

# **A Review of the Sociolinguistic Aspects of the Greek Cypriot Dialect**

*Andreas N. Papapavlou and Pavlos Pavlou*

## **Introduction**

The origins and historical development of the Greek Cypriot dialect have been examined by several scholars. Two of the earliest studies - the first in French by Beaudouin (1884) and the second in Greek by Sakelariou (1891) – examined the history, structure and other aspects of the dialect. In the 1930s, Pantelides (1930) dealt with the Medieval Cypriot dialect, Bowra (1934) discussed Homeric words in the dialect, and Hadjioannou (1936) investigated lexical borrowing and presented over a thousand loanwords from several languages (including Arabic, Armenian, English, French, Italian, Latin, Persian and Turkish).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Karageorgis (1953) dealt extensively with the ancient Cypriot dialect and Newton (1964) examined the Arabic spoken by the Maronite community living in Cyprus, and its coexistence with the Greek Cypriot dialect. Newton (1972) also published a book on Cypriot phonology and Kypri (1979) completed an historical dictionary of the dialect. Most recently, Papapavlou (1986, 1989) examined the dialect's contact with Arabic and Turkish, and the lexical influence of English on the dialect.

## **Purpose of the Present Study**

As we can see from the studies noted above, the history, structure, phonology and lexical borrowing of the dialect have been extensively studied, whereas little or no attention was paid to its sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects. In more recent years, however, several studies have explored various sociolinguistic aspects of the Cypriot dialect. These studies appear either in journals (local or foreign) or in the proceedings of various conferences. Since some of these are not accessible to the international scholar, an attempt is made in this paper to

review the main ideas of the relevant research and discuss the current sociolinguistic situation in Cyprus. Cyprus presents, in some ways, a unique situation because language seems to have acquired a central and almost exclusive role in defining the identity of Greek Cypriots; this neglects the fact that identity is not solely related to language use but to other factors as well - sociocultural (moral and ethical values) features, political orientation and socioeconomic status.

In order to appreciate the current sociolinguistic situation in Cyprus and to better understand the interplay between language and identity, the actual or perceived linguistic practices of Cypriots - as described in various studies - will be presented and discussed. These studies cover such interrelated issues as: (1) the diglossic situation in Cyprus; (2) language and identity; (3) attitudes towards the dialect; (4) language attitudes and how these can influence language use and language policy; and (5) attitudinal and motivational factors in lexical borrowing. It must be pointed out that the studies to be dealt with here are varied in many ways; some are descriptive and perceptual, and tend to be impressionistic and non-empirical, while others are factual, employ experimental methods of investigation and appear to present a pragmatic view of the current Cypriot sociolinguistic situation. When necessary, evaluative comments are made on the studies.

### The diglossic situation in Cyprus

Following Ferguson's (1959) original definition, diglossia is found in places where two forms of the same language, the *standard* 'official' form and a *dialect*, are used side by side on a daily basis. In some language situations, for example that of German in Switzerland, the distinction is between a *high* (H) and a *low* (L) dialect, while in Arabic the distinction is between the *classical* (or literary standard) and the *colloquial* (or local vernacular) form of the language.

Many researchers who have worked on the linguistic situation in Cyprus describe the Greek Cypriot speech community as diglossic (or bidialectal) or even triglossic (or triadialectal). Pavlou (1992) points out the simultaneous use of the dialect (Greek Cypriot Dialect, henceforth GCD), the demotic Greek (Standard Modern Greek, henceforth SMG) and *katharevousa* (puristic Greek). Papapavlou (1997) claims that the diglossic situation in Cyprus is rather different than that in other places. In general, Greek Cypriots use GCD throughout their daily activities but code-switch into SMG in certain situations. It is not the case that certain Cypriots predominantly use the dialect and others exclusively use SMG. Furthermore, Greek Cypriots are not a minority in their

