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Revisiting discourses of language, identity and community in a transnational context through a commemorative book project

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**Abstract**

In this article, I present and discuss a commemorative book project to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Greek School of Lausanne. I examine the continuities and discontinuities of the notions of language, identity and community as these were represented through the voices of former Greek state officials, teachers and pupils. I take a long view, combining archival material with interviews and written accounts spanning the first twenty years of the establishment and development of the school. Finally, I tentatively reflect on how the book project might have impacted on the Greek community of Lausanne and its school in a period of transition.

**Keywords:** institutional discourses, pupil voices, complementary schools, commemorative book, long view

1. Introduction

In this article, I present and discuss a commemorative book project to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Greek School of Lausanne. Complementary (also known as community, supplementary, or heritage) schools emerge organically from the desire of parents and other community members to maintain the community language, culture, history and identity among the young generation in a transnational context. In addition to being important sites for children’s language and literacy learning, they provide socialisation spaces for parents and children and a crucial link between older and younger generations of community members (see studies in Lytra and Martin 2010; also Blackledge and Creese 2010; Issa and Williams 2009; Kenner and Ruby 2012).

The idea for the commemorative book was put forth during one of the brainstorming meetings of a small group of dedicated former and current Greek school parents who had joined forces to plan a community celebration to mark the school’s fortieth anniversary. Although I was a newcomer to both the Greek school and the community, I had joined the group by virtue of my participation in the school’s Parents’ Council. During the course of the meeting, one of the participants explained how she had started collecting photographs and archival material and interviewing community members a decade ago for the purpose of recording the school’s history, but that she had eventually abandoned the project due to lack of support. As an ethnographer, I leapt at the opportunity to delve into the history of the community in which I now lived and the school my children attended, and I volunteered to take on the book project. Having an academic background worked in my favour, and I was officially given the green light by the group to pursue the project on that very evening.

Over the course of the fieldwork, data analysis and writing up processes, the aims of the book were shaped and refined as follows. The first aim was to record the school’s history and its accomplishments from its inception to the present day, situating it in the context of the numerically small but vibrant Greek community of Lausanne. In so doing, the book sought to “invite the reader to take a trip down memory lane”: for established community members this meant revisiting the early beginnings of the school, while for recently-arrived members, it meant discovering how the school had been transformed since it opened its doors (Lytra 2011a: 6).

The book project coincided with the deepening of the financial crisis in Greece, which had hit the country at the end of 2009, and had led to increasing concerns among teachers and parents about the Greek state’s ability to continue funding Greek schools around the globe. Concerns were further fuelled by media reports in Greece of alleged mismanagement and poor educational standards in Greek schools abroad. These conditions determined the second aim of the book, which was “to raise awareness among educational authorities in Greece about the multi-dimensional role of complementary schools as sites for learning and socialization and the need to continue supporting them in the future” (Lytra 2011a: 6).

In this article, I examine the continuities and discontinuities of the notions of language, identity and community as these were represented through the voices of former Greek state officials, teachers and pupils in the commemorative book. I combine archival material from the Greek Consulate of Geneva with interviews and written accounts sent via email by former pupils covering the first twenty years of the establishment and development of the school. By combining archival material and interviews, I seek to take a long view in order to examine the continuities and discontinuities in the ways notions of language, identity and community have been constructed and possibly transformed in a transnational community. Moreover, almost a year and a half after its publication in July 2011, I consider the impact the commemorative book might have had on the Greek community of Lausanne and its school as the latter changed in May 2012 from a fee-free complementary school supported by the Greek government to a fee-paying school and non-profit organisation. These developments coincided with ongoing demographic changes within the Greek community and the school as a direct consequence of the deepening of the financial crisis in Greece, particularly the steady increase of recently arrived professionals with children, many of whom had had some prior schooling in Greece.

In the following sections, I examine how recent research on complementary schools is situated within a broader conceptual shift that has redefined notions of language, identity and community from hermetically bound and fixed units of analysis to more fluid and dynamic interpretations. Then, I present the data and methodology, interrogating my own positionality as an insider researcher, and the ways I sought to make the research more relevant and responsive to the participants’ concerns. Situating the study in the Swiss immigration context as well as the context of the Greek community of Lausanne and its school, first I introduce the institutional discourses on language, identity and community voiced by former Greek state officials and teachers. Second, I discuss the different representations former pupils negotiated and constructed as these can be gleaned through their interviews and written accounts. In the concluding discussion, I reflect on how the book project might have impacted on the Greek community of Lausanne and its school in a period of transition.

2. Language, identity and community in complementary schools

The view of the discursive construction of language, identity and community is fundamental in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics (see, for instance, the collection of chapters in Heller 2007; Makoni and Pennycook 2007). This academic view, however, may be at odds with widely-held beliefs among participants who often see “their” language, identity and community as bounded objects that have remained unchanged over time and across space. While it might seem plausible to dismiss participants’ views as “folk etymologies”, they function as powerful “member categories” with real-life consequences for their users. They exert hegemonic power and are often used as a means for social stratification and boundary demarcation leading to some voices getting heard while others remain silent (for educational settings more generally, see the collection of papers in Heller and Martin-Jones 2001; also Blackledge and Creese 2010; and Lytra 2012 for complementary schools).

