

Changes in Aromanian language use and the Aromanian ethnolinguistic group's reaction to decline

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SUMMARY

Aromanians, an ethnolinguistic group scattered across the Balkans, feature a unique language and culture that are known for their irreplaceable contributions to the globe's cultural and linguistic diversity. Unfortunately, the group's language and culture are rapidly trending towards extinction. Therefore, we quantified the relationship between age and Aromanian language usage, as well as attitudes regarding a program to preserve Aromanian identity. Based on survey data from 100 self-identifying Aromanians in Romanian Dobrogea, we constructed scores reflecting respondents' use of the Aromanian language (usage score) and priority assigned to conserving a given aspect of ethnolinguistic identity (priority score). We hypothesized that Aromanian usage would decrease as age decreases and that Aromanians would overwhelmingly favor a preservation program prioritizing language conservation. The data supports both hypotheses. Use of Aromanian is lower for younger respondents; simultaneously, respondents overwhelmingly supported Aromanian-led interventions to preserve the Aromanian language, with traditions, religious customs, and social networks less of a priority. This study provides valuable direction for those seeking to preserve Aromanian identity, as the data indicates Aromanian language use in Romanian Dobrogea is rapidly declining, suggesting preservation programs should be launched now, while groups who consistently use the Aromanian language still exist. Further research is needed on education's role in conditioning Aromanian language loss.

INTRODUCTION

Aromanians, also referred to as Vlachs, are an ethnolinguistic group of pastoralists, farmers, and urban dwellers scattered across the Balkans. With few exceptions, Romanian and most non-Balkan researchers have considered the Aromanians to be heirs of Roman or Romanized populations from the Roman Empire's Balkan provinces (1). Today, Aromanians reside in northern Greece, southern Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romanian Dobrogea. The Aromanian population of Romanian Dobrogea, consisting of Constanța and Tulcea Counties, is unique in that it consists nearly entirely of settlers from Greece and Macedonia who migrated to Romania to flee political and economic discrimination and instability over the

narrow timeframe of 1910 to 1940 (2-4).

Estimating the total number of Aromanians has proven incredibly difficult. In Albania, for example, the 2011 Census registered 8,266 citizens who identified as Aromanian culturally and ethnically, while independent Aromanian-specializing scholars such as Tanner have estimated between 100,000 and 200,000 Aromanians (5, 6). Given that Aromanians have historically populated territories claimed by multiple Balkan nation-states, Balkan authors frequently undercounted or overcounted Aromanian populations. Greek-backed authors counted Aromanian populations as non-Aromanian Greeks to "prove" Greeks held ethnic majorities in Macedonian regions, which increased the legitimacy of Greek territorial claims to Macedonia; Romanian-backed authors inflated Aromanian populations to undermine Greece's claims and gain political capital (7, 8). Simultaneously, due to a history of discrimination, an unknown number of self-identifying Aromanians do not declare themselves as such to census-takers (8-10). Worldwide, the tentative consensus is that the Aromanian ethnolinguistic group numbers in the hundreds of thousands; de Puig estimates 250,000 Aromanians, while Eberhardt estimates 200,000 to 300,000 Aromanians globally (11, 12).

Despite bitter debates on population size, the academic community near-unanimously agrees that the Aromanian population is collapsing as the group rapidly assimilates into larger surrounding cultures (2). De Puig estimates that during the 20th century, the population of self-identified Aromanians fell by more than half (11). Into the 21st century, the literature regarding Aromanians in Macedonia, albeit limited in size and scale, confirms rapid and worrying assimilation of young Aromanians into the dominant surrounding language. Despite some Aromanian-language programs introduced into public elementary schools, use of the language has increasingly been confined to the household, even in historically Aromanian towns where citizens prefer to use the Macedonian language to communicate with each other (10, 13).

The situation is posited to be even worse in Romanian Dobrogea; historically, the Aromanian community in Romania has been considered fastest to assimilate into the language and culture. Micle finds that despite the average Aromanian family size of 2-3 children, many are abandoning their parents' identity faster than reproductive trends, indicating the decline of Dobrogea's Aromanian is due to assimilation (3).

Aromanian-specializing scholars posit that linguistic and religious similarities between majority Romanians and

minority Aromanians drive this trend. Loss of the Aromanian language transitions into loss of Aromanian self-identification and culture (3, 12, 14).

