

Aromanian Vlach and Greek: Shifting Identities

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ABSTRACT

In modern times, with Greek being the only language of instruction and communication in the wider society (Chomsky, 1971), Aromanian's linguistic and cultural shift has been so profound that this language is now endangered (Dinas *et al.*, 2011) in Greece. Aromanian (Weigand, 1895) is an oral Eastern-Romance language spoken by the Aromanians (armâni, or armâneashti), an ethnic group historically known for transhumance, dispersed over a wide area of the Balkans in what is present-day Peninsular Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Southern Romania, Serbia, and Albania. Their ethnicity (Eriksen, 2010) is controversial, with Greeks believing them Latinised Greeks, Romanians considering them Romanian, and others as Balkan natives from Wallachia (Ružica, 2006). In Greek, they tend to be referred to as 'Vlachs.' This term derives from the Latin 'Volci' (Volks, Wolsk) and was adopted by Germanic speakers when mentioning neighboring Gaulish Celts who had become Latinized. The word and meaning evolved over time: Walachen, Wallais, Wallons, Welschme, etc. These terms are still used in different European languages today and refer to 'Latin speakers.' Slavic speakers borrowed and adapted the German word as Olahy, Valachi, Vloh, and for the Byzantines, it became 'Vlachs.' Their nomadic and secluded lifestyle between remote valleys and high mountains, confined the Aromanians to hardship and socio-cultural periphery while sparing them from major European conflicts, periods of unrest, shifting borders and powers for one thousand years. From 1975 onward, following the consolidation of the modern Greek Republic, ideologies such as 'one people, one language' became intrinsic with Greek nationality and nationalism (Moschonas, 2004). Aromanian had, until then, been transferred mostly in the oral form, lacking written standardization, and passed from generation down to generation in the Epirus, Macedonia, and Thessaly regions of Greece. With modernity, came profound socio-economic changes; Aromanians left their local communities in large numbers (Beis, 2000), looking for a better future in Greek urban centers, Germany, the USA, or Australia. Despite Aromanian folklore, music and traditional festivals being kept alive and even revitalized through numerous associations of Vlachs, many self-identified Aromanians do not speak their ancestral language (Kahl, 2011). What is the rationale behind this (apparent) contradiction? What drove Aromanians away from their native language and led to the shift into the Greek language, society, and culture so completely?.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the Aromanian native speakers in and around Metsovo, a town that has long been considered the bastion of Aromanian identity in Greece. Without government policies to protect or revitalize this endangered minority language, only efforts by dispersed communities and individuals have managed to prolong the existence of this now endangered, oral-only language, but for how long? This study attempts to record and leave a legacy of a small, extraordinary, and resilient branch of Romance speakers, which stood the test of time while surrounded by an ocean of Balkan languages.



1.1. Origins of Aromanians

It is generally accepted that the Aromanians originated in the Balkans. The exact genetic, ethnic, and geographic roots are still the object of debate. Different studies came out with conflicting findings, and much more investigation would be required to establish the full, or near-complete, origin of the Aromanians and their language (Beis, 2000; Joseph, 2020; Kyurkchiev, 2006; Sulzer, 1782).

If indeed the Aromanians are native to where they are found today, they may descend from ancient tribes from Macedonia, Thrace, Epirus, and Thessaly, who preceded the arrival of later peoples, among those namely the Agriones, Dardanes, Edones, Macedons, Sitrones, Pelagones, and others.

Iorga (1938) puts forward his belief that the Aromanians stemmed from the Romanized populations of Illyria, with the Latin linguistic elements having replaced many of the native Illyrian languages. He goes on to say: “*Ils sont de fait avec leurs qualités et leurs défauts des anciens Illyriens et des Thraces*” (Eng. “They (the Aromanians) are in fact with all their virtues and faults the ancient Illyrians and Thracians.”).

Iorga also believes that the common element between Romanians and Aromanians is precisely the Romanization of these two different ethnicities. The progressive acculturation movement started in the third century B.C. and was consolidated with the Roman Emperor Trajan, who promoted the settlement of Roman farmers, craftsmen, herders, and tradesmen, bringing in their Vulgar Latin language and Latin customs, both assimilated and adapted over time by local the populations.