Recent research in complementary school classrooms has explored the linguistic practices and language ideologies of pupils, teachers, parents and school administrators with regard to their beliefs and practices associated with bilingualism. In a comparative study of complementary schools in four communities in the UK, Creese and colleagues (2008) show how two seemingly contradictory positions co-exist in the ideology and practice of the different actors involved. “Separate bilingualism” premised on “a view [of] languages as discrete and tied up to nation and culture in simplified and coherent ways” is juxtaposed to “flexible bilingualism [which] represents language as a social resource (Heller 2007) without clear boundaries, which places the speaker at the heart of the interaction” (Blackledge and Creese 2010: 109).

Lytra (2011b) illustrates the juxtaposition of these two contradictory positions in her research in London Turkish complementary schools. Using the example of teacher-initiated literacy activities based on the use of songs as curriculum and the talk and action around them, she illustrates how the teachers’ pedagogic practices sought to reproduce aspects of the “national” culture mediated through the use of standard Turkish. She goes on to demonstrate how mainly British-born Turkish children weaved together a range of linguistic and other semiotic resources, genres and cultural references to produce localised understandings of Turkish language and culture. Filtered through personal, family, peer and transnational perspectives, the children produced nuanced understandings of Turkish language and culture as “something that is used in the present or that can be projected in the future” as opposed to “something one holds onto vaguely as one’s remembrances” (Garcia 2005: 601). In their study on code-switching in Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese) complementary schools, Li Wei and Wu (2009) examine the tensions between the schools’ official monolingualising ideologies and policies of speaking the community language only and the actual practices and preferences of teachers and pupils. They show how pupils deployed code-switching as creative and symbolic resources to counter the schools’ hegemonic policies, resist teacher authority, gain control of classroom interaction and ultimately “push and break the boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the original, and the acceptable and the challenging” (Li Wei and Wu 2009: 193).

This recent line of research in complementary school classrooms has highlighted the tensions in social actors’ negotiations of language, identity and community in transnational contexts. On the one hand, as Blommaert and Backus (2011) argue, our world is increasingly becoming more transnational and cosmopolitan, reconfiguring conceptions of self and belonging in the shaping of

late modern, superdiverse subjectivities — the subjectivities of people whose membership of social categories is dynamic, changeable and negotiable, and whose membership is at any time always a membership-by-degree and ratified by the judgment of others. (Blommaert and Backus 2011: 24)

On the other hand, for many social actors static and bounded notions of language, identity and community continue to be salient dimensions of affiliation. As Blackledge and Creese (2010), Li Wei and Wu (2009), Lytra (2011b), and Baraç (2009) among others have shown, young people in complementary schools questioned reified versions of the language, culture, identity and community and responded with a range of identity positions associated with their own diasporic experiences and youth concerns. At other times, they accepted and reproduced identity aspects associated with a sense of self and belonging ascribed to them by the school, their teachers and families as well as the broader transnational community.

The present article builds on and extends insights into language, identity and community from the aforementioned studies on complementary schools in the UK to investigate the social actors’ discourses in a Greek school in Lausanne, Switzerland, as these were represented in the commemorative book. With notable exceptions (Pantazi 2010; Prokopiou and Cline 2010), participants’ language practices, beliefs and identity negotiations in Greek complementary schools have received scant attention. Moreover, while complementary schools have existed in Switzerland since the 1970s and have achieved some recognition by cantonal and national educational authorities, they continue to remain at the margins of policy discourses (Steiner 2012). In addition, the limited research to date has mainly focused on the impact of learning in complementary schools on immigrant children’s academic achievement in mainstream schools[[1]](#footnote-1) and less so on participants’ language practices, beliefs and identity negotiations (see Steiner 2012 for a notable exception).

3. Researching familiar settings: Methodology and data

This article reports on a one-year book project, which was conducted in the Greek community of Lausanne, Switzerland, and its Greek school. My family and I had moved to Lausanne the year before, and my two children had immediately joined the Greek school on Saturday mornings. During my first year as a Greek school parent, I became actively involved in the school’s Parents’ Council. Throughout the different stages of the book project I worked closely with three other community members: Noi Kiritsi, an old- timer and former parent who had initiated the research for the book project a decade ago; Aspasia Antonopoulou, a graphic designer and a young mother of two who had recently settled in the area; and Adrian Gramunt, an architecture student at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne who had been born and brought up in Lausanne and had gone to Greek school for several years.

The book project was inspired by a collaborative ethnographic methodology. Although collaboration with the research participants is at the heart of the ethnographic process, it often remains implicit and marginal. Moreover, ethnographers are increasingly called upon to make their work more relevant and responsive to the members of the communities with whom they are working. To address this challenge, Lassiter (2005: 15) puts forth collaborative ethnography as

an approach to ethnography that *deliberately* and *explicitly* emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it — from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process.

Collaborative ethnography thus advocates the importance of an ongoing dialogue between the researcher and the research participants throughout the entire ethnographic project. It places the research participants and their interests at the centre of the ethnographic process and views participants and their communities as the primary audiences of the research. In this study, the aims of the book, as outlined in the introduction, were defined and refined in collaboration with participants; questions such as which events should be celebrated and why, which photographs, excerpts from documents and other archival material should be included or excluded from the commemorative book, as well as who should be interviewed and why and whose authoritative voice should be ultimately heard, were continuously discussed and debated with participants throughout the writing project. Interpretations and understandings were constantly checked with participants through regular informal discussions and exchanges over email; and participants acted as critical readers of different versions of the texts and, where possible, their comments were incorporated. Finally, the publication of the book was financially supported by two local community-based associations (the Fondation de l’Entraide Héllenique de Lausanne and the Association Hellénique de Lausanne “Estia”).

