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Bilingual and multilingual students of Greek universities: Skills, fields of use and attitude toward Greek and other languages in use

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Περίληψη

Δίγλωσσοι και πολύγλωσσοι φοιτητές ελληνικών πανεπιστημίων: Δεξιότητες, πεδία χρήσης και στάση έναντι της Ελληνικής και των άλλων εν χρήσει γλωσσών

Στα ελληνικά/ελληνόφωνα ακαδημαϊκά ιδρύματα σήμερα φοιτούν ποικίλης προέλευσης δίγλωσσοι/πολύγλωσσοι φοιτητές με την ελληνική ως πρώτη, δεύτερη, τρίτη ή τέταρτη γλώσσα. Μέλημα της παρούσας μελέτης είναι, αρχικά, μία πρώτη χαρτογράφηση των ποικίλων αυτών δίγλωσσων/πολύγλωσσων νέων και των γλωσσών τους και, ακολούθως, η μελέτη των πεδίων χρήσης των γλωσσών τους εντός και εκτός πανεπιστημίου, των στάσεων έναντι των γλωσσών τους καθώς και η αποτύπωση των ταυτοτήτων που διαμορφώνουν οι νέοι αυτοί. Απώτερος στόχος είναι η διερεύνηση του

εάν και κατά πόσον η φοίτηση σε ελληνόφωνο ακαδημαϊκό ίδρυμα μπορεί να λειτουργήσει ως κίνητρο γλωσσικής και κοινωνικής ένταξης στην ελληνική/ελληνόφωνη πραγματικότητα.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά

(δι)πολύγλωσσοι φοιτητές/απόφοιτοι, χρήσεις γλωσσών, στάσεις, ταυτότητες, ένταξη

1 Introduction

The present study is part of a wider research which aspires to investigate the language uses and attitudes of bilingual/multilingual students and graduates of Greek universities. More specifically, this research aims at investigating the impact of higher education on the use of languages by multilingual students, since we believe uses and attitudes to be a crucial factor for actively integrating them into the Greek-speaking society. Thus, this research is primarily a first mapping of bilingual young people's diverse backgrounds and languages, the characteristics of their sociolinguistic behavior as well as an attempt to record the identities they form.

2. Methodology

This research is quantitative¹, with a random reference group of students and graduates, targeting only those students/graduates who have the profile of a bilingual/multilingual speaker. In order to describe the above parameters, we addressed an anonymous, accessible online questionnaire (described next) [<https://forms.gle/WcSQpuumyiHbiyjd7>] (December 2020 - May 2021).

2.1 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire contains a total of 86 questions/variables of both closed and open format. Closed-end questions produced quantitative data which were analysed through descriptive statistical analysis and the absolute and relative frequencies of all variables were studied. Open-ended questions, interview questions, produced both quantitative and qualitative data which, precisely because of the random -but also "targeted"-

¹q. v. also in Kontogianni *et al.* (2014) qualitative research with a population reference group of students with an immigrant background at the University of Crete.

sample, we tried to group as much as possible, so as to specify the participants' subjective experiences and perceptions.

The questionnaire was completed by students and/or graduates of various Departments from almost all Universities and geographical regions in the country, with a greater concentration in Athens and Thessaloniki. 229 participants made up the final sample of this study.

For the scope of our research, we rely on the theoretical background of *intercultural communication ability and intercultural literacy* (Chatzistiriou & Xenophonos, 2014, Byram 1997, Byram & Nichols & Stevens 2001, Bernaus *et al*, 1997, Heyward, 2002), which is defined as a set of perceptions, skills, attitudes, language proficiency, participatory behavior and identities of the individual. We try - both quantitatively and qualitatively- to explore those elements that delimit and shape the intercultural literacy of the bilingual/multilingual students who answered our questionnaire. Our effort is focused on the ultimate goal of exploring how language and social identity (of the specific research subjects) are interconnected, always on the precept that they study at a Greek university, given that each person's "social identity" and "nationality" are based, to a large extent, on language and are maintained throughout it (Edwards 1985, Georgogiannis 1989, Georgogiannis 1996).

