

# THE GREEK-CYPRriot DIALECT IN WRITING: ORTHOGRAPHIC CONVENTIONS AND TYPOGRAPHIC PRACTICES

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## Synopsis

This paper investigates issues related to the interplay of typography and orthography design for a non-codified dialect. Specifically, it deals with the orthographic representation of the nonstandard, Greek-Cypriot dialect (henceforth GC) spoken by the Greek-Cypriots in Cyprus with a focus on the unconventional and highly controversial orthography of the distinctive phonological features of the GC dialect, all representing consonantal variation (Schneider & Wagner, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. The analysis and interpretation of the study's findings revealed that traditionally the representation of the GC dialect in written discourse has been characterized by non-systematicity. In most cases the choice of spelling conventions has been underpinned by contradictory language ideologies regarding the different types of orthographic systems (Sebba, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. As Halliday stated, language has a semiotic value, through language we construct to a great extent our identities, our ideologies and experiences.<sup>3</sup> In the case of Cyprus, language has indeed obtained the central and almost exclusive role in indexing the national and cultural identity of GCs (Goutsos & Karyolemou, 2004)<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the study shows that a general confusion regarding the “correct”

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<sup>1</sup> E. W. Schneider and C. Wagner, “The Variability of Literary Dialect in Jamaican Creole - Thelwell's the 'Harder they Come',” *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 21, no.1 (2006): 45-96.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Sebba, *Spelling and Society : The Culture and Politics of Orthography Around the World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Michael A. K. Halliday, *Language as a Social Semiotic. The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. (London, UK: Edward Arnold, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Dionysis Goutsos and Marilena Karyolemou, “Introduction,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 168, (2004): 1-17.

orthography of the dialect prevails, raising numerous debates among linguists and lexicographers.

## Introduction

In this article we present a part of the research that is being conducted by the Language and Graphic Communication Research Lab, which is operated by Cyprus University of Technology's Department of Multimedia and Graphic Arts. Our research focuses on how the Greek-Cypriot dialect (henceforth GC) manifests itself in the written word, an issue that is both multifaceted and complicated. Specifically, we will look closely at orthographic conventions and typographic practices followed in visual representations of the GC. We should mention, by way of introduction, that there are a great variety of orthographic conventions for the representation of sounds in the dialect, and linguists, writers and researchers haven't yet implemented and thus don't follow a common practice as to how the dialect should appear on paper.

This study argues that through the years the absence of a single complete, systematic and commonly accepted orthographic system created the need for different typographic practices, which in turn created a discontinuity in the method of representing the GC in written texts. The fact that the state encouraged the use of Common Modern Greek (henceforth SMG) language and orthography, in many instances at the expense of dialectical sounds, reinforced this practice. Such a situation can be understood only if one researches the historical underpinning of the state that created the need for a continuous effort on the part of Greek-Cypriots to preserve and protect SMG in both its spoken and written forms, which confirms Halliday's assertion that the official language of a state has semantic value and reflects and manufactures identities and ideologies.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the absence of Unicode characters and a properly designed font containing a number of separate characters to render the GC created a number of problems for publishers, who used alternative, but at the same time time-consuming and amateur, practices that didn't conform to basic principles of microtypography.

In this study we will start by describing different aspects of the socio-linguistic situation in the Greek-Cypriot community. Relevant information regarding the method of analysis used and the data sources which support our assertions will follow. In the following section we will present our

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<sup>5</sup> See note 6 above.

main findings concerning the dialect's written language. Specifically, we will present a system for classifying writing systems for the GC, the typographic conventions and practices used in writing it and issues related to microtypography. Finally, we will look at the orthography of the dialect as a common practice and uncover the ideologies hidden behind the choice of one orthographic system over another.

## **Socio-linguistic underpinning**

The Greek-Cypriot community is characterized by the phenomenon of social diglossia. Two varieties, linguistically related, the SMG and the regional GC dialect, co-exist in a single continuum, each serving different social functions and carrying a different weight. SMG is the official language of the state and it is used for all official communication, including that of the courts, mass media, education, and generally for written texts. On the other hand, the GC dialect is the mother tongue of Cypriots and is used in everyday oral communication and is considered to carry less authority than SMG.