Taking a collaborative ethnographic perspective becomes pertinent especially when researching familiar settings. In her critical reflection of insider positionality vis-à-vis the study of her multigenerational Mexican-American family, Chavez (2008: 476) concurs with Labaree (2002) that

the advantage we have in knowing the community may be weakened or strengthened based on the ways in which our various social identities may shift during interaction with participants, or based on the degree of perceived or real closeness to participants as a result of shared experience or social identities (e.g. race, gender, age).

This means that the researcher studying familiar settings may negotiate different degrees of insiderness and outsiderness during different interactional moments with important consequences to the data collection, selection and writing processes.

The data collected include twenty-four oral interviews, the majority of which were digitally recorded with former pupils and parents as well as current teachers and community members affiliated with the school. In addition, three former students and one teacher sent their written accounts of their Greek school experience via email. The oral and written accounts were complemented by an extensive collection of photographs and other textual artefacts (e.g. invitations to school celebrations and other events, timetables, lists of children’s gifts for Christmas, school books, school drawings and certificates) generously shared by former pupils and parents. Access to the archives of the Greek Consulate in Geneva, the Greek School and the Parents’ Association as well as the archives of private individuals provided another valuable diachronic interpretative layer. To increase its relevance for the families and the local Greek community, current pupils were asked to produce an illustrative image and/or a narrative for the commemorative book that conveyed their experiences and feelings for their school.

4. The Swiss migration context, the Greek community of Lausanne and its school

In his welcoming address in the booklet issued by the Cantonal Office for the Integration of Foreigners and the Prevention of Racism, Philippe Leuba, Head of the Interior Department (2007–2012) quotes Article 68 of the Constitution of the Canton of Vaud (14 April 2003):

1. The State welcomes all foreigners

2. The State and the communes [municipalities] encourage their integration in conditions of mutual respect for identities and the values which underpin the rule of law. (Welcome to the Canton of Vaud, 2013: 2) [This text and the following are direct quotes from the original text in English and should not be changed. See the footnote I added to this effect].

He continues his welcoming address with the following remarks: “The proportion of foreigners in the Canton of Vaud is one of the highest in Switzerland (29.5% of the population). More than 175 different nationalities are represented”.[[2]](#footnote-2) Although official discourses on migration such as this one tend to have a celebratory tone, discrimination and stereotyping based on race, social class and more recently religion of specific immigrant groups persist in media and public discourses. For instance, in his 2005 article in the *NZZ Folio* magazine, journalist Dario Venutti eloquently discussed a genealogy of racial and social class stereotyping in German-language Swiss newspapers, first targeting the Italians in the 1960s and 1970s, then the Tamils in the mid-1980s and finally the former Yugoslavians, particularly the Bosnians and Kosovo Albanians, in the 1990s and 2000s. A sociological study by Anaïd Lindemann (2012) of two major French-speaking dailies in 1970 and 2004 revealed a shift in media discourses with regard to foreigners from earlier concerns of threatening national homogeneity and the Swiss way of life in 1970 to more recent concerns for national security and public safety coupled with the emergence of Islamophobia after 9/11.

With the exception of the sporadic coverage of the recent financial crisis in Greece and its impact on migration in French-speaking Switzerland, the numerically small and well-integrated Greek community in Lausanne and its environs has remained by and large invisible and beyond the limelight of local media and public discourses. Its invisibility has further contributed to the complete absence, to my knowledge, of any research, academic or otherwise, on the Greek communities of Switzerland in general and in the Canton of Vaud in particular.

Since its early beginnings in the mid 1850s, the Greek community of Lausanne has been transformed through a series of consecutive migration flows. It began with a handful of entrepreneurial families who settled in Lausanne to open their businesses and educate their offspring. Although numbers remained low for much of the first half of the 1900s, the community prospered and purchased the land to build the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Gerassimos. The Church was consecrated in 1923 and functioned until the official opening of the Greek school in 1969 as the principle community institution, which had both a unifying and mobilising role.[[3]](#footnote-3) Skilled labour migration from Greece and the exodus of ethnic Greeks from Istanbul (Turkey) and Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly from the professional classes, contributed to the socio-economic diversity of the community. Numbers levelled out throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Since the 2000s, the Greek community has been invigorated by the arrival of a new, highly mobile, well-educated class of professionals from Greece, the US and European Union countries. International mobility has been accelerated as a result of the financial crisis that hit Greece in 2009. Although there are no official statistics available, it is estimated that about one thousand residents of Greek origin live in Lausanne and the broader Canton de Vaud.

Since officially opening its doors in September 1969 the Greek school had catered for the educational needs of approximately five hundred children free of charge. At the time of the fieldwork, there were seventy-nine registered children in nursery, primary and secondary school and four teachers (one nursery, two primary and one high school teacher) appointed and paid by the Greek state. To this day, language and literacy courses are taught in “school” Greek following the Greek national curriculum with some adaptations. Depending on the parents’ heritage and the families’ transnational trajectories, children may speak various forms of vernacular and diasporic Greek, French and other languages at home (e.g. English, Italian) or may be taught German and English as foreign languages at school. While for many years most of the children enrolled in Greek school were born in Switzerland, since 2005 the number of children who have had some prior schooling in Greece has been steadily increasing. Since 2009, the school has been using the premises of a local Swiss school free of charge. Finally, as a result of the Greek state’s inability to continue financing Greek complementary schools abroad, in May 2012 the status of the school was changed to a non-profit organisation and parents now pay annual school fees (CHF 800 per child).

