Ethnicity, identity and language: 
The case of the Vlachs/Aromanians of Metsovo

Andromahi Koufogiorgou

University of Essex, U.K.
2nd Gymnasio Naxou, Greece

Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between language, ethnicity and identity in Metsovo, Greece. The data were obtained from a large-scale sociolinguistic research (328 speakers) in Metsovo and have been subjected to quantitative (SPSS) and qualitative analysis. Metsovo is a village largely bilingual in Greek and Vlach/Aromanian, a Romance, oral language of the Balkans. The historical route, the socio-economic organization of the community, the surrounding environment and socio-political and economic situation in Greece are examined in attempting to answer the question "are we justified to characterize this population an 'ethnic group'?". Within the framework of sociolinguistic theory and on the basis of my data analysis, I explore what constitutes the Vlach identity in Metsovo, its relationship with the Vlach language and the form that this relationship takes at this crucial point in time when the language is experiencing shift in favour of Greek.

Keywords: Vlach, Metsovo, ethnicity, identity, language shift

1. What are the Vlachs of Greece?

The situation of the Vlachs/Aromanians is special, as they remain one of the ethnologically, linguistically and historically puzzling cases of the Balkans, an area particularly rich in ethnolinguistic diversity. Various theories on the descent of the Vlachs are being reproduced without leading to a convincing answer for the academic community. Scarcity or complexity of historical sources (Winnifrith
1993) has not been the only reason. Interpretation and presentation of the existing sources, has often been subjugated to nationalistic interests and distortions of the 19th century, existing even nowadays.

The relationship between the Vlach/Aromanian language and the Vlach identity adds to the complexity of the issue. The link between language and identity is far from simple. It is an area of study fraught with controversy (Al-Wer 1999, Bourdieau 1973 in Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982: 5, 7).

To look into this issue further, it is necessary to take into consideration the historical background of the Vlachs and the area of study, and also to understand the vague terms ‘ethnic group’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘minority’. One ought to compare the definitions of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’ with the nature and organization of the specific group. Restriction of space here does not allow me to make detailed reference to definitions of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’. Suffice it thus to say, that I came to reject approaches such as that of German Romanticism and definitions like Fishman’s (1977).¹ The one-to-one relationship between ethnicity and language, with language the necessary and sufficient objective proof of the existence of ethnicity has proved to be unrealistic. There is no categorical, necessary relation between language and ethnicity, and language may or may not be included in a group’s cultural bag (Appel and Muysken 1987: 15, Allard 1979, Barth 1969, Paulston 1994, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985, Ross 1979, Wardaugh 1987, among others). Other attempts to define ethnicity have been based on its relationship with a number of objective parameters, such as descent, language, folk tradition, cultural patterns, religion, history, literature. Researchers like Barth (1969) and Ross (1979) after comparing ethnic groups and identities worldwide with different definitions, found that there was no objective parameter always present in all ethnic groups and ethnic identities. The most crucial factor for the existence of ethnic identity was considered the group’s will and effort to underline the actual or desired distinctiveness from other groups. Fought (2002: 444) pointed out that ethnicity has been shown not to be about what one is but about what ones does. Ethnicity has been historically and socially constructed and is difficult to delimit scientifically. The self-determination of a group as a distinct one has been accepted as a necessary and sufficient condition for ethnicity (Allard 1979, Appel and Muysken 1987, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985, Wardaugh