Aromanian is a unique language with exceptional linguistic forms born of a unique culture, an irreplaceable product of their pastoralist origins. For example, the practice of Balkan transhumance, using geography, plant life, and stars to navigate the Balkan wilderness, is closely tied to Aromanian culture and language and is a key marker differentiating the Aromanian group from other Balkan ethnicities (15). Yet as the Aromanian group continues to assimilate into surrounding populations, the scale of Balkan transhumance has plummeted, and the practice is at risk of disappearing entirely (11, 16). Furthermore, pastoralist Aromanians possessed deep knowledge of the uses of Balkan herbs and grasses for medicine, information which remains embedded in Aromanian culture even after their sedentarization (16-17). A study in 2014 found that of the 221 mainly plant-based preparations to treat human and livestock illnesses in southeastern Albania, half were exclusive to Aromanian communities; if these cultural communities disappear, so too will their plant knowledge (18). This local knowledge of plants is so impressive that the modern medical community has been investigating Aromanian plant use to clue them into new and improved herbal medicines. It is widely recognized that the loss of the Aromanian language and culture would represent a loss of vital cultural, practical, and potentially scientific knowledge (3, 11, 15, 18).

As such, it is important to investigate the Aromanian decline further. More recent historical studies find rapid declines in Aromanian language use in Romanian Dobrogea outpacing similar declines elsewhere in the Balkans, while pre-1990s historical studies argue for a slower rate of Aromanian language decline in Romanian Dobrogea compared to the rest of the Balkans (3, 19). However, there have been no recent quantitative social science studies on the status of the Aromanian group in Romanian Dobrogea. Therefore, this study quantified the risk of extinction of the Aromanian ethnolinguistic group and identified how the Aromanian decline could be addressed through a questionnaire survey administered to 100 self-identifying Aromanians in Romanian Dobrogea. Additionally, respondents provided information on their education status. As such, this study also explored differences in Aromanian language use and views on the various components of an Aromanian preservation program across education divides.

We hypothesize that the usage of the Aromanian language is declining. Specifically, younger self-identified Aromanians are less likely to use the Aromanian language than older self-identified Aromanians. Furthermore, we hypothesize that self-identified Aromanians desire to address this decline, with a focus on preserving the Aromanian language over other aspects of Aromanian ethnolinguistic identity, such as tradition, religious customs, and social networks.

The data supported both hypotheses. We found that

use of the Aromanian language was lower for younger respondents; simultaneously, respondents overwhelmingly supported Aromanian-led preservation programs centered on conserving languages and, to a lesser extent, traditions, with religious customs and social networks less of a priority. The data indicated Aromanian language use in Romanian Dobrogea is rapidly declining as language acquisition falters, suggesting preservation programs should be launched now, while groups who consistently use the Aromanian language still exist. To follow the Aromanian respondents' wishes, this study advocates that preservation programs engage the Aromanian community and center on linguistic preservation.

RESULTS

One hundred self-identifying Aromanians in Romanian Dobrogea completed a survey assessing the extent of respondents' use of the Aromanian language, concerns about Aromanian extinction, desires to implement a preservation program to protect their ethnolinguistic heritage, leadership preferences for such a program, and relative priority given to specific aspects of Aromanian heritage. Respondents' mean age was 55.97 years, and most respondents were high school graduates.

Aromanians' responses were quantified through a series of constructed measures. The usage score reflects average use of the Aromanian language on a scale of 1-4, with higher usage scores proportionally corresponding to higher language use. The preference score reflects average preference for specific state and non-state actor(s) to assume leadership of an Aromanian preservation program on a scale of 0-3, with higher preference scores proportionally signifying a greater preference for the actor(s)' leadership. The priority score reflects average priority assigned to a specific facet of Aromanian ethnolinguistic heritage on a scale of 0-4, with higher priority scores proportionally reflecting a higher importance placed upon that aspect of identity.

Additionally, each respondent provided their age and level of education on the survey, enabling numerical data to be analyzed across and correlated with demographic divides. Survey results are reported below.

Status of the Aromanian Language

Overall, respondents used the Aromanian language to a relatively large extent. The average self-reported Aromanian usage score was 3.07, indicating the respondents are using

CATEGORY	RESPONDENTS' AVERAGE USAGE SCORE	USAGE SCORE STANDARD DEVIATION
OVERALL	3.07	1.112
Did not graduate high school	3.75	0.866
High school graduate	3.29	0.956
College graduate	2.45	1.175
Age 18-34	1.71	1.139
35-50	3.16	1.068
51-69	3.23	0.928
70+	3.58	0.821

Table 1: Use of Aromanian. The average and absolute standard deviations of usage scores for the Aromanian language have been presented for each of 4 age and 3 education brackets, as well as for overall respondents.

