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Submitted: 08/04/2026 - Accepted: 10/05/2026 - Published: 28/06/2026

Minority Languages and the Majority Tongue: The Impact of Bilingualism in Education

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DOI: 10.26417/h5v4qf25

Abstract

The presence of national minorities in Albania reflects both historical continuity and contemporary diversity. Official recognition between 2004 and 2017 of ethnic and ethno-linguistic groups-including Greek, Macedonian, Serbo-Montenegrin, Vlach, and Romani underscores their role in shaping cultural heritage. Among these, the Greek minority is the largest, settled mainly in southern Albania. This study examines the sociolinguistic use of Albanian within the Greek community, where Greek functions as the primary language and Albanian as a secondary one. The research focuses on conditions of Albanian use, levels of competence and the interaction between local dialects and the standardized Albanian. Methodologically, questionnaires and on-site observations in schools' workplaces, everyday settings capture authentic bilingual practices. Findings highlight how Albanian is acquired, maintained, and evaluated, reflecting the processes of integration, language contact, minority rights and identity in Albania.

Keywords: Minority education, language contact, integration, sociolinguistic competence.

Introduction

Historical and institutional context

The existence of national minorities in Albania consists of a historical and contemporary/present reality. State policies and institutional commitment, reflected in the ratification of international instruments for the protection of minority rights, have established a favourable environment for the preservation of linguistic and

cultural diversity. Albania has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1995 and, as such, has ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

Greek Minority in Albania

This community is primarily situated in Dropull, Pogon and other southern (Gjirokastra, Saranda, Delvina, Himara, Mesopotam, Livadhja), as well as in some villages near Përmet. They enjoy the right to education in their native language and to learn Albanian as a second language. The main schools are located in Bularat, Dervician, Mesopotam and Livadhja.

Theoretical Framework

The sociolinguistic literature on languages in contact (Weinreich, 1953; Ferguson, 1959; Fishman, 1965, 1972; Andersen, 1990; Asenova, 2006; Shkurtaç, 2009) provides the theoretical basis for understanding the interaction between Albanian and Greek languages. Studies emphasize the role that the family, peers, and school play in the formation of language competence and language maintenance in bilingual environments.

Research Problem

In Dropull, where Greek is the mother tongue and Albanian is taught as a subject in schools, questions arise on the rate of Albanian usage language competence according to age group, gender and the relationship between spoken and written Albanian. The use of the Albanian language is not only a linguistic issue, but also an institutional and social one.

Purpose of the study

The study aims at pointing out how historical, social and institutional factors affect the maintenance of Albanian as a second language among the Greek minority of Dropull. The Greek minority constitutes the largest in the country (0.98% of the population), followed respectively by the Egyptian, Romani, Bulgarian, Aromanian and Montenegrin communities. Although small in number, these minorities play an important role in enriching the cultural and linguistic identity of Albania.

Materials and Methodology of the Study

The materials and methodology of the study are based on questionnaires and observations in different living environments, intent on a complete linguistic analysis. The study is based on a sociolinguistic approach, combining structured questionnaires, open interviews and field observations. The samples were selected from the Greek community in Dropull (Dervican and Bularat schools, as well as residents of the area), with a view to representing different generations and different social environments. A total of 340 students and 200 adults participated, divided into three age groups (6-18, 28-50 and 50-80 years old). The selection criteria included

age, gender, educational level, profession and use of the Greek/Albanian language in everyday life.

Data collection instruments included 540 structured surveys, 200 open-ended interviews, participation in children's activities, and observations at family parties. Open-ended surveys and interviews were conducted only with participants who provided their informed and full consent on a voluntary basis. Albanian language teachers demonstrated important support, facilitating contact with students and sharing observations on the use of written and spoken Albanian. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific research, respecting the rights, freedom and dignity of the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of the data were given primary importance throughout the process.

The survey questions were based on the models of Gabrielle Birken Silverman and Vito Matrenga, while the theoretical analysis was based on Durkheim's sociological concepts and Saussure's linguistic terminology. The data were analysed using statistical methods to compare language competence between age groups. Some of the survey questions:

1. Duration of use of the Albanian language in oral communication

How long have you been using the Albanian language in speech?

-Less than 5 years; -5 years;

-More than 5 years

2. Duration of the use of the Albanian language in written communication

-How long have you been using the Albanian language in writing? -Less than 5 years;-5 years;

-More than 5 years

Language variety preference/ In which variety of the Albanian language are you most able to communicate? -Speaking;/ Writing.