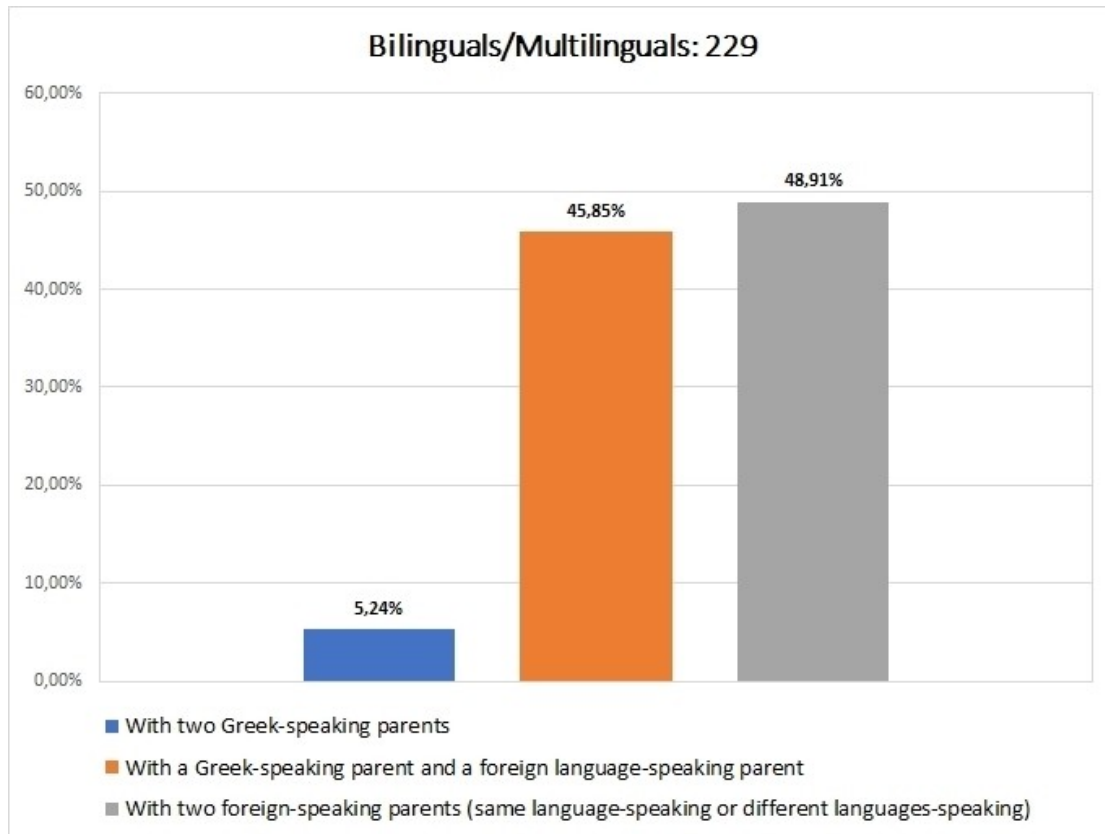
In this study, we will refer only to those questions (5 closed-ended questions and 6 open-ended questions) that concern three particularly important axes:

- The development of language skills in Greek
- the fields of use of Greek and other languages stated as 'mother tongue'/'first' and/or 'second' or 'third' languages in communication conditions inside and outside university and
- the participants' attitude toward their bilingualism both during childhood and today.

2.2 *The participants*

Our participant sample includes young, second-generation immigrants who have mostly received Greek-language schooling, youth from the Muslim Minority of Thrace as well as the Greek Orthodox Minority of Constantinople who have attended bilingual minority schools, children of Greek emigrants to Europe, Canada, USA or Australia, as well as young people from foreign language-speaking families settled in Greece, with a disparate educational background. These bilingual/multilingual young people might have Greek as their 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th language.

The above variety of bilinguals has led us to the conclusion that participants should be distinguished into three major groups: bilinguals/multilinguals with two Greek-speaking parents, bilinguals/multilinguals with a single Greek-speaking parent and bilinguals/multilinguals with two foreign-speaking parents (the two of them speaking the same or a different language). An analysis in this respect yielded the results shown in Graph 1.



Graph 1: Grouping of bilingual/multilingual students as to whether or not their parents speak the same language

From the above, it is evident that bilingual/multilingual students owe their multilingualism mainly to the family core and far less to the wider social environment: their vast majority have been raised by two foreign language-speaking parents.

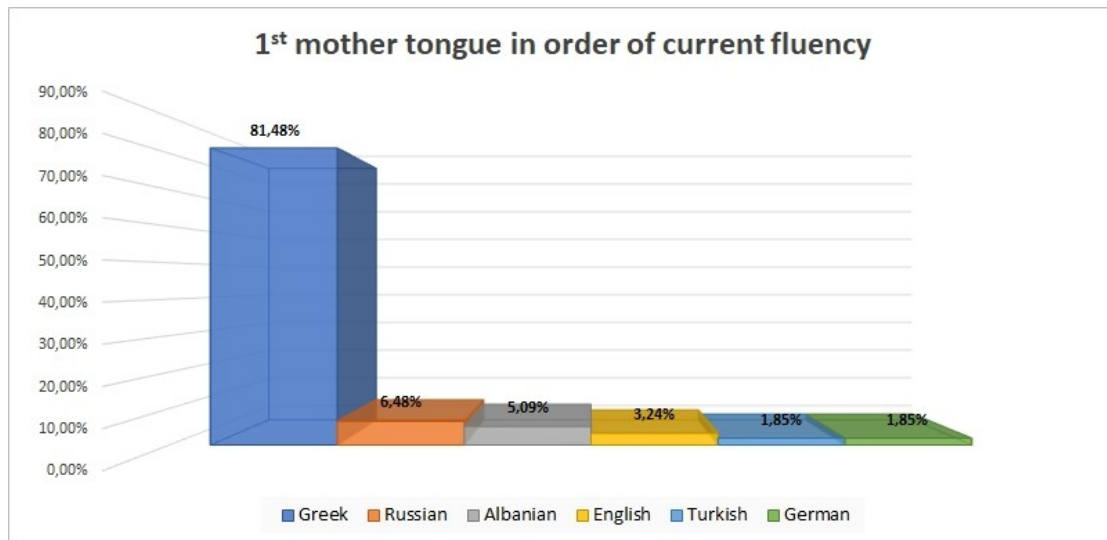
3 Mother tongues/First languages: fluency and the standing of greek language

First we present the languages which the bilinguals/multilinguals themselves classify as 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th languages in terms of how fluent they consider themselves in each of these languages.

