

Romeyka heritage in contemporary Turkey: socio-linguistic explorations of endangerment and preservation

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With Erol Sağlam

The Romeyka Project (<https://www.romeyka.org/>) aims to document and preserve an endangered Greek variety, Romeyka, that is spoken in rural Trabzon, northeastern Turkey (Karadeniz), and diaspora communities. The language displays intriguing linguistic archaisms and idiosyncrasies that might radically alter our articulations of the phylogeny of the Greek language. Spoken uninterruptedly for centuries in secluded villages, Romeyka has been discreetly preserved to this day in an area known for its staunch Turkish nationalism. However, the discreet preservation of Romeyka seems to be no longer viable due to waning intergenerational transmission.

The Romeyka-speaking villages in the Of valley in the Trabzon region emerged as Christian Orthodox settlements in the fifteenth century following the Ottoman takeover of Trabzon in 1461; these villages are the primary location of my research. The valley underwent gradual Islamisation and a Muslim majority was consolidated by the seventeenth to eighteenth century. Conventionally, a linguistic shift to Turkish accompanied the Islamisation of communities across Asia Minor, but these communities in the Trabzon region have instead retained Romeyka to this day. With religion as the only criterion of the Graeco-Turkish population exchange of 1923, Greek-speaking Christians of the Pontus were forced to leave Turkey while Romeyka-speaking Muslim communities remained, which explains the modern-day presence of the Greek variety in the region. Today, Romeyka is spoken in a number of valley systems across the Trabzon area (Çaykara, Tonya and Sürmene) as well as in major Turkish cities (such as Istanbul and Bursa) and diasporic settings across Europe (such as Berlin, Paris and Brussels), due to migration over several decades. Despite the lack of a written form and dependence on oral transmission across generations, Romeyka continues to permeate local culture and intracommunal/intrafamilial relations, especially for the secluded rural communities across the elevated valleys of Trabzon. And yet, Romeyka has been rather invisible in public and is severely endangered due to a diminishing number of speakers both in Turkey and Europe. Communities refrain – at least openly – from identifying with the language out of fear that their heritage might be perceived as antagonistic to their Turkish-Muslim identity.

Romeyka presents a unique yet fragile window through which to explore the genealogy of Greek language in general and in Asia Minor in particular. While so-called Pontic Greek varieties (spoken by Christians in the region prior to the 1920s)

have been analysed extensively, Romeyka varieties in the Of valley, where the most archaic sub-dialects are spoken, have never been studied, documented or analysed, apart from some limited attempts. Before Peter Mackridge collected data from Sarahos in the Of valley in 1983, the only other scholars to visit the area were Ioannis Parharidis in 1876 and R.M. Dawkins in 1914. My first visit to Çaykara was in 2008, and a year later I carried out my first field trip to the village of Anasta.

Thanks to subsequent field trips, I was able to put forward a daring proposal: that the Romeyka infinitive must have descended directly from Hellenistic Greek, at least 500 years earlier than previously thought. Currently, I am working towards putting forward a rather unconventional and challenging hypothesis that might rewrite the metanarrative of the historical evolution of the Greek language. I intend to argue that Romeyka/Pontic Greek constitutes a separate branch of Greek within the Greek language family – not a ‘daughter’ of medieval/modern Greek, but rather a ‘sister’ – similar to the relationship between the Romance languages, which derive from a common source rather than from each other.

But how did it all start?

When I was invited to give a talk on the syntax of medieval Ibero-Romance infinitives at the University of Oxford in January 2006, Peter Mackridge was in the audience. It occurred to him that I might be interested in investigating the infinitive in Romeyka. Until that day, I had never heard of Romeyka, let alone the preservation of the Greek infinitive in today’s Anatolia. In the eleven years since my first field trip, I have published nineteen articles and book chapters, delivered 27 conference papers, been invited to give 52 talks across the globe, organised an exhibition about Romeyka in Istanbul, delivered six workshops on Romeyka, produced a video which has had more than half a million views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcAYP4irSyQ#https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UcAYP4irSyQ>) and obtained eight research grants, including three fellowships (at Princeton, Harvard and Sorbonne 3). Intellectually, I have had some very intense moments, yet what I will never forget is my first day in the village. I arrived during a funeral, and felt as if I had gone on a voyage back through time, to my own grandfather’s funeral many years previously. It was the first of many memorable experiences in the village and each has delivered a stronger dose of adrenalin, curiosity and love. I have received so much affection from the locals, for which I shall be grateful forever.



The author with Romeyka-speakers in the *parharae* (*yayla*).

Through knowledge exchange and provision of bias-free spaces, as was the case with the Romeyka-language exhibition in Istanbul in September 2019, Romeyka speakers and the wider public are empowered to reflect on heritage and language preservation, identity and cultural memory. My work demonstrates an interesting and counter-intuitive policy point, namely that raising the status of minority/heritage languages and cultures in a society can actually aid social integration, in direct counterpoint to the ideology underpinning nationalism. Nevertheless, Romeyka faces extinction and we must act urgently if this intangible piece of the cultural heritage of Trabzon is to be preserved.

Thanks to the British Institute at Ankara, a new and exciting phase of research on the sociolinguistic dynamics currently surrounding Romeyka will start as soon as the impact of COVID-19 lessens.

Erol Sağlam (Istanbul Medeniyet University), my research collaborator, and I plan to conduct structured interviews with Romeyka-heritage families in Istanbul, Ankara and Bursa. The research aims to understand heritage-speakers' relationship with the language and to document grammatical innovations so that we can assess language contact and hence the parameters of the language's endangerment. We will compare interview data from these urban heritage-speakers with the ethnographic datasets already collected from rural Trabzon (Çaykara). This will allow us to comprehend: the vitality/endangerment of Romeyka heritage in the Black Sea region and cities of contemporary Turkey; the causes of the differing trajectories of Romeyka in the rural settlements of Trabzon and urban

centres; and the most feasible preservation measures. The data yielded will be analysed through interdisciplinary collaborations and the findings will be shared in scholarly articles and a booklet.

This BIAA-funded research pursues linguistic and sociocultural questions. What can the diverging linguistic patterns of rural and urban Romeyka-heritage communities (across generations, genders, sociocultural status and occupations) tell us about contact-induced change and its implications for syntax? How is the language shift to Turkish accelerated in urban settings? Why is intergenerational transmission of Romeyka hindered in urban settings? Is Romeyka destined for extinction due to urbanisation? How do people engage with Romeyka heritage and construe its connection to Greek heritage? Which sociocultural practices (such as agriculture, transhumance, folk songs, etc) are more essential to the preservation of Romeyka in Trabzon? Are they absent from urban settings? How does their translocation or discontinuity affect revitalisation strategies?

Attending to these questions in an interdisciplinary manner in collaboration with Erol, who has conducted anthropological research in the area, will enable us to diagnose sociolinguistic perceptions and practices that undermine the vitality of Romeyka and, drawing on our findings, design strategies to forestall the extinction of Romeyka in the near future.

Nonetheless, it will be up to the Romeyka speakers themselves as to whether we have heard the last on the Greek infinitive or not.