

The fragile future of the Cypriot Greek language in the UK

Petros Karatsareas reveals the difficulties faced by heritage language speakers in London's Greek Cypriot diaspora



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It has become somewhat of a cliché to start an article about multilingualism in the UK by stating that, according to recent surveys, up to 300 languages other than English are spoken by the different ethnolinguistic communities present in the country, especially in big cities like London, Manchester or Birmingham. But what lies underneath the surface of this remarkably diverse linguistic mosaic? How much and how well are these languages spoken? How are they viewed by the people who speak them? How likely are they to be passed on to new generations of speakers? What are the factors

that motivate communities to preserve their heritage languages, and which social dynamics drive multilingual speakers to abandon them and shift to English? In my work, I explore these questions based on my research on London's Greek Cypriot diaspora.

A typical scenario of language shift

The picture that emerges from my research has many things in common with the experiences, both past and present, of many other communities. The UK has historically been the main destination of Cypriot migrants, the majority of whom migrated in the 1950s, when Cyprus was still under British rule, and in the 1960s, immediately after Cyprus became an independent state. Once here, Cypriot migrants established communities in major cities, with the majority of them found today in North London. Naturally, the first migrants brought with them their language, Cypriot Greek, the distinct variety of Greek spoken in Cyprus. English was a second language for this generation, some of whom spoke it well, while others little or even not at all.

In the transition from the first to the second generation, things changed. The children of first-generation

migrants, the so-called second generation, have English as their dominant language. They are native in it, it is the one they use most of the time, and the one they feel more comfortable expressing themselves in. They mostly use Cypriot Greek to communicate with older family members who might not speak English well – most typically their grandparents – or with relatives back in Cyprus. They do value their Cypriot Greek highly as an important aspect of their heritage, and do use it when they want to signal that aspect of their identities. For Marios, one of the people I interviewed as part of my study, Cypriot Greek is 'his language'. He says: 'I do not want to lose Greek, I do not want to lose the fact that I am Cypriot because, if I lose the language, I will not be Cypriot anymore.' But speakers like Marios are not always comfortable speaking Cypriot Greek, because they have received significantly lesser amounts of exposure and input to it compared with English.

By the third generation, the prospects for the maintenance of Cypriot Greek worsen even more, as third-generation speakers grow up with parents who are dominant in English and speak it to them and around them most of the time. It is therefore not surprising that third-generation speakers generally have low proficiency in Cypriot Greek, if they happen to speak it at all. When these speakers have their own children, the fourth generation, Cypriot Greek becomes reduced to something of a family relic, a handful of words that they know and use occasionally in remembrance of their background. This means that Cypriot Greek has died out as a heritage language for these individual speakers and, with increasing numbers of people following the same trajectory, it will soon be in real danger of dying out as a community language, as well. Now replace Cypriot Greek with Urdu, Punjabi, Sylheti, Gujarati, Turkish or any other community language, and you will get a very similar scenario of language shift and loss.

Pressure from without

Community languages are under immense pressure. This comes first and foremost from English, the socially dominant language that affords people who speak it the largest amounts of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital.

When they go to school, British-born children of migrants are very quick to figure out which of their two languages, English or their home language, they are expected to speak if they want to do well in their UK lives. Sooner or later, they are also exposed to what some scholars have described as a hierarchy or pyramid of languages: the notion that some languages are somehow better or more valuable than others. By all accounts, English is always found at the top of the pyramid, whereas home languages are rarely given any value – unless, of course, they happen to be one of the prestigious western European languages like French (but only the type spoken in France), German or Spanish. Teachers will discourage pupils from speaking their home languages at school, and advise parents not to speak their languages to their children, based on ill-informed ideas that this will confuse them or delay their English development.

Second-generation children then begin to use English more. They respond in English when spoken to in the heritage language by their parents, and use it almost exclusively when interacting with their siblings. This is usually the first sign of language shift. When second-generation speakers become parents themselves, their language choices reflect their negative experiences, those of their parents, and the hierarchical views of wider society. Stella, a second-generation heritage speaker of Cypriot Greek, told me in an interview: 'At our home, we do not speak Greek to our children. This is wrong. I know it is wrong, but they are very young, and I want them to know English well.'

Stella's worry is unfounded. Children of migrants who are born in the UK, or who arrive at the UK in childhood or even early puberty, grow up to become native or near-native speakers of English. The amounts of exposure to and use of the language in their lives ensure this. It is the heritage languages that lag behind, because they remain confined to the home environment, which is simply not enough for second-generation speakers to develop a full range of competences. Communities have very few means to counteract this. They set up different types of educational initiatives such as complementary schools or heritage language classes with the aim of keeping their languages alive, but the conditions under which these operate (low number of teaching hours, limited funding, lack of support from local, national and home country governments) limit what they can achieve.

Pressure from within

My ongoing study in London's Greek Cypriot diaspora reveals that English is not the only force to exert pressure on the UK's community languages. In some cases, a different type of pressure comes from within the communities themselves, and that is the expectation to speak a 'proper' or 'correct' form of the community language, instead of other forms that are deemed to be 'improper' or 'incorrect'.

In most speech communities, a given variety will be considered proper and correct and will be elevated to the status of standard, while all other varieties – be they defined in terms of geographical or social factors – will be deemed improper, incorrect, and inferior to the standard. Compare, for example, the prestige that Received Pronunciation carries with the strong dislike that the Birmingham accent frequently causes among speakers of British English. Such ideas about linguistic '(im)properness' develop through complex sociohistorical processes and, once established, are typically transmitted to new generations of speakers through education, governmental policy, other institutional systems, and – of course – other speakers.

