

Jason and the argot: land where Greek's ancient language survives

An isolated community near the Black Sea coast in a remote part of north-eastern Turkey has been found to speak a Greek dialect that is remarkably close to the extinct language of ancient Greece.

As few as 5,000 people speak the dialect but linguists believe that it is the closest, living language to ancient Greek and could provide an unprecedented insight into the language of Socrates and Plato and how it evolved.

The community lives in a cluster of villages near the Turkish city of Trabzon in what was once the ancient region of Pontus, a Greek colony that Jason and the Argonauts are supposed to have visited on their epic journey from Thessaly to recover the Golden Fleece from the land of Colchis (present-day Georgia). Pontus was also supposed to be the kingdom of the mythical Amazons, a fierce tribe of women who cut off their right breasts in order to handle their bows better in battle.

Linguists found that the dialect, Romeyka, a variety of Pontic Greek, has structural similarities to ancient Greek that are not observed in other forms of the language spoken today. Romeyka's vocabulary also has parallels with the ancient language.

Ioanna Sitaridou, a lecturer in romance philology at the University of Cambridge, said: "Romeyka preserves an impressive number of grammatical traits that add an ancient Greek flavour to the dialect's structure, traits that have been completely lost from other modern Greek varieties.

"Use of the infinitive has been lost in all other Greek dialects known today – so speakers of Modern Greek would say 'I wasn't able that I go' instead of 'I wasn't able to go'. But, in Romeyka, not only is the infinitive preserved, but we also find quirky infinitival constructions that have never been observed before – only in the Romance languages are there parallel constructions."

The villagers who speak Romeyka, which has no written form, show other signs of geographic and cultural isolation. They rarely marry outside their own community and they play a folk music on a special instrument, called a kemenje in Turkish and Romeyka or lyra as it is called in Greek, Dr Sitaridou said. "I only know of one man who married outside his own village," she said. "The music is distinctive and cannot be mistaken for anything else. It is clearly unique to the speakers of Romeyka."

One possibility is that Romeyka speakers today are the direct descendants of ancient Greeks who lived along the Black Sea coast millennia ago – perhaps going back to the 6th or 7th centuries BC when the area was first colonised. But it is also possible that they may be the descendants of indigenous people or an immigrant tribe who were encouraged or forced to speak the language of the ancient Greek colonisers. Romeykas-speakers today are devout Muslims, so they were allowed to stay in Turkey after the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, when some two million Christians and Muslims were exchanged between Greece and Turkey. Repeated waves of emigration, the dominant influence of the Turkish-speaking majority, and the complete absence of Romeyka from the public arena, have now put it on the list of the world's most endangered languages.

"With as few as 5,000 speakers left in the area, before long, Romeyka could be more of a heritage language than a living vernacular. With its demise would go an unparalleled opportunity to unlock how the Greek language has evolved," said Dr Sitaridou. "Imagine if we could speak to individuals whose grammar is closer to the language of the past. Not only could we map out a new grammar of a contemporary dialect but we could also understand some forms of the language of the past. This is the opportunity that Romeyka presents us with." Studies of the grammar of Romeyka show that it shares a startling number of similarities with Koine Greek of Hellenistic and Roman times, which was spoken at the height of Greek influence across Asia Minor between the 4th century BC to the 4th century AD. Modern Greek, meanwhile, has undergone considerable changes from its ancient counterpart, and is thought to have emerged from the later Medieval Greek spoken between the 7th and 13th Centuries AD – so-called Byzantine Greek. Future research will try to assess how Pontic Greek from the Black Sea coast evolved over the centuries. "We know that Greek has been continuously spoken in Pontus since ancient times and can surmise that its geographic isolation from the rest of the Greek-speaking world is an important factor in why the language is as it is today," Dr Sitaridou said. "What we don't yet know is whether Romeyka emerged in exactly the same way as other Greek dialects but later developed its own unique characteristics which just happen to resemble archaic Greek.

Many of the world's languages are disappearing as once-isolated populations become part of the global economy, with children failing to learn the language of their grandparents and instead using the dominant language of the majority population, which in this part of the world is Turkish. "In Pontus, we have near-perfect experimental conditions to assess what may be gained and what may be lost as a result of language contact," Dr Sitaridou said.

Steve Connor



POLICE REPORT

Man and woman charged after police pursuit – Sydney

Two people have been arrested and charged after leading police on a pursuit through numerous Sydney suburbs early yesterday morning (Monday 23 May).