5. Institutional voices

The archival evidence collected for the purpose of the commemorative book provides a glimpse of the broader socio-historical conditions in the Greek community of Lausanne and in francophone Switzerland more generally within which the Greek school emerged in the late 1960s. Moreover, it illustrates the different perspectives on language, identity and community of former Greek state officials and teachers in their official correspondence with Greek state authorities in Athens and Geneva during the first twenty years of the establishment and development of the school from 1969 until 1992, and corresponds with the first chapter of the book.

In his letter to the Greek Ministry of Interior (General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad), N. Botsaris,[[4]](#footnote-4) Consul General of Greece in Geneva at the time, argued for the establishment of Greek schools in Geneva and Lausanne as a matter of urgency. To this end, he cited the lack of competence in Greek of most local Greek children and the subsequent threat of the loss of their Greek identity:

I have the honour to inform you that in the area of our Consular jurisdiction [Geneva and Lausanne] reside more than 3,000 Greeks but that there are no Greek schools, nor do Greek children have the possibility to learn Greek. Under these conditions, most Greek children completely ignore Greek and the eventual loss of their Greekness is a matter of time. (Letter by N. Botsaris, 27 January 1969, p. 1, in Lytra 2011a: 14)[[5]](#footnote-5)

In his official correspondence, N. Botsaris heavily drew on the discourse of “the loss of Greekness” (*afellinismos*) of the younger generation to argue for the establishment of Greek schools in his Consular jurisdiction. Here “Greekness” is represented as a shared identity consisting of shared claims to descent and a shared language and culture. By extension, the Greek community is constructed as bounded and homogeneous. It is represented as having unity and autonomy. Ethnic ties are represented as naturally given and ethnicity is fixed. The fact that many of the children referred to as “Greek children” (*ellinopaides*) in the letter were born outside Greece, or may have had a parent who was not of Greek descent, is omitted.

It is noteworthy that the discourse of a threat to “Greekness” is embedded in the broader context of the two Cantons of Geneva and Vaud’s explicitly assimilationist policies at the time. In his progress report to the Greek Ministry of Interior during the first year of the school’s operation, the Consul General, N. Botsaris, described the broader policy context in francophone Switzerland in these words:

With regard to the Cantons [of Geneva and Vaud] which are within our Consular jurisdiction, they do not wish that the different national or other groups that reside within them have their own schools. In general, they seek the assimilation of these groups in the broader Swiss context. This policy has been caused by the great increase of foreign nationals residing within their borders and the resulting alteration of the make-up of the population, which causes justified concerns. In general, the local authorities do not allow the exclusive attendance of foreign nationals or other groups in their own primary or secondary schools. On the contrary, they allow these groups to maintain primary schools where they teach subjects of interest to these groups. This education is complementary [to state school education]. (Report by N. Botsaris, 02 March 1970, pp. 1–2, in Lytra 2011a: 15)

The establishment of the Greek school in Lausanne and complementary schools by other communities such as the Portuguese, Italian and Spanish around the same period attested to the efforts of the Cantons of Geneva and Vaud to regulate the increasing diversity, particularly from Southern European countries, in their midst. In official rhetoric at the time, as reported by the Consul General, diversity appeared to be associated with societal problems, with alterations in the population make-up causing alarm to local Swiss authorities (cf. Lindemann 2012). This argument was, in turn, reproduced by the Consul General to legitimise the assimilationist policies of the Cantons, which sought, through a uniform educational system, to inculcate national belonging in the children of recently arrived immigrants. In the context of these policies, schools run by foreign nationals or other groups were consigned to the margins of educational provision. They could only function as complementary to state school education, during after-school hours or on weekends.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For the Consul General, the complementary function of Greek school determined the aim of the school, which he defined as follows:

From the Greek perspective, the newly founded primary schools in Geneva and Lausanne address a very important need. The aim of the schools is not to teach all the subjects commonly taught in primary school but only those subjects which contribute to the maintenance of the children’s Greekness. For this purpose it is necessary to teach Greek language, Greek history and the geography of Greece. (Report by N. Botsaris, 02 March 1970, p. 2, in Lytra 2011a: 15)

Therefore, from its inception, curricular aims and content in the Greek school, mediated through school textbooks, became the vehicle to maintain Greek national belonging and collective memory for Greek children. The Greek school aimed to forge a strong allegiance between Greek children born and brought up in Switzerland and the homeland (Greece), a kind of “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1998: 74). The ethnocentrism of Greek education has been well documented in studies of Greek language, history and geography textbooks used in primary school. In a pioneering collection of articles on the topic, Frangkoudaki and Dragona (1997) critically discussed dominant representations of Greek culture as these were reproduced and disseminated through primary school textbooks. Greek culture was perceived as superior to other cultures because, the argument went, it had remained unchanged and undiluted by other cultural influences from antiquity to the present day. “Greekness” was thus constructed through a glorification of the past, whereas change was negatively perceived as a form of decline.[[7]](#footnote-7)