¹ Ethnic recognition, he argues, operates in terms of three elements; paternity, patrimony and phenomenology. In Fishman’s (1977) theory, language is strongly connected with all three elements of ethnicity as a clear demonstrator of descent, a medium of rituals that characterize the ethnic group and part of the group’s social behaviour and it can determine the attitudes of people towards their membership in the ethnic group. Language, therefore, is seen as indicative of the existence of ethnicity.
What remains obscure, however, is the fact that the wish and claim to differentiation and self-determination can be a parameter defining not only ethnic but any kind of identity. In short, the vagueness of the term remains. Scholars like Barnett (1974), Brass (1976), Fox, Aull and Cimino (1978), Ross (1979) view ethnicity as a subjective entity and a novel notion, characterizing ethnicity as a modern phenomenon, a result of modern industrial societies. Ross (ibid: 8-9) argues that it is the result of the mobilization of groups of people mainly in big cities, away from the place of origin, with the aim of finding a job. According to Ross (ibid: 9), an ethnic group is a “political mobilized collectivity whose members share a perceived distinctive self-identity”. He argues that the political characteristic is realized by the social and political organization of the collectivity in the community to demand further political rights and political representation. He emphasizes the importance, in a technically advanced environment, of mobility for working purposes as a necessary parameter for the existence of an ethnic group. If mobility is not a characteristic of the group, then the group constructs a different kind of identity, e.g. a clan, regional identity, etc. This definition of identity seems to allow an adequate distinction between ethnic identity and all the different identities that people can have in their societies.

Comparing the characteristics of the Vlachs in Metsovo with Ross' definition of the term ‘ethnic group’, we see that this group does not display the necessary characteristics that constitute ethnicity. The locus of investigation is an agricultural environment inhabited by locals with no history of mass mobilization. This population has never collectively engaged in political struggle with their neighbouring populations and has never achieved political representation or improvement of their status through political procedures. Whatever movements were made towards the creation of a separate ethnic identity of the Vlachs of Greece have originated from outside Greece. Metsovo forms an administrative and geographical unit with the neighbouring villages (not necessarily Vlach villages). They constitute a municipality – the municipality of Metsovo.

Vlachs/Aromanians constitute no officially recognized ethnic group, and they do not consider themselves as such. Different nations have incorporated them within their boundaries. Winnifrith (1993) characterized them as a rural minority that was never mobilized to an ethnic identity. Vlachs appear to possess or at least

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2 In comparison to most of the rural areas in Greece from where people left massively in the 1950s (after the Greek civil war: 1944-1949) and either migrated to urban centres in Greece or to foreign countries like Germany in search of jobs and a better life, the population of Metsovo has remained more or less constant. The main reason was that people could still find jobs in Metsovo. The benefactors of the area played a role in that by creating working places.
used to possess features of differentiation from their neighbouring populations, e.g. language and way of life (transhumant). These characteristics could probably function as catalysts of ethnic mobilization. However, they have not (at least with regard to the Vlachs of Greece). Vlachs/Aromanians (of Metsovo, at least) do not fulfill the condition of being a “political mobilized collectivity” (Ross 1979). We are thus not entitled to referring to them as an ethnic group. But why have their differentiating characteristics never become sufficient catalysts of actively asserting ethnic identity or minority status? This question can be approached through viewing in perspective and understanding the historical developments of Vlachs and the relevant historical developments in Greece as well as by exploring the relationship of language with Vlach identity. These will also facilitate our understanding of what is Vlach identity.

2. The role of religion and historical developments

2.1 The role of Christian Orthodoxy

From the 15th century until 1815, the Ottoman Empire occupied a large part of the Balkans. During that period populations moved freely within the Ottoman Balkan peninsula. National borders had not existed from the years of the Roman and Byzantine Empire. During the years of the Ottoman Empire populations were largely defined according to religion. The greatest division in the population was that between the privileged minority, the Muslims, and the majority, the Orthodox Christians (Jelavich 1977: 5). Under Ottoman rule the church was the main governmental authority for the Christians. Through the office of the patriarch of Constantinople, which was consistently in Greek hands, the Greek hierarchy was able to hold a position of pre-eminence in the cultural and religious life in the peninsula (Jelavich 1977: 9). Due to the institutionally, economically, and ideologically dominant position held then by the Greek language and Greek culture among the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire, the Greek ethnic consciousness started to develop long before similar processes started by other peoples. The Orthodox peoples of the Ottoman Empire fought for a common cause with the Greeks (Μητασ 1997: 290). All the Christian peoples of the Balkans were in a way ‘translated’ into Greeks, citizens of the ‘under construction’ Greece. Peculiar patterns of identification and a new sense of cohesion thus emerged between the Greeks and the rest of the Orthodox Christians of the Balkan Peninsula (Xydis 1969: 220).

