Visual Graphetics and Language Ideology: Typographic Design for the Greek-Cypriot Dialect

Aspasia Papadima, Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, Cyprus

ABSTRACT

There are certain sounds in the Greek-Cypriot dialect (henceforth GCD) that cannot be represented by characters from the Greek alphabet in its written form. Contradicting ideologies have made it impossible for Cypriots to settle on an official and common orthographic system, which has led to a rich variety of typographic conventions and many significant typographic drawbacks. This study aims to introduce a new set of typographic characters for the representation of the palato-alveolar GCD consonants that would provide ideal reading conditions for users (Unger, 2007; Noordzij, 2005; Bringhurst, 2005), while taking into consideration their political and cultural stances and needs. The new typographic system has been tested in two rounds of action research, providing both quantitative and qualitative data. The results show that the proposed system satisfies both the design and linguistic criteria of a successful written system as proposed by Sebba (2007), namely phonological accuracy, simplicity and readability.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

According to Chambers and Trudgill (1998, p. 45),

All dialects are both regional and social. All speakers have a social background as well as a regional location, and in their speech they often identify themselves not only as natives or inhabitants of a particular place but also as members of a particular social class, age group, ethnic background, or other social characteristic.

The Greek-Cypriot dialect (henceforth GCD), the mother tongue of Greek-Cypriots, and Standard Modern Greek (henceforth SMG or Koiné), the official language of Cyprus, are both used for communication in Cyprus, though each has a different communicative function and suggests a different social status (Contossopoulos, 2000). GCD’s phonological peculiarities, however, cannot be effectively and accurately represented by characters from the Greek alphabet. Unexpectedly, this lack of an official and widely accepted orthographic system for the representation of GCD’s distinct sounds—the result of conflicting ideologies and political stances (Sebba, 2007)—did not hinder literary expression in print. The outcome is an unwieldy collection of inconsistent and idiosyncratic typographic conventions that have stifled the adoption of a universal orthographic system for GCD.

SMG and the regional GCD are linguistically related varieties that co-exist and are used in everyday life in Cyprus, where social diglossia dominates¹. The two codes differ both in form and function and carry a different weight within Greek-Cypriot society. SMG is the official language of the state and is used for all official communication (e.g. education, courts, mass media and written texts), while GCD is the mother tongue of Greek Cypriots and is used in everyday oral communication.

Historical and sociopolitical factors, such as the Turkish invasion in 1974 and the ensuing internal displacement of people and large scale urbanization, were partly responsible for the emergence of an “urban language variety, Koiné Cypriot” (Papapavlou, 2011, p. 174), rather than a number of subdialects.

The aims of this study are twofold. First, it attempts to show why it is important for GCD speakers to have a universal orthographic system for written communication. Second, it introduces a new set of typographic characters that can accommodate the palato-alveolar GCD consonants that couldn’t be rendered by characters from the Greek alphabet. Our proposed design hopes to satisfy typographic design criteria that would guarantee an ideal reading experience for Greek-Cypriot speakers, paying particular attention to visual homogeneity, text unity, rhythm and reading flow (Unger, 2007; Noordzij, 2005; Brinhurst, 2005). Finally, we will present the results of our action research, where the new system was evaluated by Greek-Cypriot users. The evaluation of the system was based on the criteria of a successful written system as proposed by Sebba (2007). Specifically, it was tested for phonological accuracy, simplicity and readability, as well as for user stances and attitudes towards the typographic design.
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