3.1 Languages according to the participants' estimated current fluency

We observe Greek occupies the highest percentage as the 1st mother tongue, with the following languages lagging far behind: Russian, Albanian, English, German and

Turkish. Also, in smaller percentages, are: Italian, Arabic, Armenian, Vlach, French, Georgian, Ukrainian, Spanish, Hungarian, and Tajik.



Graph 2: 1st mother tongue with current fluency

Among the second most fluent languages those with the highest percentages are Albanian, Greek, German, English, Russian (Graph 3). Other second most fluent languages that scored lower percentages are French, the Pontic dialect, Armenian, Vlach, Georgian, Romanian, Turkish, Spanish, Polish, Uyghur, Italian, Moldavian, Hebrew, Belarusian, Dutch, Uzbek and Urdu.



Graph 3: 2nd mother tongue with current fluency

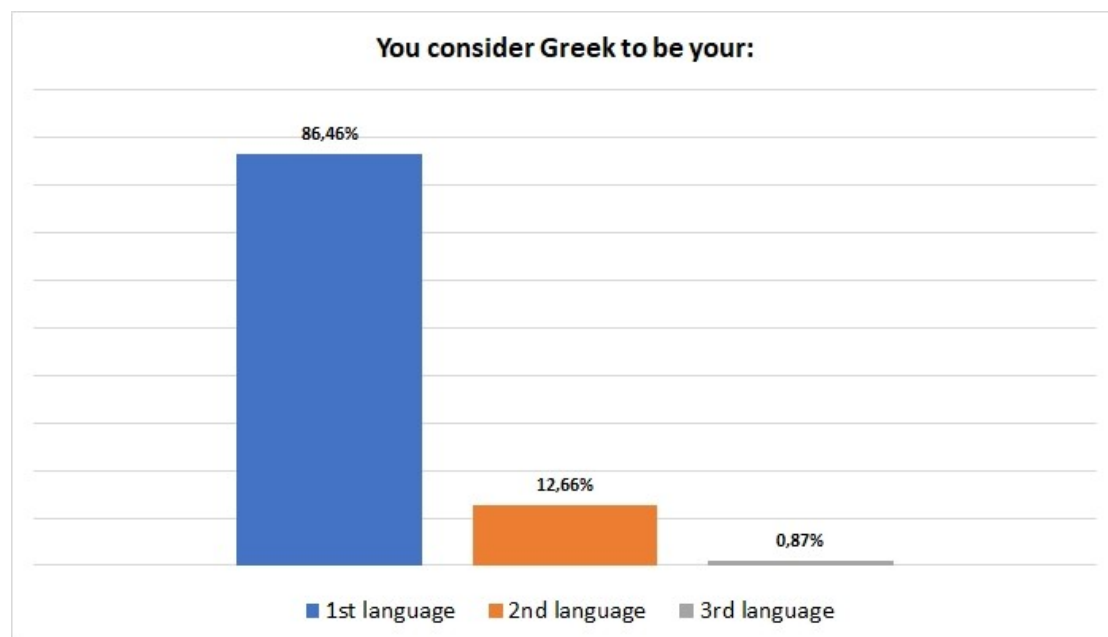
The following were stated as 3rd languages (in descending order according to the number of speakers): Albanian, French, Greek, Uzbek, Ukrainian, as well as (by a sole participant), English, Arabic, Armenian, Bashkir, Persian, Pontic Greek, Russian, Swedish, and Turkish.

The following were recorded as the 4th language: French, Franco-Provençal, Greek, Italian and Ukrainian.

We find that Greek, thanks to the Greek-speaking environment in which bilingual/multilingual students live and grow, is considered by the vast majority of participants as the first language of fluency, while ‘traditional’ languages of immigrants (Albanian, Russian, etc.) as well as the languages of the Greek immigrants’ children (German, English, French) emerge as 2nd or 3rd languages, with much higher percentages than those of languages declared as 1st in terms of fluency.

3.2 *The standing of Greek in the language repertoire of bilingual/multilingual students*

In the general question “Today, do you consider Greek to be your: a) 1st language b) 2nd language c) 3rd language d) 4th language?”, the vast majority of participants characterize Greek as their 1st language, and in significantly smaller percentages, Greek is stated as 2nd, as 3rd and as 4th (2 speakers).



Graph 4: Assessment of the current position of Greek as a 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th language

