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Why and how to integrate non-standard linguistic varieties into education: Cypriot Greek in Cyprus and the UK

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- Greek Cypriot education remains largely oriented towards promoting standard language ideologies and only accepts Standard Greek as the language of teaching and learning.
- Cypriot Greek, the pupils' home variety, is still seen as an obstacle to academic achievement by teachers and educational authorities.
- Cypriot Greek needs to be integrated into policies and practices of teaching and learning both in Cyprus and in the UK's Greek Cypriot community.
- This will:
 - hone pupils' awareness of different varieties;
 - foster the development of their critical literacy;
 - facilitate the acquisition of Standard Greek;
 - counter negative perceptions, stereotypes and feelings of inferiority associated with the use of Cypriot Greek; and,
 - aid in the maintenance and intergenerational transmission of Cypriot Greek as a heritage and community language in the UK.
- Teachers and learning activities should promote and cultivate:
 - awareness and respect of the different varieties spoken in class, Cypriot Greek and Standard Greek; and,
 - awareness of vocabulary and grammar in the contexts of use of the two varieties and their social meanings.
- This approach will ultimately change the way we view language and literacy learning.

Introduction

When a community speaks two varieties, one of these is usually considered proper and correct; it is often the official (or standard) language of the speech community and the one used in formal education. Other varieties may lack this status. They will often be regional or social vernaculars that people perceive as improper or incorrect and refer to using labels such as *slang*, *patois* or *broken language*. Research shows that non-standard varieties can be used as tools to develop the reading and writing skills of pupils who speak them in their homes, their communities and wider social environments ([Matras and Karatsareas, 2020](#)). Yet, educational systems remain oriented towards promoting standard languages and ideologies of monolingualism. Many teachers still see their pupils' home languages as obstacles to their success. They consider speaking a non-standard variety as a 'language deficit'. Educators and the media often foster a complaint culture, which assumes a drop in linguistic standards and poor grammar. Teachers often try to 'fix' these 'problems' by imposing the use of only one (form of) language in their classrooms.

There are, however, good reasons to integrate non-standard varieties into teaching because they bring many benefits to pupils who speak them alongside standard varieties. There are cognitive benefits: pupils' linguistic skills will improve so that acquiring and learning to use the standard language will be easier for them. Their critical literacy will also develop further. There are also benefits relating to self-esteem. Giving non-standard varieties a legitimate place in education will tackle negative perceptions and the feelings of inferiority that speaking a non-standard variety sometimes causes. In migrant communities, it will help with the maintenance of heritage languages, which communities consider very important in terms of preserving their identity and passing them on to younger generations (see the studies in [Pauwels, Winter and Lo Bianco, 2007](#)).

In this paper, we discuss Cypriot Greek, the non-standard variety of Greek originating in the island of Cyprus, as an example. We compare the position Cypriot Greek occupies in mainstream schools in the Republic of Cyprus with complementary schools in the UK's Greek Cypriot diaspora. In Cyprus, Cypriot Greek is the majority language that speakers acquire naturally. In the UK, it is a minority language, the majority language being English. In this context, speakers acquire Cypriot Greek at home and within the diasporic community as a heritage language. In both contexts, only Standard Greek is accepted as the target variety of education. Very limited concessions are made towards the use of Cypriot Greek in teaching and learning.

Cypriot Greek in the mainstream education of the Republic of Cyprus

Educational policy

Since the formation of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, formal policies prescribed Standard Greek as the language of education for the schools of the Greek-speaking community of the island. The

government of Cyprus has since then consistently followed closely the language reforms, textbooks and curricula of Greece. This is based on a widespread perception that sharing a common language is paramount for reasons of national identity. Things changed in 2010, when a new National Curriculum for Language developed by the Ministry of Education and Culture was the first of its kind to actively integrate Cypriot Greek – and geographical and sociolinguistic variation at large – into language teaching and learning:

“Pupils are expected to acquire a full overview of the structure of Standard Greek and of the Cypriot Greek variety (phonetics and phonology, inflectional and derivational morphology, syntax); [...] to realize that various aspects of grammar perform specific language functions, depending on genre and communicative situation [...] to be able to analyse a range of hybrid texts produced through code-switching and language alternation in a multilingual and multicultural society such as that of Cyprus.” (p. 2)

This was a programme of critical pedagogy that aimed to develop pupils’ skills in reading and writing, and in being critical about language and the way it is used in different types of texts and contexts. It promoted awareness of how speakers (multilingual and ‘monolingual’ alike) have multiple and complex linguistic repertoires, which they use to express identities and values and to form social relationships. It helped pupils develop critical awareness of the relationship between language and society. It made them aware of the ideological dimensions of language and how it can be used creatively to bring about social change.