These population influxes, together with Roman military might and influence, dwindled the previously Greek cultural dominance during the early centuries of Christianity and left a lasting Eastern-Latin cultural heritage throughout the Balkans. This applies to all the groups which constitute the fabric of Balkan populations: Romanians, Latins, Bulgarians, Serbians, Slavs, Greeks, Albanians, Illyrians, and (European) Turks (Iorga, 1938).

Another theory is that many Roman troops who initially came to protect the long Via Egnatia between Rome and Constantinople in the second century B.C. never returned to Italy, married locals, and formed their communities. When Macedonia became a Roman province in 146 B.C., a road between Italy and East Macedonia was built, and it became vital to connect Roman settlements and facilitate trading between the Adriatic Sea and the Bosphorus. Roman aristocrats coveted Macedonia's fertile green lands and mountains; settlers took land and forests, utilized metal resources and waterways, and legions crossed the vast expanse where cities grew and markets flourished. Merchants from various parts surrounding Macedonia used the Via Egnatia to move their goods. The Egnatia road linked cities such as Dyrrachium, Lyncestis, Heracleia, Pella, Amphipolis, Philippi, and Neapolis.

This geography and demography could explain the presence of subsequent Latin-derived languages or dialects from the Adriatic coast across Illyria, Macedonia, and Thracia, running through territory that is now part of modern Albania, North Macedonia, Greece, and European Turkey, broadly coinciding with the Via Egnatia route to Constantinople (Karivieri, 2008).

Based on this context, subsequent defenders of the Hellenistic origin of the Aromanians, like Keramopoulos (1939), explain their language due to the Latin-Greek bilingualism used in Byzantine times by civil servants and all segments of the Balkan populations. Other scholars, such as Poulianos (Kalionski, 2014), formulate the autochthony of Greeks and Aromanians based on their biological anthropology findings.

Anthropologists such as Dhima (1907, as cited in Tzanelli, 2002) postulate a Dinaric morphology predominance in Aromanian populations bordering Eastern Albania and Greece, that is, people of light skin, dark hair (different shades of brown to dark blond) eye-color ranging from hazel to dark brown, green, or blue, a brachycephalic skull, long face, a narrow, sometimes aquiline nose, slightly taller than the average Mediterranean height. He does not identify significant differences between the Collonja region Aromanian populations and those in the rest of the Balkans.

Notwithstanding, one more recent genetic study published in the Annals of human genetics (Bosch et al., 2006) suggests a possible Aromanian origin which differs from other Balkan populations, against the already complex genetic mosaic that makes up the Balkan region (Wilksman, 2021). The many differing theses, findings, and opinions presented here (and others not included), far from clarifying the Aromanian origins, proven genetic markers, their ethnicity, and linguistic and cultural identity, show that there are many fragments on all aspects in the long thread of their history, which is intrinsic to the history of the Balkans and Europe (Haddon, 2012). Many studies are yet to be conducted to better understand this misunderstood and unique group.

The question is not just about who, but what are the Aromanians? Even if the Aromanians are considered Romanized Greeks in most Greek historiography, some historians maintain that the Aromanians arrived from the North. Paparigopoulos (Yosmaoglu, 2014) proposes that the Aromanians, like the Bulgars, crossed the river Danube and descended upon the Balkans, and from there, they continued towards the Epirus and Thessaly.

This theory was fostered by Lambros (Kahl, 2002), who postulated that the Romanized Vlachs descended from the ancient Dacians whom Emperor Trajan conquered. They would originally have led a nomadic life at the border between Istria and the river Sava.

The geography of Greece itself, with over 80% of its territory comprising mountainous massifs, creates a North-South natural divide in the continental peninsula whereby south of the Pindus, the land is drier and Mediterranean and the Epirus and Macedonia to the North, often with inclement weather and rugged terrain, inhabited by populations not considered as Greek for a long time. The Aromanians concentrated in the North and Northwest (Dudek, 2021). The Greeks developed their culture and cities chiefly by the sea, along coastal and near-coastal locations wherever they settled (Baldwin-Edwards, 2008).