The contemporary GC does not have a normalized orthography despite the fact that we find it in written form as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the legal text *The Assizes*. The written representation of the dialect is based on the orthography of SMG. However, due to the different phonetic systems used by the GC and SMG, the Greek characters can't accurately accommodate the distinct dialectical sounds of the GC. Furthermore, the dialect has additional consonants that function sometimes as allophones and sometimes as independent phonemes and that don't fit into SMG's phonetic system. Below are the palato-alveolar sounds that exist in the GC but not in SMG:

1. [ʃ], voiceless, palato-alveolar, fricative. /x, s, sk/ when followed by /e, i, j/
2. [ʒ], voiced, palato-alveolar, fricative. /z/ when followed by /j/ .
3. [tʃ], voiceless, palato-alveolar, affricate. /k, ts/ when followed by /e,i, j/.
4. [ʎ], voiced, palato-alveolar, affricate. /g/ when followed by /e,i/.

## **Research purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore the following questions:

- a. What orthographic models and typographic conventions have been used throughout the GC's written history,

- b. How do the means of writing and the receiver influence the way the dialect appears in written form,
- c. How orthographic practices of Cypriots reveal their ideologies and feelings towards the two linguistic varieties.

## Methodology

Originally, we gathered data from published GC texts, dictionaries, literature, academic books, blogs and websites, as well as from unpublished GC texts, such as notes, text messages and email. GC words that include GC-specific sounds were gathered into a single electronic archive and classified for analysis.

At the same time, we carried out an experiment to examine whether or not the written dialect is influenced by the medium it is written in and by the receiver of the message. For the purposes of exploring the questions mentioned above, five texts were dictated to subjects between the ages of 18 and 24 who happened to be students at the Cyprus University of Technology. This specific age group was chosen due to the fact that individuals on the threshold of adulthood are more spontaneous and more familiar with contemporary communication media as well as to the fact that it would be easier to compare them with the other age groups. We asked them to compose one message for their parents and one for a friend based on the dictations using the same means of communication (i.e. text message/email and Post-It note). The five dictations included GC-specific sounds that pose problems when written. The dictations were:

Dictation 1: Παπά εν έσει γάλαν στο ψυγειόν πήινει στο περίπτερον τζαι πκίαε θκυο κουθκιά [Dad, there isn't any milk in the refrigerator. Go to the convenience store and pick up two bottles.]

Dictation 2: Κόρη εν να 'σεις ώρα να πκιάσω το τάβλι που άφησα σπιτι σου εχτές τζαι φωνάζει ο θκειός μου [Girl, will you have time for me to pick up the backgammon board that I left at your house yesterday that my uncle is asking for.]

Dictation 3: Κόρη είπεν μου ο Δημήτρης ότι εν μου έσει εμπιστοσύνη τζαι θέλει να χωρίσουμε. Πάμε πόψε να πκιούμε ποτό να σου τα πω; [Girl, Dimitris told me that he doesn't trust me and wants to split up. Can we go for a drink tonight so I can tell you about it?]

Dictation 4: Παπά επήρεν η μάμμα μου τον σσύλον στον κτηνίατρον τζαι εν έσει ώραν να πάει να τον πκιάσει. Εν να μπορείς να τον φέρεις εσύ; [Dad, mom had to take the dog to the vet and doesn't have time to go and pick him up. Will you be able to get him?]

Dictation 5: Κόρη κάποιος έπκιασεν την τούρτα σοκολάτας που το ψυγείο και εν έχω να τσεράσω τους ξένους. Φέρε θκυο πίτσες σαν έρκεσαι σπίτι. [Girl, someone took the chocolate cake that was in the fridge and I don't have anything to offer the guests. Bring two pizzas on your way home.]

Later, the data we collected was analyzed with the concordance software Monoconc 2.2 to verify the frequency with which different forms of the dialect were used.

## Results

### Synopsis of orthographic conventions used by speakers of the GC

On the basis of the information that we archived in the original stage of collection we tried to piece together a visual language of the dialect. To do this, we classified the typographic conventions of the GC by separating them into categories/orthographic systems according to the system that was followed:

In the first system Greek characters are put in bold type. This system was first implemented at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was based on the orthography of SMG, while using bold type for the phonemes of SMG to indicate the different pronunciation of dialectical allophones. It was found mainly in literature but is no longer in use.

The second system combines Greek characters and diacritical marks. This system was based on the Historical Dictionary of the Academy of Athens, and different types of diacritical marks such as the hatchek, the brève or the apostrophe were used to indicate allophones. Sometimes it appears more etymological and at others just the opposite, according to the ideology of whoever happened to have created it. We come across this system in dictionaries, scholarly manuals and in literature.

