

TRANSLANGUAGING INSTANCES IN THE GREEK LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Abstract

In this article we discuss the concept of translanguaging in relation to the theory of linguistic landscape in the Greek context in times of economic and political crisis. In particular, we look at instances in Greek public spaces where there is a combination of linguistic resources. The instances used in this paper have a political and ideological meaning that is strongly related with the current economic and political situation in Greece, while these instances also show a creative dimension of different linguistic forms and resources. Public translanguaging instances in today's multilingual Greece is a research area that has not been examined yet in the relevant literature. Thus, the aim of the present paper is to show the dynamics that translanguaging has taken over the past years in the multilingual context of the Greek society.

1. Introduction

Linguistic landscape research can help us gain insight in aspects of linguistic diversity that typify the multilayered, superdiverse multilingual contexts of late modern society (Van Mensel, Vandenbroucke and Blackwood 2016, Vertovec 2009). Polylingualism (Jørgensen 2008), metrolingualism, (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010) and glocalisation (Robertson 2012) are some of the terms used to define the complex linguistic and cultural landscape of our times. Translanguaging through code-switching, translations, transliterating and trans-enunciating (Canagarajah 2013, García 2009, Song 2016) reconstructs language by intermingling multiple languages and modes (Lu and Horner 2013) and negotiates meaning making (García 2009). This idiolect constructed by individuals or groups challenges linguistic boundaries (Otheguy, García and Reid

2015), creates linguistic repertoires as landmarks of diverse micro-communities (Blommaert and Backus 2013) or even signals mutual influences and acculturations to a lingua franca, such as English (Blommaert 2010). The aim of the present paper is to analyze instances of translanguaging in public spaces in Greece on the basis of their meaning, their scope and the use of different languages in the same message. Especially in the current timing, where the issues of economic crisis and the presence of refugees prevail in Greece, translanguaging instances in the public space become more challenging in terms of their interpretation.

2. Ideological and sociopolitical dimensions of translanguaging

The notion of translanguaging is a rather new term in the field of sociolinguistics. According to Wei (2011: 1223) it is a language phenomenon that goes both between different linguistic structures and systems and beyond them. According to Canagarajah (2011: 401), translanguaging is defined as “the ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system”. García (2008) claims that translanguaging is based on the idea of the inherent and natural effort of bilinguals to communicate and express themselves using freely their unique linguistic repertoire in a holistic way, as language has no boundaries and cannot be owned.

Apart from the educational and the linguistic/ creative/ communicative dimension of translanguaging (Tsokalidou 2017), translanguaging can also be used as an analytical lens when it explicitly seeks to challenge social structures producing language-based inequalities (Bradley *et al.* 2017). In this vein, translanguaging may disrupt the “norm”, because it can be considered as “a transformation that resists the asymmetries of power” (García and Wei 2014: 43). Thus, it is often the case that translanguaging found in street art often disregards socially and politically defined boundaries (Bradley *et al.* 2017). In other words, translanguaging practices in public spaces go beyond linguistic barriers and aim to make social contexts meaningful. Translanguaging spaces are created by and for translanguaging practices and language users go beyond the ideologically laden dichotomies between the macro and the micro, the societal and the individual (Wei 2011). Language users may feel free to bring out their personal experiences, their personal attitudes and beliefs and make

meaningful performances (Wei 2011). Thus, translanguaging spaces dispute norms and are characterized by creativity and criticality.

According to Cenoz and Gorter (2015) there are two types of language combinations regarding the linguistic form of bi/multilingual messages. The first one is the “duplicating - fragmentary” one, which displays a separation of languages, for instance, when the same text-or some parts - are presented in more than one language. The second one is the “complementary” that presents forms of mixed languages, i.e., different parts of the text are presented in different languages. This type of linguistic synthesis presupposes translanguaging practices in the sense that the two or more languages in use are needed simultaneously to comprehend the full message (Cenoz and Gorter 2015). Both of these types are presented in the current paper. Moreover, text size and position also play an important role, as they can be related to the perceived or intended power/importance of each language in the specific neighborhood, region or city (Cenoz and Gorter 2006). Furthermore, it is quite common that in some cases there are grammatical or syntactical errors in these bilingual/multilingual messages. According to Spolsky and Cooper (1991) this is due to the intention of the writer to claim power in the “designated place” through the control of the language.