Some historians suggest that the Aromanians likely originated in the Roman occupation and colonization of the Balkans, which started after the conquest of Macedonia in the third century B.C. Roman legions had been at war with Balkan armies for years when finally commanded by General Lucius Aemilius Paulus Macedonicus, the Romans conquered Hellenist Macedonia (Holmes *et al.*, 2001) at the battle of Pydna in 168 B.C.

Some experts postulate Aromanians as “*Latinised Illyrians*” (Malcolm, 2016). On the other hand, Greeks tend to believe them to be “*Latinised Greeks*” (Lazarou, 1987). Bulgarians believe them to be descendants of Thracians (Castellan, 1992).

Romanians tend to identify Aromanians as a branch of Romanized Dacians (Brâncuș, 2005), like other Romanians. The 17th century Romanian ideology has defended from its inception, a common historical Roman(ian) heritage for Vlach-Aromanians, Moldovans, and Transylvanians (Romanian speakers as opposed to Hungarian) (Bogdan, 1992), sometimes calling it ‘Greater Wallachia’ and blaming Greeks and Turks for linguistic corruption (Iorga, 1938). Cantemir (1901) repeatedly invokes the common origin of Aromanians and Romanians as a result of the Roman conquest of the Balkans and Dacia Transdanubia.

A century earlier, Maier (1812) had already exulted the Aromanian/Romanian entrepreneurial and trading skills as a trait distinguishing them from neighboring ethnicities. Furthermore, Capidan (1939) argues that the Aromanians left the Danube areas of Walachia and headed south to escape Slavic and Magyar influxes, and settled where they live today.

The study of Aromanians has presented three main difficulties:

1. The ancient presence of the Aromanians in the Balkans—one must try and trace their origins as far back as the Mesolithic period, when the domestication of animals and pastoralism took shape.
2. The evolution of their history until the present day—one must also contemplate and consider the Aromanians across prehistory, protohistory, and history. This is particularly difficult to document as their life as shepherds and nomads across the most inaccessible mountain ranges made them elusive. Living in almost complete isolation among secondary biotopes, they neither had access to historical evolution nor were they impacted by it. And every time a new group arrived in their territory, the Aromanians would have been partly assimilated into those usually larger groups. Living as fluid tribal societies, their best defense was the mountains, where they could form geographic isolates, possibly also genetically, because of prolonged intermarriage practices.
3. The lack of knowledge and comprehensive research publications and misconceptions about their history: being traditionally a civilization of shepherds, merchants, and dwellers, it is hardly surprising that they left few traces of themselves along history such as artworks, writings (Aromanian is primarily an oral language), and other items expected from old cultures.

There is a rich tradition of Aromanian folk tales, myths, legends, beliefs, and superstitions, which, in part, could shed more light on these people-to date, few researchers have focused on these elements.

The Aromanian civilization is broadly shared with Illyrians, Thracians, and others, who sometimes proclaimed Aromanian spiritual creations, folklore, and tales their own (Capidan, 1939). Aromanians communicated in their mother tongue and could be themselves exclusively within their domestic and keen contexts, while resorting to multilingualism in their dealings with other peoples. For example, their religion being Christian-Orthodoxy meant that they (if not all, many) would need to be able to read, pray, and speak in Greek at church or in ecumenic contexts. Being an ethnic minority, the Aromanians have had to assimilate and take on other cultures, sacrificing their own identity by acculturation (Vogl, 2012). Capidan proposes that a structural, historical approach to demystifying and removing the Aromanians from near obscurity might be a good start.

Tracing them back to the beginning, so to speak, the hunter-gatherer Paleolithic societies which stepped forward with the domestication of ovicaprids and rudimentary agriculture towards the end of the Mesolithic period. After that, the domestication of cattle led to agropastoral, more sedentary, and

market-orientated societies. The horse's taming enabled the emergence of more complex sociocultural dimensions. The Neolithic period brought yet more development with the introduction of (polished) pottery, known as Vinca, in several Balkan regions.