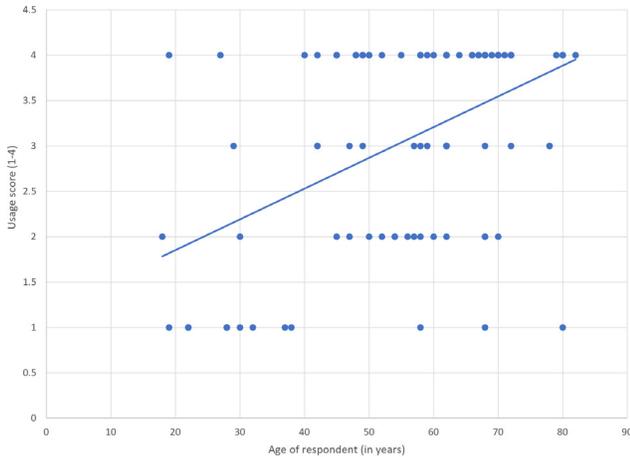


Figure 1: Usage of Aromanian vs Age of Respondent. Usage scores (1-4) of the Aromanian language have been plotted for each respondent on the y-axis against age (in years). A one-variable regression for age versus usage score yields the plotted trendline $y = 0.034x + 1.178$, indicating a decrease in Aromanian use among younger respondents. The trendline's R^2 value is 0.232 and the p -value for its slope coefficient is 4.44×10^{-7} .

Aromanian “sometimes,” which implies continued use of the language (Table 1).

Older Aromanian respondents used the Aromanian language more than younger respondents; Aromanian usage scores decrease when moving from older to younger age brackets. While the 35-50 age bracket's usage score is only 0.07 points lower than the usage score for the 51-69 age bracket, the difference in Aromanian language usage scores between the 35-50 and 18-34 age brackets is 1.45, a decline 21 times larger (Table 1).

Less educated respondents also used the Aromanian language more than more educated respondents. For example, usage scores among respondents who hadn't graduated high school were 53% larger than those of college graduates (Table 1).

Performing a one-variable regression for age versus usage score, we found a decrease in Aromanian use among younger respondents (Figure 1; $p < 0.001$). There was a statistically significant difference in use of the Aromanian language over age. The relatively low R^2 value indicates that additional factors beside age substantially influence Aromanian language use (Figure 1).

A clear drop-off in usage scores can be observed throughout the graph, especially around 40 years old, and variability of usage scores within the data is remarkably high, especially within the 18-34 and 35-50 age groups (Figure 1).

This remarkably high variability is confirmed by standard deviation statistics; as an example, for the 18-34 age bracket, the standard deviation of usage scores is almost two-thirds the average usage score. Moreover, age and education brackets with lower mean usage scores feature higher standard deviations in those scores. Usage scores of the 18-34 age bracket are 53% lower than the 70+ group, yet have

	YES	NO
OVERALL	85%	14%
Did not graduate high school	67%	33%
High school graduate	84%	15%
College graduate	94%	6%
18-34 years old	79%	21%
35-50	95%	5%
51-69	90%	8%
70+	68%	32%

Table 2: Perceptions of Aromanian decline. The percent of respondents who believed and who doubted a serious risk of Aromanian linguistic and cultural extinction has been presented for all respondents, as well as for age and education divisions.

a 38% larger absolute standard deviation. Usage scores of college graduates are 33% lower than those of respondents without high school education, but college graduates have a 36% larger absolute standard deviation (Table 1).

Perceptions of Aromanian Decline

The Aromanian respondents overwhelmingly believed their language is heading towards disappearance; 85% of respondents perceived a serious risk of the Aromanian language and culture's extinction (Table 2).

Consistently, middle-aged respondents and respondents who spent more time in school were more likely to perceive a serious risk of complete Aromanian linguistic extinction. Only 72.7% of respondents ages 18-34 and 70+ perceived a serious risk of Aromanian extinction, compared to 91.0% of respondents 35-69. Furthermore, 94% of college-educated respondents, but only two-thirds of respondents who did not graduate high school, perceived a risk of Aromanian linguistic extinction (Table 2).

Actions Aromanians Want to Take

Support for an Aromanian preservation program was near-unanimous, with 95% of respondents indicating they believed an Aromanian preservation program was necessary (Table 3). Support for such a program was broad and deep, topping 88% among all age and education groups.

College graduates and middle-aged respondents ages 35-69 were least likely to support a preservation program. Young respondents, elderly respondents, and respondents who did not complete college education were most likely to support it (Table 3).

Support for a preservation program was 12% higher than belief of a risk of Aromanian disappearance, indicating that quite a few respondents supported an Aromanian preservation program while simultaneously doubting Aromanian language,

	YES	NO
OVERALL	95%	5%
Did not graduate high school	100%	0%
High school graduate	98%	2%
College graduate	88%	12%
18-34	100%	0%
35-50	89%	11%
51-69	94%	6%
70+	100%	0%

Table 3: Support for a preservation program. The percent of respondents who supported and who did not support the existence of a program to save Aromanian language and culture has been presented for all respondents, as well as for age and education divisions.