3. Sociopolitical context: Crisis within a crisis

Since 2009 Greeks have faced conditions of rampant unemployment and a significant decrease in salaries and welfare allowances as a result of the severe economic crisis (Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2014). In 2013, 21.4% of the population was officially reported to be ‘at risk of poverty’ (Wodak and Angouri 2014). Pessimism about the future is widespread, with some surveys claiming that almost 38% of the population expects living conditions to deteriorate in the future (Wodak and Angouri 2014). This dramatic life change has triggered powerful negative emotions. As an outside event affecting the Greek society, the crisis initially cultivated a negative emotional atmosphere which in time settled to a permanently distressing emotional climate (Davou and Demertzis 2013). The decline in both physical and mental health has been reported in relevant research (Economou *et al.* 2013) and suicide rates have more than doubled in recent years (Wodak and Angouri 2014).

Meanwhile, from 2015 to 2016, Greece experienced an unprecedented influx of migrants and refugees fleeing war and deprivation in their home countries in the Middle East and South Asia, or in search of a better and safer life in the EU¹. The closure of the border between the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Greece in early March 2016, left thousands of refugees and migrants stranded in Greece –often without adequate accommodation, healthcare, and access to education (European Commission 2018). This context has paved the way for the re-emergence of the far right in the face of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn and the spread of extreme rightwing, xenophobic and anti-Semitic rhetoric. This rhetoric capitalises on anger and fear for the future in a society which attempts to make sense of a crisis that has deeply changed the status quo (Wodak and Angouri 2014). Moreover, in the latest report by the Greek National Human Rights Commission concerning the implementation of the UN International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in July 2016, the severe economic crisis that Greece has been facing during the last seven years is held as a cause of the increased discrimination against vulnerable groups such as migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Roma, and LGBT communities (Pitsela and Chatzisprou 2017).

4. The research methodology

There are plenty and different approaches of how linguistic landscape should be examined. The first studies in the field of Linguistic Landscape (LL) elaborated on the amount, the geographical distribution and the place of signs or billboards (Tulp 1978). Shohamy and Gorter (2009) edited a collective volume which includes several contributions that address the display of linguistic signs from a range of different theoretical approaches. Other works, such as Collins and Slembrouck's study (2007) or Spolsky and Cooper's study (1991) focus on semiotics and look more closely at signs-in-place by examining the authorship, readership, function, and materiality of these signs. On the other hand, Scollon and Scollon (2003) introduce the term *geosemiotics* and they support that in order to understand fully the meaning of signs,

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/echo/news/new-community-centre-refugees-and-migrants-greece_en?fbclid=IwAR0KLJ-a-AK-8GTipFyylIIG6knR1gCAjCkgyAF7jsAoKYyG1Wb2bL6Iy4U
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we should first reflect on their social and cultural placement (see also Jaworski and Thurlow 2010).

In line with Canakis (2016) as well as Blommaert and Mally (2014: 4) we attempt an ‘ethnographic linguistic landscape analysis’, seeing signs as indices of social relationships, interests and practices employed in a field replete with overlapping and intersecting norms of conduct, membership, legitimate belonging and usage and operating within different historicities. Recent ethnographic studies on the Greek LL have been undertaken in Athens and on the island of Lesbos. In Canakis and Kersten-Pejanić (2016) the LL of Athens is analyzed with regard to citizenship and its interplay with dominant discourses on sexuality, ethnicity and nationhood, while in Canakis (2018) the refugee crisis is inscribed in the LL of Lesbos. In the present paper we focus on the depiction of the psychological and social impact of the economic crisis in the Greek LL through a translanguaging lens. Thus, we examine instances in public spaces in Greece in three cities: Athens, Thessaloniki and Kalamata that have a mixture of different languages. The goals, the functions and the types of translanguaging were the main themes of our analysis. In particular, for the purposes of the final essay of the module “LRM51 Multilingualism, Multiculturalism and Intercultural Communication” that is offered in the Postgraduate Program “Language Education for Refugees and Immigrants” by the Hellenic Open University, students were invited to photograph instances of translanguaging in public spaces and analyze them with regard to their suitability for second/foreign language teaching. For this paper the two authors, who taught this module during the winter semester 2017-2018, have selected only bottom-up, unauthorized signs. The sample of these instances is around 100 photos. However, for the purposes of the current paper ten photos are presented and analyzed, as translanguaging in these photos falls into the category of “criticizing the current socio-economic situation in Greece”. Finally, it is worth mentioning that we have attempted to analyze these instances of translanguaging using both sociopolitical as well as linguistic criteria.

