

# Learning Greek and Maintaining Greek Ethnic Identity. St. George College, South Australia: Students' Perspectives

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This paper presents the first findings of a thesis undertaken as part of the requirements for completing a research doctoral degree in Education at the University of Adelaide. It describes a research proposal regarding the perspectives of students, their parents and teachers about children from a Greek background who are taught Greek at school during their secondary education. The project has been submitted and approved by the Department of Education, Training and Employment in South Australia as well as the Ethics Committee of the University of Adelaide. The research commenced during Term 3 of 2002 and this paper presents the data for one of the schools involved — St. George College. This institution represents one of the biggest and most important components of the group of respondents, and not only because students choose to attend the school for the reason that the Greek language is offered as a subject. The main factor probably is also that students' families are aware that the school is targeting the maintenance of Greek culture, Greek Orthodox Christianity and the ethos of the Greek family.

## **Conceptual framework of the research project**

### ***Principles of Humanistic Sociology***

The research undertaken is associated with the Sociology of Education and the sociological framework used to interpret and analyse the data collected is that of Humanistic Sociology. Humanistic Sociology as a school emphasises the need to accept human values and activities as facts, just as the human agents themselves accept them. Moreover there is an imperative need to interpret all social and cultural activities from the standpoint of the actors themselves and not merely that of the outside observer (Znaniiecki, 1968; Smolicz, 1999). It is important to note that sociology is concerned with cultural phenomena, yet the most significant part of the cultural phenomenon is that any such phenomenon is deeply connected with human consciousness and the way humans perceive at each time and each period specific aspects of their culture, heritage, tradition or simple every day life according to their personal or group values. Znaniiecki points out:

In contrast with the natural scientist, who seeks to discover an order among empirical data entirely independent of conscious human agents, the student of culture seeks to discover any order among empirical data which depends upon conscious human agents, is produced and maintained by them. To perform this task he takes every empirical datum, which he investigates with what we have called its humanistic coefficient, i.e. as it appears to those human individuals who experience it and use it (1963:132).

### ***The key points of Core Values theory***

For those readers who are not familiar with Professor Smolicz's work, it is imperative to clarify and explain some of the most important principles of Core Values theory:

- Core Values are defined as the special value system (group and personal) that is specific for each cultural group and identifies as well as differentiates each group from another although both exist in the same cultural context.

- Core values vary and in each ethnic group supporting values may become core ones because of the involvement of the people themselves.
- Core values help each group to become a distinctive ethnic, religious or other cultural community. They can be regarded as one of the most fundamental components of a group's culture (Smolicz, 1999:106).
- Clyne (1991) argues that one has to view cultural values according to the terms in which they are meaningful to the group concerned.
- Obeying or sharing certain core values indicates undeniable membership in the group. Rejection of the values equates to a possible (threat of) exclusion from the group. Yet in a pluralistic society such as Australia, comparative studies between different ethnic groups illustrate cultural variation across ethnic groups.
- In a particular culture more than one core value might be involved and a hierarchy of core values is established (Smolicz, 1999:109).
- According to Humanistic Sociology each group may or can promote a secondary/peripheral value to a core one according to the needs of the time. In the same way core values express the needs of an ethnic group at that particular time.
- Tradition and heritage therefore are important parts of the cultural process that have to be actively evaluated by those living today (Smolicz, 1999:227). Each generation can select a certain aspect of heritage and evaluate, reform or adjust it to its current needs.
- Tradition is continually reshaped and revalued, if it is to survive (Smolicz, 1999:228). Each succeeding generation evaluates various aspects of heritage in a new way. Some parts cease to be of interest or relevance, others take on a new importance in tune

with the sentiments, aspirations and needs of a given human group. Znaniecki summarises Humanistic Sociology's perspective as follows:

Construction of a cultural system is mere reproduction of a system already in existence when it is intended to be such by the agent and taken to be such by the other participants, even if the copy is very different from the original; it is the creation of a new system when it is intended to be such and taken as such even if the new system is exactly similar to another already existing (Znaniecki, 1968:75).

