems in Griko.

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<sup>15</sup> Vincenzo Caldarazzo (Nzinu), Antonio Costa (Ucciu), Carmine Gemma, my own father Niceta Pellegrino, Salvatore Sicuro, Salvatore Aprile, my uncle Tommaso Maniglio, Franco Corlianò, my auntie Vincenza Pellegrino and Vito Maniglio died between 2011 and 2015. These are all Griko speakers and/or people who dedicated their lives to preserving Griko. These are the people with whom I learnt Griko and from whom I learnt a lot about Griko and life.

<sup>16</sup> Cesarino De Santis (1920-1986) (better known by his nickname *Batti*) was a poet, a peasant, a migrant who spent 44 years working in Germany and Northern Italy. During his years in Germany he got to know Greeks migrants from Corfu and through this encounter, he started realizing the value of his own language. And he fought for the preservation of Griko by encouraging his co-villagers, old and young, to keep using the language and by writing poems in Griko. At the time his commitment was not fully understood, at times undervalued, at times openly derided, His influence on the maintenance of Griko in Sternatia is today acknowledged and his memory and legacy are kept alive by two of his children (Rocco and Gianni De Santis) who grew up surrounded by Greek philologists such as Rohlf and Karanastasis, who benefited from Cesarino’s precious collaboration.

Sharing their love and knowledge of Griko was always Rocco's and Gianni's aim, which they accomplished using music, poetry and theatre as their preferred means. They released three albums, *Otranto*, *Senza frontiere* ("Without borders") and *Ofidèa* ("Snake") and their work is well-known locally as well as in Greece. Gianni was a very charismatic and entertaining man, a real 'people's catalyst'. He was close to an impressive number of lay people, intellectuals and activists; he was the middle man who would facilitate relations among people. In one of our many conversations, he recalled how, when he returned to Sternatia in the early '90s after having spent over 20 years working near Milan, he felt the need to re-approach all the things he had missed; Griko was one of them. "My contribution has been to involve people in this experience. I have the gift to carry people away! [*he laughed*]." Gianni's contribution to the current revival of Griko cannot be stressed enough; more to the point his legacy transcends his death. He will keep 'speaking Griko beyond death', through his songs, his poems, his articles, his work, and Griko will 'live' with and through him.

As stated before, Gianni was unfortunately not the first, nor the only 'informant' of mine to die since I finished my field research. All of them were people with whom I learnt Griko and from whom I learnt about Griko and life. Some of them were Griko-speakers who dedicated their lives to preserving this language. Griko will, in fact, live also through the words, work and commitment of Griko activists and intellectuals, such as Salvatore Sicuro<sup>17</sup> (1922- 2014) from Martano and Salvatore

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<sup>17</sup> *Il Professore Sicuro* as he was usually referred to, was a liberal arts graduate who worked as a school teacher; he also worked as a lecturer at the University of Lecce, giving classes of Modern Greek compared to Griko. In the early 1970s he established the first cultural association dedicated to the

Aprile<sup>18</sup> (1929-2014) and Franco Corlianò<sup>19</sup> (1948-2015) from Calimera, just to mention a few.

The current revival of Griko<sup>20</sup>, including the legal recognition granted by the national law 482, is in fact the outcome of decades of work of the Griko activists. I refer to Gianni here as an example of all their contributions, which need to be acknowledged. Throughout the years, Griko-speakers, aficionados and experts alike have restlessly tried to preserve the local cultural heritage, therefore providing a material legacy upon which the transformation of Griko into a performative post-linguistic vernacular could take place. The ‘current

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Griko cause (*Glòssama*, “my language”, Martano). He is the author of a great number of articles about Griko, which Pompeo Maritati, founding member of the *Associazione Italo-Ellenica* (Italo-Hellenic cultural association) based in Zollino, assembled and published in the website of the association. Sicuro also edited the Griko-Italian dictionary written by Cassoni; a collection of poems by Palumbo. *Il Professore Sicuro* was an incredibly cultured man, fluent in Modern Greek; foremost, he was a very kind man.