5. Instances of translanguaging

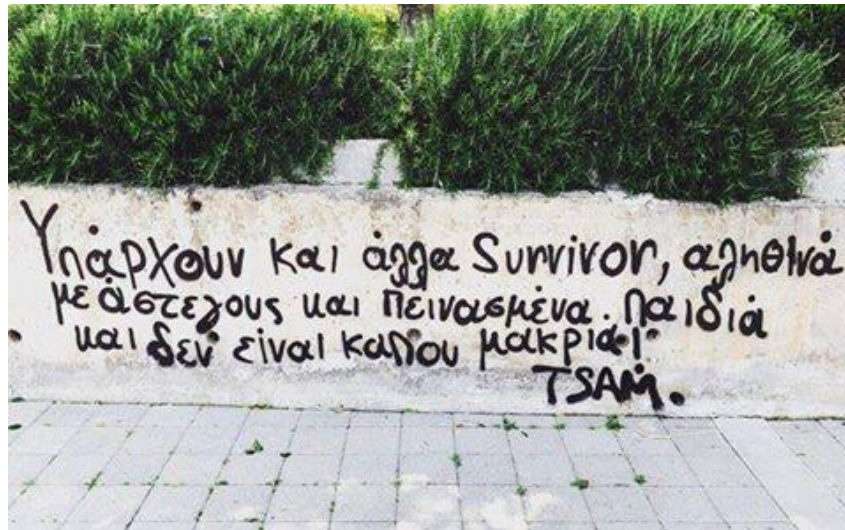
In Picture 1 the graffiti consists of one word in English and one in Greek and is found in front of the Greek parliament in Athens. The first word “trendy” is a word that is used to refer to people or objects that are in fashion. The second word means “slaves”

and, thus, the combination of these two words denotes new forms of human slavery and manipulation, such as those brought about by mass media or economic austerity measures. The specific instance consists of just two words, one in English and one in Greek, and it should be noted that the first word is of frequent use in Greek. The fact that this message is found in the surrounding area of the Greek Parliament implies that Greek politicians are to blame for this state of slavery. Moreover, the fact that it is a spray-canned message, adds to its subversiveness. According to Canakis and Kersten-Pejanić (2016), graffiti, as politically significant scribbled speech in public space, often goes against the grain of local conceptions of national propriety and respectability.



Picture 1

In picture 2 there is a phrase written in Greek with the exception of one word. The translation is “There are also other, real Survivor, with homeless people and hungry children and they are not far away”. As in other countries, “Survivor” is a running and very popular reality television program, where the participants are stranded on an island and are struggling to survive and win a prize. This graffiti intends to deconstruct this game’s conceptualisation and to remind people that in Greece this “game” is real: there are people who seek a shelter and children who are in need of food. The fact that the word “Survivor” is not written in its plural form, as the syntactical context would impose (the adjective “άλλα” is in the plural form), shows that the “creator” of this graffiti wanted to emphasize the unprecedented dimensions of this show’s popularity in Greece.



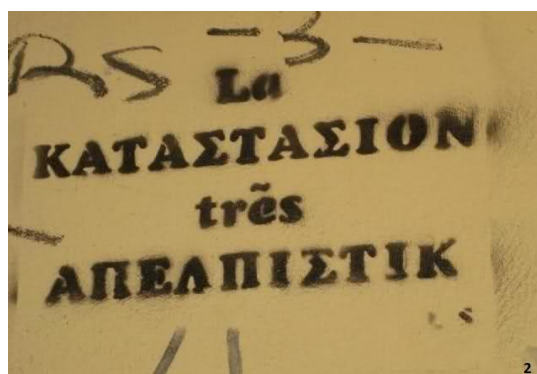
Picture 2

In picture 3 the phrase that is written is the following “Do you have life style in pills”? The largest part of the phrase is written in Greek while the phrase “life style” is in English, apparently, because this phrase is commonly used among Greeks in everyday communication. Moreover, the phrase “life style” is at the beginning of the sentence, which generally is syntactically acceptable in Greek when we want to put emphasis on the word or phrase in question (topicalization). We assume that the “creator” of the graffiti criticizes the modern way of living as well as the excessive use of medicines and drugs for any reason and purpose. The message may also be referring to the increase in the consumption of anti-depressant pills among the Greek population as a result of the increasing cases of depression in the aftermath of the crisis.