### ***Blending Humanistic Sociology and Core Values***

Additionally, Znaniecki and more recently Smolicz, have pointed out that when a person as part of a pluralist society is exposed to more than one cultural system, he or she has the opportunity to adopt values from other cultural systems. Smolicz has defined this process as a personal cultural system of shared values (Smolicz, 1984). Under this cultural umbrella of shared values, a tradition or a cultural heritage is usually influenced and subject to changes according always to the most significant principle of Humanistic Sociology, the human actor's needs and demands at the time and consciousness of those needs and demands (Znaniecki, 1963). In other words, if Humanistic Sociology is the framework within which we may interpret social phenomena, the principles that move those phenomena could be named values, tradition or culture and can be analysed through the prism of Humanistic Sociology.

### ***The Researcher and the Humanistic Sociology framework***

If we want to continue further we should state that the person who is examining, analysing or interpreting a cultural item or expression of a certain cultural phenomenon such as a language, religion or tradition through the prism of Humanistic Sociology, cannot be completely unbiased and act as a remote observer. The observer has no alternative

but to participate to the extent of having the ability to be in the agent's shoes and be able to understand the perspective from which the human agent perceives a certain cultural item or expression.

Even if the student of a human cultural phenomenon is not able to be a part of the social group that is experiencing it, namely a participant observer, capable of analysing and interpreting properly the consciousness that humans have of the phenomenon or item, the researcher must at least be open-minded. He or she must be able to perceive details that distinguish and differentiate a certain item as a cultural one with a specific and significant meaning and value for one human group, which may not be valid for another. Znaniecki points out the significance of the participant observer (at a time when the term did not exist) by supporting the idea of the humanistic coefficient — being able to understand the human actor of a certain cultural phenomenon as if one could be the actor himself — and the effort to observe phenomena in the form in which they operate in human consciousness (Znaniecki, 1968).

Moreover, Znaniecki introduced the idea of "*Verstehen*" (in English: to understand), which is perceived as understanding one's point of view or having another person's perceptions and demonstrating empathy for the ideas, beliefs and cultural choices of a person, the agent of the culture at each point of the cultural continuum. These specific choices, which could be made by the group or the individual person, are the basis for social actions. As time passes they become eventually what Smolicz has termed Core Values (Smolicz, 1981), which are either personal or belong to a group.

## Methodology of the research

The research in total involves parents and teachers of high school students of Greek background in schools offering the Greek language as a subject. It is expected the project will ascertain how effective the language acquisition is and to what extent Year 8–12 students maintain Greek culture within the educational system. The project investigates

this issue in all the government and ethnic schools in Adelaide that offer Greek, as well as the independent Greek Orthodox College of St. George, the only private school that offers five hours of Greek language per week.

The data collected from students, parents and Greek language teachers are analysed and interpreted through an interpretative, qualitative approach, which will employ empirical and ethnographic research means such as observation. The researcher is a participant observer in teaching Greek, and uses questionnaires and survey-oriented questions to collect personal statements and the experiences of respondents. Open-ended questions are also used to trace the cultural perceptions of the respondents. Last but not least, selected interviews with respondents (both personal and group interviews for cross-checking purposes) are employed on an as-needed basis to cover follow-up questions to the answers in the questionnaires.

### ***What the research has found at St. George College***

Certain assumptions have to be clarified about St. George College. St. George is an independent private school, dedicated to maintaining the Greek language and culture along with the Greek ethos and the Greek Orthodox religion. The parents of the students attending the school, in other words those who pay the fees and who have deliberately chosen this school, are people concerned with maintaining and preserving Greek language, culture and religion. They want, furthermore, their children to be a part of that heritage. The sample of St. George College is therefore, for the purposes of this research, quite significant to the extent that it is representative of a group of people who have made a conscious choice to preserve their tradition. According to Humanistic Sociology they belong to that group which shares the core values of its ethnic origin, blended and influenced by the values governing the Australian context the group is living in.