	AROMANIAN COMMUNITY	NATIONAL AUTHORITIES	INTERNATIONAL AUTHORITIES
OVERALL	2.91	1.66	1.06
Did not graduate high school	2.83	1.00	1.42
High school graduate	3.00	1.64	1.04
College graduate	2.79	1.94	0.97
18-34	2.93	1.93	1.07
35-50	2.84	1.63	1.05
51-69	2.92	1.71	1.06
70+	2.95	1.37	1.05

Table 4: Leadership of the preservation program. Preference scores for Aromanian, national, and international leadership of an Aromanian preservation program have been presented for all respondents, as well as for age and education divisions.

culture, and heritage will go extinct (Tables 2 and 3).

Leadership of the Preservation Program

The overall preference score of 2.91 for Aromanian leadership shows respondents' clear desire for any Aromanian preservation program to be led by Aromanians (Table 4). Additionally, respondents favored leadership from national (Romanian) over international (European Union) authorities, but by a smaller margin.

High school graduates preferred Aromanian leadership most emphatically; their mean preference score of 3.00 means high school graduates unanimously selected Aromanian leadership as their first choice. Respondents with college education and respondents without high school education preferred Aromanian leadership only slightly less than high school graduates (Table 4).

Preference scores for national authorities consistently grew with education while preference scores for international authorities declined with education; respondents without high school education preferred international authorities to national authorities by 42%, while college graduates preferred national to international authorities by 58%. Notably, the national leadership preference score of 1.00 among respondents without high school education indicated that they unanimously ranked national leadership as the least desirable option (Table 4).

Across all age groups, respondents near-unanimously preferred Aromanian leadership. While preference scores for international authorities remained consistently low, national authorities' preference scores declined as respondent age increased, suggesting that elderly respondents more frequently ranked the Aromanian leadership option alone (Table 4).

Overall, preference for Aromanian leadership was not only high, but also consistent. The standard deviation for preference scores for Aromanian leadership was only 0.404; by contrast, standard deviations for national and international leadership preference scores were 0.714 and 0.565, respectively (Table 4).

Preference for national leadership varied enormously across and within demographic groups, with standard deviations of national preference scores reaching 0.676 in high school graduates and 0.713 in respondents aged 51-69. The data indicates Aromanians' desire for Romanian leadership of a preservation program is especially inconsistent (Table 4).

	LANGUAGE	TRADITIONS	RELIGION	SOCIAL NETWORKS
OVERALL	3.88	2.99	1.26	1.68
Did not graduate high school	3.67	3.17	2.08	1.58
High school graduate	3.95	2.87	1.07	1.64
College graduate	3.85	3.12	1.27	1.79
18-34	3.64	3.29	1.07	1.86
35-50	4.00	2.84	1.21	1.63
51-69	3.85	3.00	1.17	1.65
70+	4.00	2.89	1.68	1.68

Table 5: Purpose of the preservation program. Priority scores for the Aromanian language, traditions, religion, and social networks have been presented for all respondents, as well as for age and education divisions. Overall standard deviations within the priority score data were as follows: (1) 0.608 for language priority scores, (2) 0.689 for traditions priority scores, (3) 1.079 for religion priority scores, and (4) 0.994 for social networks priority scores.

Purpose of the Preservation Program

Across all age and education groups, the survey's respondents ranked the Aromanian language as their chief priority for preservation and Aromanian cultural traditions as slightly to somewhat less important. Respondents consistently deprioritized preserving Aromanian religious sects and social networks (Table 5).

All education groups consistently prioritized protecting the Aromanian language; priority scores for language decreased marginally with education. High school graduates had noticeably lower priority scores for traditions and religion than the other education categories (Table 5).

The priority scores for religion generally decreased with increased education while priority scores for social networks consistently increased; for example, respondents without high school education prioritized religion 64% more than college graduates and valued social networks 12% less. Both high school and college graduates prioritized social networks over Aromanian religion, while respondents who had not completed high school prioritized religion over social networks (Table 5).

There was no statistically significant relationship between language priority scores and age (Figure 2; $p = 0.395$). As the regression analysis and a visual scan of the graph indicate, there was no significant age trend involving the Aromanian

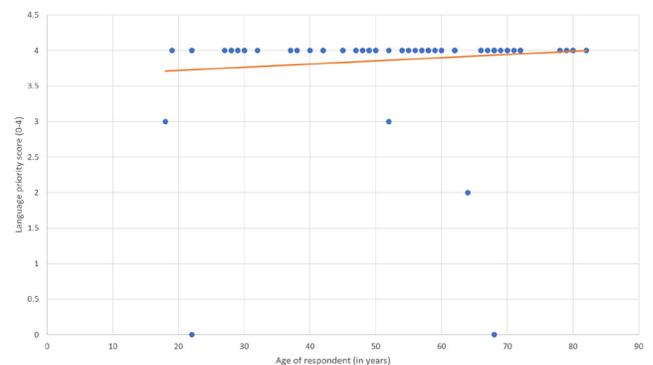


Figure 2: Language Prioritization vs Age of Respondent. Aromanian language priority scores (0-4) have been plotted for each respondent on the y-axis against age (in years). A one-variable regression for age versus language priority score finds no statistically significant correlation between the two ($p = 0.395$).

