

Two sides of Greek–Turkish language contact: A preliminary psycholinguistic investigation of word order variation in Istanbul Greek and Rhodian Turkish

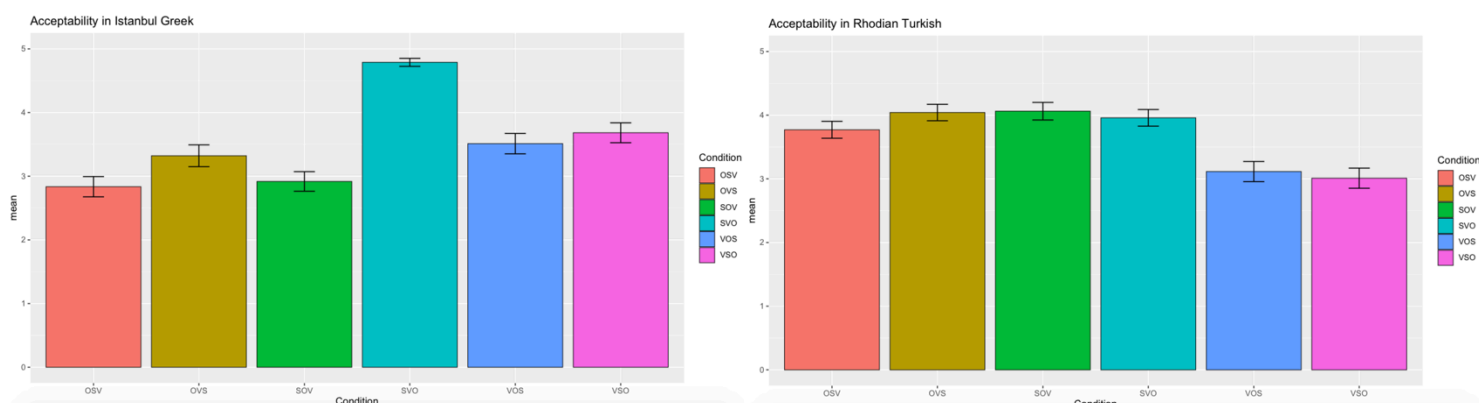
Seçkin Arslan, Sofia Prokou, & Hasan Kaili

Correspondence to Seckin ARSLAN, Seckin.ARSLAN@univ-cotedazur.fr
BCL, Université Côte d’Azur / CNRS.

This study examines word order variation in Istanbul Greek and Rhodian Turkish, two non-standard varieties spoken under minority language conditions in contact with one another. Both Turkish and Greek display considerable flexibility in word order (Georgiafentis & Lascaratou, 2013; Özsoy, 2019). Nevertheless, they differ in their canonical ‘base’ word order: Standard Turkish is a typical SOV language (Erguvanli, 1984), whereas Modern Standard Greek is by default an SVO order language (Alexiadou, 1999; Philippaki-Warburton, 1985). There is substantial evidence that language contact has driven syntactic change in word order, both in Asia Minor Greek varieties under sustained contact with Turkish (Michelioudakis & Sitaridou, 2020; Neocleous & Sitaridou, 2025) and in Turkish varieties spoken in the Balkans under contact with SVO-languages (Heine, 2008), as well as in Rhodian Turkish under contact with Greek (Kaili, 2019).

We recruited 21 speakers of Istanbul Greek (mean age = 60.14 years, SD = 22.27) who had resided in Istanbul for the majority of their lives at the time of testing and who had acquired both the Istanbul Greek variety and Turkish from birth in naturalistic settings. In addition, we recruited 18 speakers of Rhodian Turkish (mean age = 51.56 years, SD = 22.99) who had resided in Rhodes and had acquired both Rhodian Turkish and Greek from birth through naturalistic exposure. These participants were administered a spoken sentence listening experiment with an end-of-sentence acceptability judgment task with 6 conditions of all possible word orders adapted either in Istanbul Greek or Rhodian Turkish, respectively (e.g., Greek SVO: *Ο γάιδαρος τρώει το μήλο.* ‘the_{DET-M} donkey eats the_{DET-N} apple’; Turkish SOV: *Eşek elmayı yiyor* ‘donkey apple_{ACC} eats’). There were 18 items per condition manipulated across 6 conditions of all possible orders. We used a fully crossed design in which each participant saw all items. We also conducted a semi-spontaneous speech production task. The spoken samples were transcribed, and currently are being analyzed.