A few other differences between St. George College and the other schools offering Greek have also to be pointed out. The fact that the

choice of school is based on the curriculum to be taught and the further familiarisation the school is offering its students with Greek traditions, heritage, culture and language, influences a few other parameters. The school, to begin with, represents a special sample since all students study Greek, the curriculum is structured to provide more Greek language contact lessons per week than government schools, the number of students of non-Greek origin is very small and last but not least, the students have better cultural preservation skills and are more knowledgeable about Greek culture and language.

Another factor is quite interesting. Students perceive attending the school as conferring social and cultural status and prestige. It is a pride based on the attitude that “we are here to learn how to preserve Greekness and this is great”. They take pride in being Greek and in studying the culture of their heritage. Consequently, they feel privileged. Students gave the data collected during the research, conducted in September and October 2002 at St. George College with the tireless support of this school’s authorities, voluntarily. Due to the voluntary character of this research the number of students participating is not the exact number of the students who attend the school. The students demonstrated further interest in the research, as did the other schools that were involved.

## **Respondents’ characteristics**

According to Humanistic Sociology, collecting data aims to produce two different kinds of information. As with every other research project, it has to identify the “sample” or what Humanistic Sociology researchers call the “group of respondents”. Categorising the sample gives the opportunity to extract more generalised conclusions and make the research valid. Because qualitative research in general has been criticised for being subjective or even biased by the researcher’s preconceptions, the numbers and figures provided by Humanistic Sociology’s concrete data (the term defines survey-like data) collection, may add to the scientific parameter. In the part of the research

conducted at St. George College the concrete data provided the following information (Table 1).

The figures indicate that between 93 and 100 per cent of the students in each class participated, with Years 8 to 11 totalling eighty-three students. Boys represented little less than 50 per cent of the sample and the majority of the students (seventy-five out of eighty-three students, namely 90.3 per cent of the sample) are Australian-born. The respondents belong to a family with two or three siblings. Only six students were only children and three students belonged to families with more than four children.

Students/Year			Participating Boys		Participating Girls		Place of Birth			Number of Siblings			
Year	No. of Students	%	Number	%	Number	%	Greece	Cyprus	Aust	1-2	%	3-4	%
8	22	26.5	11	50	11	50	4	18	17	77.2	2	9	
9	23	27.7	14	60.8	09	39.2	3	20	18	78.2	3	13	
10	21	25.3	9	42.8	12	57.2	3	18	14	66.7	3	14.3	
11	17	20.5	7	41.2	10	58.8	1	16	14	82.3	3	17.6	
Total	83		41	49.4	42	50.6	11	72	63	75.9	11	13.2	

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Amongst the survey questions the students were asked was "the language mainly used within their close family circle (parents, siblings, grandparents) and friends of Greek origin, if any". As far as the language spoken at home is concerned, the students' answers revealed an anticipated although not very promising future for the Greek language, as the reader can verify in Table 2. Year 8 students consistently at a quite high 86.3 per cent reveal that they speak mainly English with their siblings, parents and friends of Greek origin. The surprising



figure is that exactly the same students at the same percentage speak Greek with their grandparents. The knowledge of the language exists. The choice though of the method of communication always depends on human decision-making, as outlined by Humanistic Sociology.

Year 9, 10 and 11 students follow the same trend and at an average 89 per cent they use the English language to communicate with their siblings, and almost 92 per cent of them speak English with friends of Greek origin. The median percentage falls to 80.7 per cent in favour of the English language, when it comes to the language used to communicate with parents, mainly because of the high percentage of the year 11 students who use Greek with their parents. As was expected, the trend for the year 8 students as regards the language used to communicate with the grandparents, was repeated by the responses of year 9, 10 and 11 students, who at almost 87 per cent use also Greek with their grandparents.