own country (in some places a minority may feel inferior in the presence of a 'prestigious' majority) and Cypriots are not in any way socioeconomically and culturally deprived in comparison to the rest of the Hellenic world (in contrast to places, such as Mexico, where one group of speakers may be economically, socially and culturally at a disadvantage in comparison to others). Moschonas (1996), in describing the relationship between the two linguistic codes (GCD and SMG) spoken in Cyprus, expresses his dissatisfaction with earlier studies that were either 'romantic' and 'folkloristic' in their approach or failed to distinguish between synchronic and diachronic differences between the two varieties. He states that the two codes find themselves in *complementary distribution* (an issue also discussed by Sciriha, 1995), lists the domains in which they are used, and asserts that there is a *functional* differentiation in both the spoken and written codes. There are several factors that dictate the selection of one code over the other and this choice is, of course, based on 'latent' evaluations regarding the two. Furthermore, Moschonas states that SMG does not always complement GCD; in certain situations, it comes into opposition with GCD, something that undermines their complementary relationship. This antagonistic role of SMG is evidenced in the metalinguistic evaluations of the linguistic situation in Cyprus, which is often 'constructed' by a social 'elite'. Further, this antagonistic relationship coexists and often coincides with other ideological oppositions - such as left vs. right wing, defeatists vs. intransigents (two of the many terms relating to Cypriots' stances towards various solutions proposed for the Cyprus problem), etc. Moschonas believes that even the discussion of the role of English in Cyprus serves the linguistic hegemony of SMG over GCD.

### **Language and identity**

Much has been written on the issue of language and identity in Cyprus in newspapers and popular magazines, but very little substantial research is found on the matter. In one paper, Ioannou (1991) attempts, in an impressionistic manner, 'to trace the ideological and psychosocial elements shaping Cypriot linguistic behaviour as well as to point out a dangerous erosive [*sic*] tendency affecting Cypriot cultural life (p. 15)'. In his attempt to describe this linguistic behaviour and how it has 'shaped' Cypriot ethnic identity, Ioannou makes references to several issues - such as Cypriots' weak linguistic expressive capabilities, Cypriots' Anglomania, Cypriots' excessive use of English loans and expressions, Cypriots' desire to become European, the 'neo-colonial inferiority complex of the Cypriot nouveaux riches', the development of Cypriotism and

the 1974 Turkish invasion of the island. He tries, rather unconvincingly, to link these issues together and arrives at a conclusion that is not adequately derived from them, when he states that 'political expediencies created a Cypriot identity linked only to technological, economic and pragmatic factors rather than to historical and cultural ones (p. 37)'.

In another paper that addresses the issue of language and identity, Karoulla-Vrikkis (1991) wonders whether code-switching from SMG to GCD, and the frequent use of English words in the speech of Cypriots, is the onset of a new 'creole', or a sign of ethnic disorientation, or an attempt to identify with certain other nationalities, or the creation of split personalities. Or is it, as she puts it, evidence of affluence and good education among Cypriots? She explains that Cypriots use foreign terms when conversing among themselves in order to emphasise their own similarities (i.e. that they are both educated and of high social status) in comparison with other people. When this happens, Karoulla-Vrikkis claims, speakers 'subconsciously deny their Cypriot identity in order to identify with a foreign one (p. 46)'. It may be true that certain speakers, Cypriots or otherwise, use foreign terms in their speech as a mark of status; however, no evidence is presented (empirical or otherwise) that would substantiate Karoulla-Vrikkis' claim that, by doing so, Cypriots deny their own identity. At another point, she claims that Cypriot identity is stronger when Cypriots use the dialect, because feelings of equality and solidarity are high and the speakers feel more intimate. In this way the dialect becomes a symbol of fraternity, since it is associated with spontaneous and genuine feelings. Karoulla-Vrikkis concludes her paper by stating that certain language problems may have a reflection on Cypriot identity, but she acknowledges that further research is required before making definite statements about such a 'complicated' issue.

Panayiotou (1996) examines how, in the Greek world, language change has served as a sign of a deeper crisis in values, and she indicates that throughout Greek history, political and social conflicts have always had a linguistic aspect. Panayiotou claims that such a phenomenon can be witnessed today in Cyprus where, once again, language issues are used in the formation of certain ideological 'stands' (what she refers to as *'ideologimata'*) in order to fight against various 'enemies'. Panayiotou contends that the crisis of values among Cypriots originates in their attempt to acquire a western European identity. While western Europeans are born into and live in a certain set of values, which they accept as their own, people from eastern Europe and the Balkans (including Cypriots) constantly try to adopt those values, quite often unsuccessfully and with traumatic effects. Panayiotou refers to the Franco-Levantine, a special kind of non-western-

