

# The heartbeat of Vlach/Aromanian in Metsovo, Greece

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses data collected in Metsovo from young people belonging to three age groups, ranging from 5 to 19: pre-school children, primary school children and adolescents. Metsovo is largely bilingual in Greek and Vlach, a Romance, oral language of the Balkans, experiencing shift in favour of Greek. Part of the motivation for this investigation is the realization that the future of Vlach lies in the youngest generation. The analysis is based on qualitative as well as on quantifiable data. I look into whether there are differences in the ability and use of Vlach and in language choices and attitudes among the groups described above. This study is not and could not be longitudinal. However, it has allowed me to detect patterns of variation, as well as how children of different ages negotiate their communicative competence, their identity through language and how language attitudes are formed and sustained or altered.

**Keywords:** Vlach, Metsovo, children, language shift, variation

## **1. Introduction**

Metsovo is a village in Epirus, Greece, which is largely bilingual in Greek and Vlach/Aromanian. Vlach/Aromanian is an oral language and among the lesser-used languages of the Balkans. My wider research has shown that the linguistic environment of Vlach can be characterized as one where language shift towards Greek is taking place. Vlach has also been reported as an endangered language by various researchers (e.g. Κατσάνης 1977; Kramer 1987; Κατσάνης & Ντίνας 1990; Trudgill 1992a, 1992b, 2000; Greek Helsinki Monitor *Report* 1995; Dahmen 1997; Σελλά-Μάζη 1997; Κέντρο Ερευνών Μειονοτικών Ομάδων 2001, among others). Complex combinations of social, political and economic factors are leading to the shift. My motivation for researching the child population of Metsovo separately from the rest of the population has been based on the realization that the younger generation is the one that sets the pace for the life of Vlach from this point in time onwards. I look into the role that language plays in enculturation in the context of the present situation in Metsovo. Saviile-Troike (1982: 213, cited in Romaine 1984: 4) stresses the integral role which language learning plays in the enculturation of children and she notes that language is part of the cultural body transmitted from one generation to the next as well as a primary medium for the transmission of other aspects of culture and a tool which children use to explore and manipulate the social environment and establish their position and relationships within it.

## **2. Pre-school children**

The information on pre-school children is based on qualitative data (due to their young age). The data suggest that these children, and it is not an exaggeration to say that all pre-school children, are Greek dominant. The linguistic situation compared to that

experienced by previous generations has turned upside-down. Many people aged forty and over report that, when they first went to nursery school, Greek was like a foreign language to them. Especially those who came from stock-breeding families<sup>1</sup> were Vlach-dominant.

There are also people now in their late 20s who remember that when they started school there were some words they only knew in Vlach, like /ka'tuSa/ for 'γάτα' (cat) or /'uda/ for 'βρεγμένο' (wet), because they kept hearing them from their grandparents with whom they spent a lot of time. Grandparents, and especially grandmothers, become important when it comes to the exposure of young children to Vlach. Their presence appears to be catalytic, if not a *sine qua non*, in the linguistic development of children in Vlach. However, it is not a rule that grandmothers will always speak Vlach to the very young children. I never saw any grandparents speaking solely Vlach to their grandchild. Differences do exist among grandmothers who are now in their 55-60s and those older than that; younger ones are Vlach-dominant but their exposure to Greek and their wider contacts with non-Vlach speakers allows them to communicate in Greek and not to have too great a difficulty to speak it and use it with grandchildren. In Metsovo there is a kind of community decision, a widespread practice, not to speak Vlach to children, at least until they start going to school, to make sure that they learn Greek well enough first. Nowadays, this view seems to have ceased to be so strong although its resonance is still traceable. Under the present surrounding circumstances there is no real 'risk' for a child to become monolingual in Vlach or even Vlach-dominant. In addition, the symbolic domination of Greek and the heteroglossic situation (Tsitsipis 1998), according to which Vlach is viewed as inferior and unnecessary, still persist<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the possibility of children becoming balanced bilinguals in this context seems minimal.