Year level	Language used with Siblings				Language used with friends of Greek origin				Language used with Parents				Language used with Grandparents			
	Gr	%	En	%	Gr	%	En	%	Gr	%	En	%	Gr	%	En	%
8	3	13.7	19	86.3	3	13.7	19	86.3	3	13.7	19	86.3	19	86.3	3	13.7
9	2	8.7	21	91.3	2	8.7	21	91.3	3	13.1	20	86.9	19	82.6	4	17.4
10	2	11.2	19	88.8	1	4.7	20	95.3	2	9.4	19	90.6	18	85.7	3	14.3
11	2	11.8	15	88.2	1	5.9	16	94.1	5	29.5	12	70.5	15	88.2	2	11.8
	9	10.6	74	89.4	7	8.4	76	91.6	13	19.3	70	80.7	71	86.8	12	13.2

Table 2. Language used by the participants within their social circle.

## Cultural data revealed

The second part of the distributed questionnaire includes what Humanistic Sociology defines as cultural data. Cultural information is extracted from answers to open-ended questions, where the respondent is presenting his or her personal ideas, perceptions and

views through a series of statements and expressions of feelings and thoughts. What the research has found out is not new or unexpected. The findings relate well to the existing literature and certain ideas we all have regarding Greek language and culture and their preservation. The students' perceptions are presented below and they are followed, where applicable, by the relevant existing literature.

### *Characteristics of the Greek Community in Adelaide*

Studies on the Greek ethnic community in Australia since the early 1980s (Smolicz, 1982) until recently (Tamis, 2001; Papademetre and Routoulas, 2001) emphasise the following. Greeks speaking Greek at home constitute almost 16% of the population in South Australia (1996 Census). According to the data this number mainly represents first generation Greeks, who were educated both in Greek and in English, and still use Greek to communicate with their social group and their children. The majority of them maintain what Smolicz (1984) considers the core values, beneficial for mother tongue preservation: religion, family, cultural awareness. Indeed the research indicates that students who reveal in their personal statements that they are Greek born, are family and religion-oriented with a strong attachment to their cultural heritage and collectivistic family. Especially when it comes to the elderly, they have managed to maintain their ethnicity and language through tough times whilst they have been successfully assimilated, a situation that has been narrated to students by their grandparents. They still communicate with government departments through interpreters or their English-speaking offspring. For them the maintenance of the Greek language and culture is more than important and imperative — it is taken for granted.

An expected shift from this behaviour is observed within the second generation Greek Australians, with a certain change in attitude that moves towards a Creole Greek language and a residual perception of Greek culture. This is the trend emerging from both the data produced by the students' responses and the impressions of all the

participant observers of the situation. Presently the majority of them are a bilingual, bicultural group with dual identity and probably bi-valent (Smolicz, 1999), since their personal cultural system includes items from both cultures.

The actual study is concerned with the younger generation, which is still of school age. A better reading therefore of the parents' generation (in our sample of those belonging to the second generation) and their attitude towards both Greek and Australian cultural values, their perceptions and choices regarding their cultural and linguistic heritage, is considered essential and potentially illuminating for the purposes of this project.

The majority of the second generation Greeks, especially those who have gone through an English language school education and assimilation procedure, are — according to the investigator's observations and the students' reports, as well as researches undertaken by Smolicz, Secombe, Papademetre and Tamis — more than able to communicate with parents and siblings in Greek. Furthermore the majority of them are more than efficient in terms of bilingual/bicultural proficiency. They are considered responsible for maintaining the Greek cultural and linguistic heritage in their children, the third generation. According to data collected from students at St. George, the sample taken indicates the following general conclusions for the parents belonging to the second generation:

- They are concerned about faith and family unity — values important for maintaining linguistic and cultural traditions;
- They insist their children learn Greek yet they do not communicate with their children in Greek;
- They find it easier to speak, express feelings or give instructions in English, using Greek less than English, in the form of a “subordinate language” as Skutnabb-Kangas has termed it (1981).