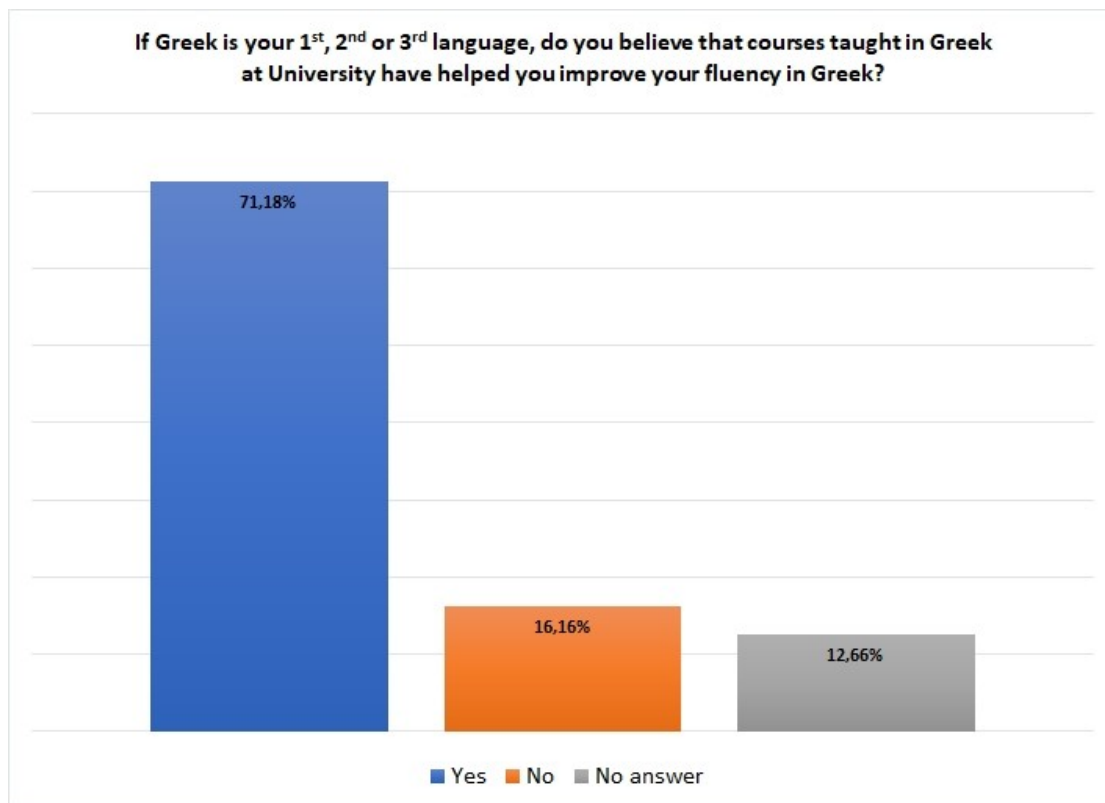
We conclude that the percentage of participants who believe Greek is their first language is higher than those who state it as the 1st language of current fluency which means that Greek, regardless of fluency, holds the first place in the bilingual/multilingual students’ language repertoire.²

² It should be noted that, due to both the speakers’ and the scientific community’s multifaceted perception regarding the definition of “mother tongue” (Sella-Mazi, 2016), there is no mention of “(one) mother tongue” in the questionnaire, but of “mother tongues” or for “1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th languages”.

4 Studies in Greek-speaking universities and language skills in Greek

Another consideration in this study is whether and to what extent attending Greek-speaking academic courses significantly enhanced -or not- the use of Greek in general, as well as the proficiency in the comprehension and production of oral and written Greek.

The research data analysis shows that, according to the vast majority of bilingual (multilingual) students, university courses in Greek contribute strongly to the improvement in the use of Greek, while only a smaller percentage do not believe so (Graph 5).



Graph 5: Assessment of the improvement of fluency in Greek through Greek-speaking courses

Regarding the individual language skills (written and oral speech comprehension and production), and whether attending a Greek-speaking university can help improve the use of Greek and to what extent, findings provide the following detailed data:

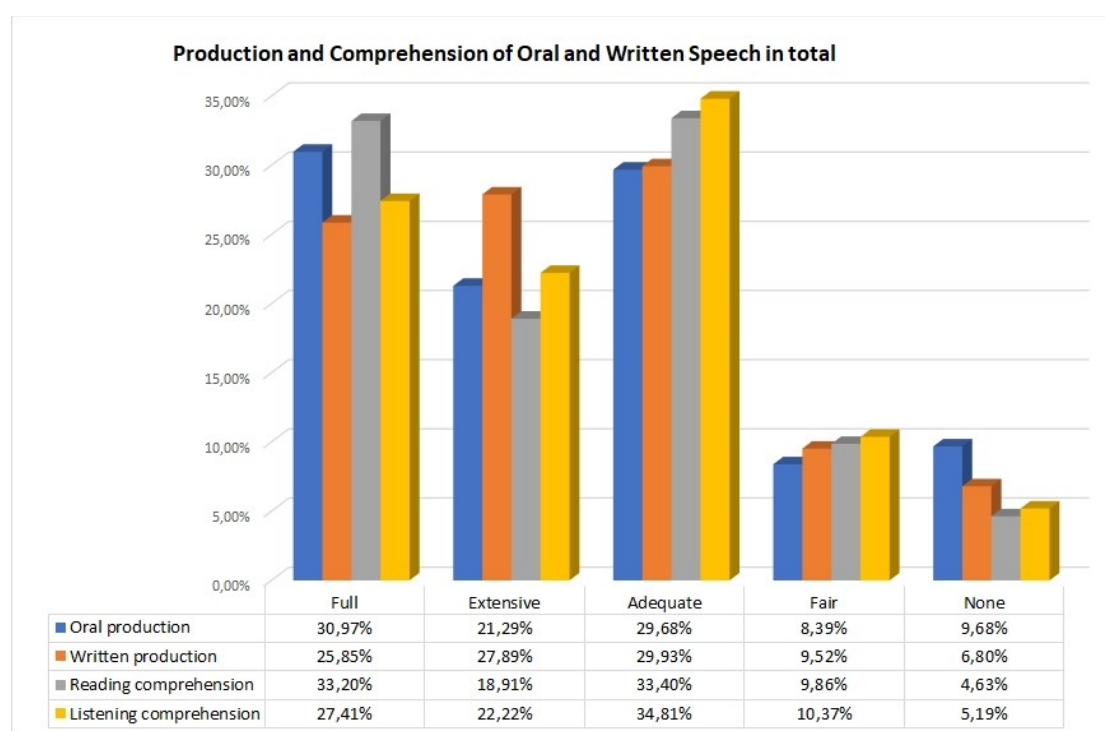
52.11% of bilingual/multilingual students believe courses taught in Greek have helped “extremely or a lot” in improving *comprehension of written* Greek; a percentage of more than 1/3 states “enough” and a much smaller percentage “little” to “not at all”.