### 3. Primary school children (7-12 years old)

*Family* is the first continuous contact of children and their first socialization context. The family offers children selective versions of the wider society, and is thus an active transmitter of available subcultures screening in and out elements which constitute the latter (Elkin & Handel 1984: 127, 129). As mentioned earlier, Greek is nowadays cemented as the dominant language, as young parents raise their children primarily in Greek and expose them to the mainly Greek oriented subculture of Metsovo. Along with family, the next important agency of socialization for children is *school*. School can be seen as a conservative socializing agency – it aims at orienting children to and fostering their respect for the established social and political order. In the generation of those who are now over 50, family and school were non-convergent in their aims, at least the linguistic ones. The family was largely a Vlach dominant context. School and wider Greek society orientations and symbolic domination won over the local and more traditional ones. Parents consciously tried not to speak Vlach to their children. Family and school at this point in a way joined forces to foster Greek in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Vlach populations have traditionally engaged in live-stock breeding, which flourished between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and well into the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Epirus (see Rokou 1994). It was not only a form of economy, but also produced and sustained a certain form of society. Vlach is closely associated with this form of society. It was spoken and sustained within a social context mainly structured on this particular kind of economy largely based on live-stock breeding. With the coming of capitalism the population slowly started to abandon stock-breeding. Nowadays only few stock-breeding families exist while the social context which favoured Vlach slowly changed (see also Koufogiorgou 2003: Chapter 5).

<sup>2</sup> However, it is easier for many at the present moment to acknowledge certain advantages of knowing Vlach.

School has an important influence in shaping a child's language development in that it creates the context in which new usages of language, such as reading and writing, occur (Romaine 1984: 176). The monolingual tradition of schools in Greece (including Metsovo) and lack of a written form of Vlach and of written literary tradition weakens the position of Vlach, even more as soon as a child enters primary school. Reports by teachers of the two primary schools of Metsovo show that children do not use Vlach at school since they say that 'they hardly know any Vlach'. The teachers always address them in Greek even outside the classroom. Some of those teachers who are non-Vlach speakers sometimes respond negatively to children using Vlach, as many of the children reported. My observations at the primary schools of children playing in the schoolyard during the break, observations of primary school children at the Children's Library (Παιδική Βιβλιοθήκη), in the central square, or on the streets while playing, verify non-use of Vlach in all the above contexts. In the interviews primary school children revealed some interesting aspects of their current linguistic situation. When asked in the first place whether they speak Vlach, many said yes, although they contradicted one another in group-interviews. Many primary school children appear to over-report knowledge and use of Vlach. They do know some fixed phrases and expressions in Vlach, greetings, obscene and fun words and jokes. It appears to be the case that this is all they use of the Vlach language, especially when they want to make fun of something or someone. When they are addressed in Vlach, by grandparents in the vast majority of cases, they understand most of it but they respond in Greek, apart maybe from a few words that they know how to say. No complete or lengthy conversation can be held in Vlach by primary school children. *Lack of participation in conversation* in Vlach is a factor, which at least discourages the linguistic development of children in Vlach, since conversation in a certain language has been found to be "the most important context for child language development" (Wells 1979: 17, cited in Romaine 1984: 160). It is a *collaborative* activity in which each participant conveys his intention and takes account of the informational needs and expectations of the hearer.

All of the primary school children I interviewed reported that boys of their age use Vlach more than girls. An explanation may be offered by the fact that, as most informants report, Vlach is now used for jokes or for indulging in obscenities, storytelling, etc. The employment of Vlach in this domain can be said to be more dominant in the sub-culture of boys, and could thus explain its higher use by them. Interviews with the children and observations of them have shown that it is not the case that boys, especially of this age, know more Vlach as such or actually hold conversations in Vlach. Parents and school teachers confirm that boys do use Vlach to swear or to make fun. *Peer-groups* of boys promote such usages of Vlach, which are highly valued and cultivated among the male peer groups. Tendency for differentiation in the usage of Vlach between males and females among children of primary school age is thus confirmed by reports both by parents and teachers. There are exceptions to this tendency, namely of some young girls who seem to use Vlach more. They are in the vast majority cases of girls who live in the same house as their grandparents or at least spend or have spent a lot of time with grandmothers and other old Vlach-speaking caretakers. What describes the present linguistic situation of children of this age is *non-reciprocal conversation* (term used by Gal (1979) and Zentella (1997)). Even when children are addressed in Vlach by parents, grandparents etc., they answer back in Greek. Non-reciprocal conversation is an acceptable form of conversation, going on non-reciprocally in different languages. This is a possible reason for the children's over-reported proficiency and use of Vlach, as the expectations of the community of the young children to speak Vlach are rather lax and the boundaries of who is considered