The 2010 curriculum included plans for the contrastive teaching of Cypriot Greek and Standard Greek. It showed that Cypriot Greek, too, is a linguistic system with its own rules and structure. The aims were

- to sharpen the linguistic and literacy skills of pupils in both Standard Greek and Cypriot Greek;
- to do away with negative attitudes towards Cypriot Greek, which are prevalent among Greek Cypriots and often make speakers feel like they cannot speak correctly; and,
- to develop pupils’ awareness of different styles of language and the ways in which language is used to signal social differences in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

In the words of the curriculum, this cannot be done “without taking into account the pupils’ linguistic reality” (p. 10), that is, without recognising that pupils in Cyprus have Cypriot Greek as their mother tongue but are exposed to Standard Greek in more official aspects of their everyday lives.

Unfortunately, this curriculum was short-lived. In 2015, the previous curriculum, the 1999 Greek Programme of Studies for Language, was reinstated. This programme states that language teaching aims to foster communicative appropriateness. However, in a rather self-contradictory way, it does not opt for the teaching of variation:

“One of these linguistic varieties is the one that we cultivate in school. It is the linguistic variety in which schoolbooks, student projects/compositions, etc. are written. It is in this

variety that teaching takes place and it is correlated [sic] to the language spoken in the urban centres of the country and used by canonical Greek writers.” (pp. 7244–7245)

However, pedagogical interventions based on the 2010 curriculum showed that integrating non-standard varieties makes for better, more effective, and critical literacy learning. For example, in the interventions described in detail in [Tsiplakou et al. \(2018\)](#) and in [Papanicola and Tsiplakou \(2019\)](#) pupils were encouraged to examine contrastively texts of the same genre (e.g. recipes, flyers, instructions) written in Standard Greek and in Cypriot Greek and also to produce such texts, both oral and written (see [Tsiplakou 2019](#) for sample teaching materials and discussion). Through these activities, they developed awareness of the differences in vocabulary and grammar between the two varieties, which ultimately helped them learn the standard variety better. Crucially, they were able to understand and actively comment on the fact that in real life, different varieties are used in different contexts by different people, depending on age, sex, education and identity. They also became aware that vocabulary and structures from one or the other variety may be used strategically in communication to signal power, superiority, authority, modernity (typically the standard variety) or authenticity, humour, affect, solidarity (typically the non-standard variety), although such social meanings are not strictly compartmentalised. The latter type of awareness of use and social meaning is called critical metalinguistic awareness and is central to critical literacy.

Practice

Cypriot Greek is present in Greek Cypriot classrooms but is often excluded or ignored. It evokes informality and is used for joking among teachers and pupils, and is only allowed in less structured learning activities. Several classroom studies have documented that when pupils use Cypriot Greek in structured activities, teachers correct them ([Ioannidou and Sophocleous, 2010](#)), often hindering pupils’ efforts to express themselves ([Ioannidou, 2009](#)). When pupils attempt to speak the standard, teachers guide the type and amount of talk they produce. As a result, pupils often produce brief utterances, whose content, structure and vocabulary are confined to the learning task at hand, i.e. they produce almost formulaic, stilted language and do not use the standard variety either appropriately or creatively ([Ioannidou, 2014](#)). This was shown, for example, in [Constantinou \(2013\)](#), who compared the oral production of senior high-school students during group tasks in which only Standard Greek was used and in group tasks where Cypriot Greek was allowed. The data show that the use of Cypriot Greek facilitated expression and aided content learning, while its exclusion and the imposition of Standard Greek hindered the development and expression of critical thinking. In addition, [Ioannidou \(2014\)](#) documented that during classroom talk pupils’ dominant speech acts were short utterances in the form of reply, with simplified structures (i.e. no connective words or embedded clauses). On the contrary, on occasions that allowed more informal talk, such as group work, pupils produced richer and multi-levelled talk, moving between the two varieties. The picture that emerges suggests that pupils are more fluent when they use Cypriot Greek for their contributions, but fluency decreases when they use the standard language.

