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“The Power of Language”: Young People in Greece as “Scapegoats” in Covid-19 Crisis¹

Sofia Alexopoulou²

Abstract

Governments around the globe take measures to protect citizens against the coronavirus threat. At the end of the day, security becomes a top priority issue and therefore is included in almost every policy agenda. In light of this, some governments seem to victimize certain social groups when they are incapable of addressing successfully the health crisis of Covid-19. An indicative example is the Greek government's tactic (New Democracy Party) to blame young people for the spread of the virus, while the real ‘culprit’, according to some (Tziantzi & Papadopoulou, 2020), was the restart of tourist industry that resulted in a sharp rise of the Corona incidents. In doing so, language was the key ‘vehicle’ for this purpose along with statistical numbers, but the latter is a whole different discussion that this paper is not going to open. On the contrary, this paper constitutes a problematization on the usage of language for political reasons. Language is not a neutral tool but plays the games of political elites, while it has the power to create new scapegoats. Is this a wise political choice when Greek society encounters so many problems related to the Covid-19 pandemic? Logical reasoning says no. Will young people be the only exception to this rule? Certainty not, today new scapegoats come into light: citizens who refuse to be vaccinated and/or the sprayed’ ones.

Keywords: language; ruling party; young individuals; scapegoats; victimization; coronavirus.

Introduction

Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, the language played and continues to play a key role in describing the daunting reality. A series of new terms invaded our vocabulary literally ‘overnight’ for describing the unprecedented health crisis. The barrage of words was immense such as “lockdown”, “herd immunity”, “social distancing” and so on. It was even developed a special dictionary dedicated to the Covid-19 that was released in Greek (Katsoyannou & Stefanidou, 2020). Very indicative is the phrase of Marianna Katsoyannou, Associate Professor in the Department of General Linguistics at Cyprus University, during an online seminar under the title "*Public Language in the Era of the Pandemic*" that has been organized by the Laboratory for the Study of Social Issues, Media and Education, at the University of Ioannina: "*the (linguistic) communication, the terminology, and the translation were suddenly matters of life and death*" (Katsoyannou, 2021).

Taking this comment into account, the Greek government together with other important stakeholders such as some members of the medical community, treated the language as a ‘vehicle’ that was aimed

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not only to inform citizens about the new virus (see the Press releases circulated by the Greek Ministry of Health), but also to create new scapegoats. The paper at hand offers to the reader a critical reflection on how the ruling party attempted to victimize young people, as a social group, with the usage of language to hide its failure(s) in handling the Covid crisis. The victimization of young individuals took place mostly in the first year (2020) of the pandemic in Greece. At this point, it is worth mentioning that my intention as a researcher is not to exercise a critique against the government in place. By contrast, what needs to be highlighted is that language is not neutral but is ‘colored’ by the state authorities for the promotion of certain political aims. Language influences greatly the public opinion and turns social groups against each other.

Opening Up the ‘Language Fan’ for victimizing Young People in Greece

The victimization of young people makes part of the so-called “blame game” to establish a common enemy (social automation), who is going to support the political system and the dominant political rhetoric. In this ‘game’ the Mass Media participate actively and tend to formulate public opinion with the usage of evaluating judgments and characterizations, often produced in an arbitrary way. In this section, the public statements of members of the government and not only, are presented in bold (the author used bold for adding emphasis and the translation was conducted from Greek to the English language). These statements seek to construct the profile of young people and have a very didactic tone. In particular:

*"The basic cause of (virus) diffusion was **the entertainment of young people**" (Naftemporiki, 2020a).*

Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister.

*"This is not a critique, but young people are **more susceptible to such behavior (entertainment)**, but this is just a judgment. I am getting the accusation by the opposition that you victimize young individuals as if they are completely irresponsible and beyond criticism" (Samara, 2020).*

Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister.

*"I want to make a special appeal to young people, to young children. I am also a parent having kids at this age, 17, 23, and 22, I know the **carelessness of this age**. But please, I have an appeal to make: Protect yourselves, **you are not invulnerable**, and particularly those who are not invulnerable are your parents and your grandfathers and your grandmothers" (Euronews, 2020).*

Mr. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister.

*"I make for once more an appeal to the young individuals and the citizens who do not follow the basic measures of individual protection, masks, hygiene rules, security distances, **to consider their responsibilities** against the vulnerable groups, the rest of the citizens who live in the country" (Rigopoulos, 2020).*

Mr. Vasilis Kikilias, Minister Health.