In a similar approach within the Balkan 'biocenosis,' one could examine the Aromanian people in temporal strata, starting with:

1. The Roman arrival,
2. Aromanian life under Roman occupation (lasting a Millenium with Byzantium),
3. The Turkish occupation, which lasted five centuries,
4. Contemporary history of the Balkans and Europe (Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman Empires, and so on).

1.2. *Language of the Aromanians*

Within the Eastern-Romance linguistic group, [Tagliavini \(1964\)](#) presents four related languages:

1. Daco-Romanian, spoken in Romania, Moldova, and parts of Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Ukraine, Bulgaria,
2. Istro-Romanian, spoken in Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina,
3. Megleno-Romanian, spoken in North Macedonia,
4. Macedo-Romanian or Aromanian spoken in Greece, Albania, N. Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania ([Bec, 1971](#)).

The (perceived) relationship between the Aromanian and Romanian ethnicity and language, has been controversial since at least the 19th century to this day. This subject would require further study to try and explain deep-rooted historical misunderstandings, prejudices, and political manipulation between different Balkan nations, chiefly Greece and Romania ([Theodorescu & Barrows, 2001](#)).

Comparative linguistic studies, show that Aromanian has a similar structure to Albanian, the only surviving Illyrian language, which lends some credence to the Illyrian theory. The fact that Roman colonization of Macedonia began earlier and lasted longer than that of Dacia, would suggest that the Aromanians preceded the Romanians in Balkan history.

Around 400 B.C., the Romance-speaking worlds comprised three main languages: Umbrian, Oscan, and Latin. The latter was originally spoken in Rome and the adjacent Latium area, and eventually spread across much of the European Continent, North Africa, Middle East, and portions of the Eurasian landmass. After the Roman Empire collapsed, the branch of the Neo-Latin languages known as the Romance group, was formed sometime between the 6th and 8th centuries A.D. ([Caragiu Marioțeanu, 1969](#)).

Within this vast and varied group (spanning longitudinally from Western to Eastern areas of the European Continent) are Italian, Sardinian, Provençal, French, Portuguese, Rhaeto-Romance, Spanish, Dalmatian, Romanian, and further dialects and minority languages. A comparison between Aromanian and the main contemporary Romance Languages, illustrates manifest linguistic kinship at phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic levels ([Rudd & Kelley, 2011](#)). [Table I](#) demonstrates this comparison.

On [Table I](#), twenty-five Aromanian words in alphabetical order were compared with the major Romance languages. This comparison demonstrates that:

1. Aromanian lexicon is overwhelmingly of Latin origin.
2. Aromanian contains some Slavic and Greek words.
3. Aromanian shares seven cognate spellings with Romanian, two with French, two with Portuguese, none with Italian, and none with Spanish. Most of the Romance languages share some cognate spellings among themselves.
4. Aromanian has some lexicon not present in the main Romance languages.

1.3. *Aromanian-Greek Interactions*

In Greece, Aromanian and the Aromanians were considered uncivilized, beastly even, their language unworthy and abhorrent to mighty, brilliant Greek, the language of philosophers, scientists, and great thinkers, the cradle of Western civilization ([Aldrete & Aldrete, 2019](#)).

The extent of these prejudices was manifested in slogans such as “*be civilized, not Vlach*,” combined with the absence of a written, standardized form of the language, the educational system conducted solely in Greek, no Aromanian printed press, literature or even tombstone inscriptions were allowed. [Beis \(2000\)](#) identifies a parallel with ethnocide, a long and deliberate process of elimination of a people by dissolving their culture and language ([Calvet, 1974](#)).