Police stopped a Mitsubishi Lancer at Waratah Street, Rushcutters Bay, about 12.45am for the purpose of a random breath test.

The male driver returned a negative result but left the area before being permitted to do so, and police initiated a pursuit.

The car was driven through the city and on to Parramatta Road, travelling through numerous suburbs, including Camperdown, Petersham, Burwood and Auburn, with police following.

The pursuit was terminated by police due to the dangerous manner of driving.

Just after 1am, police patrolling Parramatta noticed the vehicle at the intersection of the Great Western Highway and Woodville Road, and another pursuit was initiated assisted by Polair.

The car then stopped at Woodville Road, Merrylands, and a man and woman were arrested and taken to Parramatta Police Station. During a search of the car, police allegedly seized 22 tablets believed to be prohibited drugs and other items.

A 30-year-old man has been charged with police pursuit – not stop – drive recklessly (Skye's Law), disqualified driver, drive unregistered vehicle, drive uninsured vehicle and Supply Prohibited Drugs. He was refused bail to appear at Parramatta Local Court today.

A 27-year-old woman was charged with drug offences and owner permit drive unregistered and uninsured vehicles. She was bailed to appear at Parramatta Local Court on the 29 June 2011.

Drug Squad issue CCTV footage after large-scale pharmaceutical theft – Kingsgrove

Drug Squad detectives have issued CCTV footage as part of a renewed appeal for information into the alleged large-scale theft of pharmaceutical drugs from Kingsgrove in March.

Between 2pm on Saturday 5 March 2011 and 3pm Sunday 6 March, a number of people entered a business on Garema Circuit and took more than 50kg of pseudoephedrine and 67kg of codeine.

Pseudoephedrine may be used as a precursor in the manufacture of the illicit drug methylamphetamine; the quantity of pseudoephedrine stolen has the potential to produce many kilograms of this drug.

Pseudoephedrine and codeine in raw form are both prohibited drugs and the possession and supply of these items and severe penalties apply under the Drugs Misuse and Trafficking Act.

Strike Force Hyperno comprises detectives from the State Crime Command's Drug Squad and Campsie Local Area Command and was established to investigate this incident.

Today's CCTV footage shows three men who may be able to assist with the investi-

gation; investigators are appealing to anyone who may have seen them in the vicinity of the business around the time of the incident, to contact detectives.

Detectives also wish to speak with anyone who witnessed any suspicious activity in the vicinity of Garema Circuit at Kingsgrove either at the time, or over the weekend following the incident.

Anyone with information is urged to contact Strike Force Hyperno detectives or Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

Police search for missing woman – La Perouse

Police in Sydney's south-east are conducting a search for an elderly woman reported missing from her Hillsdale home.

The 66-year-old woman left her Jauncey Place residence about 6pm (Sunday 22 May).

She has not been seen or heard from since. Police from Botany Bay Local Area Command were alerted to her disappearance and inquiries commenced.

Concerns are held for the woman's welfare as she has been suffering from depression. As a result of information received, a search of the coastline around La Perouse was launched about 9.30am today.

The search involves police from Eastern Beaches LAC, the Dog Unit, Rescue Squad, Public Order and Riot Squad, Polair and Marine Area Command.

The woman's been described as being of Caucasian appearance, 175cm tall, 65kg with a thin build and blonde/grey shoulder-length hair. She was last seen wearing a red cardigan, floral knee-length skirt and yellow raincoat.

Anyone who sees the woman or has information about her current whereabouts is urged to contact Maroubra Police Station via Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

Elderly man dies after being found with stab wounds following home break-in - Bourke

An elderly man has died after he was found in his home with a number of stab wounds following a suspected break-in at Bourke in the state's Far West.

About 9.30am on Saturday 21 May 2011, Police and other emergency services attended a home in Becker Street after an 81-year-old man was found suffering a number of stab wounds.

He was taken to hospital for treatment and later airlifted to Dubbo Hospital in a critical condition; however, he died about 9am today.

Investigators are examining reports a man of Aboriginal appearance attended the elderly man's home and demanded money before stabbing him.

Investigators would like to speak to anyone with information about the incident, or who witnessed a male, described only as being aged in his 20s or 30s and of Aboriginal appearance, acting suspiciously in the vicinity of Becker Street about 9.00am on Saturday. Anyone with information about the incident is asked to contact Bourke Police or Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

**ANY PERSON WHO CAN ASSIST SHOULD CONTACT
CRIME STOPPERS ON 1800 333 000**