To measure linguistic competence, a structured survey was used, designed on two dimensions: oral and written. The questions were built on the basis of Durkheim's sociological analysis and Saussure's linguistic terminology, focusing on the difference between language (langue) and discourse (parole). The instrument aimed to identify:

- Preference for language variety (standard/dialect, oral/written);

- Time of language acquisition (in childhood or later);

- Frequency of use of Albanian and Greek in different settings (family, school, business, social);

- Ratio of use according to social relationships (with parents, siblings, friends);

- Passive comprehension in cases where the language is not spoken.

For the age group between 6 and 18 years, the surveys were completed in writing; for other age groups, the oral form was used to avoid non-response. The data were analysed using statistical methods to compare language competence between age groups.

Results and Discussion

After presenting the theoretical context and methodology of the study, this section presents the results of the questionnaires and interviews conducted with members of the Greek minority in Dropull. The data analysis aims to identify the main trends in the use of Albanian and Greek, taking into consideration the factors of age, gender, social environment and cultural status. The results are not seen merely as linguistic indicators, but are placed in a broader sociolinguistic framework, where language is both a means of communication and a symbol of identity. In accordance with Fishman's (1967, 1991) approaches to "*domain analysis*" and Weinreich's (1953) theory of linguistic interference, the use of Albanian in this community reflects clear limitations in certain fields (education, commerce, administration), while Greek preserves the status of the dominant language in family and social life. This section presents the collected data, divided according to age group and communication environment, as well as a discussion of their implications in relation to the international literature on bilingualism and the preservation of minority languages.

The analysis of the 13 survey questions highlighted the results and some clear trends in the use of Albanian and Greek within the Greek community in Dropull:

Dominance of Greek: In 95% of the cases, the surveyed participants use Greek as a language of communication, while Albanian is used only in 5% of the cases, mainly in limited contexts (Albanian language class at school, sporadic communication with Albanian peers)

-Age group 6–18-year-old:

Children 6–8-year-olds have difficulties in using Albanian, as they start learning it in the first year of school.

From the age of 8-18, knowledge of Albanian is better, but its use remains limited in the school environment.

-Age groups 28-50- and 50–80-year-old:

Albanian is rarely used, only in working relationships with Albanians, in trade or in family businesses.

-In everyday communication (family, social, emotional), Greek remains the preferred language.

Communication environments:

Family: Greek is used with parents, siblings and young children. Only in special cases, when one parent is Albanian, children are encouraged to learn it.

Society: Greek is spoken with minority friends, while Albanian is used only when the friends are of Albanian ethnicity.

Emotions: In situations of annoyance or when emotionally overwhelmed, all age groups use Greek business environment. Language use depends on the interlocutor: Greek with minorities, Albanian with Albanians.

School: Albanian is used only during Albanian language classes; as for the other subjects and communication, Greek dominates.

Passive understanding: Even when not speaking Albanian, participants understand it in contact with Albanian peers, although this contact is limited.

Social contacts are also linguistic ones, as they include different linguistic varieties of strata and regions, depending on the composition and affiliation of social groups. As Shkurtaç emphasizes, Albanian sociolinguistics has shown that language use is closely linked to the social circle and to the processes of adaptation in the community. Adaptation to the social circle is one of the fundamental requirements of modern sociolinguistics, where language is not only seen as a mean of communication, but also as a mean of identification.

Islamaj (2008) emphasizes that “*the Albanian language, as well as other languages for their speakers, is not only a means of communication, but also a means of identification*”, underlining its role in building individual and collective identity. This dimension of language as an identity symbol is obvious in studies on the language-identity relationship in the Albanian context (Priku, 2008). This analytical framework allows us to comprehend that the use of Greek and Albanian in the Greek community of Dropull is not simply a practical matter, but it is closely related to the processes of integration, identity preservation, and cultural adaptation in different social environments.

Analytical framework: The data from the questionnaires were statistically analysed, while the interviews and observations were treated through thematic analysis. The comparison between generations and genders served to assess language competence and to understand the processes of integration, identity preservation and the influence of extralinguistic factors.

Statistical analysis: The questionnaire data were processed through percentages and categorization according to age, gender and social status. The comparison between the student-adult-elderly groups highlighted differences in language competence and use of Albanian.

Thematic analysis: Interviews and free conversations were coded according to the main themes: the use of Albanian in school, in family, in public settings; perception of Albanian as a second language; code-switching and language mixing. Recurring patterns of linguistic behaviour and the factors that condition them (environment, age, gender, social status) were identified.

Intergenerational and gender comparison: Levels of linguistic competence between generations (children, adults, elderly) were compared to see trends in the preservation or weakening of Albanian. Gender analysis highlighted differences in the use of Albanian, especially in relation to the educational and professional environment.

Sociolinguistic dimension: The role of extralinguistic factors (historical, economic, cultural) in language choice was examined. It was analysed how the use of Albanian reflects processes of integration, identity preservation and cultural negotiation.