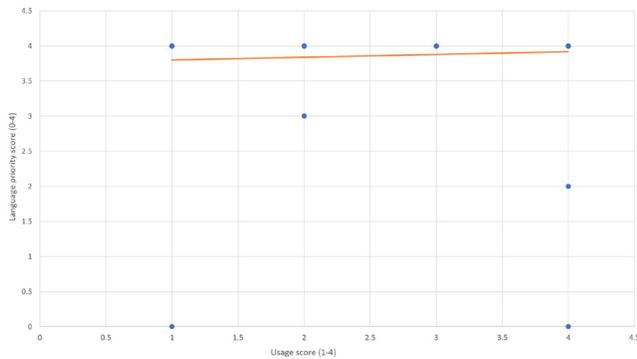


Figure 3: Language Prioritization vs Language Use. Respondents' language priority scores (0-4) versus Aromanian usage scores (1-4) have been plotted. A one-variable regression for usage score versus language priority score finds no statistically significant correlation between the two ($p = 0.562$).

language's priority score other than consistent prioritization; language's first-place importance remained entrenched across all generations.

Similarly, there was no statistically significant relationship between language priority scores and Aromanian usage scores (**Figure 3**; $p = 0.562$). Self-identifying Aromanians who never spoke the language were no more or less likely to prioritize it than Aromanians who spoke the language regularly.

Across age measures, tradition's priority score was also generally constant, although somewhat higher in the 18-34 age group. The priority score of social networks steadily decreased as age increased, while religion's priority score remained generally flat, except for the 70+ generation. Respondents ages 70+ had a markedly higher religious priority score and were the only group that didn't prioritize social networks over religion (**Table 5**).

Aromanians' first-place priority for language preservation and second-place priority for tradition preservation was consistent across respondents, with standard deviations for language and tradition priority score data of 0.608 and 0.689, respectively. Priority for religion and social networks was much less consistent, as some respondents valued these aspects of ethnolinguistic identity strongly, while others not at all; standard deviations for religion and social networks priority score data were 1.080 and 0.994, respectively.

Respondent Demographics

Most respondents were between 51-69 years old and had completed high school education without graduating from college (**Table 6**). The sample's mean age was 55.97 years. The sample was significantly older than the average Romanian, whose average age is 40 (20). We do not know if the age distribution in the survey was representative of the Aromanian community due to a chronic lack of accurate census figures (7, 11).

	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENT OF TOTAL PARTICIPANT POPULATION
OVERALL	100	100%
Did not graduate high school	12	12%
High school graduate	55	55%
College graduate	33	33%
Aged 18-34 years	14	14%
35-50	19	19%
51-69	48	48%
70+	19	19%

Table 6: Demographic breakdown of survey respondents by age and education. The number of respondents and percent of total participant population in each age and education division used throughout this study have been presented.

Age-Education Correlation

Performing a one-variable regression for age versus education level, we found higher education levels weakly correlated with lower age ($R^2 = 0.29$). We coded "did not graduate high school" as 1, "high school graduate" as 2, and "college graduate" as 3.

DISCUSSION

We administered a questionnaire to one hundred self-identifying Aromanians in Romanian Dobrogea to observe (1) the extent of the Aromanian language's use and any usage trends based on age and education and (2) community opinion on the formation and composition of programs aiming to preserve the Aromanian language and culture. Aromanian language use was significantly lower among younger ages and respondents with higher education. Respondents strongly endorsed interventions to preserve the Aromanian language specifically, with cultural aspects less of a priority; respondents strongly preferred any Aromanian preservation program to be Aromanian-led.

Ultimately, the study's results supported both hypotheses that the usage of the Aromanian language is declining among younger Aromanians, and that self-identified Aromanians want to preserve the language over other aspects of Aromanian ethnolinguistic identity, such as tradition, religious customs, and social networks.

Use of the Aromanian Language

Our study provides quantitative support to the notion that use of the Aromanian language is declining. The data suggests serious difficulties in intergenerational transmission of Aromanian language use, supporting previous literature. As language use is poorly transmitted to younger Aromanians, and as older Aromanians pass away, overall language will likely deteriorate. If current trends persist and action is not taken, an overall breakdown of the Aromanian language in Romanian Dobrogea may take place. The age-usage score trendline ($p < 0.001$) suggests that intergenerational language transmission may cease entirely in Romanian Dobrogea in 61 years, at which point new Aromanians would hold a usage score of 1.00, corresponding to "no use at all." This result is worrying for those attempting to preserve Aromanian heritage, as previous literature suggests that weak intergenerational transmission of the language is a gateway to wider cultural

dissociation (3, 10, 11, 13, 15).