Christian Orthodoxy has come to play a very important part in the neohellenic consciousness and it is an integral part of what constitutes the ideal Greek citizen (see also Xydis 1969: 238). In the Byzantine and post-Byzantine era, a Greek called
himself Rhomios or Roman and under the Ottoman administration he was known as Rum, a term with a strong religious connotation. The Vlachs refer to themselves even to the present day as Arman (in Vlach), which is equivalent to the Greek term Rhomios, also laden with religious connotations. Christian Orthodoxy is an essential characteristic of the Vlach identity as well (for reasons historically explainable along the lines discussed above). It is also a strong link and a point of identification with the rest of the Greeks in Greece. The religious feeling and the Orthodox belief is prevalent in Metsovo. Reference to religion is a common refrain in the interviews where informants were asked to describe themselves as Vlachs.

2.2 Historical development in the Balkans and Greece

I proceed by exploring how historical reasons/events have led to a close identification of Vlachs and the Vlach identity in Metsovo with the Greek identity and ethnic consciousness, resulting in today’s situation where being Vlach is totally compatible with being Greek. Comments like “we are a hundred percent Greeks”, “we are the purest of Greeks” are a frequent refrain in the community and common to all age groups.

The Vlachs rose against the Turks in the 19th century participating in the Greek War of Independence (1821-1828) and provided many of its leaders. They have been co-founders of the Greek nation-state and of the neohellenic consciousness (see also Τουκουλάκης και Χριστόπουλος 1997: 426 and Μέγρις 1998). This contribution to the Greek cause of independence and to the Greek state constitutes a source of great pride for the Vlachs.

Economic and social conditions that contributed to the shaping of the identity of the Vlachs of Greece as it appears nowadays and over time ought to be examined, as well. The formation of the Greek ethnos constituted the expression of a wider social and economic transformation that came about via the growth of the commercial capitalism. It was also a process involving the incorporation within the emerging Greek ethnos of all the extra culturally and linguistically diverse population groups (Μηλιώτης 1997: 283). The development of transportation and long-distance trade was the axis around which the procedures of economic and social differentiation revolved i.e. the emergence and gradual domination of the new capitalistic production relationships. These new economic relations did not only mean the emergence of a new, quite small social class – that of the capitalist traders – or of some new professions or technical mastery (or the movement of the populations); they also meant a new formation of economic and social organization (Ρόκος 1994, Μηλιώτης 1997: 285). These changes led not only the bourgeois but also all those involved with the bourgeois towards a frame of new social
relations. They led the carriers of the bourgeois social relations and of the ‘European Spirit’ (Enlightenment) to the adoption of the ethnic idea of hellenism and of the strategy towards an independent syntagmatic nation-state (Μηλιώτης 1997: 286).

These changing economic conditions benefited the Christian merchant. In the 18th century and even in the 17th century the carrying trade of the empire was largely in the hands of Orthodox Christians (Jelavich 1977: 13). Traders were to a large extent those who engaged in sheep/cattle breeding, the owners of herds. The cattle-breeders/sheep farmers were transformed into merchants (Ρόκου 1994: 34, 35). Sheep farming and the occupations related to it were largely in the hands of Vlachs. Thus Vlachs participated actively in these economic, social and historical processes, forming an important factor in the ethnogenetic process of Greece (Άρης 1998). Vlachs, when asked about their identity, draw great pride in being Vlach due to this particular reason. They also use these facts as proof and arguments to support their Greekness. The educated and trading classes of the Balkans, of the area of the Black Sea and of the East, whatever their ethnic origin/descent, had been hellenized exactly because of the nature of their occupations (Μηλιώτης 1997: 289).

The merchants-bussinessmen needed a language to communicate, a language that would allow them to promote their business activities without problems and through which they would be able to come into contact with the Christian authorities of the Ottoman Empire whenever they needed their protection. The language that met these conditions was at that point clearly the Greek. Thus, the Christians of the Empire turned very early towards Greek, which at the 17th century and until the beginning of the 19th was the only language of the Balkans used in print (Μηλιώτης 1997: 289).

