

Studying and Describing Unwritten Languages

CHALLENGES IN THE CODIFICATION OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES: A CASE STUDY OF TSAKONIAN GREEK

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Abstract

Tsakonian is an endangered language in need of codification and digitization in order to allow its universal access and dissemination. This paper focuses on the processes of codification within a language planning framework and provides a historical review of the 'graphization' initiatives of the language in order to shed light on its evolution to the present date. Of interest is how 'unplanned' language planning activities influenced by political, social and economic factors at the micro-level have affected these processes in the present case. A valid and reliable script institutionalized by the local community is vital in the creation of an emerging standard. This is essential for the development of the Tsakonian corpus via the uniform transcription of the language and transliteration of existing texts supporting the language's transmission and survival. The scientific, educational, technical and political issues involved in the development of a standard script and writing system are examined. A democratic model of language planning is proposed where the community is an active agent in the decision making process addressing ethical concerns of ownership and access.

1. Introduction

Tsakonian¹ is an endangered Indo-European language² which Ethnologue³ classifies as a modern descendant of Laconian Doric, a dialect of Ancient Greek. It is spoken in the Peloponnese in the municipality of South Kynouria by a population according to Ethnologue of about 300 speakers. However, sources in the Community⁴ claim a much larger number⁵. It is divided into three subdialects: Northern Tsakonian, Southern Tsakonian and Proponitic Tsakonian, the last of which is now extinct. In the past, 'Tsakonia' was not confined to the area of the present day but reached all the way to Vatika which is in the southern tip of Laconia (Liosis 2007). The Tsakonians led a transhumant pastoral lifestyle characterized by seasonal migration. This resulted in substrate influence in the language from contact with other local dialects throughout the ages witnessed in the varieties that survive today. Even though Tsakonian is mutually unintelligible with Modern Greek there is a definite continuity from Ancient Greek supported by linguistic, historical and archaeological evidence (Buck 1910, Jeffrey 1961, Miller 2014 & Striano 2015). Tsakonian is in need of codification and digitization in order to allow its universal access and dissemination.

This study examines the processes of codification within a greater language planning framework. It provides a historical review of the 'graphization' initiatives of the language in order to shed light on its evolution to the present date. Emphasis is

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