While Greek state officials deployed a discourse of loss of the children’s “Greekness” and the need to support it against the Cantons’ assimilationist policies, former teachers’ discourses represented in the commemorative book foregrounded the heterogeneity of the children’s competences in Greek. In his official end-of-year report submitted to the Consul General in Geneva for the academic year 1971–1972, the head teacher, K. Krommidakis, used the diversity of the children’s competences in Greek to explain his proposed restructuring of the classes for the following school year:

At the beginning of the next school year 1972-73 we will try to restructure the classes on the basis of the children’s ability to understand Greek because when there are children in the same class who understand Greek very well, others well enough or others poorly the children’s performance is hindered and the teacher’s task becomes more difficult (Report by K. Krommidakis, 1971–1972, p. 2, in Lytra 2011a: 19)

According to the proposal, children were to be regrouped based on their competence in Greek, whether they understood Greek “very well”, “well enough” or “poorly”, rather than on their age. This regrouping introduced another identity aspect, one associated with the ascription of specific learner identities. Further down in the same report, the head teacher attempted to explain the conditions that had brought about this variation in the children’s competences in Greek:

We believe that these differences cannot be completely eradicated because the children’s free time from Swiss school will remain more or less the same and the children’s different abilities in understanding, reading and speaking in Greek within the same class will continue to vary depending on whether the children speak Greek at home. Therefore, the proposed restructuring of the class will not change the classroom dynamics completely. It is important to point out that out of the 92 pupils in both schools [in Lausanne and Geneva] only 16 were born in Greece, that is 17.3 percent of the total number of pupils, while 31 of them, that is 33.7 percent, have a foreign mother, which means that they don’t speak Greek at home. (Report by K. Krommidakis, 1971–1972, p. 2, in Lytra 2011a: 20)

These conditions were not specific to the Greek school of Lausanne (see papers in Lytra and Martin 2010). Nor were they confined to a particular era: the children’s limited time for extra-curricular activities, the complementary function of the community school, the use of the community language at home and the parents’ fluency in the language were all factors that reappeared in subsequent end-of-year teacher reports until 1991 when the last such report was drafted. To address the children’s diverse competences in Greek particularly those children who were categorised as “not speaking Greek”, the head teacher, T. Pispinis, proposed the creation of special “Greek as a foreign language classes”:

The headmaster has proposed the creation of two special classes because out of a total of 43 registered pupils at least 15 do not speak Greek. The purpose of these classes will be to allow those pupils to exercise their oral and written Greek because they face serious difficulties in their current classes and they are forced to drop out. (Report by T. Pispinis, 15 September 1980, p. 2, in Lytra 2011a: 20)

The negatively charged term “children who do not speak Greek” is gradually abandoned in the teachers’ reports. It is replaced in the early 1990s by the less negatively charged but equally ideologically laden term children “who speak Greek as a second language”. This shift in the discursive construction of the children’s learner identities needs to be situated in a broader discursive shift that occurred in educational policy discourses in Greece towards the recognition of linguistic diversity within Greece due to the unprecedented influx of immigrants in the country at that period (cf. Lytra 2007).

Throughout the first twenty years, the teachers’ end-of-year reports discussed ways in which they sought to develop the children’s Greek language, culture and identity in a transnational context. This enduring aim of the Greek school was nicely encapsulated in the letter the head teacher, G. Petritsi, sent to parents with regard to the children’s voluntary participation in the parade marking the seven hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Swiss Confederation in 1991. The introductory paragraph of the letter framed the children’s participation thus:

On the occasion of the celebration of the 700th anniversary since the foundation of the Swiss Confederation, the Swiss authorities invited our school to participate in this celebration, in a parade where our children in our national dress waving our national flag will make a beautiful and impressive contribution. (Letter by G. Petritsi, 9 June 1991, in Lytra 2011a: 28)

As the photograph below illustrates (Figure 1), similarly to children from other communities (e.g. Italian), the children of the Greek school were called upon to represent the Greek community of Lausanne in the commemorative parade organised by the Municipality of Lausanne. The children were asked to display their cultural identity through the use of traditional national symbols: national dress and the national flag. In the introductory paragraph of the letter, the discursive construction of national belonging was achieved through the repeated use of “our”, which served to produce a powerful image: “*our* children in *our* national dress waving *our* national flag will make a beautiful and impressive contribution”. This image documented in the photograph below reified cultural identity and erased the heterogeneity within the Greek community and its school. It also provided a glimpse of how the broader Swiss society attempted to regulate diversity and how majority–minority relations were perhaps perceived and represented at the time. By the early 1990s, it appears that the assimilationist discourses of the late 1960s had given way to a purported celebratory discourse of linguistic and cultural diversity.



**Figure 1:** Pupils lining up for the parade commemorating the 700th anniversary of the foundation of the Swiss Confederation (Photograph source: P. Iossifidis, in Lytra 2011a: 29)

In the next section, I consider how former pupils who attended Greek school during the first twenty years of the school’s operation reflected on their experiences and visions of language, identity and community.