Until the development of the social relations and processes described above, we cannot speak of ethnic/national consciousness as such of the populations of the Ottoman Empire. The linguistic and cultural communities, despite whatever ethnic characteristics, were not organized in modern nations (see also Βασιλόπουλος 1996: 70). According to Balibar (1992 cited in Δημοκράτης 1997: 142-3), the formation of nations constitutes a dynamic process based on class interests and is instigated by the action of state mechanisms, a process that achieves the formation of the homo nationalis who depends materially, politically and ideologically on his ethnic unit as the most complete form of political community in the modern world. The Vlachs of Greece, as shown, participated in this process and came to identify with the Greek ethnic unit.
2.2.1 The Rumanian claims

Historical events with effect on the Vlachs in Greece are related to the Rumanian claims over these populations, to which I can only make brief reference here. The term ‘Koutsovlag question’ came to the forefront after the end of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913 and specifically before the Treaty of Bucharest (July 23, 1913). In the mid-19th century the Rumanian nationalism emerged, in the form of an effort to create a Rumanian or at least a distinct, non-Greek national identity among Vlachs of the southern Balkans by promoting the theory that there are strong links between Vlachs and Romania. In this framework scholarships were granted to Greek Vlachophones to study in Romania and Rumanian schools were founded in many Vlachophone villages (TΣιτος 1993). Such initiatives angered the Greek government and were regarded as an intrusion in the internal affairs of the country. The result was a split within the Aromanian community, some welcoming the Rumanian support, while others taking the position of the Greek authorities. In villages like Metsovo and Anilio people rejected any schools funded by Romania. Even recently I have heard this rejection expressed in the most fervent terms, not only by old people with first-hand experience of the situation, but also by young Vlachs of Metsovo who studied in Rumania. The fear that their Greekness might be questioned and that they might be characterized a minority, which they utterly reject, has led many to reject the Vlach language or any attempts to maintain it.

3. Economic-social and political organization of Metsovo

The socio-economic organization of Metsovo and the changes following the new economic conditions – i.e. the beginning of the capitalist relations – have influenced the community values and the strong attachment of the community to tradition. Its resonance still echoes. The Vlachs of Metsovo, when asked what it means to them to be Vlach and what constitutes their identity, almost always emphasize their attachment to tradition.

Metsovo is a typical example of an artisan/small industry village, the mountainous centers created on the junctions of commercial communications. All these towns are attributed the stock-breeding and artisan character (Póxou 1994: 41). During Turkish domination the community was organized according to the framework of the taxation and the stratified local society in rich and poor people. The local authority was identified with the Ottoman profiteering from the management of public revenue. The people of trade and later of the corporations were promoted to people of wealth through the process of leasing of taxation (Póxou

3 Like Perivoli, Avdella, Fourka, Megarovo, Vlachokleisoura.
1992). The political dimension of their economic behaviour magnified their political power and vice versa, which legalized interference, economic and social control on the property, the production process and on the lives of the community members, ending up in social control by the higher social strata towards the lower. This kind of intervention influenced the formation of the local mentalities and the hierarchy of values (Póxou 1992, and personal contact). The community attitude towards the economic obligations and functions reproduced the system of established balances while it projected the values of respect and decency. The process of the formation of this kind of community authority supported the power of tradition, while promoting social injustice and social discrimination, which in turn reproduced social criticism and a conservative mentality (Póxou 1992: 6-7).

The community as a whole reproduced the traditional values even in the framework of the neohellenic state. The feeling of respect for the tradition and the family mentality delayed modern ideas. There is an interesting interplay between traditional elements and modern trends. In Metsovo one observes the co-existence of tradition and modernity, the traditional Metsovo costume and latest fashion clothes, cattle breeding and tourism expansion, Vlach and Greek spoken at the same time.