The third system combines Greek letters with the letter “ι”. To indicate the Cypriot pronunciation of the word “κυρά” on paper, for instance, the combination of the letters -τ, -ζ, -ι is used for the allophone /κ/. This system is used in official and unofficial texts, textbooks in elementary school and on the web.

Finally, the fourth system includes:

- a. Latin characters slipped into Greek texts, a practice that was used in the past in glossaries but which has fallen into disuse, and
- b. “Greeklish”, which we encounter in communication via computers and in text messages.

## The GC's visual language. Microtypography

Based on the dominant writing system used, which is a combination of Greek characters and diacritical marks, the GC's written form conceals an amazing wealth of letter and word forms and contains a great variety of combinations of letters that don't exist in SMG: words with many consonants, with many double consonants, and words with an unequal proportion of consonants and vowels within the same word.

If we try to illustrate this proportion using some words from the GC as examples and compare them with words in SMG with the same meaning, some interesting conclusions arise<sup>6</sup>. It is obvious that consonants are overrepresented in the GC, while the visual patterns created in relation to the consonants-vowels in the same word are more balanced in terms of distribution and alternation in SMG than in the GC. The total number of letters in one word is greater in the dialect than in SMG, thus creating more visual signs at the level of texts. (fig. 2-9)

		consonants GC	consonants CMG	vowels GC	vowels CMG
αυτῆς	βῆμα	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦
ντίζω	αγγίζω	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦♦
καλλέ	καρά	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦
μάπουρος	κουκουάρι	♦♦♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦♦♦♦
απιθια	αλιδα	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦♦
μούγιη	δουρόν	♦♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦
άπταρος	άλογα	♦♦♦♦	♦♦	♦♦♦	♦♦♦

Figure 2-9: Consonants-vowels representation in words with the same meaning, both in GC and SMG.

The same phenomenon also occurs in words that are equally common to both SMG and the GC. When these words are used in the GC, in many cases we encounter double consonants not only in the middle of a word but also at the beginning, as in the addition of the letter “v” to the end of neuter nouns, something that is foreign to SMG.

When we analyze letter forms and counterforms at the level of microtypography, we discover interesting interrelated forms and symmetries that

<sup>6</sup> GC dialectal words are spelled according to the orthographic system followed in the GC dictionary by Κωνσταντίνος Γιαγκουλλής, Θησαυρός Κυπριακής Διαλέκτου (Λευκωσία: Theopress, 2009).

derive from the corresponding combinations, double consonants and consonantal clusters.

This wealth is reflected graphically in a plethora of new forms that are created in the negative space between characters and that enrich the visual diversity of signs within the space. The new forms are sometimes dynamic and at others graceful, according to the font used, creating motifs reminiscent of dancing figures. (fig.2-10)

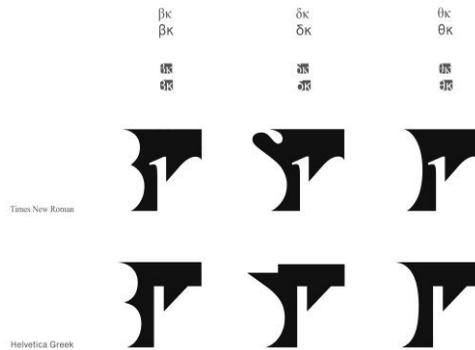


Figure 2-10: Motifs created by the counter-forms of characters in GC

The visual language is enriched still further by the addition of diacritical marks above or below the letters that highlight the pronunciation of the sounds. New visual diversity is thus created along the horizontal axis of the text, in the counterforms in between the ascenders and the descenders of the letters, when combined with the additional forms created by the diacritical marks that appear in the spaces in between lines. Gunther Kress, commenting on the multimodality of language, notes that:

There is here a specialization of tasks between image and writing. Writing is used to tell what happened, it informs about the events; image is used to show what there is or was, it informs about content. Language serves one function, image another. Language is not the full carrier of all meaning, nor even of all ‘central’ or ‘essential’ meaning.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Gunther Kress, “Sociolinguistics and Social Semiotics,” in *The Routledge companion to Semiotics and Linguistics*, ed. Paul Cobley (London, UK: Routledge, 2001), 69.