and who is accepted as Vlach are flexible, in relation to their linguistic ability in Vlach. Communicative competence at the level, for instance, of ability to greet an old person in Vlach, even if one's knowledge of Vlach is restricted to a few expressions, is usually met by the young and is considered important. It may be the case that primary school children consider themselves speakers of Vlach, no matter how limited their actual competence in the language is, since they fulfil the requirements of restricted communicative competence. Children as young as 8 or 9 demonstrate metalinguistic awareness, i.e. "one's notion of the ability to talk about language as having an objective existence" (Romaine 1984: 173), regarding variation in the proficiency and use of Vlach between girls and boys, as well as regarding variation in linguistic behaviour and choices in interactions between their parents or grandparents and themselves. Their reports also indicated awareness of differentiation in linguistic behaviour between Metsovo and the neighbouring village, Anilio (where use of Vlach is more widespread). Primary school children also displayed awareness of the differentiation in the evaluation of the two languages, Vlach and Greek. Some of their comments show awareness of the symbolic domination of Greek. These findings lend support to findings such as those by Reid (1978), which suggested that "sociolinguistic development of this kind may in fact take place at the pre-adolescent stage".

Surprisingly, many primary school children with only passive knowledge of Vlach or with almost no knowledge at all identified Vlach as their mother tongue. When asked why, they drew upon the intimacy and familiarity associated with Vlach, and the 'warmth' of the language. Although, I do not have statistical data and numbers from the primary school children population, it may be worth reporting, with a word of caution, that primary school girls tended to identify with Vlach as a mother tongue on an emotional/affective basis, while boys of the same age generally appeared to use somewhat more Vlach. As I said, I am not sure how generalizable this finding is as many children identify with Greek only. However, the previous finding argues for the symbolic value of Vlach in Metsovo, which is being transferred to the youngest of its members although they may not be speakers of Vlach at all. The general positive attitude children of primary school displayed towards Vlach seems to be based on the acknowledgement of this symbolic value, the intimate and familiar character of Vlach., Positive attitudes may also be due to the fact that nowadays parent pressure towards the avoidance of speaking Vlach is not so strong any more, since the "desired" reversal of the linguistic situation has undoubtedly already occurred. Vlach is now under threat by Greek.

#### **4. Adolescents (Gymnasio & Lykeio students)**

Space limitations on the present article allow me to present only some of the data I collected on the adolescents in Metsovo through questionnaires (completed by 25 boys and 25 girls), interviews and observation. Adolescents as a source of data for variation, is an area of research with increasing interest in sociolinguistics (see e.g. Cheshire 1982; Eckert 2000).

The data collected through questionnaires showed tendencies for variation in the linguistic habits, choices and attitudes between male and female adolescents. In Figure 1 (Std. Deviation: .38) we can see that 6 % report Vlach as their mother tongue, 83% identify with Greek and 8% with both Vlach and Greek. Interestingly, it is only adolescent girls who report Vlach only as their mother tongue (12% of the female adolescents) ( $p = .074 > .05$ ).

