The effect of Italo-Romance contact on the Greek cluster νɣ in Corsica and the implications for sound change in Italiot Greek in Southern Italy

Nick Nicholas & John Hajek

To cite this article: Nick Nicholas & John Hajek (2015) The effect of Italo-Romance contact on the Greek cluster νɣ in Corsica and the implications for sound change in Italiot Greek in Southern Italy, <i>WORD</i>, 61:1, 2-11, DOI: 10.1080/00437956.2015.1006852

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00437956.2015.1006852

Published online: 05 Mar 2015.

Article views: 318

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The effect of Italo-Romance contact on the Greek cluster $vɣ$ in Corsica and the implications for sound change in Italiot Greek in Southern Italy

Nick Nicholas and John Hajek*

School of Languages, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC 3010, Australia

(Received 12 February 2014; accepted 19 August 2014)

In this study we describe a change in the phonotactic structure of Corsican or Cargese Greek, involving the historical cluster /$vɣ$/, and relate it to contact with local Italo-Romance (Corsican). While the change in Cargese is seen to be very limited in scope, it provides a useful key to a better understanding of a similar but more complex series of changes in Greek dialects spoken in another Italo-Romance contact situation some distance away in Southern Italy. It also shows how a small change leads not to immediate replacement of an earlier structure, but to increased variation over time. We also motivate the change in question to show that it is related to very specific phonotactic and frequency features of /$gw$/ in Italo-Romance.

Keywords: Greek; Italo-Romance; Cargese; sound change; language contact; phonotactic change

1. Introduction

The development of the cluster /$vɣ$/ is investigated in the Greek dialect spoken in Corsica from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. This is the only cluster to have undergone regular change in the dialect, in its final generation of speakers, and the primary conditioned outcome was /$ɣw$/. We argue that this change was the result of contact influence from Italo-Romance /$gw$/, and that it also sheds valuable light on the accommodation of Greek to Italo-Romance phonotactics elsewhere, i.e. specifically in Southern Italy, where the two language varieties have been in contact substantially longer, and the consequences of phonotactic assimilation on local Greek are more pronounced. The change in Corsican Greek is shown here to have taken place through a process of gradual convergence, involving intermediate forms as well as free variation and secondary developments; this is also borne out in comparison with the Greek of Southern Italy, many hundreds of kilometers away across the Mediterranean.

Little known amongst the many dispersed diasporic Hellenic communities of the world is the formerly Greek-speaking village of Cargese on the French-controlled island of Corsica. Greek speakers first arrived in Corsica in 1676, and after a somewhat complicated history (Nicholas 2005, 2006 for details) they were ultimately settled permanently in Cargese in 1775. Greek survived in the village from that time until what appears to have been the last speaker’s death in 1976.¹ Today the village’s

*Corresponding author. Email: j.hajek@unimelb.edu.au

© 2015 International Linguistic Association
linguistic repertoire is limited to Corsican (Italo-Romance)–French (Gallo-Romance) bilingualism.

The village provides an unusual linguistic laboratory for understanding the progression of sound change over time particularly in a Graeco-Romance contact situation. This is possible given our clear knowledge of the history of the village and its residents to the modern day, its complete isolation from other Greek-speaking areas, including in Southern Italy, and the availability of recorded observations about Cargese Greek made by linguists who visited the village in the twentieth century, as well as earlier source materials.

2. Greek νɣ in Southern Italy and Corsica

Italiot Greek, i.e. the Greek spoken in Southern Italy (in the regions of Calabria and Salento), has various clusters corresponding to standard Modern Greek νɣ: νg, νɣw, νv, gw, gg, and g, as in (1) (data from Karanastasis 1984–1992):

\[
(1) \quad \text{αύγο 'egg'} > \quad \text{Calabrian Greek: εύγο, αγώ, αγγό, αγγό, αγο, αγό, Salentine Greek: αγγό, αγγό, αγγό, αγό}
\]

The multiplicity of forms reported in Calabria and Salento represents dialect variation at local village level in each of these two regions.