Assigning the role of the image to that of typographical design, we can grasp what it means for the rendering of meaning and content in the written word. As Danesi observes:

Alphabetic writing has become the norm in many cultures. But in every alphabetic sign, there is a pictographic history and prehistory similar to the one described above for the letter A. The pictographic content of our letters goes unnoticed because our eyes are no longer trained to extract pictorial meaning from them.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond all of this, the choice of font, the basic design features, as well as size, weight, slant and the negative space along the horizontal and vertical axes of the text, suggest, alter and finally dictate the form and means of transmitting a complete message. Bringhurst, commenting on visual communication within typography and specifically on the use of accents and diacritical marks, mentions that:

Simplicity is good, but so is plurality. Typography's principal function (not its only function) is communication, and the greatest threat to communication is not difference but sameness. Communication ceases when one being is no different from another: when there is nothing strange to wonder at and no new information to exchange.<sup>9</sup>

Looking back at Cypriot publications through the centuries, we can understand better not only the significance of the visual polyphony that derives from the dialect's writing systems and typographic design but also the visual evolution of the written word at the design level. From the embellished letter design and amazing diversity in the design of ligatures during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, we gradually end up at the simplicity and restraint of letter design in modern typography, which expresses itself through the simplification of character forms in completely basic shapes and reflects the evolution and simplification of the language.

### **Orthography as social practice**

Research into the history of writing unveils the way medium influences writing content as well as its characters. Writing evolved over many

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<sup>8</sup> Marcel Danesi, *Messages, Signs, and Meanings : A Basic Textbook in Semiotics and Communication* (Toronto, Canada: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2004), 113.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style* (Point Roberts, WA : Hartley & Marks, Publishers, 2005), 89.

thousands of years and within its history the history and evolution of human culture is reflected.

Every culture's writing developed not only according to the needs for which it was created but also according to its geopolitical position, its available resources and materials, the writing surfaces used, the type and angle of the writing implement, the skill of the writer and even the position he wrote in. Katsoulidis notes that writing surfaces dictated not only the type of writing implement but also the form the characters would take. Hard surfaces used at the birth of writing (such as rock, metal, and pottery shards) as well as the instruments used for engraving characters into these materials, gave spare, geometric letters. As these materials yielded to softer and more pliable writing surfaces (such as animal skins, wax tablets and paper) and experimentation led to the appropriate writing implements for each surface, there was the possibility to create more fluid characters with a greater freedom in their form and direction.<sup>10</sup>

Technology played a defining role in the evolution of typographic letter forms, as the formulaic and geometric nature of contemporary fonts shows, the design of which is preordained by the austere nature of digital pixel clusters<sup>11</sup>. Technology transformed not only the content and writing materials but also its very space. Bolter, commenting on the refashioning of the writing space in the late age of print, mentions that:

...Each writing space is a material and visual field, whose properties are determined by a writing technology and the uses to which that technology is put by a culture of readers and writers. A writing space is generated by the interaction of material properties and cultural choices and practices.<sup>12</sup>

The new writing spaces in which the dialect is encountered in its written form offer a wide field for typographic experimentation and implementation of practices that differentiate between or dictate its written form according to the technology and medium used, the ideology of the writer and the receiver of his message.

On the basis of the information we collected from the experiment we carried out for this research, we observed that the method of writing the dialect is influenced by the knowledge of orthography of SMG, by the medium and by the receiver of the message.

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<sup>10</sup> Τάκης Κατσουλίδης, *Το σχέδιο του Γράμματος* (Αθήνα: Εκδοτική Ελλάδα Α.Ε., 2000), 21-24.

<sup>11</sup> The first printers that appeared in the 1980s could print only in pixel clusters. This restriction led to very characteristic, geometric font designs.

<sup>12</sup> Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, c2001), 12.

The manner of writing differs according to who receives the text since in cases where young people are jotting a quick message to their parents, they prefer Greek letters for the most part and whole words, so that their writing can be more easily read by their elders. Likewise, as we confirmed, there was a higher frequency of English punctuation marks, like the question mark, than Greek.

When young people leave a quick note for their friends or neighbours, they use short hand and Latin characters more often.