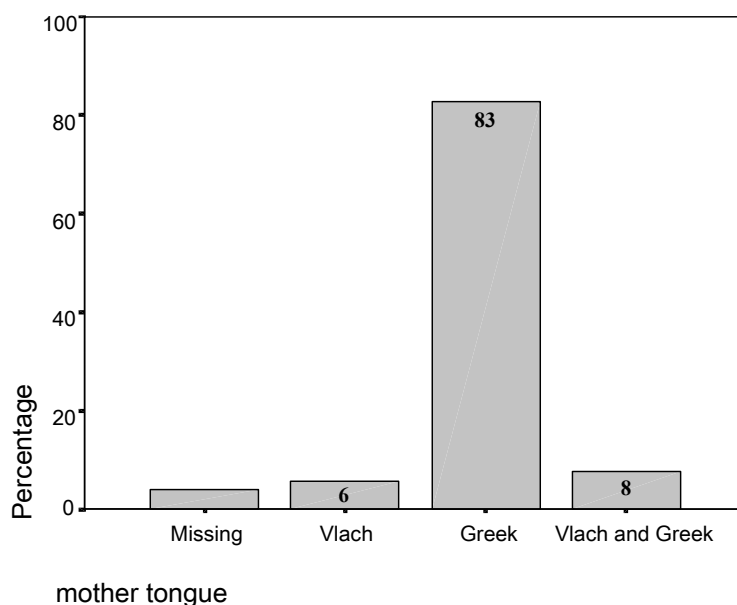


Figure 1. What is your mother tongue?

Reports of proficiency in Vlach differ significantly between male and female adolescents ( $F = .504, p = .007$ ) (Figure 2), with boys