European who is characterised by the proclivity to adopt foreign cultural models and who thus imitates them - sometimes successfully and many times unsuccessfully. He (or she, of course) lives in a conflict between what 'he is' and what 'he would like to be', and this leads to a personality split. Linguistically, the Franco-Levantine exhibits the following characteristics: he knows many 'useful' languages, makes excessive use of loan words, code-switches and code mixes - which lead progressively to the marginalisation of his mother tongue. In a like fashion, Cypriots are sometimes proud of their 'Homeric' language and sometimes ashamed of this same 'village' dialect. Some Cypriots accuse the various governments that education is not Greek enough while others feel that it is too Helleno-centric. As in Greece, and other places, Panayiotou explains, language is used as a 'banner' in various political confrontations. Right-wing Cypriots, for example, support the drastic elimination of GCD and the cultivation of SMG in the spoken domain (where GCD is quite strong); leftwing Cypriots support the introduction of GCD in the education system. A third group, the so-called pragmatists and technocrats, are in favour of introducing English in secondary education. Of course, Panayiotou explains, all these language-planning-related statements are expressed in subtle tones.

### **Attitudes towards the dialect**

Contrary to linguistic evidence, which stipulates that all languages and varieties are 'equal', and that none is inherently better than any other, people still believe that some languages are more 'precise', 'beautiful' and 'expressive' and that some dialects are 'inferior', 'inexpressive' and 'incomplete' (Papapavlou, 1997). Papapavlou experimentally investigated Greek Cypriots' attitudes towards their dialect and SMG by employing the *matched-guise* technique (developed by Lambert, 1967). The judges - Greek Cypriot university students - used 12 polar traits (i.e. sincere - insincere, intelligent - unintelligent, etc.) to rate the voice characteristics of what they believed to be 10 different individuals (although in actuality there were only five guises). That is, judges were not aware that they were evaluating the same speaker in two different guises (dialect and SMG) and therefore their judgements were taken to reflect their feelings towards the two varieties rather than towards the speakers themselves. The results clearly showed that Greek Cypriots hold more favourable attitudes (i.e. have more positive feelings) towards SMG than towards the Cypriot dialect, which they use in their daily interactions. Specifically, those who use SMG are thought of as being more attractive, ambitious, intelligent, educated, interesting, modern, dependable and pleasant than those who use the Cypriot dialect. However, the judges did not feel

that SMG speakers were more sincere, friendlier, kinder or more humorous than the Cypriot speakers (for more details see study in this volume).

Furthermore, in another attitudinal study - one that builds on previous work which has indicated that adult members of Cypriot community are very equivocal and uncertain about their feeling towards GCD - Pavlou (1997) investigated preschool children's language attitudes towards SMG and GCD. More precisely, the aim of his study was to assess the degree to which children's attitudes reflect those of the adult speech community. The study followed models such as Rosenthal (1974) and Cremora and Bates (1977) which suggested that the use of and preference for a certain linguistic code is linked to socioeconomic class. In his study, Pavlou interviewed 40 children from two distinct socioeconomic classes: 20 from an upper-class urban kindergarten and 20 from a lower-middle-class semi-rural kindergarten. The study proceeded in three steps: the investigation of: (1) children's abilities to discriminate between the two varieties, in this case SMG and GCD; (2) their ability to categorise speakers according to social-class stereotypes; and (3) their ability to reveal attitudes and make value judgements towards representative speakers of each variety. Pavlou's findings showed that Cypriot children of higher socioeconomic status tend to prefer SMG, whereas children of lower status tend to associate more with the dialect. As the author himself admits, however, further work is needed before definitive conclusions can be made.

In another study, Sciriha (1995) conducted a quantitative sociolinguistic survey of the use of GCD and SMG among Cypriots in different domains, and of Cypriots' attitudes towards these two varieties. The findings of her study, Sciriha contends, 'highlight the importance of language use and how this can be shown to reflect the deeper processes at play in an ongoing struggle by the Greek Cypriots for their own identity (p. 8)'. Some of her data show that the respondents regard SMG as prestigious when compared with the dialect, and that they consider the place of the dialect to be in informal settings - even though they actually use the dialect extensively in different domains and settings. These findings are hardly surprising to someone familiar with the Cypriot scene, but had never been verified quantitatively. Also, Sciriha finds it surprising that although the dialect is not used as a medium of instruction or in church services, 'overwhelmingly the Cypriots in the sample speak the dialect (p. 27)'. At first glance, Sciriha's surprise may be justified, but she fails to truly understand the diglossic situation in Cyprus. Furthermore, she arrives at a questionable conclusion when she states that since Cypriots interact 'with one another in virtually all domains in the Cypriot dialect', then it must mean that they do so in order 'to distance themselves from mainland Greeks who, after all,

indirectly and unwittingly gave them the Cyprus problem (p. 29)'. Such a question was never posed directly or indirectly to the respondents (at least from what we can see from the author's questionnaire) and therefore her conclusion cannot be derived from the data; indeed, it shows a very superficial understanding of the history of the Cyprus problem. In spite of her initial surprise, Sciriha acknowledges at the end of her paper that 'this variety [referring to the dialect] is after all "their language" (p. 32)' and that is why Cypriots are determined to hold on to it tightly.