6. Former pupils’ voices

In their narratives, collected for the purposes of the commemorative book, former pupils repeatedly reflected upon the close community ties among many of the families, particularly those families where both parents were originally from Greece and who had migrated in the 1960s as skilled labourers. In many ways these families formed the backbone of the Greek community in the 1960s–1980s. V. Ioannidis, who attended the Greek school between 1977 and 1985, described these strong community ties as follows:

We all spoke Greek at home. We used to go to Church often. Then, the children went to the Greek school. On weekends we went out with other Greeks. We had a lot of contact. “Estia” [the Greek Association of Lausanne] had just been established. We all participated in the dinners and other events “Estia” organised every Saturday. We would prepare desserts, food, whatever each family could contribute. When I was young we would see our Swiss friends only on Wednesday afternoons. Weekends were for the family. We kept this tradition in my family for several years. (Interview with V. Ioannidis, 17 February 2011, in Lytra 2011a: 28)

V. Ioannidis sketched community life in the 1970s and 1980s as traditionally centred around three community institutions: the Church, the school and the community association, “Estia”. The choice of name of the Greek association at the time was not accidental. Named after the ancient Greek Goddess of the home and hearth, Hestia, the appropriation of her name for the newly founded Greek association alluded to its function as the hearth of the community’s social life, or as one of the older community members wrote in an article commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of “Estia”: “a meeting place where the doctor, the architect and the labourer can drink their ouzo together and chat” (Lytra 2011a: 26–27).

In V. Ioannidis’ and other former pupils’ accounts, the Greek community of Lausanne was represented as a closely-knit community where the community language (Greek) and shared cultural practices (the active participation in dinners and other community events) were maintained and unproblematically reproduced in the next generation. References to the members’ diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds, migration trajectories and political orientation, and the conflicts these might have caused, were omitted. Moreover, the Greek community was represented as inward- looking, where contact with other immigrant communities and broader Swiss society seemed to be mainly confined to institutional settings (the state school and the workplace). According to former pupils' accounts this somewhat insular representation of community life was not unique to the Greek community at the time, but seemed to reflect the way immigrant communities co-existed alongside mainstream Swiss society.

In addition, in their accounts, former pupils articulated localised versions of what it meant to be part of the Greek community of Lausanne and its school. Some accepted and reproduced aspects of the language, identity and community ascribed to them by the school, their teachers and families as well as the broader Greek community. They expressed this in their enthusiasm to participate in school celebrations that commemorated national days, such as the day commemorating the start of the 1821 War of Independence against the Ottomans. O. Buckhardt, who attended the Greek school between 1984 and 1993, recalled how his annual participation in school celebrations shaped his personal identity and sense of belonging:

What I remember most vividly are the annual celebrations and their preparation. Every year we used to learn new songs. There were the more patriotic songs and the more modern ones. Every year we used to perform new plays with historical themes [to celebrate Independence Day]. Thus, we learned Greek history through the different parts we played. I played the parts of Rigas Fereos [Greek writer, thinker and revolutionary], Lord Byron [who died during the Greek War of Independence and was declared a national hero], or a simple fighter ready to confront the enemy, and through acting out these parts I learned what it means to fight for your freedom. Every year we learned new traditional dances. How proud I felt dancing in national dress in a hall full of parents! The Greek school did not only teach me how to speak Greek but to BE Greek [capitals in the original] and to be proud of it. (Email from O. Buckhardt, 6 February 2011, in Lytra 2011a: 25)

O. Buckhardt ended his narrative with a firm assertion of pride in both his ability to “speak Greek”, but more importantly “to BE Greek”. In this and other former pupils’ narratives the nation is reproduced through the construction of collective memory. In this context, a seminal historical event in the making of the modern Greek state, the War of Independence, was enacted every year by the children in the Greek school. As O. Buckardt eloquently described, to commemorate this event, children wore national costumes, danced folk dances, sang traditional songs, recited patriotic poems and acted out the parts of national heroes. The stage was decorated with artefacts that were emblematic of the homeland as a nation, such as Greek flags and black and white reproductions of engravings of men and women who had fought during the War of Independence. These public school performances lent authenticity and legitimacy to the national discourse and set out to teach the children what it means “to fight for your freedom” and ultimately what it means “to be Greek”.

Other former pupils interrogated aspects of this reified version of cultural identity, firmly rooted in narratives of collective memory and tradition. In her rendition of “Liberty” (*Η Ελευθερία*) which she drew at home as part of a school assignment in 1980 for the commemoration of Independence Day, Ν. Kassimidis-Schorderet represented Liberty crowned with a wreath made of laurel leaveswith rays of light emanating from her body (Figure 2 below). She creatively drew upon and weaved into her drawing a variety of cultural threads: the rays of light and Liberty’s elevation over the burning city allude to the representation of saints in Byzantine iconography; the laurel leaf wreath hints at the crowning of victorious athletes in the Olympic Games in ancient Greece*;* Liberty’s sombre lavender dress, the severed chains still dangling from her hands and the burning city with the tall apartment buildings give the drawing a distinctly modern feel. Unlike the school performances that foregrounded national belonging more directly, the drawing represented a more personal interpretation of Independence Day.