49.63% believe Greek language courses have helped them to improve *comprehension of oral speech* “extremely or a lot”; a percentage of more than 1/3 states “enough”, while much smaller percentages were found for “little” to “not at all”.

52.26% believe Greek language courses have helped them to improve *written Greek production* “extremely or a lot”; a percentage of less than 1/3 indicates “enough”, and there were much lower percentages for “little” to “not at all”.

Regarding the improvement of *oral speech production*, 53.74% of bilingual/multilingual students consider Greek language courses to have helped them “quite or very much”, a percentage of less than 1/3 states “fairly”, while and “little” to “not at all” answers were found in much lower percentages.

A benchmarking of the improvement in Greek due to studying at Greek universities according to the participants’ estimates is illustrated in the following graph:



Graph 6: Improvement in Greek due to studying at Greek universities according to the participants’ estimates

The results show that more than half of the bilingual/multilingual students have almost equally strengthened all the language macro skills by attending Greek courses. However, if we add the first three positive gradations, it can be concluded that higher education mainly develops comprehension and to a lesser degree speech production. In particular, written comprehension in Greek ranks first with (85.51%), followed by listening comprehension (84.44%), oral production (83.67%) and written production (81.94%). It is evident that the study of academic textbooks and university lectures play an important role in enhancing reading comprehension and listening comprehension (respectively), while it can be deduced that the productive skills are not equally developed.

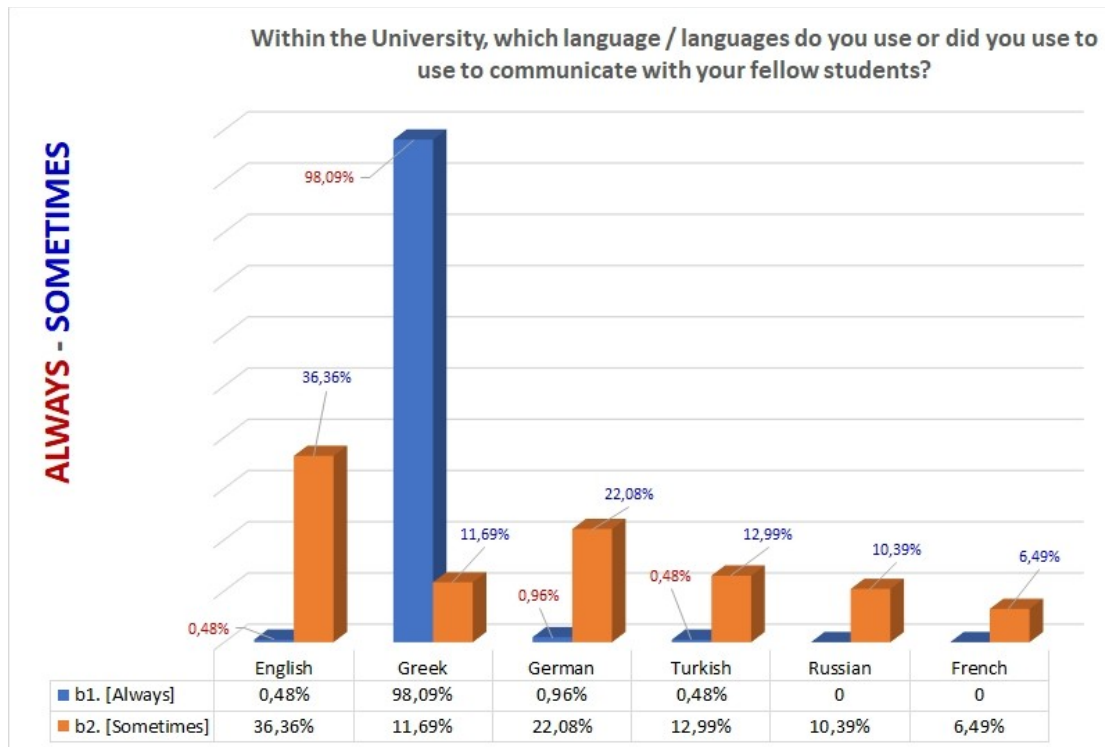
5 Fields of language use inside and outside university

Another question that concerned us is the matter of the fields of using Greek inside and outside the university, hypothesizing that the use of Greek inside the university institutions would also help the use of Greek outside them, as well as in the wider communication of bilingual/multilingual students. Hence, by combining individual variables, interlocutors (teachers, fellow students, and the wider environment) and communication conditions, we obtained the following results.

5.1 Inside the university: use of languages with teachers (“always”) and fellow students (“always” and “sometimes”)

In their vast majority (82.67%), bilingual/multilingual students always address their teachers in Greek. In much smaller percentages, which obviously reflect the reality in the Foreign Language Departments, they use German (10.89%), English (3.96%), French (1.49%) and Russian (0.99%).