Variability and Sampling

We did find enormous variability within age brackets. Academic narratives on the Aromanians have tended to imply or argue for a relatively smooth and continuous decline in Aromanian language use, which would lead us to expect a decently smooth decline in Aromanian usage scores among the study's respondents (9). Instead, **Figure 1** indicates a pronounced drop-off at $x = 40$ years, corresponding to the late 20th and 21st centuries. These results imply that the language's disappearance has been accelerating in more recent years.

Furthermore, age (and education) brackets with lower overall language use also feature more variable use, which indicates Aromanian language use has not equally declined among young respondents. Rather, some young respondents have maintained above-average language use. Others no longer speak the Aromanian language and have effectively dropped out of Aromanian identity, preserving only their identification as an Aromanian. It is likely that many more individuals in Romanian Dobrogea of Aromanian origin have assimilated out of both their language use and their Aromanian identification, a phenomenon demonstrated among Aromanian communities in Macedonia and across the Balkans (2, 11, 13).

The sampling of solely self-identifying Aromanians may have led to self-selection bias, as assimilated Aromanians would not be included. This self-selection bias might also explain the relatively high average usage score for the Aromanian language. The survey focused on self-identified Aromanians to reflect trends within the Aromanian community alone; furthermore, determining who is of Aromanian origin but does not identify as such is difficult, often becoming a highly variable, political question (7-10).

On the other hand, sampling only self-identifying Aromanians may have also excluded individuals who speak the Aromanian language yet only privately identify as Aromanian, an exclusion which would create a more pessimistic view of Aromanian language use than is warranted. This phenomenon is well-attested in Northern Greece, where in modern days the Aromanian language is tolerated but ethnic animosity against self-identifying Aromanians remains stiff (3-4, 8-9). However, Romanian Dobrogea's tolerant attitude towards Aromanians makes this potential source of error highly unlikely to significantly alter survey results (3).

Investigating Other Causes

It is possible that other factors besides age may influence Aromanian use, as the significant relationship between age and language use was found to hold relatively low predictive power.

The rural-urban divide between farmer and urban dweller Aromanians may condition changes in language use (3). Perhaps urban Aromanians, who are exposed to more

Romanian and English media, are more prone to assimilate than their rural counterparts. More research is needed to investigate the importance of the rural-urban divide on Aromanian use.

The literature suggests education is also a factor influencing use of Aromanian, both historically and in modern times (8-10, 13). Language use decreased among respondents with higher levels of educational attainment; increased education likely promotes loss of the language in addition to decreased age.

Although the respondents' education level correlates with age, the relationship is weak and unlikely to account for all or even most of the correlation between age and Aromanian usage scores ($R^2 = 0.29$). More still, the regression analysis likely overestimates the sample's age-education correlation because it ignores granularities within the sweeping designations "did not graduate high school," "high school graduate," and "college graduate." When respondents chose to offer granular data, it tended to go *against* the age-education correlation; for example, Aromanian respondents who completed 7th grade education were younger than those who attained the higher level of 8th grade education.

A study which explores the intersection of education and language use change in Romanian Dobrogea would be an important addition to academic literature on the Aromanian ethnolinguistic group. Such a survey might want to take into consideration education length, level, type (technical schools, trade schools, private vs public schools, humanities programs, etc.), major/academic specialization, and even the time of respondents' education relative to major restructurings and regime changes in Romania's notoriously reform-heavy education system (21).

Sample Size Limitations

All survey conclusions rely on a sample size of $n = 100$, which, while impressive by the standard of Aromanian surveys, could be expanded (13, 18, 19). Research fieldwork conducted with greater funding over larger periods of time might attain a large sample size, which is needed to support or refute implications on changes in Aromanian language use.

Formulation and Leadership of Interventions

The Aromanian language in Romanian Dobrogea is on the decline, a decline that respondents acutely perceived. Almost all respondents (85%) believed their language is heading towards extinction, and 95% supported a preservation program for the Aromanian ethnolinguistic group. The Aromanian community's near-unanimous support across all age and education divides implies an enormous desire among Aromanians to protect their heritage.

Support for an Aromanian preservation program was somewhat higher than belief in a risk of Aromanian disappearance. It is likely the respondents who supported a preservation program while disbelieving a risk of Aromanian extinction still saw the Aromanian language on decline and

wanted to revitalize Aromanian ethnolinguistic identity.

Respondent categories which spoke less Aromanian more acutely perceived a risk of Aromanian linguistic extinction. Given the trend of persistent assimilation, Aromanians with lower language use likely used the language less compared to their parents or grandparents; in their own lifetimes, they witnessed Aromanian linguistic decline and assimilation firsthand. Additionally, the Aromanian peers of younger and more educated respondents are likely to have themselves gone through this process, such that Aromanians with lower language use are surrounded by firsthand and secondhand language loss. By contrast, respondents with greater language use may have less personal experience with Aromanian language decline. They may feel that because they and their peers were able to preserve their language use over decades, the Aromanian language is unlikely to fully disappear, even if it declines.