In Greek-speaking Cyprus, Standard Greek – the type of Greek spoken in Greece – is the official language, the high variety used in education, administration, and formal media. Cypriot Greek, the local vernacular, is the low variety that is acquired naturally as a first language, but which is only accepted in informal, everyday communication. This distribution of interactional domains has

○ Pentadaktylos (literally 'The five-fingered'), one of the most iconic and traditional Greek Cypriot coffee houses (*kafeneia* in Greek) dotted along north London's Green Lanes. The name refers to the highest peak on the Kyrenia Mountains in the northern coast of Cyprus. PHOTO: CHRISTOS DANAKIS.



engendered positive attitudes towards Standard Greek, and a mixture of positive and negative attitudes towards Cypriot Greek. Speakers of Cypriot Greek report that they perceive speakers of Standard Greek as more intelligent, more educated, politer and more modern. In contrast, they associate Cypriot Greek with a rural way of life and a low level of education. Some even consider it an ‘incorrect’ language. The educational system of the country plays a key role in sustaining and reinforcing these notions, with teachers actively discouraging the use of Cypriot Greek in the classroom through explicit corrections.

In my research, I find that positive perceptions of Standard Greek, and the mixture of positive and negative perceptions of Cypriot Greek, have been transplanted from Cyprus to London. British-born speakers describe their heritage language using negative labels that are familiar from Cyprus, like *xorkátika* ‘villagey’ and *varetá* ‘heavy’, but also labels that have been borrowed from the way non-standard varieties of English are often described, such as *spazménéa* ‘broken’ or *slang*. Among some speakers, Cypriot Greek words or sounds are considered improper, incorrect or even lazy (another English stereotype), whereas speaking Standard Greek is viewed as proper and polite. ‘If I’m talking with someone from Greece, I feel that I, too, have to make the effort to be polite and say *ce* [the Standard Greek form for “and”] instead of *te* [the Cypriot Greek form]’, says British-born Elia.

London’s Greek complementary schools play a key role in engendering negative views towards Cypriot Greek. Schools have as their aim to develop the skills of their students in Standard Greek, and only accept this as the variety to be used for teaching and learning, even though it is not part of the students’ backgrounds and linguistic repertoires, which typically include English and Cypriot Greek. Complementary school teachers do not incorporate Cypriot Greek into their teaching, and do not generally provide opportunities for students to use their repertoires fully to develop their skills in language. Instead, they engage in a wide range of practices that make explicit their disapproval of its use by the students, including explicit corrections, recasting and even laughter. Skevi’s experience is particularly telling:

When I was in the first grade, one day I was late and there was no chair for me to sit. I said to the teacher, ‘I don’t have a *tsaéra* [Cypriot Greek for “chair”].’ The teacher gave me a nasty look. She said, ‘What is that?’ ‘Chair’, I said to her, ‘chair’, in English. She said, ‘That’s not a *tsaéra*, that’s a *karékla* [Standard Greek for “chair”].’ Afterwards, I realised that the Cypriot I knew, the Cypriot I had learned, was heavy Cypriot. I realised I did not speak correctly, I spoke in a mistaken way.

Another push towards language shift

It is not at all impossible that the type of interaction that Skevi had with her teacher could happen to a student in

a school in Cyprus. Fortunately, however, this ideology about language standards does not yet seem to have an impact on the vitality of Cypriot Greek in Cyprus, where it remains the language that is naturally acquired by the Greek-speaking population of the island. In the London context, however, these attitudes push British-born speakers towards abandoning Cypriot Greek as a preferred code of communication. Observe that, when faced with her teacher’s lack of communicative co-operativeness triggered by the use of *tsaéra*, Skevi did not offer the Standard Greek word as a solution, as the teacher wanted. She replied in English, and then concluded through self-reflection that the other language of her linguistic repertoire was a mistaken way of speaking.

Another important difference compared with Cyprus that has emerged from my work is that, in London, the use of Cypriot Greek is discouraged even in informal settings such as the home environment. Stella remembers that ‘when my sister and I were young, and someone would come around to visit, we would speak to our parents – you know – with a villagey sort of accent. My mother would say, “That word is not correct”, if we tried to use it. “You must use this word, not that one because that one is villagey.”’ Chrystalla, a mother, puts it like this: ‘I do not want my children to learn the type of Greek that I speak, because it is not a perfect model. I prefer for them to hear Standard Greek.’ As a result of all this, we now see the first signs of a community-wide preference for the use of Standard Greek in communication even with other members of London’s Greek Cypriot diaspora. In Despoina’s words, ‘I understand both Cypriot Greek and Standard Greek because I learned them at the Greek school but, when I speak, I try to speak the Standard Greek way rather than the Cypriot Greek way.’

It would be tempting to argue that the preference for Standard Greek could eventually displace Cypriot Greek as the community language of London’s Greek Cypriot diaspora. This is highly unlikely, if not completely improbable. British-born Greek Cypriots have minimal exposure to Standard Greek. They do not speak it at their homes and, if they do not go to complementary school, they only get to hear it on television, the radio or online, and even then a lot of them have trouble understanding it. The difficulties they experience when faced with the task of speaking in Standard Greek in public or with a speaker from Greece, and the way they avoid having to find themselves in such situations, are signs of an uneasy relation with that part of their linguistic heritage. What is therefore more probable is that, under continuing pressure from without and within the community, London’s Greek Cypriot diaspora will eventually lose both varieties of Greek in its linguistic repertoire. ■

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