showing higher reported proficiency, a trend similar to that detected in younger children.

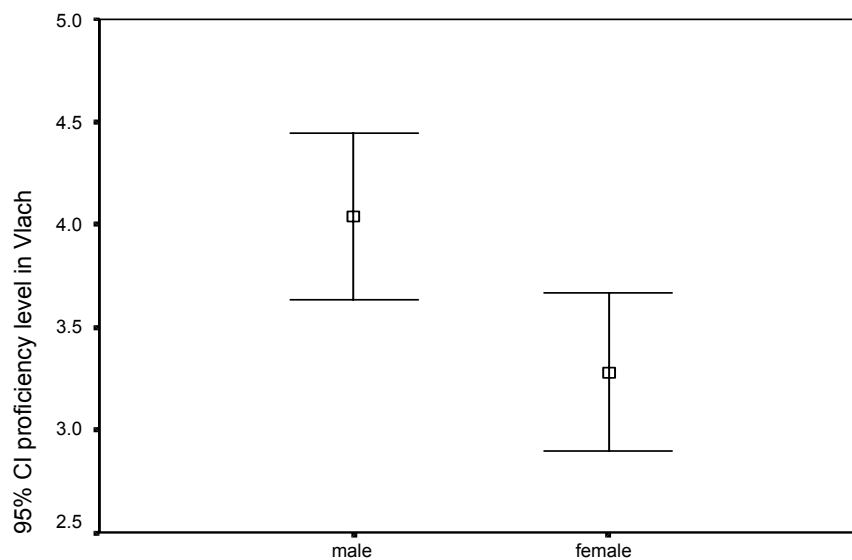
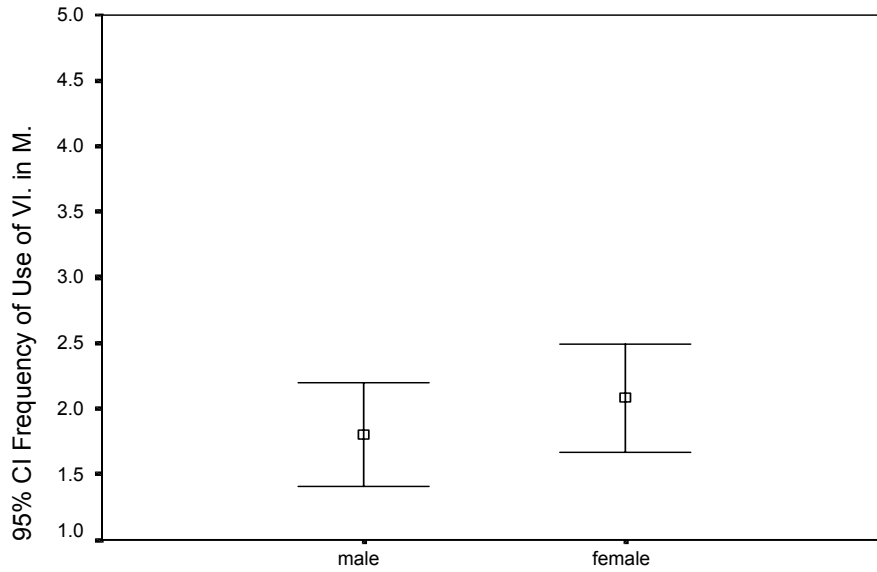
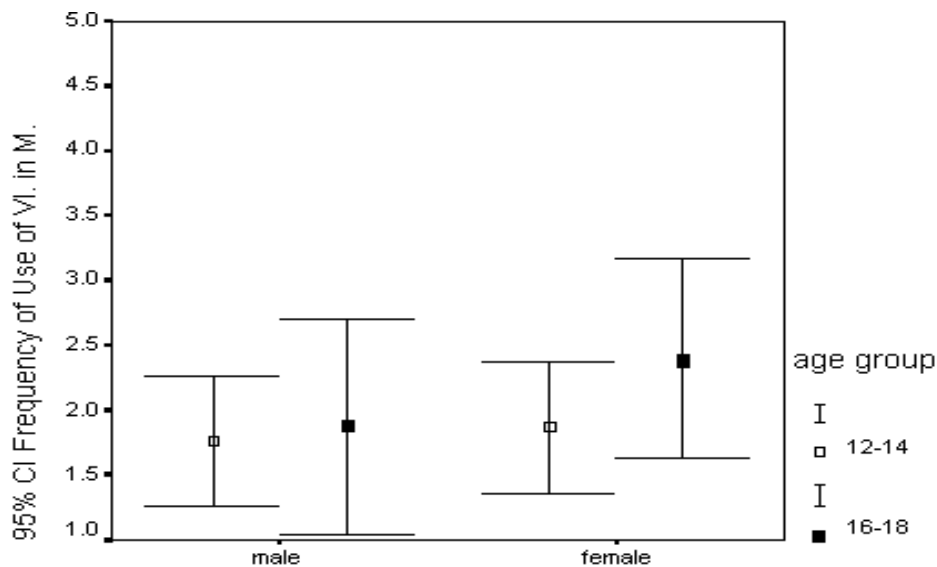