Picture 3

Picture 4 depicts a sentence that is a mixture of Greek and French, not only at the word level but also at the morphological level. In particular, this phrase means “The situation is very exasperating”. The words “situation” and “exasperating” are in Greek, however their suffixes are French, i.e. feminine nouns that end in -ion and adjectives that finish in -ique. Moreover, we have the French article “la”, as the French equivalent for the noun is “La situation” and also the adverb “très” in French to maximize the amount of desperation. The verb of the sentence is missing and thus one has the impression that this graffiti is more like a title than a simple statement.



Picture 4

Picture 5 is characterized first of all by its intense colors and the detailed picture of a child. The graffiti in English is translated as “Wanted: Peace” and it is a phrase borrowed by a book’s title written by a Greek author, Antonis Samarakis (original title: Wanted: Hope). The verb “wanted” is written exclusively in Greek, but the next word is a mixture of Greek and English. In particular, the word starts with the first two letters of the Greek word “hope” but the second half is “peace” in English. The resulting word is a homophone of the Greek word for hope [elpis]. The graffiti in question makes a clear connection to children’s lives that are threatened daily by wars and seeks peace for them. The message refers to the refugee crisis and constitutes a political statement.



Picture 5

Picture 6 is also characterized by its intense colors. It depicts a man who is covering his mouth with a message that has a double meaning: solidarity and virtue. More specifically, the word “solidαρετή” is a paraphrase of the Latin word “solidarity” which is used in many European languages. The Greek equivalent is αλληλεγγύη [alilegii]. However, the second half of the word (αρετή) is the Greek word for “virtue” and it was presumably chosen because it is phonologically similar to the ‘arity’ part of the original word. Thus, the “creator” of the graffiti in question, apart from creating a playful effect by providing a ‘near homophone’ of the word ‘solidarity’, implies that solidarity is a virtue that people must have and perform in their daily life rather than just talk about it. This instance is very interesting, as translanguaging occurs through the combination of two words in different alphabets.



Picture 6

In picture 7 there is colourful and vivid graffiti with an old lady who closes her mouth with her finger and says “Positive thinking” as an advice to younger people. The first part of the word “positive” is spelled with Greek characters forming the Greek word «πώς» (how). Thus, the implied message seems to be: “how can positive thinking be achieved?” a question asked by an old lady who symbolizes wisdom and experience. The message seems to reflect a negative emotional climate and pessimism about the future which must be related to the sociopolitical and economic crisis in the country.



Picture 7

Pictures 8, 9 and 10 have something in common. Their authors express ‘anarchic’ views and in pictures 8 and 9 they seem to want to incite the addressees to take action. Greek ‘anarchic’ or ‘anti-authoritarian’ protests have a long history that stretches back to the Metapolitefsi, a specific historical moment after the fall of the dictatorship (1974) marked by increased liberalization, democratization and aspirations towards European ‘integration’ (Kitis and Milani 2015: 271) These protests are carried out by a heterogeneous group of people that can include leftist activists, students, pupils, the unemployed, migrants, hooligans, thrill-seekers and agents provocateurs (Economides and Monastiriotis 2009: 65; Kitis and Milani 2015: 271). The tactics in these protests typically include fighting the police, or attacking international organizations, state institutions, banks and other symbols of authority and corporate capitalism within particular urban spaces (Kitis and Milani 2015: 271). These practices follow the 19th century anarchist tradition of “propaganda of the deed”, according to which “we must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda” (Bakunin 1980: 195-6, cited in Kitis and Milani 2015: 271). From this perspective, actions proverbially speak

louder than words, and are meant to incite revolution in the masses by setting an example for others to follow.

In picture 8 we can see a political graffiti on a wall which aims to challenge and disturb gender power structures, and the hegemonic nationalist discourse which has been marked by a sharp right-wing turn since the 2010 financial crisis (Canakis 2017, Kitis and Milani 2015). The message reads ‘To hell with the nation, the cops and the army. [it is time for] Gender counter-attack with glitter and anger’. The word ‘glitter’ is written in English while the rest of the message is in Greek. It seems that the author of this message uses deliberately the word ‘glitter’ in English in order to emphasize its symbolic function as a stereotypically feminine signifier. We see a counter-discourse targeting state authoritarianism through the words ‘the nation,’ ‘the army,’ ‘the cops’ and asserting gender and sexuality rights through the words ‘counter-attack’, ‘gender’ ‘glitter’.