The historical development of the cluster νɣ in Italiot Greek has generated much discussion in the Greek philological literature, and there are a number of competing hypotheses about the exact mechanism and order of change involved (see Nicholas 2007 for details). Careful analysis by Nicholas (2007) makes it clear, however, that the various outcomes represent a convergence of the inherited Greek νɣ cluster and its most comparable Romance target gw, a change triggered by contact over many centuries with local varieties of Italo-Romance.\(^2\) The range of observed reflexes also suggests that this change occurred gradually, with intermediate forms alien to both Greek and Romance phonologies (νɣw, νv) emerging to bridge the gap, brought about through metathesis and convergence. Moreover, the chain of sound change has continued further in some villages in the area leading to completely delabialized outcomes gg and g – consistent with the subsequent development of historical /gw/ in local Italo-Romance dialects. With respect to the question of whether the shift from νɣ to gw is a spontaneous phenomenon arising independently in South Italian Greek or results from contact with Italo-Romance (as argued by Nicholas 2007), the latter is strongly suggested by the fact that the same process has occurred, albeit to a slightly more limited degree, in Cargese Greek. In this case, we have a similar Greek–Italo-Romance contact situation, but over a much shorter time frame and in complete isolation from other Greek dialects. Fortunately, the stages of change in Cargese have been recorded in real time and variability, allowing us to understand in some detail how such phonotactic accommodation has taken place over time both in Corsica and in Southern Italy.

The Greek spoken in Corsica between 1676 and 1976 (Blanken 1951; Parlangèli 1952; Vayacacos 1964, 1965) originates in the Maniot dialect spoken by the majority of colonists arriving from Greece (Mirambel 1929). The synchronic phonotactic structure of Maniot, as in most Greek dialects and Standard Modern Greek, has strict place-governed ordering requirements in fricative clusters (Nicholas 2007), as seen in (2):

\[
\text{WORD 3}
\]
That the shift from other examples that retained the original labial+velar cluster, such as the verbs ‘acceptable in Greek, as in Velar+labial ordering in obstruent clusters (involving stops or fricatives) was previously in the Maniot dialect of Cargese, as in the Greek dialects of Southern Italy, the cluster has been subject to further change in the direction of gw: gw is its closest possible counterpart and very common in Italo-Romance, which does not allow vɣ and generally disfavors all nonsibilant fricative+fricative clusters. The change accelerated in the last generation of Greco-Corsican speakers, so that there is a real difference between the reflexes of vɣ recorded by Blanken (1951 but based on fieldwork in the 1930s) and then by Parlangéli (1950s) and Vayacacos (1965), only a few decades later.3

The assimilation is no earlier than the twentieth century; no trace of it can be found in any late nineteenth-century records of Greco-Corsican. Thus, Stephanopoli Ragazzacci uses vɣalte ‘take out!’ in his 1860 translation of the Prodigal Son (Blanken 1951: 284), and Phardys (1888: 172) records kovɣo ‘I cut’ in a folk song, and pevɣo ‘I send’ in his glossary. That the assimilation did not take hold in the first two centuries of Greek settlement is not surprising: for a substantial period there appears to have been relatively little linguistic contact with local Corsican Italo-Romance, helping to preserve Greek in its original form. Once relations between local Greek and Corsican populations were eventually fully normalized in the nineteenth century, intermarriage and then the use of Corsican alongside Greek in Cargese eventually became the norm (Blanken 1951: 23–5), and it is only after that stage that the assimilation in question and other contact effects start to be observed.

The initial stage of the assimilation is recorded by Blanken (1951: 76), who gives examples of the metathesis of vɣ > vɣ in Greco-Corsican: avɣo > aɣvo ‘egg’, zevɣari > zevɣari ‘pair’, and fevɣo > fevɣo ~ fevɣo ‘leave’. Blanken presents fevɣo as being in free variation with fevɣo; although he implies aɣvo is the main form used, he indicates that the speaker Demetrios Corizzi used both aɣvo and aɣvo in a couplet (Blanken 1951: 299). That the shift from vɣ to vɣ was still very much under way in the 1930s is confirmed by other examples that retained the original labial+velar cluster, such as the verbs vɣazɣo ‘I take out’, evɣala ‘I took out’, and vɣo ‘that I go out’ (Blanken 1951: 117, 133, 284, 287) with no indication of metathesis.