Formal practices therefore create a formulaic and less genuine form of the standard. Crucially, these practices silence students, who feel that the school rejects their home variety. In interviews conducted by [Ioannidou \(2009\)](#), many pupils expressed their frustration when, especially in oral communication, they were not allowed to use their home variety. Student comments from this study illustrated both the linguistic and the social dimensions of these frustrations:

“when I speak (Standard) Greek (...) I feel like I am a stranger because most of us in Cyprus we speak Cypriot. Miss, this is not my language”

“I prefer to speak Cypriot because I know it well.”

However, children and young speakers make extensive use of Cypriot Greek on the internet and when using mobile phones, tablets and other electronic devices. They violate traditional orthographic norms and use the English alphabet to write Greek. When they play, children mix Cypriot Greek and Standard Greek, using them to signal different social identities. These studies show that the two varieties are not kept completely separate in actual linguistic performance. Rather, speakers use both, combining them in fluid, performative and creative ways. In an ethnographic study among preschool children during playtime at home (Ioannidou, 2017), children moved between the two varieties to perform role play and to construct imaginary scenarios, exhibiting flexibility and fluency in their communication.

Cypriot Greek in the complementary schools of the UK's Greek Cypriot diaspora

The UK is home to a large Greek Cypriot community. Estimates of its size range between 200,000 and 300,000 people. Most members of the community migrated to the UK between the late 1940s and early 1970s, forced by poor living and working conditions in Cyprus as well as the conflict between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities that culminated in the 1974 war and the de facto partition of the island. Today, Greek Cypriots are mainly concentrated in London, especially its northern boroughs, and other major British cities like Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool. As a community, they place a lot of emphasis on Greek and Cypriot culture as key elements of their identity. Maintaining the Greek language and passing it on to younger generations is very important in this respect. Greek is taught in 68 after-hours (or complementary) schools, which operate on Saturday mornings and possibly also on a couple of weekday evenings. The running of these schools is overseen and/or coordinated by the Cyprus Educational Mission, a London-based office of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus, which helps with the supply and training of teachers, the development of teaching materials and other day-to-day issues.

Educational policy

The Ministry of Education and Culture of Cyprus produces the curricula used in Greek complementary schools in the UK, with the last officially approved curriculum dating from 1997. This curriculum lacks any references to Cypriot Greek (and English) as parts of the pupils' linguistic repertoires, referring only to Greek. In recent years, the Cyprus Educational Mission has led reform initiatives, which have resulted in a new curriculum (2019) that is currently pending review and approval. A key aim is for all pupils with a Greek Cypriot or mainland Greek background to “communicate efficiently in Greek” (p. 4). The new curriculum recognises two challenges: first, that the pupils' first language is English and that their knowledge of Greek is limited; second, that pupils

with a Greek Cypriot background are exposed to Cypriot Greek at home and within their extended family and community environments.

The curriculum links the maintenance of Greek to cultivating pupils' religious, ethnic and cultural identities. It describes Greek language, culture and identity in rather fixed terms. At the same time, it acknowledges the pupils' diversity and complexity. It recognises their family language abilities and migration biographies. It also makes some space for the use of Cypriot Greek in teaching and learning, especially in order for pupils to connect with Cypriot culture through songs and poems. It still sees Cypriot Greek and English as ancillary languages that are useful in supporting the development of Standard Greek. In that, it reinforces language asymmetries in the complementary school classroom. However, the recognition of the teaching and learning potential of Cypriot Greek is an important step forward. This is a key difference between UK schools and mainstream schools in the Republic of Cyprus.

Recognising Cypriot Greek in the curriculum opens up additional pedagogical spaces. Teachers are now able to capitalise on their pupils' linguistic and cultural resources. They can mobilise the linguistic and cultural abilities of their pupils and their communities. They can use these to build on their local knowledge in the classroom, transform learning objectives, and experiment with new teaching approaches. In a recent doctoral study, [Charalambous \(2019\)](#) explored the multilingual and multimodal teaching and learning practices in a London complementary school with a large Greek Cypriot student population. The teacher built collaborative relations with the students and ensured that students were active co-designers and co-producers of multimodal texts. The teacher went beyond simply acknowledging the students' diverse multilingual and multicultural repertoires and experiences. She encouraged and supported the interplay of standard and non-standard varieties (Cypriot Greek and diasporic varieties alongside standard varieties of Greek and English) to increase student engagement and agency, deepen thinking and enhance understanding of texts and student investment in their identities as language learners. Students' use of both standard and non-standard varieties increased metalinguistic and critical abilities by drawing connections between varieties and affirmed positive attitudes towards Cypriot Greek as resource for literacy development, cultural affiliation and intergenerational connection.