The assessment of linguistic competence: It was assessed at three levels: *comprehension, production and fluency.*

The analysis is based on Jim Cummin's theory on bilingual ability, especially the concept of interdependence of linguistic competence (Common Underlying Proficiency (1979; 2000), according to which the development of a second language is closely linked to the competence in the mother tongue. In this context, the use of Albanian by the Greek minority in Albania is seen not only as a process of acquiring a new language, but also as a reflection of the relationship between Greek and Albanian in the formation of academic and social skills, as well as in Pierre Bourdieu's concept (Bourdieu, 1991), on cultural and symbolic capital where the choice of language is seen as a form of power and social prestige.

In this context, the use of Greek by the Greek minority in Albania can be interpreted as the preservation of ethnic and cultural capital, while Albanian appears as social capital necessary for integration. These theoretical perspectives allow us to conclude that the use of the Albanian language should not be seen only as just a linguistic phenomenon, but as a complex process with social and cultural dimensions. In this sense, Albanian appears as a means of communication, sign of identity, cultural practice as well as interactive with different social contexts.

From this aspect, it can be affirmed that the analysis showed that regardless of age, gender and social status, the participants know Albanian at different levels, conditioned by extralinguistic factors. The results showed that 95% of the participants use Greek as their main language, while Albanian is mainly used at school and in limited contacts with Albanians. This result is consistent with the concept of *domain analysis* by Fishman (Fishman, 1967, 1991) where the second language is limited in use to certain fields (education), indicating a tendency of language displacement. Simultaneously, the use of Albanian in school reflects the educational policies of minorities, where the second language serves as a means of integration but not always as part of ethnic identity.

The findings on the limited use of Albanian in the Greek minority take on a fuller meaning when placed in an international comparative framework. *In Spain*, for instance, the *Catalan model* of bilingual education has institutionalized Catalan as the main language of schooling, aiming at full competence in Catalan and Spanish. This

case obviously confirms that when a minority language has a strong legal and political status, it can be preserved and developed simultaneously with the dominant language. In *Finland*, the Swedish-speaking minority is entitled to institutional protection through special educational laws, where education is provided in Swedish and Finnish, guaranteeing linguistic equality. Compared to these models, the situation in Albania is different: Albanian, as a second language for the Greek minority, is mainly taught in schools and does not have the same institutional status in everyday life. This contrast highlights the crucial role of educational policies and the legal status of the language in preserving linguistic identity. Among others, the main factors influencing language choice are *environment, family and age*.

The results of questionnaires and interviews conducted with members of the Greek minority in Dropull show that Greek remains the dominant language of communication, while Albanian is used mainly in limited contexts such as school, commerce and sporadic contacts with Albanians. In about 95% of the cases, participants use Greek, while Albanian appears in only 5% of the usage. This phenomenon is consistent with the concept of “domain analysis” of Fishman (1967, 1991), according to which the second language is limited to certain domains, indicating a tendency of language displacement.

Intergenerational differences are evident: children aged 6–8 learn Albanian only at school and face difficulties using it, while from the age of 8–18 knowledge is better, but remains limited in the educational environment. Among young people aged 18–28, Albanian is more dominant in oral communication, often with linguistic code switching, but phonetic and morphological interferences are strong. Among adults and the elderly, Albanian is used only for practical needs, while Greek remains the main language of family and social communication. This difference shows that linguistic competence in Albanian is closely related to institutional exposure and not to spontaneous use in everyday life. Linguistic observations and analyses highlighted obvious morphosyntactic and phonetic problems.

Word stress is often placed according to the Greek model, creating a “Greekized” intonation in Albanian. The placement of the definite article before the noun, the position of the adjective, the confusion of cases and the incorrect use of verb tenses are among the most frequent errors. Furthermore, the gender of nouns is often treated indiscriminately, leading to morphological deformations. These phenomena appear in all age groups, proving that the competence of Albanian is limited and strongly influenced by the structure of Greek. At school age, children use Albanian mainly in the standard form, but with phonetic and orthographic inaccuracies; among young people, interferences are visible in oral communication; while among adults and the elderly, Albanian remains a learned language, not naturally acquired.