Simultaneously, college-educated and middle-aged Aromanians, who least doubted Aromanian extinction, were least supportive of interventions to protect cultural and linguistic heritage. Meanwhile, respondents without high school education and those aged 18-34 and 70+, who most doubted Aromanian disappearance, also most empathically supported an Aromanian preservation program. Perhaps college-educated and middle-aged respondents found there to be not only a serious risk of Aromanian extinction, but a near certainty, and therefore believed the resources and effort that would go into a preservation program better spent elsewhere. Still, even among these groups, support for a preservation program never dipped below 88%.

The Aromanian community appears ready to act, as respondents overwhelmingly supported Aromanian leadership of any preservation program. This public opinion could reflect both a reclamation of Aromanian agency and elevated trust of Aromanians compared to both national and international authorities.

Aromanians also favored leadership from Romanian over European Union authorities, which is interesting given extreme distrust of Romanian institutions compared to the EU among overall citizens of Romania (22). Aromanian respondents might trust Romania far more or the EU far less than the average Romanian. Alternatively, given longstanding attempts by international institutions to preserve Aromanian ethnolinguistic heritage, and given the continued real and perceived decline of such heritage, respondents might distrust international effectiveness specifically when it comes to preserving their language and traditions.

Simultaneously, preference for national authorities consistently grew with education while preference for international authorities declined, implying more trust in government among more educated Aromanians.

While these results ought to be further investigated, they are not conclusive since respondents were not directly asked about their faith in public institutions. To explore relations between the Aromanian minority and state institutions, further

surveys explicitly regarding trust in national and international institutions among the Aromanian community in Romanian Dobrogea ought to be conducted.

Desired Focus of Interventions

As hypothesized, respondents overwhelmingly prioritized the Aromanian language's preservation over cultural traditions and other aspects of their ethnolinguistic identity. Nevertheless, the result is worth commenting on because of its sheer universality. Age had no statistically significant effect on prioritization of the Aromanian language ($p = 0.395$) which barely varied across education levels. Even use of the Aromanian language had no discernable effect on its prioritization ($p = 0.562$). In other words, self-identifying Aromanians who didn't speak the language did not feel any more or less affinity to it than Aromanians who spoke the language regularly, a somewhat counterintuitive conclusion. Aromanians across age and education brackets also consistently prioritized tradition somewhat below language and much above religion and social networks.

The survey's focus on language in its initial questions may have affected linguistic priority scores. Further research to determine this effect's extent among Romanian Dobrogea's Aromanian population should be conducted. In our view, it is unlikely emphasizing language in the initial questions dramatically altered linguistic priority score. Historical works, academics, and activists around the Aromanian issue have for centuries treated, explicitly or implicitly, the Aromanian language as a major, if not defining, marker of ethnolinguistic identity, such that rank-and-file Aromanians are probably conditioned to associate their identity with language, especially in the context of surveys and academia (4, 6, 8-15, 17). Another fruitful line of research might be on the impact of intellectuals generally on the language's prioritization within the community, and the strategic value of a language-based approach for preserving Aromanians' broader cultural heritage.

The lower and less consistent prioritization of religion and social networks implies these two dimensions of ethnolinguistic identity are not particularly important to Aromanian self-identification in Romanian Dobrogea.

The results suggest that the shared Aromanian language is the bedrock of Aromanian identity in Romanian Dobrogea, transcending age and education barriers, with tradition serving as a secondary component. Put differently, should the Aromanian language go extinct, the culture will probably follow suit, and the world will lose irreplaceable linguistic, cultural, and local diversity and knowledge.

Based on the survey's results, we venture to provide three recommendations for those seeking to preserve Aromanian identity, in particular people outside the Aromanian community:

1. Preservation programs should emphasize protecting the Aromanian language, since linguistic identity forms the

core of Aromanian identity and matters most to the Aromanians themselves.

2. Preservation programs should engage the Aromanian community, and to do so should feature Aromanian leadership; after all, the community staunchly favors an Aromanian-led preservation program.
3. The time to launch preservation programs is now, while groups who consistently use the Aromanian language and maintain Aromanian culture still exist.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Response Rate

In July 2019, a 7-question questionnaire survey was administered in Romanian to 100 Aromanians in Tulcea and Constanța Counties in Romania (i.e., Romanian Dobrogea) by traveling to Aromanian neighborhoods, villages, and churches. Following the guidelines of Aromanian anthropological research, we also developed contacts among historians, sociologists, psychologists, and numerous self-identifying Aromanians who could guide us towards other members of the Aromanian community (10).

