

A Study of an Individual's Languages and Literacies

Christina Christofi

The following article was written by Christina Christofi while studying on the Certificate Programme in Adult Literacy, Numeracy and ESOL Education at London South Bank University in 2004-2005. It formed part of her assessed coursework. It is the third in a series of accounts on language acquisition and learning that *Language Issues* is publishing. The series explores the personal, social and cultural factors which have influenced the development and use of language and literacies at different stages of people's lives.

Introduction

In this study I will analyse my acquisition of the Greek Cypriot dialect, standard Greek and English and discuss the factors that have influenced and shaped my bilingualism and literacy practices. In addition, I will draw on my research into second language acquisition to try and interpret my experiences according to what current second language theorists believe.

Background

I was born in Cyprus to Greek Cypriot parents and the family moved to the United Kingdom when I was two years old and two years after Cyprus's Independence from British rule in 1962. In the 50's, my mother had lived and worked in Britain before returning to Cyprus to marry my father, so they already had friends and family here when they made the decision to emigrate to the UK. We lived in Ealing with relatives when we first arrived, then moved to South London when I was about four, when my father started his own barber shop in Camberwell, South London. My sister and I attended the local Church of England primary school during the week and Greek classes at the local Greek Orthodox Church on Saturdays.

When I was eight we moved to Walworth, where I attended another Church of England primary school until the age of 11, when I left to attend a large comprehensive secondary school in Peckham. I stayed on at school and found I had quite an aptitude for learning languages. I did French, Spanish and German at '0' level, as well as sitting for my Modern Greek. After 'A' levels, I studied French and English at The Polytechnic of North London.

After graduating I did a TEFL course at International House and soon afterwards got my first job in

Greece, teaching English. I met my husband in Greece and continued to work both in various language schools and my husband's shoe shop. I left Greece after 13 years to return to Britain with my husband and two sons. Since returning to the UK, I have worked in ESOL at the Baytree Centre in Brixton. I am currently employed as an ESOL tutor and Co-ordinator there.



Christina and her sister at the Greek school in Camberwell.

Childhood and education

In their book 'How Languages are Learned' Lightbown and Spada (1999) cite two types of bilingualism; one where children grow up hearing more than one language virtually from birth *simultaneous bilinguals* and those who begin to learn a second language later *sequential bilinguals*. When trying to determine which group I belonged to, I actually found it difficult to place myself in either of these categories, as I cannot remember starting to learn English as a second language. My earliest memories are of being able to converse in both languages, but I am very much aware that I must have been exposed only to Greek Cypriot until the time I went to school. Speaking to my sister, who is three years older than me, and who remembers being unable to understand the teachers when starting school, I have come to the conclusion that she must have 'brought' English into the home, which meant that I was exposed to the language before starting school. I remember playing with our

neighbours' children, who were English, before starting formal education. By being exposed to English in this way, I was acquiring the language without consciously having to 'learn' it. My sister and her friends provided what Stephen Krashen (1987) would term *comprehensible input* and this, coupled with my desire to 'join in', meant that I acquired the language quite effortlessly.

Lightbown and Spada (1999) suggest that, when a child has schooling in one of the languages, there may be differences in the amount of metalinguistic knowledge they develop and in the type of and extent of the vocabulary they eventually acquire in the two languages. I can remember very clearly going to the community Greek school and learning to read and write in Greek. Greek is very much a phonetic language and so reading was particularly easy. We learned from a Greek book also used in Cyprus and Greece at the time, the equivalent of the 'Ladybird' 'Peter and Jane' series. Years later, I discovered my husband had learnt from the same book! What I loved about it were the illustrations and the almost nonsense text, whose sole purpose was to present the particular sounds that the teacher wanted to present to us. What also fascinated me at the time was the bizarre vocabulary, so the ball was called a *topi*, which I thought must have been Greek rather than Greek Cypriot dialect, but which I learned years later was the 'real' Greek word for ball, and not the one in current use *mbala* from the Latin for 'ball'. The methods that were used to teach us Greek were very didactic and there was very little variation in the methods used: we would read the lesson for the day, do dictation and then grammar exercises, which invariably meant declining verbs. It was quite boring, but it gave me a good grounding in the *metalanguage*. When we progressed to the O-level class, we would then do exam preparation, which meant translating passages from English to Greek and vice versa, as well as writing compositions. This helped to develop my vocabulary in both languages.