Blanken (1951: 117) notes that the epenthetic -γ- in -vɣo verbs – of the type recorded by Phardys (kovɣo ‘I cut’, pevɣo ‘I send’) and widespread in Greek dialects – no longer appears in Cargese: his consultants produce kovɔ in the same folk song (Blanken 1951: 297). This would have eliminated a major source of the vɣ cluster in the dialect. But the phenomenon is lexically conditioned and not in fact regular: Blanken (1951: 77–8) provides other examples of γ-epenthesis, and Vayacacos (1965) shows survival of the velar element in the same verb: kovɣo < kovɣo ‘I cut’ (see below).

The particular kind of metathesis Blanken records for Greco-Corsican, e.g. aɣvo > aɣvo ‘eggs’ is unusual for Greek, and is otherwise found only in Italiot Greek in Southern Italy – evidence in support of the influence of contact with Italo-Romance clusters gw, kw in both areas. The treatment of Corsican loans into Cargese Greek in the early twentieth century shows a parallel outcome to native vɣ > vɣ, with velar+labiodental gɣ (and kɣ)
apparent in Vayacacos. There is one important difference between Southern Italian Greek and Greco-Corsican.

3. Differences in development: Southern Italy vs. Corsica

There is one important difference between Southern Italian Greek and Greco-Corsican apparent in Vayacacos’ (1964, 1965) field notes. Southern Italian Greek has \( \nu \nu > gw \)
whatever the following vowel. But Vayacocos records unmetathesized vɣ (unpalatalized) or vɣ (palatalized) consistently before front vowels (Vayacocos is inconsistent in inserting diacritics to indicate palatalization).5

(3) Cargese vəjeno ‘I go out’ vʒitə ‘he went out’
Std. Gk /v̂enyə/ [vəje] /v̂yike/ [vʃice]
S. Italian Gk gweno, gwitfe

This pattern even holds for verbs which apply metathesis before back vowels in inflection: B170 ekovye ‘he was cutting’ vs. B80 ekovye / ekoywane ‘they were cutting’. As a result, the metathesis and progressive Italiotization of vɣ occurs only before non-front vowels in Cargese: the phenomenon of convergent shift is, in this dialect, much more restricted in scope and environment than in Italiot Greek.

There are two possible explanations for the difference in the scope of sound change between Greco-Corsican in Cargese and Italiot in Southern Italy. The first involves the varying extent of palatalization of ɣ. In Southern Italy, the palatalization of ɣ does not range any further than in Standard Greek: intervocalic palatalized ɣ is [j ~ j] in Salento and [j] in Calabria, while the realization of palatalized /vɣ/ is [vj] in both regions (Katsosyanou 1995: 119, 122–5; Profili 1983: 103–9). In Maniot and Greco-Corsican, on the other hand, the palatalization of ɣ, proceeded to fricative [ʒ]. The palatalized [vj] in Southern Italy is thus closer articulatorily to a labiodorsal than the Greco-Corsican [vʃ] is. This somewhat reduced degree of phonetic difference may have been sufficient for Italiot speakers to treat [vɣ] and [vj] in the same way, i.e. as subject to metathesis to labiodorsal [gw], while the Greco-Corsicans kept the labiocoronal cluster distinct from the labiodorsal. But there are problems with such an account: the articulatory similarity of [vɣ] and [vj] is not particularly great, and vɣ > gw does not on its own seem plausible without analogical motivation. In fact, palatal [j ~ j] and velar [ɣ] have been felt to be so distinct in Salento that they have undergone phonemic split: [ɣ] has become an allophone of /k/, while /j/ is now a distinct phoneme. The conflation of [vɣ] and [vj] into [gw] thus seems problematic.