4. Customs and rituals and marriage patterns

In customs and rituals the Vlachs (of Greece) do not essentially differ from the rest of the Greeks. Somewhat distinctive features can be found in marriage customs and rituals but these are compatible with Greek customs. The traditional costume is not exactly the same for all Vlachs. It varies according to the area. In general it can be said that it follows the Balkan patterns (see Póxou 1994, Aβεγιοφ 1999). Moreover, the Vlachs have developed oral poetry (Εξαγγελίας 1986) as well as folk wisdom and proverbs and their traditional folk music follows the rhythmic, melodic, and instrument patterns of the Greek traditional folk music of Epiros. Some songs have Vlach lyrics, some have Greek.

The idea that Vlachs have for a long time avoided intermarriage with non-Vlachs is widespread. To an extent it is true but such generalizations are unsustainable without investigating the reasons why this has been happening and looking at what is going on nowadays. Metsovo and Vlach villages in general are situated in mountainous areas, rather isolated until recently. It was not until the 1940s (World War II) that a road was built connecting Metsovo to the urban centers close to it, Ioannina and Trikala. Until then communications were extremely difficult and transportation was carried out on mules. Few people had the chance to travel further than the nearest villages. Visitors from outside were not very frequent.
Chances to meet people from elsewhere (thus non-Vlachs) were rare, as confirmed by informants, especially older ones. Marriages within the community were thus inevitable. This is one of the factors that have contributed to the maintenance of the local language for a long time. Special marriage patterns existed even within the community. The local community was divided in the rich and the poor. Those with wealth, i.e. merchants and herdsmen, would not allow their descendants to marry people without dowry of their standards so as not to moderate the wealth of the family. So, for instance, members of herdsmen families would marry members of other herdsmen families to the extent that, sometimes, even cousins would marry each other.

Answers to the question “What is your opinion about mixed marriages” showed that nowadays Vlachs in Metsovo do not display preference for non-mixed marriages. The majority, 80%, have a positive attitude to marriages with non-Vlachs while there are few (4%) who said that they do not consider marriages with non-Vlach Greeks “mixed” because they are not a different race. Those who showed a preference for non-mixed marriages are basing their argument on the fact that they don’t want their children, for instance, to get married with someone from far away and move far from the family.

5. Aspects of identity

5.1 Local identity?

Ethnographically collected data and reports are suggestive of a kind of localism in Metsovo, an observation compatible with Ross’s suggestion (1979: 9) according to whom if mobility is not a characteristic of the group, then the group constructs a different kind of identity. It is noteworthy that many young people demonstrate no wish to leave Metsovo, as it provides for them economic and psychological security. They do not live in anonymity and this is satisfying. Through connections or through the established family jobs they have to worry less about their future work. Metsovo is, for most of its inhabitants, “the best place”, “it has everything”. They are particularly proud of their benefactors and of the fact that although the place is “pure rock”, they managed to be a wealthy village/town attracting so many tourists. They emphasize that one of their important characteristics is that they save money, maintain “order”, and are very smart. They are proud of keeping the Orthodox faith and the traditions alive. Metsovo is nowadays one of the very few, if not the only place in Greece where one can still see people, especially women wearing their traditional costumes. They refer to their distinctive traditions and rituals, as those of marriage for instance, as Metsovítika. They refer to the tradi-
tional costume and the traditional wool products, even to songs and dances as Metsovítika, not as Vlach, although other Vlach villages, at least the neighbouring ones, e.g. Anilio and Milia share some of these characteristics. As far as language is concerned, many reports suggested the construction of a local identity. Concerning Greek, they claim to speak “pure Greek” “without heavy accents, as elsewhere in Greece”. As to the Vlach variety, they also claim speaking the “good”, the “clear”, the “original Vlach” that not even the neighboring villages speak so well as Metsovo.

In other words, in Metsovo one gets a feeling of pride, honor and superiority. An emphasis on the local characteristics of Metsovo is evident and appears to be an integral part of what constitutes the identity of the Vlachs/Aromanians of Metsovo. Some informants have even criticized it as an excess.