Most of my schooling was in English apart from the Saturday Greek school. However, whereas some of our Cypriot contemporaries were 'submerged' by the second language to the extent that they no longer used their first language at home, *subtractive bilingualism*, my parents and, more particularly my grandmother, insisted we use Greek at home. As a result we used both languages quite happily, swapping from one to the other depending on if we

were talking to each other or to our grandmother, parents or mum's friends who would often come round for coffee and a chat. Listening to them reminiscing about Cyprus once again gave me the opportunity to listen and absorb the language. Grandmother would also tell us stories in Greek, and even though we knew these off by heart we would often beg her to repeat them again and again.

My parents, like many immigrant parents, were keen for their children to do well at school and have a good education. I remember when our first set of the 'Encyclopedia Britannica' was delivered and my sister and I pored over the texts with enthusiasm. We used them for homework or just to look up interesting facts. We really treasured these books and I think that they certainly whetted our taste for books and reading. There were always Greek newspapers to read at home and mum liked to read about various saints from the Greek Orthodox faith. She also read magazines about famous Greek actors and actresses that her friend used to pass on to us. The articles were short and so easy for us to read too. Aunty Cleo was our first Greek friend and it was with her that I first became aware of the differences between Greek from Greece and the variety we spoke at home, i.e. Greek Cypriot dialect. I later became aware that the version of the dialect spoken by us 'BBCs' or British Born Cypriots, was also interspersed with 'Gringlish'. I was probably in my teens when I discovered that 'Fishbury Park', where many Cypriots lived and worked when I was growing up, was in fact 'Finsbury Park'!

In 'Language and Culture', Kramsch (1998) discusses what she calls *language crossings* to describe how children switch from one language to the other to indicate solidarity with the discourse community whose language they are using. She describes this as an act of *identity*, where the bilingual child is making a statement about where they feel they belong. This corresponds to my own experience. I often found myself making choices about when I felt British and when I felt Greek Cypriot and with my siblings and Cypriot friends we often used this kind of language crossing to indicate this. For example, we would often slip into Greek Cypriot if we were discussing anything associated with family/cultural or religious events such as weddings or religious festivals and switch back to English to discuss David Cassidy's latest hit or what had happened in the latest episode of 'Lost in Space'!

Even after starting Greek school, the variety of Greek I spoke at home remained the Cypriot dialect and even today, when I speak to my parents, I still revert to this dialect, rather than using the standard Greek variety. I realise that I not only use the Cypriot vocabulary with them but also revert to the Cypriot pronunciation for Greek words, so that instead of pronouncing the 'g' in 'ge' (Eng. 'and') as a /gi/ sound I will pronounce it as a /dz/ sound, the Cypriot way. Yet when I speak to my husband, I automatically revert to the Greek pronunciation and lexis.

Adulthood

In 1984, when I first moved to Greece to teach English, I was aware of differences between the way my parents spoke Greek and the standard Greek that we were taught at the Greek school, but what I was not prepared for was the condescending and sometimes dismissive attitude of some Greeks when I spoke the Greek Cypriot variety. I can only liken this to the attitude of some Southerners on hearing a Northern accent. I remember feeling like the poor country cousin, who was visiting her 'posh' relatives in the city! The effect this had on me, was to make me feel awkward when speaking Greek to strangers. It also made me feel slightly embarrassed about using the Cypriot dialect, which I had never experienced before.

It was not until many years later and after becoming better acquainted with my native Cyprus, that I discovered that the Greek Cypriot dialect is a very rich one and has many similarities to the Greek spoken by the native Greeks of Asia Minor. I am now proud to be counted as a member of this particular *discourse community* and have the added advantage of being able to swap from the Greek Cypriot dialect to the standard Greek, which Greeks who speak only standard Greek are unable to do! For instance, I can remember travelling from mainland Greece to Cyprus one summer with some Cypriot university students returning home for the summer break and having a fantastic time speaking the Greek Cypriot dialect-to the absolute bemusement of the Greek crew, who couldn't understand a word we were saying. This example of language crossing as an adult was certainly empowering. Looking back, I believe my fellow Cypriots had also endured quite a bit of ribbing about their Cypriot accents during their time in Greece and by flaunting our Cypriot dialect in front of the Greek crew, we were demonstrating an act of open defiance.