The alternative explanation involves the impact of analogical change on verb paradigms in Italiot, but not in Cargese. As seen previously, in Cargese Greek the third person plural of a verb (ekoywane ‘they were cutting’ < ekoyvane) is subject to metathesis, but the third person singular, involving a front vowel after vɣ, is not (ekovye ‘he was cutting’ < ekovye). In Italiot, analogical change has taken place, shifting [j] to [ɣ] before front vowels, and thereby regularizing verb paradigms (Rohlfs 1977: 27: troyise rather than the expected trojise ‘you eat’, modeled on troyo ‘I eat’). It is likely then that analogical leveling in Italiot led to the replacement of palatalized [vj] with unpalatalized [vɣ] even in palatalizing contexts. Once this occurred, it fed into secondary metathesis to [vɣ] and subsequent shift in the direction of [gw]. If this hypothesis is correct, the main locus of analogy would also have been verb endings, given how widespread ɣ-epenthesis was in Italiot verb inflections, and how infrequent it is in stems: thus, xorevyo, xorevji > xorevyo, xorevyi > xoregwo, xoregwi ‘I dance, he dances’ (Vuni Italiot, Calabria: Karanastasis 1984–92).

Moreover, Rohlfs (1977: 121) indicates that the normal conjugation of pistevyo > pistegwo ‘I believe’ is pistegwo::pistegwi ‘I believe:he believes’ in (Calabrian) Italiot. This is indeed the regular case for the Vuni dialect; but in nearby Chorio Rochudi, where the vɣ cluster is completely lost before back vowels in verb inflections, there is no
analogical remodeling and the conjugation is instead *pisteo:* *pistevji*. This alternation supports the claim that without the analogical pressure from a labial-velar cluster in *pistegwo*, *pistevji* could fail to metathesize to *pistegwi* in the dialect. If analogy was a primary motivation for *νγ*-metathesis, it is possible that had Greco-Corsican survived, the same kind of analogical levelling would also have taken place for *ekovje:* *ekovwane* ‘he was cutting::they were cutting’, giving *ekogwe:* *ekogwane*. This analogy would have spread further until *νʒ* was replaced by *gw* everywhere in Cargese Greek.

4. Why Romanization of only *νγ* and no other cluster in Cargese Greek?

The shift away from *νγ* toward Italo-Romance *gw* has been motivated partly by the phonotactic distance between source and target language, and the increasing influence of Corsican Italo-Romance, especially in the dying days of Greek in Cargese. But the question remains as to why, of all the many Greek clusters alien to the Italo-Romance phonotactic system, it is *νγ* that is the first and only cluster to be Romanized in Cargese Greek. There is no doubt of the importance of the availability of the Italo-Romance cluster *gw* with elements that are reasonably comparable with those of the Greek *νγ*. But a possible argument that they are the most alike of all Greco-Romance cluster pairs appears not to be true. If we take the Cargese Greek cluster *νʒ* (the palatalized version of *νγ*), the Corsican cluster most similar to it is *zv* and one can make the case that that phonetic distance between the individual elements in *νʒ* and *zv* is less than between those in *νγ* and *gw*.

However, we wish to suggest that there are other reasons that account for *νγ* > *gw* as the first and only recorded change:

1. across languages sound change has been shown to start in one small context before generalizing over time to other related contexts. Hajek (1997), for example, provides many examples of very gradual interaction between place of articulation and the expansion of sound change over time. In successive phases, we would expect an increasing set of Greek clusters to be subject to Romanization – as has clearly occurred in Southern Italian Greek, which has been subject to intensive contact over a much greater period of time (see below).