Figure 2. Proficiency in Vlach by Sex



**Figure 3.** Frequency of use of Vlach by sex



**Figure 4.** Frequency of use of Vlach by age group by sex

The difference between males and females in reported frequency of the use of Vlach (Figure 3) is not significant ( $F = .125, p = .316$ ). However, this disagrees with the rest of the results as well as with the information obtained from interviews and observations, a discrepancy which suggests that the girls may have over-reported their use of Vlach more than the boys (also see Figure 4).

Data (which I have no space to present) have shown a trend with boys having a slightly more positive attitude towards Vlach and its possible maintenance in comparison to girls. An interesting point appears as we witness a change in the attitudes of female adolescents in comparison to those demonstrated by younger girls; the older ones come out as more negative than the younger ones. An explanation could be that by growing older, the two genders become aware of the social roles pre-set for them. Female adolescents, by disengaging themselves in some ways from the connotations of

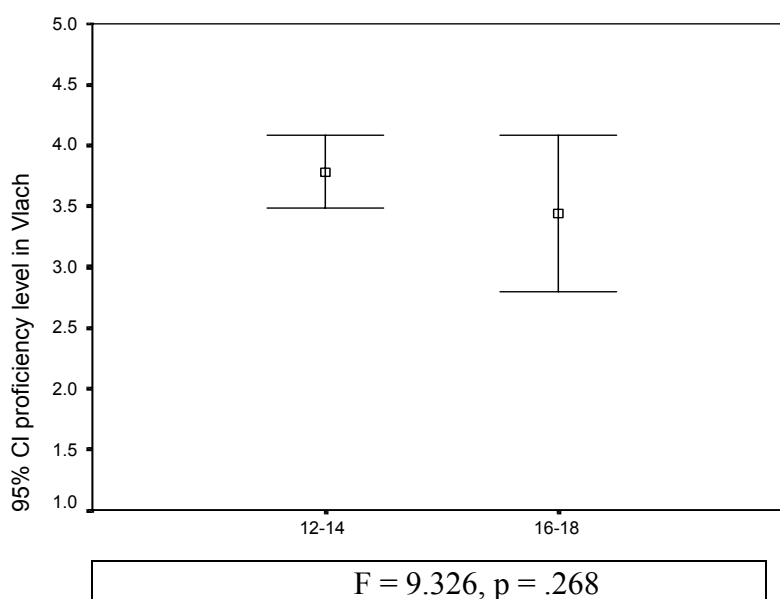
Vlachness and the traditional ways of life, social roles and expectations already existing for them, express a need and desire to define themselves quite differently from the local community's expectations. Papazachariou (1998) in his research on variation in intonation among adolescents in Goumenissa (northern Greece) offers similar explanations regarding gender variation and the negotiation of social identity. The findings shown below (Tables 1 & 2, Figure 5) support this trend and explanation. Statistical tests I conducted purely exploratorily on the different sub-age-groups, namely, adolescents who attend Gymnasio (12-14 years old) and adolescents who attend Lykeio (15-18 years old) revealed interesting patterns.

**Table 1.** Crosstabulation: Age by Mother Tongue

<i>Age</i>		<i>12-14</i>	<i>16-18</i>
<i>Mother Tongue</i>	Vlach	9%	0%
	Greek	82%	94%
	Vlach and Greek	9%	6%
p = .345 (not significant)			

**Table 2.** Crosstabulation: Age by “Do you speak Vlach?”

<i>Age</i>		<i>12-14</i>	<i>16-18</i>
<i>Do you speak Vlach?</i>	Yes	94%	78%
	No	6%	22%
Fisher’s Exact Test (1-sided) p = .11 (not significant)			



**Figure 5.** Age by Proficiency in Vlach

Results yielded by answers to questions on attitudes towards Vlach lend support to the same tendency. Younger adolescents exhibit a trend of viewing Vlach somewhat more favourably. In most cases, the differences in attitudes between the two age subgroups of adolescents are statistically insignificant. Their relatively favourable attitude may be interpreted in two ways. Answers of the older adolescents (students of Lykeio) could be seen as revealing a higher degree of social consciousness. Late adolescence (Lykeio stage) comes out as a key point in the linguistic dispositions and attitudes. It is a route leading to a model which approaches that exhibited by adults, with stronger pragmatic tendency as to the usefulness of Vlach in relation to Greek. The tendency of identifying with Vlach even on an emotive basis appears to shrink in late adolescents and more markedly so in the case of females. A possible explanation could be that approaching adulthood increases social awareness. Another interpretation, which seems less plausible and realistic, is to suppose that things have changed so radically for younger children, i.e. that they know and speak more Vlach than the older ones. Observations, participant observations and reports by parents, family, teachers and siblings do not support such an explanation. Social conditions where these younger children live do not favour Vlach more than the social conditions of the older adolescents. Although there have been reports and observations which show that there is scope for change in attitudes towards a more favourable orientation for Vlach, considering the present social setting wherein Vlach and Greek are situated, it seems difficult to expect that young children and adolescents will use Vlach significantly more as they grow up, to an extent that would affect the sociolinguistic scene of Metsovo to a significant degree; more so, when the core of speakers of Vlach, namely those over 40 years old, will have passed away.

#### 4. Conclusive remarks

Focusing on the lives of the children of different ages and their development towards adulthood has allowed us to detect some patterns of variation in linguistic habits, knowledge and attitudes within the child population of Metsovo. It has also allowed us to feel the heartbeat of Vlach. The signs emitted by the young in Metsovo are not promising. It could not be claimed that positive attitudes exhibited at a theoretical level are adequate for the continuation of Vlach when all else does not support its maintenance. However, detailed research is necessary on the actual speech and language mixing (Vlach-Greek), before any strong predictions can be made about the future of Vlach.

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