TABLE I: COMPARISON BETWEEN AROMANIAN AND MAIN ROMANCE LANGUAGES

Language	English	Aromanian	French	Italian	Portuguese	Romanian	Spanish
Examples	I praise (verb.)	alavdu	je loue	lodo	louvo	laud	(yo) alabo
	Beard	barbă	barbe	barba	barba	barbă	barba
	Dog	câne	chien	cane	cão	câine	perro
	Open (i.e., door)	disfaptă	ouverte	aperta	aberta	deschisă	abierta
	I (pronoun)	eu	moi, je	io	eu	eu	yo
	Sons	ficiorlji	fils	figli	filhos	fii	hijos
	Big, large	gros	gros, grand	grande, grosso	grande, grosso	mare	grande, largo
	Thank you	haristo (from Greek < $\upsilon\chi\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}$)	merci	grazie	obrigado	mulțumesc	gracias
	Worm	iermu	ver	verme	verme	vierme	gusano
	Grief, pain	jale (from Slavic < žalī)	douleur	dolore, dolor	dor	jale	dolor
	Mileage	kilometraj	kilométrage	chilometraggio	Quilometragem, kilometragem	kilometraj	kilometraje
	Language	limbă	langue	lingua	língua	limbă	lengua, idioma
	Mine (masc.)	meu (possessive, masc.)	mon	mio	meu	meu	mí, mio
	Wednesday	njercurea	mercredi	mercoledì	quarta-feira	miercuri	miércoles
	Bone	os	os	osso	osso	os	hueso
	Pig, pork	porcu	porc	porco	porco	porc	cerdo
	Rare, scarce	rar	rare	raro	raro	rar	raro
	To diminish (verb)	scutere	diminuer	diminuire	diminuir	scădea	disminuir
	Sky	tser	ciel	cielo	céu	cer	cielo
	I fill up (conjug.)	umplu	je remplis	riempio	preencho	umpl	yo relleno
	I see (conjug.)	vedz	je vois	vedo	vejo	văd	veo
	Dining car	wagon-restorant	vagon-restaurant	carrozza ristorante	vagão-restaurante	vagon-restaurant	coche-comedor
	Foreigner (fem.)	xeană	étrangère	straniera	estrangeira	străină	extranjera
	September	yismaciunj	septembre	settembre	setembro	septembrie	Septiembre
	Flight	zbor (from Slavic < sŭborŭ)	vol	volo	voo	zbor	vuelo
Source	Macmillan dictionary	Gramatică Armânească–simplă și practică–1993, Ianachieschi-Vlahu <i>et al.</i> , Skopje	Larousse–Dictionnaire Français	Treccane–Dizionario della Lingua Italiana	Porto Editora–Dicionário de Português	DEX–Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române	DLe–Diccionario de la lengua española

Starting with the end of the Second World War and continuing in the 1960–the 70s, migration was so pronounced that by the 1980s, the vast majority of Aromanians were living in large conurbations such as Thessaloniki, Larissa, Athens, and other towns all over the country and abroad (Koukoudis, 2003). Speaking Aromanian became in many instances unnecessary and impractical, rather than a forbidden vernacular kept within domestic circles, orally transmitted from parent to child, and child to grandchild.

The immigration into cities became generations old, Vlachs married non-Vlachs, ceased to use their ancestors' language, and many did not speak a single word of it. At the same time, since the 1960s, there has been a tradition of Vlach associations and fraternities in considerable numbers and importance, such as the Panhellenic Federation of Vlach Cultural Associations, representing smaller groups from Peninsular Greece.

1.4. The Greek Republic and Language Policies

In Modern Greece and since 1924, one language and religion, have been held as core values of Greek identity and stability (Smolicz, 1991). Brubaker (1996) proposes three core elements to approach nationalism and how to claim a nation that has not come to be.

Historically marginalized ethnic groups were entitled to claim 'nationalizing nationalism' owing to a status entitling them to create a core nationality, conferring legitimacy and control over that state.

Examples of such nationalist aspirations, are the Palestinian and Kurdish liberation movements as unrealized or incomplete states.

Trans-border nationalism, or a trans-frontier sentiment of ‘ethnonational kin’(ship), which transcends national borders: The Aromanian ‘millet’ movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be used as an example, as can the Irish unification attempts.