**Figure 2:** Drawing of “Liberty” by former pupil (Drawing by Kassimidis-Schorderet, in Lytra 2011a: 20)

However, while former pupils sometimes expressed their enthusiasm about Greek school and their participation in school celebrations and the cultural practices and traditions associated with them, at other times they took a more ambivalent position. In the following narrative, R. Kalavassi, who attended the Greek school between 1975 and 1980 critically appraised her participation in carol singing which was organised yearly by Father Alexandros until 2006:

Carol singing was a real marathon! When it first started [in 1974] we didn’t even have a small van to drive us around. Two or three dads including my father would drive us around in their cars along with Father Alexandros, a triangle [a type of percussion instrument] and a collection box and we would go around EVERY single neighbourhood in Lausanne — Renens, Prilly, Chailly, Pully, everywhere! We would do this on Christmas Eve and then again on New Year’s Eve. I remember that when I was a child carol singing seemed an endless and tiring activity. When we thought we had finished with the singing, Father Alexandros would say “we still need to visit this and that house”. We would finally return home late in the evening. Our mothers would be waiting for us for the *réveillon* [a long dinner and party held on Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve]. Luckily there were no mobile phones at the time because we would have been called up and told off for taking so long. In retrospect, this is part of our tradition and now I’m glad I participated! (Email from R. Kalavassis, 7 December 2010, in Lytra 2011a: 26)

The negotiation of positions, which were in some ways contrary to the dominant discourses of language, identity and community articulated by teachers, parents and other community members, was a recurring theme in former pupils’ narratives. They reported how they had questioned the relevance in their lives of traditional rituals, ceremonies and festivals, which, similar to R. Kalavassi’s carol singing, they had found “endless and tiring” when they were young. They also reported how they had questioned the very idea of having to go to Greek school every Saturday while their Swiss peers did sports, played outdoors or went to birthday parties. Reflecting back on their younger selves and the tensions they experienced, however, they distanced themselves from these positions and unanimously acknowledged the importance of participating in a shared Greek culture, identity and community life through the Greek school. N. Kassimidis-Schorderet, former pupil and mother of three pupils who were enrolled in the Greek school at the time of fieldwork, pondered on these tensions and how she experienced them with her own children:

I remember saying, “This school I can’t stand it any longer. When I have kids, they won’t go to Greek school”. And now, you see what happened. We learned how to read and write. If it hadn’t been for the Greek school I wouldn’t be able to read Greek. And when our first daughter was born we decided to name her Pelagia, a Greek name, and my husband used to say, “she will learn Greek, she will go to the Greek school”. He is half-Spanish, half-Swiss. He never spoke Spanish at home when he was growing up, only when he visited his family in Spain . . . The first year Pelagia went to the Greek school with a lot of enthusiasm. But this year the course is harder and she has more homework in Swiss school too and she says to me “I have a lot of work now [in the Swiss school], why should I go to the Greek school?” “Why? Because you have to learn how to read and write!” And I like the fact that she got to know other Greek children. When she celebrated her birthday in October this year, and last year too, she invited the girls from her class. Both the girls from the Swiss school and the Greek school came to celebrate her birthday. (Interview with N. Kassimidis-Schorderet, 11 December 2010, in Lytra 2011a: 35)

N. Kassimidis-Schorderet’s narrative illustrated how the ambivalence towards the Greek school she experienced as a child was experienced by her eldest daughter who, like her younger self, queried why she should continue going to the Greek school. In eight-year old Pelagia’s implicit comparison between attending Swiss and Greek schools, the legitimacy and authority of the Swiss school is never called into question. Rather, the challenge her mother and other Greek school parents continue to face is the need to inculcate in their offspring the legitimacy and authority of the Greek school as an educational institution in its own right. Moreover, the narrative alludes to changes that the Greek community in Lausanne and broader Swiss society have undergone in the span of forty years. Unlike V. Ioannidis’ sketch of strong community ties and limited contact with others outside the community in the 1970s and 1980s, which resonated with her own experiences as a young person growing up in Lausanne, her daughter’s experiences strongly suggest that friendship ties and social networks have become more complex and interconnected as “both the girls from the Swiss school and the Greek school came to celebrate her birthday”.

7. Concluding discussion

In this article, I explored the continuities and discontinuities in the representations of language, identity and community negotiated and constructed by different social actors in a commemorative book published to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Greek School of Lausanne. I focused in particular on the first twenty years, which documented the establishment and development of the school until the early 1990s. I illustrated how the discourse of threat to the “Greekness” of the younger generation, intimately linked with the loss of the Greek language, culture and identity, was strategically deployed to successfully lobby for the establishment of the school in 1969, and how in the years following the founding of the school it became less pronounced (see studies in Lytra and Martin 2010; also Blackledge and Creese 2010; Lytra 2012 for the mobilisation of the discourse of loss in other complementary school contexts).

In addition, I showed how discourses of linguistic competence dominated the teachers’ official end-of-year reports and how the proliferation of negatively charged terms, most notably children “who don’t speak Greek”, implicitly compared the children’s written and oral abilities in Greek to those of an idealised “native’ speaker”. The use of such terms had the effect of stripping away the children’s agency and voice. By the early 1990s, such terms were replaced by the less negatively charged but equally ideologically laden terms of children “who speak Greek as a second language”. The shift in terminology heralded a move away from a deficit conceptualisation of the children’s competences in Greek to an understanding of how their competences might be embedded in their broader linguistic repertoires. However, as Martin-Jones (2007) cogently argues, these terms were premised on a “'container' view of competence where the children’s linguistic abilities were seen as properties stored in 'containers'” side-by-side (2007: 166–167). THE WORD "CONTAINER" IS A QUOTE WITHIN A QUOTE. They failed to capture the idea that linguistic competences were in fact dynamic and changeable over the span of one’s life.