Practice

Greek complementary schools see speaking Greek in general as a resource rather than a hindrance or problem. However, the values they attach to Cypriot Greek and Standard Greek differ, and attitudes towards the two varieties vary. Schools compartmentalise and hierarchise the pupils' languages. As in Cyprus, Standard Greek is the main target language in language learning. Cypriot Greek is stigmatised. Teachers disapprove of its use by pupils, especially in writing. They generally only allow it as a support mechanism that will help pupils to develop their literacy in Standard Greek. This is, however, done inconsistently and without appropriate pedagogical framing. For example, in a recent study, Georgiou and Karatsareas (forthcoming) documented a complementary school teacher in north London reacting with discomfort to pupils' use of Cypriot Greek in the classroom. On the one hand, she wanted to reward their production of Greek answers. On the other, she wanted to guide them away from the use of Cypriot Greek words and expressions, because she knew these would not be allowed in the GCSE exam. She then systematically asked pupils to provide equivalent words and expressions in Standard Greek. In one noteworthy instance, she used five different ways to request an alternative, drawing on the pupils' full linguistic repertoire: Cypriot Greek *το ίδδιον πράγμα* [toi'ð:io'brayman]

‘the same thing’, με άλλον τρόπον [meˈal:ɔˈdropon]; Standard Greek πώς αλλιώς [pos aˈlos]; English *slash*, *alternatively*.

Marginalising Cypriot Greek in complementary schools in ways such as this poses a direct threat to its maintenance as a heritage language. For many pupils, exposure to and knowledge of Standard Greek outside the school is minimal or even non-existent. The variety pupils are naturally exposed to at home and with their families and friends is Cypriot Greek. Pupils often experience uncertainty as to whether a certain form or structure is Standard Greek or Cypriot Greek. For some of them, the reasons why Standard Greek should be the language they have to learn at complementary school are unclear. Teachers explain that this is the target language of the GCSE and A-level examinations, but this is not always a convincing response. This appears to lead to pupils losing motivation to attend complementary schools. It also creates feelings of inferiority and underachievement.

As mentioned above, however, in some schools, teachers acknowledge pupils’ differential language abilities and preferences and allow them to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoires. By thus valuing and mobilising the entirety of the linguistic repertoires not only of the pupils but of the teachers as well, pupils’ confidence and pride in using their heritage language are strengthened. This also increases their sense of ownership of their language and literacy learning.

Recommendations

By integrating non-standard varieties into education, teachers will be able to foster respect for all the languages and varieties that pupils bring to the classroom. Adopting inclusive pedagogical practices will allow teachers to send a message of linguistic and cultural pluralism, make connections with the pupils’ and their own knowledge of their cultures, histories and communities, and affirm the pupils’ and teachers’ multilingual and multicultural identities.

Some ways in which this can be done are outlined below.

Teacher training and awareness:

- Teachers can be trained to understand the notion of (socio)linguistic variation; outside in-service training, teachers can develop such understanding through observation of language use by different people in different contexts, self-observation and reflection on their own variety and language use and the exploration of plenty of relevant materials that are freely available online (e.g. dialect atlases).

Classroom practices:

- Teachers can avoid correcting pupils when they use non-standard forms in the classroom, as this might curb their willingness to speak in class or elicit short, artificial replies.
- Instead of corrections, teachers can work together with pupils in structuring the process of language learning. They can learn from the pupils’ linguistic capital and let them take initiatives in language learning (e.g. decide what materials they want to use, what aspects of language or content they want to focus on, whether they want to work in groups), in order to foster ownership of their learning.

- Teachers and pupils can focus on developing and enhancing stylistic and sociolinguistic awareness (what to say or write and how to say or write it in context-appropriate ways). This can be done by
 - listening to, reading and producing oral and written texts with the same content but in different varieties;
 - systematically exploring differences in accent, grammar and vocabulary. If a variety or its sounds are not included in the official writing systems, pupils can explore alternative ways of writing these sounds, e.g. with Roman script;
 - exploring what the use of a standard vs. a non-standard form or variety implies for the text's meaning. Does the choice of variety signal e.g. education, formality, power, authority, affect, solidarity, humour, casualness? Does the choice of variety affect the validity or seriousness of the content?
 - reflecting on their own use of language and,
 - reflecting on their own attitudes towards their languages and varieties.

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Further reading

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