Previous researches have proved that Greek cultural and linguistic maintenance, although residual and transformed into an Australian-

Greek amalgam, is still significant and considerably higher than in other ethnic groups, even the newly arrived and equally cohesive Chinese ethnic group (Smolicz, 1999). Smolicz, Tamis and Papademetre in Australia along with other scholars in Greece and worldwide consider Greek language and culture preservation as an anticipated outcome of the strong and cohesive Greek family, the core of the Greek community in the Diaspora and the most significant factor in preserving both Greek cultural awareness and the language. The students participating in the research seem to share the same belief when they say, "I know I will speak Greek, I speak and understand Greek now because my family speaks Greek at home. I believe that in my family we will always speak Greek". Yet in this typical but complex and idiosyncratic Greek family in Australia, a shift is apparent.

In such families according to students' responses, the Greek language is now a "subordinate language" to the dominant English (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981), at least as far as the second generation is concerned. The existing knowledge of Greek is at a junior primary level and is strictly restricted to the vocabulary needed to communicate with first generation migrants in everyday family communication. More than apparent also is the trend to code-switching and mixing languages (e.g. within the same phrase they use both English and Greek grammar, syntax and vocabulary). They use English words to fill the gap of a Greek word unknown to them and vice-versa. A similar phenomenon appears when they apply Greek grammatical rules and suffixes to English words, creating a specific "Greenglish" idiom, a pidgin language (Papademetre, Tamis, Tsolakidou). However, where the nuclear family insists on speaking Greek at home and at social events (clubs, family celebrations, dances, etc.) the maintenance of Greek language and culture is better. This fact is apparent in the responses of all the participants in the present research and has already been proved by other researches examining the Greek migrant family both in Australia (Smolicz, 1979; Papademetre and Routoulas, 2001), and in the Greek Diaspora (Tamis, 2001).

## Students' attitudes towards Greek language and culture

What is quite interesting, when a researcher has the chance to look deeper into the cultural data provided by a humanistic and qualitative approach, is that the reading and interpreting of just numerical data in issues related to culture and language can lead to misinterpreting the research participants' actual feelings, ideas and attitudes. To be more specific, the research undertaken at St. George College, although it is a qualitative approach, includes survey-like data as well as cultural data. This data assists in crosschecking the same theme, i.e. speaking and learning the Greek language. The answers given by the students when asked to circle the language they use mainly with their friends of Greek origin, was English at an extremely high 90 per cent. However, when the same question was asked in the open-ended cultural questions, since the respondents had the chance and opportunity to be more specific and explain feelings as well as attitudes, a different situation was revealed: English is the main language, yet the reason and the way they use the Greek language, i.e. for swearing so as not to be understood, for greeting and expressing feelings, as a secret communication code in the presence of others, denotes the fact that while Greek for them may not be their main language it is their identity language.

What follows is a summary of the answers that students have given in the open-ended questions and how they explain and rationalise these responses:

- Firstly, they reveal that they attend St. George because their parents wanted them to, yet they are extremely happy about this choice. They feel privileged and find it significant that they gain social and cultural kudos amongst their friends of Greek origin and social circle.
- Although they admit that they speak mainly English within their family and their social circle, although they share Australian customs and habits, yet when asked how they identify themselves, they answered that they feel they are Greek in their hearts.

- Many of them, although they do not have problems fitting into the Australian context, surprisingly enough for a sample of mainly second and third generation, feel that they are different and they are happy about that.
- The parameter mentioned as one which helps or otherwise influences them to identify themselves as Greeks, is mainly their relationship with the Greek Orthodox religion. They do not attend church often, although they claim that they are believers.
- Other parameters mentioned were their knowledge of the past, their relationship with Greek culture and maintaining certain customs and rituals within their families.
- They do not feel proficient in Greek but they do not care. They do not speak perfect Greek but they feel Greek.
- All of them claim that they know enough language, history, customs and traditions to feel that they are a part of Greek culture and when they use their own residual Greek they feel that they express themselves better.
- A significant sixty per cent of respondents have never visited Greece, yet they dream of Greece. They are more than eager to visit their parents' place of origin; one other reason therefore why they learn Greek is to communicate with their relatives in Greece.
- They strongly believe that learning Greek will help their life socially and professionally, since it will help them with their clientele, which, needless to say, will support them because they are Greeks.
- A quite surprising factor has emerged in the students' responses as regards the reason they want to learn Greek, a reason that is quite vivid and alive and matching the vibrancy of adolescence. As the students see it, the main factor that pushes them to learn Greek is to understand the lyrics of the modern Greek songs they sing. They feel that through these songs they are a part of the contemporary culture in Greece and that they communicate the same attitudes as the young residents of Greece.

