

9/1/2023: LANGUAGES ON THE FAULT LINES

As metaphor and as reality, in our ever-more-hybrid world, translation and polylinguality are now ubiquitous. Languages live side by side, commingle, influence each other. Do you too live, create, think, on a linguistic fault line?

1. Nektaria Anastasiadou (Turkey)

Istanbul, my city, is perched atop the North Anatolian Fault, a geological rift that passes just twenty kilometers below us, through the Sea of Marmara. Earthquakes are normal in Turkey and Greece, one of the most seismically active regions in the world. But I don't just live on a fault line. I also write on it, in the Istanbul dialect of Greek, a language fractured historically by the splays and trenches that arc southward from the Anatolian plate into the Aegean and Ionian seas. Like its geography, the Greek language is rich with islands, mountains, near deserts, and lush forests that have always been in the eye of pirates, colonizers, and immigrants. The language has been divided into mutually intelligible dialects since ancient times, and no intellectual movements—not even the pseudo-ancient form of Katharevusa Greek invented in the 18th century—were able to shake these dialects. Katharevusa, however, was abandoned in 1976 in favor of the more insidious “Standard Modern Greek,” which is essentially Atheno-Peloponnesian. This Central Greek (I refuse to call it “Standard”) made its way into the homes of Greek-speakers everywhere through printed media, radio, and television, eroding many dialects and threatening to level the language into something as stark and bare as the rocks of Attica.

Istanbul Greek, the dialect in which I write, has been spoken in the city in for over two thousand years. Although Ottoman Turkish became the official language after the 1453 conquest, with Arabic and Persian also recognized, over fifty minority languages, including Greek, Ladino, and Armenian were allowed to flourish, as we see not only in books, but also in multilingual Ottoman signage, calendars, and even sales receipts. Within this Ottoman linguistic hybrid, Istanbul Greek maintained Byzantine forms now lost from Central Greek, such as the verb μνίσκω/mnísko (to live), the noun χουλιάρη/houliári (spoon), as well as Arabic and Farsi words that entered the Greek language well before the Ottoman conquest, including μπεζεστένι/bezesténi (covered market, from Farsi bazzāzistān). The dialect's main speakers—Orthodox Christians called Rum, meaning Roman, as well as Romaniote Jews—often attended French or Greek schools and had close business relationships with Italians; consequently, we incorporated significant French vocabulary and almost as much Italian as the Ionian Greek dialects. And because Rums and Romaniotes lived in the same neighborhoods as Ladino-speaking Jews, we absorbed Ladino words such as κομφεταρία/komfetaría (from Ladino konfitería), along with vocabulary from Ottoman officialdom and neighbors. But Istanbul Greek is not only the result of archaisms and borrowing. We also have a natural affinity for language play. After all, Constantinople—not Athens—was the center of Greek letters from shortly after its founding in 330CE to the early 20th century. I haven't met one Istanbul Rum, regardless of age, profession, or education, who doesn't invent his or her own words. Moreover, we still love to mix it up, just as we did in the times of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, running through three or four languages in a single sentence.

International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm) Iowa City Public Library

9/1/23: Languages on the Fault Lines.

Tammy Lai-Ming Ho (Hong Kong), Mary Rokonadravu (Fiji), Saba Hamzah (Yemen), Nektaria Anastasiadou (Turkey)

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Istanbul is an intense source of attraction to the people of Greece, but to this day most Greek publishers refuse to publish the Istanbul dialect and for that matter, any non-Central Greek dialects. The result is that not only Istanbul characters, but also Cretans, Salonikans, Corfiots, and others speak Athenian in Greek novels, creating a fiction scene that is colorless and stilted. You now understand the boldness of my decision to write a novel entirely in Istanbul Greek, no concessions, no footnotes, no glossary. But I was told repeatedly by people in the business that a novel in Istanbul Greek would never be published.

Despite such opposition, I refused to write an Istanbul novel in Central Greek, which would result in something as fake as a London novel with Londoner characters speaking Southern American drawl. Instead, I vented my frustration by creating an Istanbul Greek Idiom series on Twitter, in which I discuss one Istanbul Greek word or expression and its etymology per day. In 2021, journalist and author Nikos Efstathiou noticed my series and asked me to do an interview for leading Greek newspaper Kathimerini. I responded to his questions in Istanbul Greek, and Kathimerini published my replies as given, without edits: a groundbreaking move. Soon after, Ioannis Papadopoulos, a publisher with Constantinopolitan roots and a progressive outlook, contacted me; in 2023, Papadopoulos released my second novel *Στα Πόδια της Αιώνιας Άνοιξης/Beneath the Feet of Eternal Spring*, the first book ever to be published entirely in Istanbul Greek. Some reviews have praised the freshness of its voice; other reviews have not even commented on the dialect. The latter is a compliment to Greek readers and critics, who seem to be more ready for diversity than their publishers.

The Ancient Greeks and other Mediterranean civilizations purposely built their settlements along massive fault zones, which are usually accompanied by drinking water, hot springs, protective cliffs, and fertile land depressions. Before modern civilization covered these fault lines and splays with high-rise concrete, earthquakes did not cause the devastation that they do today. Toppled buildings were simply rebuilt. The problem, therefore, is not the fault line itself, but what we build on them; whether it is something rigid, cumbersome, and inappropriate to the natural topography, or whether it is something flexible, natural, and harmonious with its environment. In my case, writing on the fault line has been just as propitious as the Ancient Greek experience of building on them. This does not mean that I have had an easy time publishing. On the contrary, I have had to rebuild many times in different languages. But ultimately, I have been able to create something rich and fresh that I never could have done in a more stable geography.

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