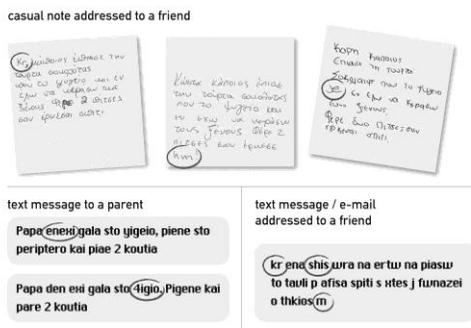


Fig. 2-11: How young people write in GC

On the other hand, as far as medium is concerned, when they send a text message to their parents with their mobile phones, while they try to write whole words in order to be more easily understood, they nearly always use Greeklish. At the same time, they sometimes forget and introduce characters they use in their everyday speech with friends on the Internet into their writing, such as, for example, when they substitute the number “4” for the Greek letter “ψ”. Written communication between young people mediated by computer or mobile phone typically features Latin characters and short hand. (fig. 2-11)

Generally, in written communication, when young people use the dialect when making notes on paper, they avoid using the more readily identifiable dialectal forms. This probably owes to the fact that as long as they are using Greek characters, they want to preserve the mental image they have of proper orthography which comes from their knowledge of SMG. On the other hand, when the dialect is used on computers and mobile phones, dialectal forms are used because in this case they are using Latin characters with which the speakers believe they can more easily render the sounds of the dialect. Indifference to orthography and the principle of least effort were also noted. For example, in monosyllabic

words they use only the first consonant (mou=m, sou=s), and at the same time they avoid changing languages on both mobile phones and on computers.

### **Hidden social messages in orthographic conventions of the GC**

The third goal of our research was to explore the hidden social messages concealed by Cypriot orthographic practices and their meanings. For this goal we adopted the theoretical framework introduced by Sebba, who dealt extensively with the orthographic conventions followed in different countries, their practice and what these practices indicate<sup>13</sup>. Sebba considers orthography to be a social practice. Briefly, he considers orthography itself as a social practice and notes that it is not a neutral process but a symbolic action that carries social messages. Orthography is intertwined with the culture and letter forms are shaped within social practices in order to transmit messages/meanings. Members of a society choose a specific way of writing out of a variety of likely choices. Especially important in such a choice are the parameters that involve:

- a. how different the writing is from the official variety and
- b. the degree of recognizability, which, incidentally, must be close enough to the norm/official language as to be recognizable.<sup>14</sup>

While analyzing the data, we found that in the case of the GC, the variety in orthographic conventions reflects the ideological position of the user, which connects language with national identity. We classified the interviewees into 3 categories:

In the first category, the supporters of etymologically correct writing want an orthographic system based on the orthography of SMG where dialectical sounds appear in bold or with symbols above the phonemes of the SMG. In this case, orthography reveals national identity since it establishes the connection between Greece and Cyprus. Sometimes, however, in their attempt for a more historically accurate etymology they are driven to extreme lengths, such as, for example, the word  $\tilde{\chi}\acute{\upsilon}\lambda\lambda\omicron\varsigma=\sigma\acute{\kappa}\acute{\upsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  [dog], (written with a double “ $\chi$ ” and diacritical marks) which isn’t used in SMG.

In the second category, the proponents of an intermediate solution, always having the orthography of SMG as a model, designate dialectical

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<sup>13</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

sounds with diacritical marks and/or combinations of Greek characters such as, for example, the word  $\sigma\acute{\epsilon}\rho\upsilon\nu=\chi\acute{\epsilon}\rho\upsilon\nu$  [hand]. They show the “distinctness” of the GC from SMG sometimes more and other times less clearly.

In the third category, the proponents of non-etymological writing use Latin characters slipped into Greek/Greeklish and generally Latin characters. They believe that they are representing the oral flavor of the dialect more faithfully this way. They stress the Cypriot identity more and keep a distance from SMG.

To answer the question “Why is Greek orthography used?” we must keep in mind that SMG plays an important role in Greek-Cypriot society and constitutes a state linguistic policy. This is relevant to the history of Cyprus and to the intense politicization of Greek-Cypriots, while the language is irrevocably connected to national identity and constitutes proof of the Greekness of the island.

## Conclusions

The absence of an official orthographic system led to the creation of multiple systems of writing that reflect the ideologies and feelings of the speakers of the GC. The absence of a properly designed digital font creates typographic problems when writing the dialect via electronic media. There is a clear need for a complete and systematized writing system for the dialect that will be based not only on linguistic criteria but also on the needs of speakers, its use and its recognizability (Sebba, 2007)<sup>15</sup>. Many studies have been conducted on the GC but none has focused, until this moment, on typographical issues. This research is the beginning of further research on the dialect from another visual angle.

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<sup>15</sup> See note 5 above.

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