The sentence judgement data showed that Istanbul Greek participants favored SVO orders in Greek, and showed an overall preference for the VO over OV order ($\beta = 2.04$, SE = 0.27, $t = 7.4$, $p < 0.001$). The Greek word order preference was modulated by the age of Istanbul Greek participants ($\beta = 0.03$, SE = 0.01, $t = 11.07$, $p < 0.001$) and there was a significant interaction between word order and age ($\beta = -0.02$, SE = 0.01, $t = -4.28$, $p < 0.001$). This indicated that the older individuals in the Istanbul Greek community found OV order more acceptable. The sentence judgement data in Rhodian Turkish showed that the Turkish speakers found OV orders more acceptable than VO orders overall ($\beta = 0.59$, SE = 0.12, $t = 4.91$, $p < 0.001$). However, OSV/OVS and SVO orders were found to be equally acceptable as the SOV order (all comparisons $p > 0.68$). Our initial preliminary analyses have shown highly variable word order patterns in spontaneous speech production, especially a slightly elevated rate of verb-final OV structures in Istanbul Greek (Zakhariadis-Awad et al., 2025). Analyses of Rhodian Turkish transcriptions are still on-going. These preliminary data suggest that contact-induced change is active on both sides of the contact zone, leading to the alignment of word order patterns with those of the societally dominant language. Future analyses will investigate the contribution of multilingualism-related variables to this convergence.



Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Pinar Arslan for her help during data collection, and to our interns, Philip Zakhariadis-Awad, Can Aydemir and Stavroula Panagea, for their help during data coding and transcriptions. Seçkin Arslan also acknowledges funding support from L'Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF) under the BALKANLING project (No: 3659/3674UE), and from the National Research Agency, MindContact project (grant. no. ANR-24-CE28-1950).

References

- Alexiadou, A. (1999). On the properties of some Greek word order patterns. In *Studies in Greek syntax* (pp. 45-65). Springer.
- Erguvanli, E. E. (1984). *The function of word order in Turkish grammar*. University of California Press.
- Georgiadjentis, M., & Lascaratou, C. (2013). Words in order: Introduction. *Journal of Greek Linguistics*, 13(2), 177-180.
- Heine, B. (2008). Contact-induced word order change without word order change. In *Language contact and contact languages* (pp. 33-60). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Kaili, H. (2019). On dependent Clauses in Rhodian Turkish. In C. Tzitzilis & G. Papanastassiou (Eds.), *Language Contact in the Balkans and Asia Minor (Greek Language: Synchrony and Diachrony 2)*. (pp. 391–407). Institute of Modern Greek Studies.
- Michelioudakis, D., & Sitaridou, I. (2020). Towards a formal model of transfer under contact: Contrasting Asia Minor Greek to mainland Greek and Turkish in search of syntactic borrowings. *Contrastive studies in morphology and syntax*, 245-261.
- Neocleous, N., & Sitaridou, I. (2025). Word order and information structure in Romeyka. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, 1337962.
- Philippaki-Warbuton, I. (1985). Word order in modern Greek. *Transactions of the philological society*, 83(1), 113-143.
- Zakhariadis-Awad, P., Prokou, S., & Arslan, S. (2025). *Exploring contact-induced change in word order in Istanbul Greek. 12th Novi Sad workshop on Psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic and clinical linguistic research*, University of Novi Sad.
- Özsoy, A. S. (2019). *Word order in Turkish* (Vol. 97). Springer.