Most participants seem to have a monolingual attitude toward their fellow students (“always” in Greek) -and in much smaller percentages they always use German, English and Turkish- but in the “sometimes” option, we notice the emergence of their multilingualism, using mainly English (apparently as lingua franca), as well as, in descending order, Greek, German, Turkish, Russian, French, Italian, Albanian and Romanian to much smaller extent. The above data are shown in the following graph:

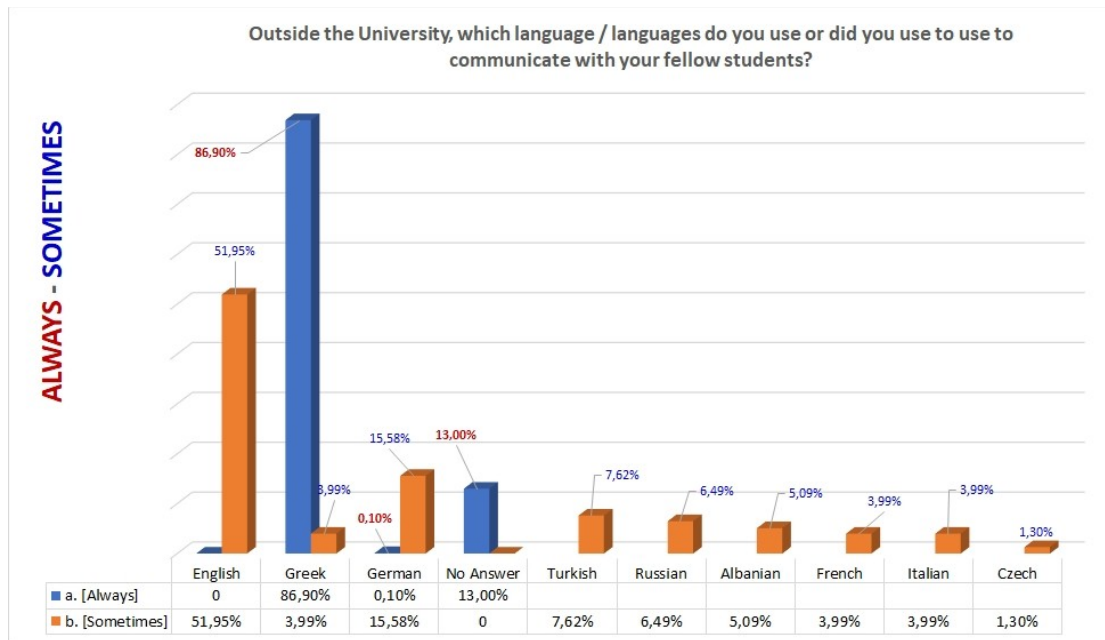


Graph 7: Languages use with fellow students inside the university (always and sometimes)

5.2 Outside the university: use of languages with fellow students (“always” and “sometimes”) and circle of friends (“always”)

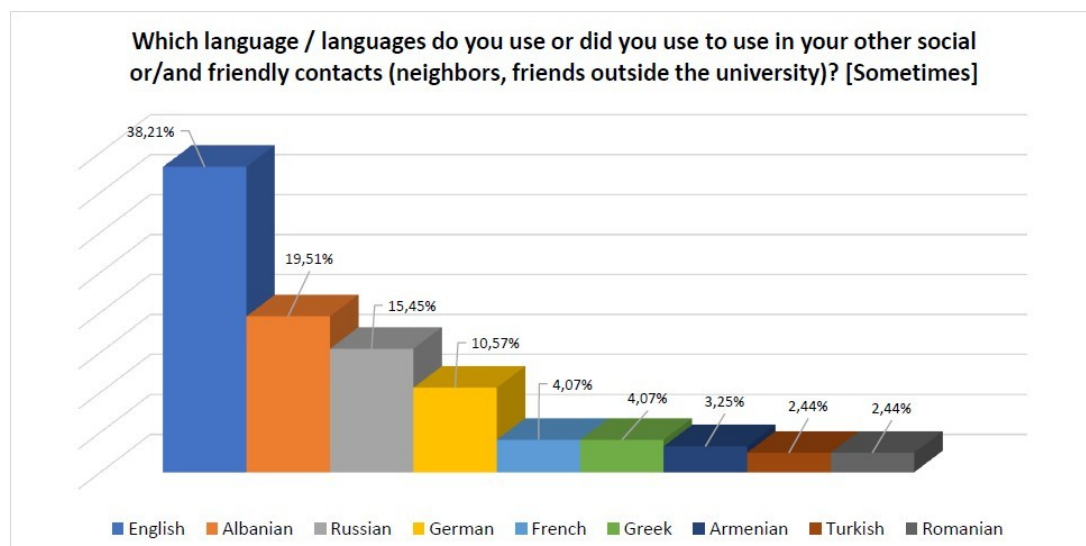
In the question “Outside university, what language/languages do you always use/have you used with your fellow students?”, Greek holds again first place, with a high percentage, but slightly less than in the communication condition “inside the university”, given that 13% did not answer the question.

In the answers to the question “Outside university, what language/languages do you sometimes use/have you used with your fellow students?”, however, the multilingualism of our bilingual/multilingual students emerges again, with English -as lingua franca- occupying the highest percentage, much higher than in the communication condition “inside university”, and followed, in descending order, by: German, Turkish, Russian, Albanian, Greek, French, Italian and Czech. Communication conditions, therefore, influence our multilingual students’ language behavior. It seems that outside the university they act more spontaneously, putting into operation their entire language repertoire.