Not surprisingly, a common thread that emerged in both the former teachers’ and the former pupils’ narratives has to do with what Blackledge and Creese (2010) have aptly referred to as the process of “inventing and disinventing the national”. Dirlik (2004), reported in Blackledge and Creese (2010: 185), alerts us to the fact that nationalist discourses in diaspora communities are often overlooked. She further cautions that these discourses may vary within and across groups in a diaspora community. During the first twenty years of the establishment and development of the Greek school, teachers reproduced national memory and imagination, through the curriculum and teaching materials designed for state schools in Greece as well as the pupils’ participation in national celebrations and other events. For their part, pupils who had attended Greek school during that period expressed great pride in “being Greek”. While current debates on globalisation have argued that the nation state is in demise, the reproduction of a reified vision of cultural identity in former pupils’ narratives for the commemorative book attested to the continuous importance of national belonging in their lives. At the same time, their narratives illustrated their localised interpretations of what “being Greek” meant for them as well as the tensions it created in their younger selves and their children.

In the remainder of the section, I provide a tentative discussion of the impact of the book on the Greek community of Lausanne and its school in a period of transition with regards to the two aims the book set out to fulfil. Undeniably, both the Greek community in Lausanne and Swiss society more generally have undergone tremendous social, economic and demographic changes, particularly in the last ten years. For many decades, community life for many community members was centred around the Church of St. Gerassimos, then the school (since 1969) and, finally, the community organisation “Estia” (since 1974). Since the 1990s, community ties started to become more diffused and the school seemed to have been transformed into the primary and most dynamic community institution.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this article, the first aim of the commemorative book was to record the history of the school and its accomplishments over a period of forty years. The book was launched in a high-profile celebration that took place on Sunday, 6 November 2011. It attracted about three hundred community members across generations as well as some media coverage in Lausanne and Athens. About fifty community members, whose names were listed in the acknowledgements’ section of the book, had participated at various stages of the project. The book and subsequent celebration were very well received, particularly by the older, established generation who had actively contributed to the founding of the school. The second aim of the commemorative book was to raise awareness among Greek educational authorities about the importance of continuing to financially support Greek complementary schools around the globe. Nonetheless, a month after the book launch and community celebration and in the throes of the financial crisis in Greece, the Greek Parliament passed a new law radically reforming Greek education abroad. According to the new law, the Greek state stopped administering and financially supporting Greek complementary schools by appointing and paying the salaries of teachers and sending textbooks and other teaching materials. The responsibility for the administration and financing of Greek schools was passed on to parents and communities.

In the months following the new legislation, the discourse of loss was once again mobilised by a small group of teachers and community members who spearheaded the transformation of the school from a fee-free complementary school exclusively financed and administered by the Greek state to a fee-paying school and non-profit organisation. A noticeable shift in the discourse of loss from 1969 was that its focus was no longer on the loss of the younger generation’s Greek language, culture and identity. Rather, the children’s “Greekness”, understood as a shared language, culture and identity, seemed to be assumed, and what were at stake were the imminent loss of the school as an educational institution and its long history of continuity and achievements as documented in the commemorative book. This shift in the discourse of loss reflected the ongoing demographic changes within the Greek community and the school, particularly the steady increase of recently arrived internationally mobile professionals with children, many of whom have had some prior schooling in Greece. It is difficult to estimate the direct impact the research and publication of the commemorative book had on galvanising parents and community members. What is certain is that the Greek School of Lausanne in its new form (since May 2012) continues to have a high number of enrolled pupils, confirming a prophetic statement by one of its former teachers that “the school will continue to exist as long as the parents themselves are interested in having a school [for their children]”.

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1. For instance, the Research Centre on Multilingualism (Institute of Multilingualism, University of Fribourg/HEP Fribourg) is currently conducting a project which investigates the potential transfer of reading comprehension and writing skills of primary school children between the language of origin, Portuguese, and the language spoken at school, French or German (“Language of origin and language at school: Are language skills transferable?”, 2012–2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The quotes are in the original English version of the booklet. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Since its establishment, the Church of St. Gerassimos organised Sunday school classes where literacy in Greek was also taught. The classes met irregularly and had an informal character. Greek language classes were revived in the mid 1960s due to increased interest by parents. The community leaders who spearheaded the effort for the foundation of the Greek school at the time were elected representatives to the Church’s governing body, pointing to the intimate connection between religion and language maintenance in the Greek community of Lausanne (for similar findings among Greek communities in the US and Australia, see Gogonas 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All names are in the original, as they appear in the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are my own from the original in Greek and French (in the case of the email by O. Buckardt). Note that the official correspondence between Greek state officials and former teachers with Greek state authorities in Geneva and Athens was in the formal register, known as *katharevousa*. This register was used for all official purposes in adminstration, education, the courts, and so forth, until it was abolished in 1976 when *dimotiki*, the every-day spoken language, was adopted as the official language. The use of *katharevousa* is not reflected in the English translations. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is worth mentioning that the regulations for setting up schools by foreign nationals did not seem to apply to international schools, most of which were originally founded to meet the needs of the local English-speaking communities. An important difference between international and community schools is that the former were purportedly conceived as open to all nationalities through an English-medium education while the latter were seen as serving the needs of a specific ethnic immigrant community (e.g. Greek, Spanish, Portuguese). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Greek language, history and geography textbooks and curricula have since been revised and many of their ethnocentric elements have been removed. In practice, Greek education remains by and large ethnocentric where the linguistic and cultural capital of children who speak a language other than Greek at home is often viewed as deficit (Lytra 2007; Gogonas 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)