The identity and characteristics of the Vlachs of Metsovo (and of Vlachs in general) change over time and are adapted according to the surrounding circumstances and changes and that markers indicating Vlach identity or descent are called upon or suppressed accordingly. Talking to younger people made this even clearer. Their reports were illuminating in understanding how they perceive their Vlachness. Answers to the question “what is a Vlach?” and “what does it mean to you to be Vlach?” are indicative of how they negotiate their Vlachness, how complex this issue is and how unclear it is in their minds. Language was sometimes, but not always, used in describing themselves as Vlachs. In the case of the Vlach/Aromanian identity there is an interesting coexistence and interplay between two contradicting elements; the pride in being Vlach and the feeling of inferiority, both of which may coexist in one person at the same time, or develop or change and develop as group attitudes under the influence of the surrounding circumstances and trends. This interplay is evident in the conscious choices of using or not using Vlach in certain situations. An important factor that has influenced the formation of such feelings is the way other Greeks perceive Vlachness, the usage of the word *Vlach* (*βλάχος*) in Greek, or at least the way the Vlachs perceive the attitudes of the rest of the Greeks towards them. In particular, 89% reported that they perceive the word *Vlach* is used negatively by non-Vlach Greeks, 56% that they are annoyed by it and 41% said that this fact influences whether they choose to speak Vlach or not. Observations and information from interviews indicate that popular beliefs and misconceptions about Vlachness (meaning the villager, coarse, peasant, boorish), have influenced the self-perception and attitudes towards the Vlach language.
5.2 Language, ethnicity and identity

I deem it necessary to present the views of the Vlachs of Metsovo themselves about the relationship between the traditional language and the Vlach part of their identity. A group may or may not carry language in its cultural bag. The question “do you think it is necessary to speak Vlach in order to be Vlach?”, which was used by Trudgill (1983) in his work on Arvanitika in Greece, was important to be included in this work concerning Vlachs. In their case, linguistic distinctiveness does not appear accompanied by any awareness of a separate ethnic identity but is certainly one of the distinctive features of Vlachs. The notion of ‘core value’ (Smolicz 1981) refers to how a specific group perceives the distinguishing elements of their own culture. For some ethnic groups, language constitutes such a core value, a status that may have come to be accorded for a number of different reasons. The answers to the above question were almost equally distributed between “yes” and “no”: 49% believe that speaking Vlach is an important constituent of being Vlach, 48% do not. The opinion of those who do not agree that to be a Vlach you have to speak the language is accompanied by the comment that what matters is the origin/descent.

However, when asked whether they think that if the language disappeared, other elements of the Vlach identity would disappear as well, the percentage of affirmative answers rises to 82.6%. From here one concludes that the vast majority do think that language is an important part of their Vlachness and if this constituent is lost, other elements of Vlach identity will be lost with it. Edwards (1985: 129) considers it a fallacy to accept that language loss leads to further erosion, that language is somehow instrumental here and that therefore if its loss could be prevented, other elements would remain in place. “Language and other elements of ethnicity are simultaneously acted upon by social forces; some succumb, some do not” (ibid.).

The discrepancy between the answers to the questions (a) whether one has to speak Vlach in order to be Vlach, and (b) whether language loss will affect other elements of Vlachness as well, proves revealing; on the one hand, it shows the awareness of the importance of the role of the local language in their distinctive character and the repercussions of its potential loss on this distinctive character itself. On the other hand, it is suggestive of an attempt to reconcile the fact that younger generations do not speak Vlach, that Vlach steadily loses speakers and their awareness of these facts with their wish to maintain their Vlachness. Similar cases have been reported in previous research and, more specifically, by Trudgill (1983) on the Arvanites of Greece, by Al-Wer (1999) on the Chechens and Circassians of Jordan and observed by Khemlali-David about the Sindhis in Malaysia.
(cited in Al-Wer 1999). It is suggested that in such cases of language loss, identity markers tend to be redefined so that the emphasis falls on non-linguistic community traits as signaling a separate identity. The number of affirmative answers to the question whether it is important to speak Vlach in order to be Vlach increases as the level of proficiency increases. A possible explanation, supported by information obtained through interviews, is that those who do not speak Vlach well or not at all, do not want to see the inadequacy in speaking Vlach as a reason that renders them “less Vlach”.