*"As a society, we are facing a danger: a sanitary rupture between generations. **The young people have been accused as irresponsible, the young were victimized for the spread of virus ...**" (Naftemporiki, 2020b).*

Mr. Alexis Tsipras, Opposition's Leader (SYRIZA).

*"Until now, **the young people were to blame, now the older people are to blame, as long as people do not understand how useless Mr. Mitsotakis himself is**" (Newsit, 2021).*

Mr. Nassos Iliopoulos, spokesman of SYRIZA.

*"**The students are responsible for the spread, critical are the following 10 days**" (THETOC, 2020)*

Experts on coronavirus in Thessaloniki.

*"**The irresponsible behavior of young people is paid by older adults**" (Skai, 2020)*

Mr. Nikos Sypsas, Infectious Diseases Specialist.

*"**It's young individuals who are indifferent to the protection and safety measures that we have proposed and we say repeatedly**" (Newsbomb, 2020)*

Mr. Nikos Sypsas, Infectious Diseases Specialist.

*"We have said scientifically that the mask and the distances will lower the number of cases. **Unfortunately, not all understand that. The gatherings continue in the evenings. Nobody said that young people can not go out. Let's go out in a group of four people, let's wear a mask, and let's sit to chat. It is not possible to watch what we are watching every night...Let's consider their families**" (Ethnos, 2020)*

Mrs. Matina Pagoni, Chairman of the Association of Doctors of Hospitals of Athens and Piraeus.

*"Another important source of infection is **the irresponsible young people who, for a drink or a date, they stand close to each other, without distances, without a mask in bars or parks, they do not care about their grandparents: they say, come on, it's a simple flu, the capitalists and the journalists fabricate everything**" (To Vima, 2020)*

Mr. Achilleas Gravanis, Professor of Pharmacology at the Medical School of the University of Crete and researcher at the Institute of Molecular Biology & Biotechnology of Institute of Technology and Research.

To sum up, using the conventional content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), I analyzed the previous speech statements. The dominant depiction of young people in Greece is described as follows: they are "irresponsible", they are "carelessness", they are "responsible for the spread", they feel "invulnerable", they do not "understand" the seriousness of the situation, they are "indifferent to the protection and safety measures", while they are interested only in their "entertainment" and not in protecting their "families"/"grandparents". Unquestionably, the crisis of coronavirus was an excellent 'opportunity' for disorienting the public opinion in an attempt of the Greek government to

overlook its collective and individual responsibilities for the management of this pandemic (read more on this subject in the paper of Alexopoulou & Pavli, 2021). However, the reality is completely different. According to recently published research, it has been discovered that young people are not irresponsible against the coronavirus, but around 83% of them follow strictly the measures (Protothema, 2020).

Conclusions

Indisputably, young people in Greece were victimized harshly. It is often said that young people represent ‘the future of Greece’ and suddenly they are demonized as ‘destructive forces’ because of their ‘reckless’ behavior to demand a few moments of entertainment. Conversely, throughout the economic crisis of 2009, the young people were depicted as a ‘valuable resource’. The dominant narrative back then was that several foreign countries were taking advantage of the Greek youth, which displayed a very high level of qualifications/skills, to support their labor sector. As a consequence, the phenomenon of “brain drain” was emerged. Today, young people are a ‘dangerous burden’ to the governmental plans for tackling the pandemic, while it is silenced deliberately and systematically that the individual responsibility has nothing to do with the age factor. Everything else falls into the category of political fantasies that concentrate on an aggressive and constructed political discourse targeted against young people.

All in all, the point highlighted by Mrs. Tsitsanouidi - Mallidou is correct, when she said that in the context of the Covid pandemic the "*language was manipulating and has been manipulated*" (Tsitsanouidi-Mallidou, 2021). This is the case of young individuals in Greece. Experience has shown that once such tactics are put into practice, it is only a matter of time until the next ‘victim’ is chosen. At present day, the victimization has been transferred into citizens who refuse to be vaccinated and/or are characterized as ‘sprayed’ because they often embrace conspiracy theories to justify their choice to remain unvaccinated. What can be done at the policy level (policy recommendation)? The Greek policymakers have to stop playing the "blame game" against vulnerable groups because social unrest and divisions can probably cause more problems than they solve. It is a very critical moment to stand all united -as a society- against this lethal, invisible virus that disrupted our ‘normal’ life. Any other practice is not only dangerous but also follows the logic of irresponsible politics, something intolerable for a country that wishes to call itself a modern representative democracy.

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