Minority nationalism is an attempt to oppose nationalizing nationalism, which may also compete with homeland nationalism to apply to the same group. Those directly and adversely affected by the policies of nationalizing nationalism may invoke minority nationalism to advance their cause. Catalans in Spain (Bruyèl-Olmedo & Juan-Garau, 2015) or Uyghurs in China (Tohti, 2014) are suitable examples of minority nationalism.

1.5. *The Last Aromanian Speakers of Metsovo*

Metsovo is considered one of the oldest Pindean Aromanian settlements, officially mentioned in 1383 but, according to historians, likely to date as far back as the eleventh century. Aromanian comprises three main dialects: Pindean, Fărshărot, and Gramustean (Ntasiou, 2017). Although there are no precise figures on the ratio of Aromanians and Greeks, it is believed that over 60% of Metsovians are Aromanian, and most demographics are at least partly Aromanian. The last population census of 2001 indicates just above 7,000 people in the Metsovo municipality (National Statistical Service of Greece, 2003). Without factual data, the number of native speakers in 2023 may be lower than one hundred people. Prentza and Kaltsa (2020) presented similar findings in a study of a Vlach (oral-only) variant conducted at another location in Northern Greece.

During this research in Metsovo and surrounding villages, no person under forty who spoke Aromanian as L1 (native) was identified. Conversely, they all spoke varying levels of English. There was a correlation between age and language proficiency with people over seventy years speaking Aromanian as L1 and, in some cases, identifying as bilingual, decreasing to L2 or ‘fragmented knowledge,’ meaning that they could understand and speak some words or short sentences. In demographics older than forty-one years, the number of non-speakers was higher among female participants. Only one male participant under thirty declared that they had ‘fragmented’ knowledge of Aromanian. Most participants aged thirty-one and under answered N/A, meaning they identified as non-speakers of Aromanian. Finally, when asked whether Aromanian would (still) be an important language twenty years into the future (McKinley & Rose, 2020), none of the participants answered ‘yes’.

All thirty participants in this study, believed in varying degrees of conviction that Aromanian would not be important, with eleven stating that Greek would completely replace Aromanian, followed by those who affirmed Greek and English as important languages for communication (COE, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; EC, 2012; FRA, n.d.). For these, Aromanian is the oral Romance language their grandparents speak, or speak amongst themselves and other elderly local people in this part of the Pindus mountains. Beis (2000) identified a dichotomy among Metsovon Aromanians: on the one hand, they showed pride in their distinct identity; on the other hand, using their mother tongue was associated with self-awareness of ethnic separation from the other Greeks. Although this study focuses on one localized socio-geographic area, it is fair to say that Greek Aromanians have not considered their language maintenance a priority for decades.

Trying to define language maintenance, which tends to imply vernacular, oral transmission, Edwards (1990) asks whether a language could be ‘technically’ preserved in the written (standardized) form, even when few or no speakers use it regularly.

The decline of Aromanian in Greece was partly caused by prohibitive language policies, educational policies (or non-existence thereof), and family language transmission conditions (Lane & Wigglesworth, 2012). Like with numerous other languages in Europe and beyond, there was a combination of major factors, external and internal, particularly in the twentieth century, which caused irreversible sociocultural changes.

The change has become even faster and more dramatic with the new millennium, the Internet, and globalization. Aromanian will likely expire with the last native speakers because “*a language dies when nobody speaks it anymore*” (Crystal, 2002, p. 1) for everyday communication.

2. CONCLUSION

This study identified the near-complete extinction of Aromanian native speakers in contemporary Metsovo and adjacent villages in the Pindus region. There may be socio-geographic pockets of native Aromanians elsewhere in Greece or, indeed, other parts of the Balkans, where the language landscape is different. Aromanian may continue to be transferred to a small number of speakers or new learners and future speakers, as a second or third language. Unless language planning policies, ideologies, and

practices change and effective revitalizing interventions take place, Aromanian will be a dead language in Greece within one, to two generations at the most.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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