In sum, we witness a situation of a population losing its language but still hanging on an identity fully compatible with the Greek one but also of symbolic meaning, with local characteristics and responsible for group solidarity and a feeling of closeness among Vlachs.

5.3 Constructing an identity

We accept identity as defined in Mendoza-Denton (2002: 475) where she points out that for our purposes (with regard to language) we will understand identity to mean the active negotiation of an individual’s relationship with larger social constructs, insofar as this negotiation is signalled through language and other semiotic means. Identity then is neither an attribute nor a possession, but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis.

Language is a resource of making meaning, but not a neutral one. Language choices bring with them particular values and positions so that individuals are inducted into cultural practices (Le-Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). In the case under investigation, the choice of codes – Vlach or Greek – create a rich resource of negotiating and constructing meaning. Greek and Vlach are differentially esteemed. The choice of linguistic code is socially marked and the data indicates that the informants are aware of the emblematic nature of the two languages. Awareness of the symbolic capital and the pragmatic connotations that each linguistic code carries is put into use according to the surrounding circumstances and allows for fluidity in the construction of identity through language.

Speaking Vlach functions in the community as a way of indicating and creating intimacy, closeness. It gives a sense of belonging to the local community with all the benefits that this may entail. The use of Vlach is locally advantageous and responsible for in-group solidarity. It is used for emphatic purposes, or to exclude outsiders from a discussion. In this respect the use of Vlach takes on a secretive and conspiratorial character, not in any political sense, but rather in a gossipy or playful manner. For young Metsovians with less fluency in Vlach, speaking in Vlach often becomes a game that functions, among other things, as a bond of
intimacy among those who can participate in it. This play, they feel, belongs exclusively to them and takes on some kind of unifying character.

In this context, Greek often comes to connote power, authority and distance, especially as far as the older speakers of Vlach are concerned. It is associated with social advancement and modernization. When older speakers or speakers fluent in Vlach start using Greek with other locals, they are often negatively criticized and thought of as posh, putting on airs. Based on this evidence, we can view the case of Vlach in terms of what Bakhtin (1981) calls heteroglossia and what Tsitsipis (1998) builds on for the case of Arvanitika in Greece. Heteroglossia is understood as a development whereby a rather peaceful coexistence of languages in a pre-industrial socio-economic mode of production seems to pressingly give way to a battlefield in which the one linguistic code is viewed through the eyes of the other. The sanctions of the linguistic market are pressing: the use of Vlach may be locally advantageous but Greek facilitates access to things socially and economically profitable. Reports and comments by informants show that we are obviously dealing with a certain kind of metalinguistic awareness (Silverstein 1981, cited in Tsitsipis 1998), in which the use of Vlach is viewed as having decreasing usefulness.