### **Language attitudes, language practices and their effect on language policy**

Pavlou (1992) provided the first example of how language attitudes towards GCD are exploited for practical purposes, by showing how the use of the dialect in radio commercials is by no means coincidental. Products that are uniquely Cypriot (e.g. *halloumi* - type of cheese), or products that are locally produced (e.g. traditional pastries), or products that reflect some traditional values of the Cypriot society (e.g. dowry items) are more often advertised in GCD. The choice of this code is based on the assumption that most members of the Cypriot speech community consider GCD as part of their own identity and that, for these speakers, the dialect has an emotional appeal linked to their tradition and lifestyles. A comparison of commercials using both varieties (SMG and GCD) would further elucidate language attitudes and identity.

In a rather comprehensive study, Karyolemou (1996) discusses the way in which the Cypriot community expresses the relationship between language and identity in their metalinguistic comments and opinions. The language-related issues that have extensively preoccupied the community in the press since 1986 include: (1) the translation of the law from English into Greek; (2) the official languages of the University of Cyprus; (3) the reinstatement of the teaching of Classical Greek in secondary schools; (4) language deficiencies in such areas as choice of vocabulary, excessive use of loanwords, and weak expressive capabilities among the young; (5) the possible use of Greek as the language of instruction in private tertiary education (where the language of instruction is in fact English); (6) the use of Greek in public signs and in all types of advertisements; (7) the adoption of the Latin alphabet in the transliteration of place names and proper names; and (8) the teaching of Greek as a native language to repatriated Cypriots. Karyolemou claims that, before 1986, language policies were governed by what can be termed '*linguistic liberalism*', based on the assumption that language cannot be regulated since it evolves on

its own and takes care of itself. On the other hand, Karyolemou argues, in the last 10 years the Cypriot community has adopted an '*interventionist*' approach, which is rooted in the assumption that language is a social institution and that, therefore, corrective measures can be applied to it. In conclusion, Karyolemou explains that Cypriots have a confused opinion of linguistic matters and that, therefore, language policy should not be based on their attitudes. She points out, however, that language-policy makers have to take into account the public's attitudes if they want to avoid policies that the community may eventually reject. The issue of whether language planners should take speakers' opinion into consideration is surely a difficult and intricate one. Given the prominence that language plays in the lives of Greek Cypriots, it would be unwise to ignore their feelings altogether and to take drastic steps with radical language policies.

### **Motivational factors in lexical borrowing**

One of the earliest sociolinguistic studies in Cyprus is that of Papapavlou (1988), who investigated the motivational, attitudinal and sociocultural factors that contribute to lexical borrowing in the Cypriot dialect. He discussed seven independent factors, and two dependent measures. The former were: (1) attitudes towards SMG; (2) attitudes towards GCD; (3) attitudes towards foreign people; (4) attitudes towards foreign languages; (5) ethnic ambivalence; (6) feelings towards authority and obedience; and (7) anomie. The two dependent measures were the ability to identify loans from non-loans, and the ability to provide Greek equivalent words to loans. A Likert-scale questionnaire was developed, completed by 138 Cypriot high school seniors, and several statistical comparisons were undertaken. A simple correlation matrix showed that only four out of 21 possible inter-relationships achieved statistical significance. Thus: (1) subjects' attitudes towards SMG were related to those towards GCD; (2) attitudes towards GCD were related to those towards foreign people; (3) attitudes towards foreign people were related to respect for authority and obedience (anti-democratic ideology); and (4) respect for authority and obedience were related to anomie (feelings about normative standards of conduct in society). Furthermore, two stepwise regression analyses were carried out in order to examine which of the seven independent factors contributed most to the two dependent measures. In the first regression, the most important and significant variable was subjects' attitudes towards foreign people and, in the second regression, it was attitudes towards foreign languages. It can be deduced from these results that what encourages Cypriots to borrow freely and use loans in their daily conversations is their positive feelings towards