Whilst living in Greece, I continued to use English as my main language, partly because I was working as an English teacher, but also because I mainly socialised with the British ex-patriots there. However, being familiar with the lingua franca certainly gave me a little 'street cred' with my British friends, especially when it came to ordering the meals in the taverna! Unlike my Scottish friend Rosemary, I wasn't going to make the mistake of ordering 'shutters' (*pantsuria*) instead of 'beetroot' (*pantsaria*)!

During my first summer in Greece, I enrolled on a Greek language course at the University of Thessaloniki, and it was here that I developed a greater understanding of Greek art and literature. On my course, as well as other foreign students, there were a number of Greeks from around the world and we were all welcomed as part of the *homogenia*, a term that is used to describe all those people of Greek origin. This was a very positive experience for me, in terms of my language and identity.

After marrying a Greek, I began using more Greek than previously, especially since my mother-in-law did not speak English. However, according to my Greek Cypriot cousins living in Athens, this had now developed into a Northern Greek 'twang', which was certainly a surprise to me but sits well with the behaviourist view that imitation and practice play a fundamental role in language development. My only regret is that my written Greek did not develop at the same rate as my spoken discourse and so, although I am able to write Greek with some competence, I am very rarely called upon to do so. Even when I lived in Greece, literacy events were rare, mainly associated with some kind of form-filling. I became adept at filling in tax forms, work permit forms, health forms and the various other forms that the Greek bureaucratic system threw at me! However, I still enjoy reading novels in Greek and share this love of reading with my husband. We often share books and I find that when I am reading a Greek novel, I am able to make the necessary cultural and historical associations needed to get inside the text, alluded to by Kramersch (1998),

to be literate means not only to encode and decode the written word but... is the capacity to understand and manipulate the social and cultural meanings of print language in thoughts, feeling, and actions .p.56

Summary

When discussing the topic of this study with my older sister, I was reminded of the complexities surrounding language acquisition and found myself leaning towards those theorists that claim that language acquisition is very much influenced by the environment you operate in and the social practices you employ. This can be illustrated by the fact that, even though my sister and I grew up speaking both English and Greek Cypriot at home, we had very different experiences when starting school. Being the eldest she struggled to learn English and can remember clearly feeling like an outsider when she started school, yet I have no such recollection. As far as I can remember I could speak English before I went to school and I was not aware of being at a disadvantage because of speaking another language at home. I think that, having a sibling who could speak English, meant that I had a link to English before actually learning it formally: my sister and her friends were my models and by interacting with them I was able to develop my English. According to interactionist theorists such as Michael Long (1983), learners learn by taking part in conversational interaction and this is what I was able to get from my sister and her friends.

As for Greek, both my sister and I grew up speaking the Greek Cypriot dialect and shared the experience

of going to the Greek school and learning to read and write the language. We also shared in the discovery of our Greek ethnicity through the teaching of history and religious instruction, which was an integral part of learning the Greek language at the Community school we attended. This was the crucial link between being *Greek* Cypriot as opposed to just Cypriot. My sister went onto marry a Greek Cypriot and I a Greek, but, interestingly, it is my sister, who has spent most of her life in the UK, who says she feels more Greek than British. I find myself identifying sometimes with my 'Britishness' and at other times with my 'Greekness': I can read a book in English and draw from my knowledge of English literary traditions and at other times I can read a Greek book and draw from another literary tradition to inform that reading and both experiences are unique and relevant to me and my personal make-up.

Nowadays, I find that although English is still my preferred language for reading and writing, I am equally happy speaking Greek, Greek Cypriot or English and will use whichever one suits the moment. I still find that anything to do with family or religion is most definitely Greek or Greek Cypriot and I would never dream of praying in English, but as for dreaming in English, I think I still do so most of the time.

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Christina Christofi has just completed the Certificate Programme in Adult Literacy, Adult Numeracy and ESOL Education at London South Bank University. She is a fulltime teacher and ESOL Co-ordinator at the Baytree Centre in Brixton, London. She has been working in the ESOL field in the UK since 1996, having previously taught EFL in Greece in various language schools

christina@baytreecentre.co.uk