

EXCLUSIVELY TO "Ο ΚΟΣΜΟΣ" ABOUT THE FUTURE OF MODERN GREEK IN AUSTRALIA



WHO IS WHO

B.A. Hons. Linguistics and Modern English Language (Lancaster University, UK), MA European Master's degree in Linguistics (University of Manchester, UK; Freie Universität, Germany), Ph.D. Linguistics (Lancaster University, UK)

Dr Efrosini Deligianni's research interests bifurcate into two major pathways, one under Theoretical and one under Applied Linguistics, which largely intersect. Within the former, she is mostly driven towards research on language change, discourse pragmatics and cognitive-linguistic processing. Her future research aspirations predominantly lie with a cognitive neuroscience of language (e.g. fundamental cognitive processes of Second Language Acquisition (or SLA)). Within the later, she plans to pursue research in SLA and in the development of interactive foreign language teaching material for Greek (Classical & Modern). Her non-academic work experience revolves around foreign language teaching (English; Ancient and Modern Greek) and translation (English to Modern Greek and vice versa). During her previous placement at a research organization in Cyprus, the Cyprus Neuroscience and Technology Institute (CNTI), she was actively involved in the organization and implementation of EU-funded programs in Educational Technology, Global Education and Youth Activism.

As a postgraduate student, she was awarded the Mont Follick Fund, for research on Classical languages.

Yes, but the fact is that we are now somewhat recognized in Australia and there is a very substantial Greek community. I'd like to believe that at least in this context, Greek is not a dead language. It does however operate in an environment that is somewhat undermined by English, but ... The key to the solution of this problem is our culture. There are many people who when exposed even to a single aspect of Greek culture, they automatically begin to care more about the language and try to learn a lot more of it. A classic example was the Aboriginal student, which was somehow exposed to Greek culture, appreciated what she saw and that become her motivation to learn the Greek language, thus excelling in this year's HSC.

But when we talk about this particular student, we are talking about a conscious decision to learn Greek. Do you think that many of your students feel pressure from their external environment, so regard the learning of the Greek language as a chore?

In some cases this is true. Although judging by my experience so far, I must say that I have not come across a situation like that. I feel that all students who attend our lectures, do it solely because they feel this connection with Greece and want to somehow maintain this contact. When I read questionnaires they have filled out, it's obvious to me that they want to be able to communicate with his grandparents, or with friends and relative when they visit Greece. There are also some that want to work in Greece at some point in their life. If we can overcome some specific problems - for example, that I come from a different environment - we will be able to do a good job. Already the first signs are evident.

The concern however regarding the teaching of Greek in Australia is not only permanently present, but also a growing one. From your own experience, are there ways to deal with the decline of numbers of students?

First let me talk about my own experience. I thought the level of Greek in Australia would have been very low. I thought there would be much more serious problems. But I saw there is a dynamic here and a lot of interest in the language. Then I realized there is a general concern amongst all universities that there is no interest amongst students to the point where they are worried whether or not they will be able to maintain the Greek departments in the long term..

But this is a multi-factorial issue, you can not say that there is a specific reason that has led us here. First there's the business aspect: most people use different criteria and therefore there is a growing problem not only for languages in general, but also in all theoretical subjects, because they are not directly related to establish long term careers. At the same time, we are talking about a country like Australia where there is no immediate need - nor is there the necessary background-for learning foreign languages. In the case of Greek, we are referring to a language that requires great effort and one that cannot be learned by

people there worked there in the past. So I joined the class having my own perceptions of what is needed for this particular position, how can I help students, etc. Unfortunately, the first few months were spent on getting to grips with all that. In other words, finding out who my students were, what they need from me and how I can help them without imposing my own ideas about what exactly they need, both in terms of language and culture. In their vast majority my students are of Greek origin, and therefore have the relevant background. Of course I had never before had contact with the Greeks of the diaspora, so ...

The beginning of the new year found you better prepared, I presume.

Clearly, I started teaching just a week after my arrival in Sydney. Now I'm in a much better position, I have begun to understand the space around me and strive for the best. Sometimes I manage, others I can make the wrong choices, just like one would expect. I hope that as time passes, things will improve. What I realized was that I needed to give my students the opportunity to tell me themselves what their needs are. I use several questionnaires to tell me what was their experience of the Greek language was and how the lessons will work best for

them. On the other hand, foreign students who do not have a Greek background and just attend some Greek lesclasses are more positive, appreciate the effort and are all on the same level. While in our class there are people with very different experiences and it is really very difficult to be able to hold their attention throughout the duration of the course. There are some with very little experience with the Greek language and some fairly advanced. I think this is the biggest problem we are facing.

Are the lessons taught in Greek or English?

It all depends. In the course of this semester I use mainly English as most of students are beginners. There is a girl from India, one from Vietnam and another from the Philippines. So I cannot use Greek on a permanent basis, but I still do as much as possible.

What are the main reasons that would make someone choose these courses?

There are two language courses: the Introductory Greek A and B Introductory Greek, as well as Greek Mythology. They are all optional subjects. Especially the lessons on Greek mythology are very popular amongst students of all classes, usually

second year-or higher. Those who want to continue working at a senior level with the Greek language, there is a collaboration with the University of Sydney. At UNSW they are purely optional courses aimed at people who want to maintain a contact with the Greek language and culture.

But can these courses help students in their career once they finish university?

Unfortunately this is one of the biggest problems we face. The students themselves put that into consideration, realizing that other options would offer much more-although there are so many Greek students at UNSW, very few choose these subjects. Perhaps there is a direct relationship with finding appropriate employment but the knowledge of languages is always a very important asset that cannot go unnoticed. What students gain, especially those who have a Greek background, is that they retain a basic relationship with the language and culture. I think if we find appropriate ways to approach them, then there will be more interest.

But whether we like it or not, Greek is one of the so-called «dead languages» which makes the work of those engaged in its teaching extremely difficult.