Graph 8: Language uses with fellow students outside university (“always” and “sometimes”)

Of greater interest is the fact that in another question about the **less frequent (“sometimes”)** use of language in the wider social, intimate/friendly environment outside university (neighbors, friends outside university), our bilingual/multilingual students’ multilingual behavior multiplied, with English maintaining first place, but to a lesser extent than in previous communication conditions, Albanian occupying the 2nd place for the first time, followed in descending order by: Russian, German, French and Greek, Armenian, Turkish and Romanian. Also, much lower percentages were recorded for: Vlach, Italian, Azeri, Arabic, Georgian, Hungarian and Swedish.



Graph 9: Languages use in the wider social but familiar/friendly environment outside university (“sometimes”)

We observe, therefore, that the farther away we move from the sociolinguistic realm of the “university environment”, in both its strict and broader sense, the more the spectrum of languages in the bilingual/multilingual students’ repertoire unfolds, which shows that the speakers are in harmony with mapping of a specific socio-linguistic domain with a specific language/languages.

6 Attitudes and emotions towards languages in use

Next we present sample answers to selected open-ended questions relevant with the bilingual/multilingual students’ (and graduates’) attitudes toward both their bilingualism in childhood and today.

6.1 How did it feel to speak more than one language when you were a child? Please describe both languages and emotions.

We distinguish three types of attitudes during childhood: positive, in the majority of students, neutral, which depends on the combination of language and place of residence, and negative, which later however -in adolescence and adulthood- turns into a positive attitude.

In their majority, bilinguals/multilinguals report (a) *positive emotions*: “Joy and gratitude”, “Free to communicate and understand everything”, “Pride and self-confidence”. A number of bilinguals/multilinguals report (b) *negative emotions*: “shame” for the other language but “confidence” for Greek, and some others -nearly equal in number to those who experienced negative emotions- manifested a *neutral attitude* toward their bilingualism: “I have two mother tongues”. There are also cases where *the combination of language and the wider social environment* had a positive or negative effect on the bilingual during childhood.

6.2 Do you feel the same today? Please write down languages and describe emotions.

In all groups, we find that *positive emotions* are still maintained today, while all those who as children had negative emotions report that today they feel “lucky”: “I am no longer ashamed”, “I have gained confidence” or, at least, “I am a little indifferent now”. Those few cases where *negative emotions* are currently expressed depend on the usability of the said two languages or language proficiency in them.

6.3 Is it important for you to know Greek well? Why?

With the exception of very few respondents, nearly everybody replied that it is either “quite” or “very” important to know Greek well, which highlights the importance of Greek for our bilingual/multilingual students, either because they feel it as *a mother tongue* or because it is the language of their *everyday life*: “In a way, I also consider it my mother tongue now” (Greek-Albanian)³. Also, many answers of “*practical-communication orientation*” are recorded: “Because I live in Greece”. It is also interesting to note that a significant number of respondents consider Greek “*part of themselves*”.

6.4 Do you think Greek plays a role in shaping your identity? Please justify your answer.

Almost all participants answered affirmatively to this question, while those few who answered negatively (3 out of 229) either did not mention a reason or attribute equal importance to all their languages: “All the languages I know have played an important role in shaping my identity” (Greek-English-Swedish).

The reasons why they answered “yes” to the above question may be grouped as follows: a) *emotional reasons* related to childhood and parents, b) *pragmatic/practical reasons* “Because I am a citizen of Greece”, c) *communication and integration reasons*: “Because, this is the way for me to feel I have successfully been integrated in all areas of life” (Greek-Turkish-Arabic), d) *shaping individual identity*: “It helped me discover my identity” (Turkish speaker of the Muslim Minority of Thrace), e) *impact of education and culture*.

7 Correlation between studying at a Greek university and integration into Greek society

Returning to our original quest, the relationship between intercultural literacy and identity, and more specifically the contribution of Greek higher education to socialization and the formation of social identity, the participants’ majority (67%) answered positively, 22% negatively and 11% of the participants did not answer the question “Do you think your studies at a Greek university have helped with your integration into Greek society?”

³The student’s 1st and 2nd language, as stated, are mentioned in parentheses in order.

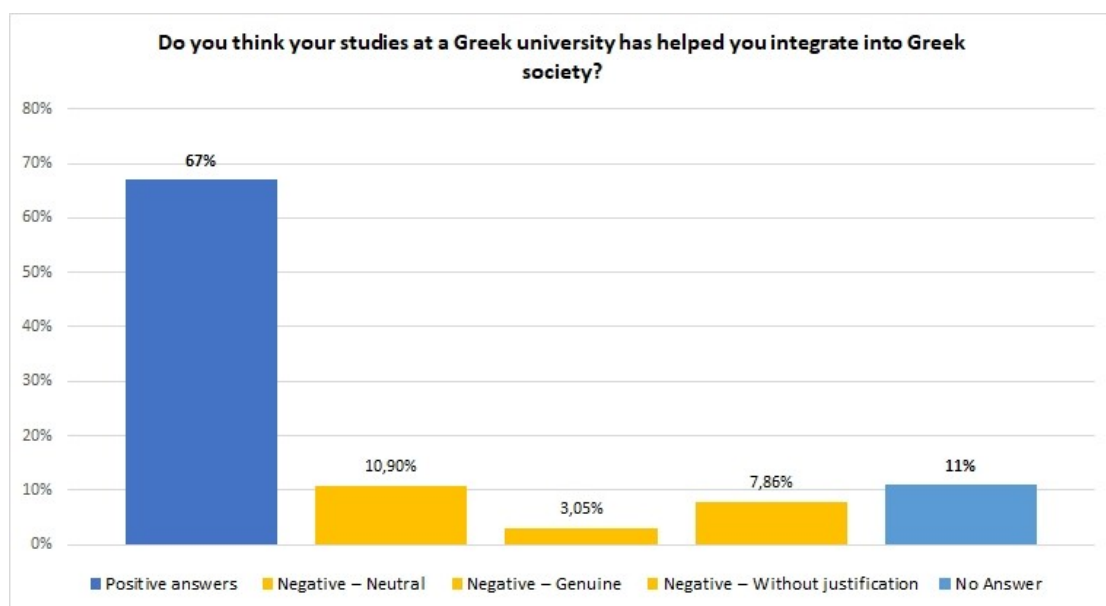
7.1 Correlation between studying at a Greek university and social integration