<sup>18</sup> Rocco Aprile (or simply *Il Professore Aprile*, as he would be referred to) was a Latin and ancient Greek teacher, an historian, poet and writer. Graduated in classic literature, he was a fine connoisseur of local as well as Greek history and author of a number of books, among which *Storia di Cipro* (History of Cyprus, 2007), *Storia della Grecia moderna* (History of Modern Greece, 1984), *Grecia Salentina: origini e storia* (Grecia Salentina: origins and history, 1994). As a novelist, he wrote *Il funerale e i fiori di campo* (The funeral and wild flowers, 2008), *Il sole e il sale* (The sun and the salt, 2009), *Arsindò* (2010).

<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately I met Franco Corlianò only once; he was a railway employee and an artist. He is the author of “The Griko-Italian, Italian-Griko dictionary” (2010), “Three owls on the dresser: the world of childhood in the Greek-Salentine tradition” (2010), a collection of games and toys, lullabies, riddles and nursery rhymes; “Greek-Salentine proverbs: history, culture and tradition” (2010). He is best known as the composer of the song “Klama” (*tears*), more widely known as “Àndramu pai” (My husband leaves), a song about migration, which became famous in Greece thanks to the performance by the Greek singer, Maria Farandùri.

<sup>20</sup> To be sure, the current revival has produced multilayered and dynamic responses which range from accommodation and re-appropriation to tacit or open contestation.

revival', with everything that it entails, is indeed only the last in a series of attempts to bring about a language ideology transformation and restore prestige to this language and the culture attached to it. The activity of the philhellenic circle of Calimera at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which developed around Vito Domenico Palumbo (see Pellegrino, 2015) corresponds to what I define 'the first revival. These intellectuals contributed to the preservation of poems, songs in Griko, which had until then been transmitted orally and further enriched it with their own productions. This despite the fact that, as Sobrero (1974: 77) argues, the intellectualistic nature of this attempt caused its failure and did not prevent the subsequent shift to Salentine and Italian.

Equally central has been the contribution of all the activists, which I define as the 'middle revival'. This took place in the second half of the 1970s and was part of a widespread phenomenon in Europe. The 'middle revival' promoted a re-evaluation of the past as a response to the rupture in cultural practices brought about by the modernisation process. It advanced claims for local specificity in the context of Italian national politics; it however lacked a framework of articulation which would legitimise these claims. The social actors involved belong to 'the-generation-in-between', that is the generation born in the years post WWII, which "grew up with one foot in the old world and one in the new world", as an informant called Mario, from Sternatia told me. Their interpretation, appropriation and redemption of 'the past' transcended the

boundaries of Griko to incorporate the overall Salentine area<sup>21</sup>, paving the way to the current revival.

### *Conclusion*

In this article I have argued that while the use of Griko as a vehicle to convey information had progressively faded out, today its performative and artistic use has increased. Griko has now become a cultural and social resource: a performative post-linguistic vernacular. This shift in the language ideology of the locals would have not occurred without the contribution of a variety of local actors and activists; this needs to be acknowledged. Their legacy keeps allowing for Griko to be a performative resource despite the death of its very speakers.

*Stasu kalò, Gianni. I kiaterèddhasu*

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<sup>21</sup> Various cultural associations were established in the second half of the 1970s and interestingly all their names save one are in Griko. Most of these are 'historical' associations, which have incessantly worked to bring the issue of Griko to the fore, each of them focusing on different aspects: *Argalio* ("loom", Corigliano) privileges music; *Chòrama* ("my village", Sternatia) the 'intellectual' aspect – through book and art exhibitions; *Ghetonia*, ("neighborhood", Calimera) editorial activities; whereas *La Bottega* ("the workshop", Zollino) and *Glòssama* ("my language", Martano) are more versatile in nature.

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