The survey was anonymously administered to all self-identifying Aromanians; only personal questions of age and education were asked at the end of the surveys. Our survey response rate for self-identifying Aromanians was 100%. Surveys were completed on paper; interaction with respondents before and during survey completion was limited to clarifications to avoid influencing respondents' results.

The study was administered primarily in the Romanian language, with an Aromanian translation available in case the Romanian was not understood. This choice was made to reach self-identifying Aromanians who use the language infrequently – most Aromanians we met could speak Romanian, while not all could speak Aromanian.

The survey included questions about the state of the Aromanian language in Romanian Dobrogea and attitudes towards a language conservation program in the Aromanian community.

Usage Score

The usage score was used to interpret data from Question 5 regarding the use of Aromanian. The specific question was: "Limba de comunicare în casa/familia dv. este aromâna:" (English: The language of communication in your household/family is Aromanian:)

The answer choices were: "Da", "Puțin", "Ocazional", and "Nu" (English: "Regularly", "Sometimes", "Rarely", and "Never"). The participants' answers were assigned equidistant values; "regularly" corresponds to 4, "sometimes" to 3, "rarely" to 2, and "never" to 1. With respondents' answers represented numerically, the usage score was calculated by taking the arithmetic mean of all responses for the group in question. The usage score is constructed to be directly proportional to language use.

Preference Score

The preference score was used to interpret data from Question 3 regarding preferences for leadership of a potential Aromanian preservation program. In this question, respondents were told to rank their preferred leadership of an Aromanian preservation program between the Aromanian community, national authorities, and international authorities. The ranks were assigned equidistant numerical values; a first-place rank corresponded to 3, a second-place rank to 2, and a third-place rank to 1. Those who felt strongly that one or more groups should be excluded were told not to rank said group(s), which corresponded to 0. The preference score was the arithmetic mean of all responses for the group in question. The preference score was constructed to be directly proportional to the respondent's leaning towards a given option.

Priority Score

The priority score was used to interpret data from Question 4 regarding the purpose of an Aromanian preservation program.

Respondents were asked to rank their preferred focuses for the preservation program, choosing between the Aromanian language, traditions, religious customs, and social networks. Respondents were encouraged to rank any other aspects of Aromanian identity they saw as important; none chose to do so. Again, the ranks were assigned equidistant numerical values; a first-place rank corresponded to a 4, a second-place rank to 3, a third-place rank to 2, and a fourth-place rank to 1. Respondents who felt strongly that one or more dimensions of ethnolinguistic identity should be excluded were told not to rank said dimension(s), which corresponded to a 0. The priority score was the arithmetic mean of all responses for the group in question.

Once again, the priority score was constructed to be directly proportional to the respondent's prioritization of a given dimension.

Data Processing

Respondents' answers were compared by age and education. In this survey report, all percent values are rounded to the nearest percent and non-percent scores to the nearest hundredth. Due to rounding, figures may not always add up to 100% or expected score values.

For one-variable regressions in this paper, the Excel Analysis ToolPak extension was used. Relationships were assumed linear. The trendline's function, R^2 , and p -values are provided.

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Chestionar

privind opinii/percepții ale aromânilor din Dobrogea (România)

Questionnaire on Opinions/Perceptions of the Aromanians in Dobrudja
(Romania)

– iulie 2019 –

1. Sunteți de acord cu Raportul Adunării Parlamentare a Consiliului Europei (17 ianuarie 1997, prezentat de Lluís Maria de Puig /Spania/), conform căreia limba /dialectul/ și cultura aromână se confruntă cu un risc serios de dispariție:

Da

Nu

2. Dacă sunteți de acord, credeți că este nevoie de un program de salvare a limbii și culturii aromâne:

Da

Nu

3. Dacă credeți că este nevoie de un astfel de program, considerați că eforturile de salvare a limbii și culturii aromânilor trebuie conduse, în primul rând, de:

/numerotați ordinea respectivă/

Aromâni

Autorități naționale

Autorități internaționale

4. Care credeți că sunt aspectele cele mai urgente care trebuie adresate pentru salvarea limbii și culturii aromânilor:

/numerați ordinea respectivă/

(Vă rugăm să dați și câteva exemple, dacă doriți.)

Limba /dialectul, idiomul/

Tradiții, obiceiuri

Religia

Rețele de socializare/Interacțiuni sociale

Alte aspecte (dați exemple)

5. Limba de comunicare în casa/familia dv. este aromâna:

Da

Puțin

Nu

Ocazional

6. Copiii dv. vorbesc aromânește

Da

Puțin

Nu

Ocazional

7. Folosiți Internetul /e-mail, Facebook, bloguri/

Da

Ocazional

Nu

Puțin

Alte răspunsuri

.....

.....

.....

.....

Respondent:

Vârsta

Studii

Domiciliul actual

Satul /în care familia a fost realocată în 1940/.....

Data