In the case of terminal speakers, mostly young, an interesting pattern of a metalinguistic nature in their use of Vlach arises. Their use of Vlach often takes the form of speech play. The two language systems allow various homonyms or near-homonyms and the fact that the phonology and morphology of Vlach and Greek have influenced each other seems to play a role in that. Also, words and expressions difficult to pronounce attract younger speakers’ attention and offer grounds for metalinguistic comments and rehearsals. Technological terms or generally words that don’t exist in Vlach and are used especially by the elderly, who adopt either the Greek word and add a Vlach ending/suffix or simply distort the words, become the locus of a brief humoristic and satirical debate. Moreover, terminal speakers display a tendency either to imitate other speakers’ speech in Vlach or narrate stories or punchlines that took place in Vlach. Terminal speakers indulge in telling jokes in Vlach and rehearsing obscene words. They are interested in uttering the specific words or expressions, and these are what constitute the joke. Tsitsipis (1998: 103), who reports similar phenomena in the case of terminal speakers of Arvanitika in Voiotia, Greece, defines this habit as the production of “a metalinguistically focused slim text”. All the aforementioned examples are locally meaningful as, in order to be appreciated, one has to depend on specific contexts and local incidents. For terminal speakers, Vlach becomes an object of attention, inquiry, rehearsal. Such features of a distancing speech allows them to distance themselves in a way from Vlach. However, they transform these features in appro-
appropriate ways. The line of interpretation that Tsitsipis (1998: 101) follows about similar phenomena in the speech of terminal speakers of Arvanitika can be adopted in order to explain the speech behaviour of Vlach speakers just described. The production of an across-the-border-voice is their way of negotiating and constructing a flexible group identity; an identity that allows for and makes explicit membership in two worlds at the same time. Younger generations in Metsovo abandon the agricultural subsistence. They turn to urban professions or to higher education or, if their economic activities are locally oriented, they tend to take on a rather urban character. Therefore, they do rely on the community’s support, while being aware of the fact that the way to socially upward mobility can only be achieved through Greek. Outspokenly and blatantly criticizing the traditional language and values would mean risking their relationships with the older members of the community and the community values. Since they do have expectations for support from their families, extended families and the community, it is understandable how and why the linguistic attitudes of terminal speakers are expressed through what has been called an across-the-border-voice.

Elderly and more fluent speakers of Vlach do not engage in such linguistic practices. When they use metalinguistic statements, it is usually to explain or clarify what they mean or to reproduce folklinguistic concepts; for example, that other communities’ Vlach (like in Anilio or Milia) is “heavier” or “thicker” than the particular speaker’s own variety. They engage in such folk—and metalinguistic—comments about their Greek as well, e.g. that they, in Metsovo, speak much “better”, more “correct” and “purer” Greek than in Anilio. The need to construct and negotiate a fluid identity by trying to combine the Vlach element with the Greek society and the urban, modernized ways of life is not characteristic only of younger and terminal speakers. Older people as well, fluent in Vlach, display such a need. They express it by claiming that they have or exaggerate their connections with Yianena, Trikala and life elsewhere.

6. Conclusions

I have concluded that we are not justified to refer to the Vlachs of Metsovo as an ethnic group. Strong claims about the connection between language and ethnicity have been challenged. Looking through the history of Vlachs, we discern that the meaning of Vlachness/Aromanianess takes on different characteristics over time. Language has played a very peculiar and complex role in the formation and modification of Vlach identity. The results obtained by quantitative and qualitative data show that the Vlach language is thought of as an important ingredient of Vlach identity but not as the exclusive characteristic (although nowadays it seems
that Vlachs are only distinguishable through their language from the rest of the Greeks). Linguistic distinctiveness appears to be downplayed in the context of language shift.

At a theoretical level the case under discussion shows that identity is constructed and subject to change according to the surrounding circumstances. Apart from the fluidity and dynamic character of identities, ethnic or of any other kind, the case under discussion suggests that markers signalling certain identities can be circumstantial and resorted to as needed. It also becomes clear that identities are multidimensional and that individuals, as well as communities collectively, may assume various identities simultaneously and the forms of these identities may change over time. The Vlach/Aromanian identity condenses multiple experiences and meanings, like ecological and economic peculiarities, and forms a unifying line among Vlach/Aromanians in diverse contexts. The Vlach/Aromanian identity acquires a symbolic significance of its own which makes a difference for those who belong to the group. Where group solidarity becomes relevant, Vlach identity and markers constructing it are called upon. In other cases, when Vlach/Aromanian identification is not to one's benefit on the basis of pragmatic reasons, markers of Vlachness are not invoked. When needed, they stress their Greekness. In other cases even, when they seek differentiation from other Vlachs, the regional, local Metsovo identity is called upon.

What has also been shown is how terminal speakers of Vlach negotiate a fluid identity, on the borderline of the two worlds they are members of, through a use of Vlach anchored in a metalinguistic-metacommmunicative frame. Fluent speakers express the need for a fluid and open-ended identity through emphasizing their knowledge of Greek or their social contacts with non-Vlachs.

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