These findings are placed in a broader sociolinguistic framework, where language is seen as a means of communication and a symbol of identity. As Shkurtaj (2009) emphasizes, language use is closely related to the social circle and the processes of

adaptation in the community. Islamaj (2008) and Priku (2008) underline that language is a means of individual and collective identification, a dimension that clearly appears in the Greek community of Dropull. In this sense, the choice of Greek preserves cultural and ethnic capital, while Albanian appears as social capital necessary for integration, according to Bourdieu's (1991) concept of cultural and symbolic capital. Statistical analysis of the data showed clear differences between generations and genders, highlighting that competence in Albanian is more elevated among students than among adults and the elderly. Young people often use linguistic code switching (Bonny Norton, 1997), switching from Greek to Albanian and vice versa, especially when communicating with Albanians. This phenomenon shows that bilingualism is present, but not balanced. Albanian is used as a means of practical communication, but not as a language of identity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Thematic analysis of the interviews highlighted the perception of Albanian as a second language, code-switching and language mixing in certain environments. These patterns of linguistic behaviour are conditioned by extralinguistic factors such as environment, age, gender and social status. In this context, Jim Cummins' theory on the interdependence of linguistic competence (1979; 2000) assists to understand that the development of Albanian is closely related to competence in the mother tongue, while educational policies play a decisive role in linguistic integration. International comparison makes the situation clearer. In Spain, the Catalan model of bilingual education has institutionalized the use of Catalan and Spanish, while in Finland the Swedish-speaking minority enjoys institutional protection through bilingual education. In Albania, Albanian for the Greek minority is mainly taught in school and does not have a strong institutional status in everyday life, highlighting the crucial role of educational and legal policies in preserving linguistic identity.

Discussion

-Linguistic interaction and the role of bilingualism

The results show that the use of Albanian in the Greek minority remains limited and mainly functional, while Greek maintains the status of the main language of family and social communication. This phenomenon is consistent with Weinreich's (1953) observations on linguistic interference, where the dominant language in the social environment tends to prevail over the second language.

Differences by age group

The data analysis shows clear differences by age: children learn Albanian at school, young people use it with strong interference, while adults retain it at a mechanical level. This result confirms the approach of Fishman (1972), who emphasizes the role of school as a preserving factor, yet not sufficient without support from the family and community.

-The social and cultural dimension of Albanian

The use of Albanian is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a social and cultural process. In this sense, Albanian appears as an indispensable mean of communication in the market and administration, but not as a strong sign of identity. This result is consistent with Andersen's (1990) studies on the adaptation of speech to the social context.

-The role of educational and institutional policies

Educational policies have created opportunities for learning Albanian as a second language, but its limited use in everyday life shows that language preservation requires a combination of both institutional and social factors. This conclusion supports the analysis of Shkurtaj (2009) on the need for an integrated linguistic environment for the preservation of minority languages.

-Limitations of the study

The study is focused on the Greek minority of Dropull and other areas where this community lives, are not included. In addition, the data is mainly based on questionnaires and analyses with other minorities in Albania which leads to better understanding the dynamics of bilingualism.

Conclusions

From the data collected, it can be deduced that Albanian is mainly spoken in the standard form, because it is learned in school. However, its use remains limited and often conditioned by extralinguistic factors such as environment, family, age and social context. Greek maintains a dominant position, while Albanian is perceived more as a learned language than as a language naturally used in everyday communication. The study showed that the Greek language maintains a dominant position in everyday communication of the Greek minority in Dropull, while Albanian is used mainly in the school environment and in limited social and commercial situations. The use of Albanian is conditioned by factors such as environment, family, age, social relations and economic context, which determine the choice of the linguistic code and directly affects the linguistic competence of the speakers. Greek-speaking students encounter obvious difficulties in basic elements of the Albanian: word stress, definite article, adjective, cases, degrees of adjective, gender, noun inflection, tenses and moods of the verb. These difficulties show that the interaction of the two linguistic systems creates constant interference. A frequent phenomenon observed is code-switching and mixing of Albanian with Greek, especially in everyday communication. This shows that bilingualism is not balanced, but rather oriented towards Greek as the main language.

The results by age group showed that in the ages of 6-18, Albanian is taught as standard in school, but its use is influenced by Greek; in the ages of 18-28, Albanian is used mainly in oral communication, but with strong interferences; while in the ages

of 30-80 years, Albanian is used mainly for practical and commercial needs, being perceived more as a means of communication than as a language of identity. Local dialects (Gheg and Tosk beyond Tepelena) create great difficulties in understanding and using, them limiting the ability of students to cope with linguistic variation.

In a broader historical plan, it should be noteworthy that the Greek minority has been part of the Albanian reality since the beginnings of the nation-state. Its recognition in 1921 in the League of Nations and early policies to guarantee basic rights, especially in education and culture, shows that the issue of language has always been linked to the process of integration and preservation of identity. The introduction of the Albanian language as a subject in the curricula of Greek minority schools has helped to preserve it, but has not managed to make Albanian a language widely used in everyday life.

This shows that educational policies are necessary, but not sufficient enough without support from the family and the social environment. This research provides a complete overview of the dynamics of bilingualism in Dropull, showing that Albanian is learned, but not always used. The study contributes to the sociolinguistic references on languages in contact, highlighting the role of linguistic and extralinguistic factors in the preservation or weakening of a language in minority environments, as well as placing this reality in a broader historical context of relations between the Albanian state and the Greek minority.

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