They are also extremely attracted to Greek dances, not only the folkloric ones but modern versions as well.

- Boys and girls have admitted unanimously that they love to speak Greek when they swear or when they are angry, when they do not want to be understood, or when they speak with their friends as a part of showing off to others that they are Greeks.

In other words speaking and learning the Greek language is for them something much more interesting and significant than the preservation of culture and language. They feel, and this is extremely significant according to Humanistic Sociology, that the language they speak in their private moments is a unique code of communication between people of the same kind. In a multilingual and multicultural context it is quite significant to the extent that it gives them something they need even more than culture and tradition. It provides them with an identity, a much-needed identity, which keeps at bay globalisation and its cultural side effects. Greek for them is not their parents' language, which they have a duty to preserve. It is something they need; it is their identity language. This situation could mark a shift in the maintenance of the Greek language as we know it. Yet, even in Greece, all of us who are in close contact with adolescents know that even there the Greek language is changing, probably as a result of the "omnipotent" English language. In Greece the trend is to add English words and expressions in the everyday language, by incorporating them into the Greek syntactical and grammatical system. For example in Greece young teenagers "kanoun download" (download files) or "ehoun hang-over" (they have a hang-over after a party). In Australia, the practice of young teenagers of Greek origin implanting Greek words or phrases into the English language is an interesting phenomenon. The researcher has observed students talking about Saturday's soccer game saying, "They played a good bala" (they played a good game).

## Conclusion

According to Humanistic Sociology when a social or ethnic group is changing its values, especially its core ones, such a conscious choice made at certain times means that this group is evolving in terms of its cultural identity. By explaining, analysing and interpreting social phenomena we may be able to explain the shift happening in the Greek ethnic group as far as the broader Greek community and language are concerned. Do they believe that language is not a valuable cultural item any more and could be replaced by English?

The important sociological question that this research study aims to answer is whether the Australian-Greek community in Adelaide has shifted from considering language as one of the main core values for its survival to using the Greek language as an identity language with just a simple and residual knowledge and use. If so, another value will become the core one (religion, for example, or historical and cultural awareness) or this shift indicates an unreserved assimilation process driving the local Greek community to desert its ethnic values in favour of a pluralist society value system.

Yet, this theory and the attempt to interpret the phenomenon in view of that is not — according to Humanistic Sociology — correct since it is speculating without paying attention to the human agent's perspective. The interpretation will come when the data collected is analysed and interpreted, because the students have clarified, emphasised and highlighted (as much as they could) the following through their statements:

- They are and feel Greek and not just Australian.
- The Greek language that students use — even this form of the language that has been diminishingly accused of being a pidgin and Creole one — is what they need. It is enough for them that they understand each other and identify through that common communication code not only themselves, but also the cultural weighting of the language.



- They do not care about the residual nature of their own Greek culture, tradition and history, since they claim they only need to be proud of their origin.
- When asked to identify themselves culturally and ethnically they indicated in all kinds of expressions that Greekness is deeply in-built into their system.
- They take pride and feel gratification, self-esteem and recognition in being Greeks and “wogs”! A significant and remarkable shift!
- They are not attached to the tired slogan “Greeks did it first”. Since they have been brought up in another cultural system away from Greece they have the luxury and ability to distance themselves and laugh at Greek behaviour. They do identify with it but they love to imitate it.
- They live in an era of globalisation, with Greeks in Greece terrified for the future of their language, while here in Australia they are counting on their origin to be different and to survive.

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