2. we suggest that a shift from *νγ* in the direction of *gw* (and related variants *γw*, *ɣ*, *w*) rather than phonetically more akin *νʒ* > *zv* reflects in the first instance the preferred structural nature of Corsican (and indeed Italo-Romance in general), and the phonetic modeling that would have arisen as a result for speakers of Cargese Greek. A statistical analysis of a large-scale text corpus of Corsican Italo-Romance shows *gw* (2345 instances) to occur more than six times more frequently than *zv* (381 instances) in that language.6 Our corpus analysis also shows other strong evidence in favor of *gw* being unmarked in Corsican, in comparison to *zv*: it is morphologically simplex and does not occur over morpheme boundaries. In contrast, with the exception of loan forms [zvittseru] ‘Swiss’ and [zvedese] ‘Swedish’, *zv* is morphologically complex, always involving a prefix /s/ with predictable voicing before /v/, e.g. /s+vela/ [zvela] ‘it unveils’. There are other phonotactic restrictions on *zv* in Corsican: with the exception of /tras+versale/ [travversale] ‘transverse’, *zv* is always restricted to word-initial position in our corpus and can never appear medially nor after any other consonant. Such restrictions do not in any way apply to *gw* – which appears freely and frequently in all permissible phonotactic positions in Corsican,
including after other consonants, e.g. [gwerrə] ‘war’, [treqwa] ‘ceasefire’, [zgwaltu] ‘astute’, [lienqwa] ‘tongue’. It often appears also at the end of verb stems, e.g. [distiŋqwu] ‘I distinguish’ – [distiŋqwe] ‘he distinguishes’, just as vγ does in dialectal Greek. Given all of these facts, the frequent and unrestricted presence of gw, as compared to that of zv, in the Corsican speech of Greek-Corsican bilinguals in Cargese would have strongly favored the restructuring of vγ to gw in the local Greek over vβ > zv. Our account based on frequency and structural effects – in a language contact situation – is also consistent with the well-known frequency/usage based approach to account for sound change, e.g. Bybee (2002, 2006).

Other fricative clusters in Greco-Corsican are even more aberrant than vβ and vγ from an Italo-Romance perspective, and it would be difficult to associate with these, even very distantly, any kind of Romance cluster in Corsican; yet they have remained stable to the end. For instance, a folk etymological conflation of γόνο < ekδύνο ‘to undress’ and εύμνος ‘naked’ has given the innovative Cargese form γόμινος ‘naked’ (e.g. B130): the μn cluster is broken up (as had already taken place in Maniot), but the very un-Romance cluster γό is preserved. (Similarly we find γόδο ‘that I undress’ A147, γόμιδα ‘around seventy’ A116.) We would argue that there simply is no cluster in Corsican that could serve as a target for shift in these cases, at least in the early stages of phonotactic restructuring under way in Cargese Greek.

5. Change in Italiot Greek: further along the path

In the Italiot Greek of Southern Italy, by contrast, the historical set of Greek clusters that are alien to local Italo-Romance phonotactics have been significantly transformed and reduced in number (Rohlfs 1977: 24–54). This undoubtedly reflects, as already noted, the much longer period of contact and bilingualism. While shift is still under way in some cases, the pattern is consistently one of making Greek clusters more akin to those possible in Southern Italo-Romance. The Maniot clusters vð, yð in (2), for instance, correspond to the following Southern Italian Greek words (data from Karanastasis 1984–1992); the most common Italiot form for each is in boldface:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancient</th>
<th>Standard Modern</th>
<th>Calabria</th>
<th>Salento</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kd &gt; Standard Modern yð</td>
<td>amygdales &gt; amiydala ‘almond tree’, ekderò: &gt; yðero ‘flay’</td>
<td>dd, nd: amiddala, amendulea, meddulea, mendulea ‘almond tree’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In these examples we see the final and preferred outcome to be prototypically Southern Italo-Romance with the full assimilation of heteroorganic clusters into geminates. The addition of an initial epenthetic vowel a allows a phonotactic word shape with geminates in medial position as preferred by local Italo-Romance dialects. There is plenty of language internal motivation for such epenthesis (the only kind in fact that Rohlfs 1977: 20–1 considers), but the outcome is largely consistent with Italo-Romance. Indeed, this
contact-induced tendency is so marked in Southern Italy, that other typically Greek clusters are also subject to radical change in Southern Italian Greek: Gallicianò (which is more innovative than other Calabrian Italiot dialects in this regard) allows mostly clusters with initial /s/ and final liquids. The only clusters it retains, that are not also historically native to Italo-Romance are /xr/ and /xl/, featuring the velar fricative traditionally considered alien to Romance (Katsoyannou 1995: 127–8). However, contact with Greek and Arabic has led in many Southern Italian dialects to the borrowing of [xɔ] (Rohlfs 1966: 233), so that even these clusters should no longer be considered atypical for local Italo-Romance in the areas concerned. Although there is a range of realizations of Greek clusters in the Italiot villages of Southern Italy, the usual outcome (in bold) is consistent with and acceptable to local Italo-Romance norms, e.g. ks > fs, ts, f, and ps > sp, fs, fts, ts, ss (Rohlfs 1977: 43, 53).