Picture 8

In picture 9 the graffiti reads ‘Abandon pro-evolution and make a pro-revolution’. The main nouns in this message (pro-evolution/pro-revolution) are in English and only the verbs are in Greek. ‘Pro-evolution’ refers to a soccer video game which is very popular in Greece. Thus, the authors invite the people who read their message to stop being passive and to take action, i.e. engage in ‘revolution’. Presumably the authors belong to an ‘anarchic group’ and wish to make the young people, who have been the main victims of the economic crisis in terms of unemployment to react against the system and to overthrow the government and the neoliberal policies (austerity measures) which are imposed by the EU on Greece.



Picture 9

In a similar note, picture 10 refers to the dictatorship of capitalism. ‘Then with the tanks, now with the banks’. The authors manage to create a powerful message in a playful way, by choosing the English word ‘banks’ which rhymes with the Greek loan word ‘tanks’. If the Greek word for banks had been chosen there would be no rhyme and the effect would not be the same. The underlying meaning of the message is that during the Greek military dictatorship (1967-1974) authority was imposed on the people through the military ‘tanks’ while in current times the people in Greece are struggling under the harsh financial measures imposed on them.



Picture 10

The above examples, apart from their socio-political messages, provide very interesting instances of TL which express the creative aspect of language contact, a fascinating dimension that, as research data has shown (Tsokalidou 2017) frees bi/multilingual people from having to make a specific language choice. It has been shown that translanguaging spaces can be created by artists and writers who inhabit multilingual contexts in their life and work. This creativity can be seen in the unique combinations of elements from different languages that result in often unpredictable new translingual words and expressions making bilinguals feel at home and free from restrictive norms.

6. Concluding discussion

The instances of translanguaging that have been presented make direct reference to sociopolitical issues such as the economic austerity (picture 1, ‘trendy slaves’), surviving (picture 2), desperation (picture 4), modern life style (picture 3). Moreover, the messages put forward important values such as freedom (picture 5) or hope (picture 7) and solidarity as a virtue (picture 6). The use of translanguaging in pictures 8, 9 and 10 is more subversive. It challenges state authoritarianism and economic austerity. Overall, in most cases the use of translanguaging makes the intended messages lighter, more creative and more humorous. The instances we have presented include both “duplicating - fragmentary” and “complementary” types of bi/multilingual messages, in line with Cenoz and Gorter’s taxonomy (2015).

In particular, the instances presented in the present paper show peoples’ creativity and their abilities to navigate between languages and language varieties, to flout norms of behavior, to criticize social phenomena and to articulate views (Wei 2011, Wei and Zhu 2013). Multilingualism and translanguaging are rich sources of creativity and criticality, as they are highly related with differences, conflict, different ideologies, policies and practices (Wei 2018). Greece’s current political, social and economic situation has generated a lot of public reaction and conflict between different ideologies. Moreover, in regard with language use and choice, our instances show that, similar to several other contexts, English emerges as a global lingua franca in Greece (cf. Sifianou 2010). The high visibility of English in the Greek LL has also been shown by other studies (Canakis 2014, Nikolaou 2017). Canakis’s (2014) study in Athens demonstrates that “the omnipresence of English in the LL of central Athens

testifies to the status of English as a global lingua franca but also to its indexical relation to contemporary global values” (ibid.: 62).

Linguistic Landscape is a relatively recent field of study in sociolinguistics/sociopragmatics. In the Greek context the number of LL studies is limited (Canakis 2014, 2016, 2018, Nikolaou 2017). Our study is the first investigating translanguaging in the Greek Linguistic Landscape. From a study such as this we can draw various conclusions about sociopolitical and sociolinguistic issues emerging in the country in the current timing of severe socioeconomic crisis. Recent studies in linguistic landscape have begun to incorporate the context of production of signs into their analyses but there are still only a small number that also investigate the context of reception. Further research is needed in this area, in order to get insights into the interconnectedness of language with the current social issues.

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