Regarding the *positive answers* (67%), apart from the very frequent correlation between (a) studies, improving proficiency in Greek and social integration and (b) studies, university degree, professional possibilities and prospects and social integration, the answers which are of particular interest are those which (c) highlight the purely social and inclusive nature of university education, sometimes combined with upward social mobility: “I believe Greek university has helped me improve my Greek, thus, further facilitating my smooth integration into Greek society” (Arabic-Turkish-Greek), “Apparently, because it gives me more opportunities and knowledge” (Greek-Georgian), “Yes, because I proved there is social mobility” (Greek-Albanian). The following answer (d) is both touching and a manifestation of bitterness: “I am considered to be 'more Greek'; I have extra value for them... not for everyone” (Greek-Romanian).

7.2 Non-correlation of studying at a Greek university and social integration

Of the 50 *negative responses* (22%) recorded:

(a) 10.9% are not essentially negative answers, but rather *'neutral'*, as in their justification, the participants state they believe they were already fully integrated, so they were not additionally supported in that through their studies in a Greek University, (b) a small percentage (3.05%) are *'genuine' negative* and are related to purely personal reasons and/or interpretations “I didn't feel integrated in Greek society from a very young age, and it didn't help me even when I was a student” (English-Greek), (c) while a small percentage of the negative answers (7.86%) *do not provide any justification*, a finding to be further explored.



Graph 10: Correlation between studying at a Greek university and integration into Greek society

From the above data, we may conclude there is a substantial positive correlation between studying at a Greek university and social integration for the majority of bilingual/multilingual students, based on both the improvement of their proficiency in Greek and the new opportunities for socialization and professional development. It is interesting that a sufficient percentage of participants think they are already integrated in the Greek society, therefore studying at a Greek university offers nothing special, and for a smaller percentage who consider themselves excluded from Greek society, studying at a Greek university does not help in this direction either.

7 Conclusions

This study, part of a wider research, is a first attempt to map the bilingual/multilingual students and graduates of Greek universities who responded to the research, examining specific variables such as their language repertoire in order of fluency, the use of their languages in different social and cultural settings inside and outside the university, the contribution of university studies to the development of Greek language use, bilinguals' attitudes and emotions toward their languages in childhood and today, and the reasons why Greek is important or unimportant for them, the reasons why Greek plays or does not play a role in shaping their identity as well as the existence or non-existence of causality between university studies and social integration.

It is impressive that a vast majority of our sample, despite their multilingualism, consider Greek their first mother tongue in terms of fluency at the time. To identify the student's family languages, one should look for them in the second or third consecutive language stated in the research. It is also positive that Greek-speaking university studies improve all language skills in Greek and benefit primarily (written and oral) receptive skills. It is worth noting that Greek "casts a shadow" over the use of other languages within the university when interacting with fellow students. These other languages start to emerge as the language repertoire becomes more flexible, English emerging as a lingua franca outside the university environment. When the bilinguals/multilinguals of our sample were children, their feelings toward bilingualism were mixed: the majority had positive feelings, but there were also neutral and negative ones. It is important that there is a positive change of feelings as they reach adulthood, as in their vast majority, they realize their bilingualism/multilingualism boosts their self-esteem, broadens their horizons, some feel "lucky" to be bilingual while others remain "indifferent". In addition, they state that it is very important for practical reasons, as well as for emotional and communicative ones, to have a good knowledge of Greek, and they reckon that, for various reasons, their identity has also been shaped with the contribution of Greek. Finally, most believe that studying at a Greek/Greek-speaking university contributes to their integration in Greek society thanks to the improvement of their proficiency in Greek and the professional prospects it opens up, while some of them think they are already fully integrated in Greek society.

Regarding the projections of this study, we quote the bilingual/multilingual students in our sample themselves:

“I hope Greece will soon realize the enormous linguistic wealth immigrants and refugees bring. It is to the country’s benefit and all those who live here.” (Greek-Albanian), “I didn't know Greek before I entered kindergarten. After interacting with Greek-speaking children, I started speaking Greek, and since then, I have used it exclusively outside the family environment, but I consider both languages my mother tongues” (Greek-Russian).

The keen interest in the research itself as well as the Greek language and Greek-speaking society among the participating bilingual/multilingual students is notable. Our research on the analysis of remaining variables is on-going. We are grateful to this new generation of multilingual Greek citizens.

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