Despite the synchronic extent of cluster transformation in Italiot, we would suggest that the process began in the first instance with γ’, just as in Cargese, for the same kinds of typological and structural reasons given for the preferential transformation of γ to gw in that location. Historically, the same kind of Italo-Romance phonotactic input (with frequent and free distribution of gw) was available to Greek speakers in Southern Italy as in Corsica.

6. Conclusions

 Whereas Greco-Romance contact in Southern Italy is arguably thousands of years old, contact in Corsica has been relatively brief. Accordingly, while the phonotactics of Italiot have moved substantially toward the phonotactics of Italo-Romance, the changes in γ represent the first such step in Greco-Corsican. As argued elsewhere (Nicholas 2011) the spread of /s/-apocope to prevocalic contexts, where it is strictly disallowed in Maniot, represents another type and example of shift. This means that the single change in γ in Greco-Corsican can be taken as an entry point for phonotactic assimilation in the dialect, moving through Greek one cluster at a time rather than all at once; we can extrapolate that the same took place in Italiot. The choice of γ as the first cluster to assimilate has depended on the availability of a phonetically similar target cluster in Romance that is the most frequent, productive and unrestricted in phonotactic distribution; there is no reason to think that such change would not eventually have spread to all Greek clusters unfamiliar to the local form of Italo-Romance, as indeed has taken place in Gallicianò.

Our survey has also shown that even for the single cluster γ, the phonotactic change has not happened at once, but has been a gradual process of convergence, involving intermediate forms, sometimes not native to either source or target language. For the first two centuries, inherited Greek γ survived and was the only outcome recorded in Cargese, as seen above. Only in the 1930s when contact between Greek and Corsican (and French) was more intense than it had ever been, and with Greek already moribund, do we find the first stages of change. By the 1930s the Greek cluster γ was showing clear instability, such that by the 1950s metathesis and shift to γ had become the norm, with occasional full accommodation to Romance gw. One decade on, new, additionally reduced variants (w, y), also characteristic of Corsican Italo-Romance, had appeared – in the speech of the same speaker, Justine Voglimacci, with whom Vayacacos (1965: 4) primarily worked.

(5) Stage 1 1676: γ
1888: γ
Stage 2 1934: γ ~ γ (Greek); gw, kv
The profusion of intermediate forms shows that the phonotactic assimilation was the result of a gradual convergence of the source and target clusters; this is particularly obvious at Stage 2, when the Greek and Romance clusters are still distinct. This gradual assimilation is corroborated by the intermediate forms reported for Italiot in (1). Such rapid shift and change leading to significant phonetic variation within the speech of the same speaker is of course not unusual in the terminal stages of a dying language and has been reported elsewhere, e.g. Dorian (1981) for a Scottish Gaelic dialect.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes
1. There is a verbal report of a surviving Greek speaker in the mid-2000s (Antonio Romano, pers. com).

2. Italo-Romance is the name given to the closely related Romance dialects of Central and Southern Italy, Sicily, Northern Sardinia and Corsica. Amongst these, Corsican is most similar to Tuscan and Standard Italian, cf. Maiden & Parry (1997: 3).

3. All examples have been transliterated into IPA. Blanken and Parlangèli differentiate stressed e, o from unstressed ɛ, ɔ; Phardy and Vayacacos do not. The following abbreviations are used: P = Parlangèli (1952); A = Vayacacos (1964); B = Vayacacos (1965).

4. The form appears in B163 in the proverbial expression skvaltaruŋa djaulunə ‘pupils are little devils’, which Blanken had also reported; this may explain the more conservative form used. Moreover, the previous page in Vayacacos’ field notes contains a mention of Justine Voglimacci’s father; this suggests, albeit weakly, that the form is being used by the linguistically more conservative Versinis.


6. The corpus (532,818 words) is a collection of online materials written in Corsican, assembled through the An Crúdabán web crawler as of 22 July 2005 (http://borel.slu.edu/crubadan/index.html). Our thanks go to Kevin Scannell for making the collection of links available to us.

REFERENCES


