Language and the Construction of Identity in Cyprus

Abstract

This presentation provides a review as to what extend language is a factor in the construction of identity in Cyprus. Identity is and has been a very complex problem in Cyprus and it is also one of the reasons that led to the war in 1974 and one of the reasons the problem has remained unresolved ever since. This paper argues that there are three major reasons that affect the notion of identity in Cyprus. These areas are: a) the consequences of the Ottoman and British Empires on Cyprus. b) The current policy on language education in Cyprus c) the political situation in Cyprus. It also speculates whether English will be used as the language of communication for the Greek and Turkish Cypriots. ***It should be noted that this paper is offered as work in progress, at an early stage of a PhD, and no strong conclusions are made.***

The impact of the Ottoman and the British Empires on Cyprus

When the Turks ceded Cyprus to Britain in 1878, the bicommunal character of Cyprus had already been formed (Kızılyürek, 2001) A census in 1832 recorded 198 Christian villages, 92 Muslim and 172 mixed villages (kızılyürek, 2001). The Greek-Cypriot community was 80% and the Turkish-Cypriot 20%, and both communities were divided linguistically, religiously, ethnically and culturally. The Turkish-Cypriots identified with Turkey, the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim religion and the Greek-Cypriots identified with the Byzantine Empire, the Greek language, culture and the Orthodox religion. Certain factors helped preserve the above mentioned values:

- The ottoman *millet* administrative system, which distinguished the two communities on the basis of religion and ethnicity. (Joseph, 2005) The Orthodox Church on the other hand held a strong position among the Greek-Cypriots and helped them preserve their political ethnic and religious identity under all the years of Ottoman rule.
- The educational system emphasized the Turkish ethnic identity to the Turkish-Cypriots and the Greek ethnic identity to the Greek-Cypriots, an educational system controlled by their respective religious institutions.

The Cypriots' national identity however, was formed during the British Colony and grew so strong, and created such a deep schism that it proved impossible to

bridge, instead; it led to the war in 1974.The Greek-Cypriots' aspiration for *Enosis* (union) with Greece and the sudden uprising of Greek nationalism was a fact that made the Turkish-Cypriots fear for their existence. This sudden nationalism led the Turkish-Cypriots to idealize motherland Turkey which would protect 'the lonely children' (Kızılyürek,2001 p.233). This was the beginning of Turkish nationalism – non existent previously- and which would grow along with Greek nationalism. It is interesting to note the different goals of each community; on the one hand was the national interest of the Greek-Cypriots which was *Enosis* (union with Greece) and on the other hand the national interest of the Turkish-Cypriots which was *Taksim* (partition of the island). The years 1960-1974 were years of internal ethnic and national conflict which culminated in the war of 1974. The notion 'identity' was further perplexed for both communities after the involvement of both Greece and Turkey and Britain became *de facto* due to the Zurich agreement as guarantor powers.

The segregated educational system that started during the Ottoman Empire continued even during British colonial years. This   was a fact that suited the British colonial administration as they could further strengthen their position in Cyprus by taking advantage of this communal schism and exercise the well known 'divide and rule' policy on the island. As mentioned by Kızılyürek, 2005, the fact that the British took advantage of the ethnic and religious differences between the Greek and Turkish-Cypriots 'was the very foundation of the British administration in Cyprus' (p.229).

Even after the independence of Cyprus in 1960 this segregation continued and the two communal chambers had even gone so far as to pass a legislation –in accordance with the Constitution- that established an educational unity with Greece and Turkey (Joseph, 2001) The consequences of such a method and its impact on Cyprus today is accurately presented by Neil Fergusson, (2001 p 218): 'This ethno-nationalist indoctrination of the communities via media propaganda and biased curriculum material in segregated schools still fuels the fires, keeping the conflict alive in the minds of generations who live in isolation from their enemy'

The war in 1974 triggered further alienation for both communities as they could now freely exercise their own policies; interesting to note is the fact that despite the war and according to the Consitution, the official languages in Cyprus are both Greek

and Turkish. Due to the stagnated political situation though, very few people speak Turkish on the Greek-Cypriot side and few speak Greek on the Turkish-Cypriot side.

The linguistic situation in Cyprus is described by many as diglossic (or bidialectal) in demotic Greek 'standard modern Greek' SMG and the Vernacular Greek 'Greek-Cypriot dialect' GCD (Papapavlou-Pavlou, 1998). The situation is exactly the same for the Turkish-Cypriots where they speak 'standard Turkish' ST and the 'Turkish-Cypriot dialect' TCD.

Greek-Cypriots

Language policy and planning are closely related to factors such as social political and national and this explains the reason why the SMG (Standard Modern Greek) variety had been chosen as the 'proper' variety. It was a way to avoid being cut off from motherland Greece and to maintain an identity very similar to that in Greece. (Papapavlou, 2004) thereby intentionally enhancing the gap between the Greek-Cypriots and the Turkish-Cypriots.

A language policy from the Ministry of Education in 2004 (see **appendix)** states clearly that the official language to be used in state schools during lessons by both teachers and students is the SMG variety. The teachers are encouraged to correct the children who use the GCD .The GCD is not denied and can be used in situations such as a celebration where a play is to be set up on Cypriots' daily lives or problems, or when reciting a poem. It also mentions that children who have specific difficulties in any kind of oral work can use the GCD in class, especially for children in lower classes.

All children are mainly exposed to the GCD until the age of six. From then onwards they are taught in schools that the SMG variety is to be used in schools and when wanting to be refined. The GCD is mainly to be used in more informal situations or when talking to family and friends. Also on TV and the Radio the SMG variety is used.

In this way children are indirectly taught that the GCD is not refined and words exclusively from the GCD are not encouraged to be used as by doing so one is related

to peasants 'horkates'. This creates a problem to children who might feel embarrassed being caught using such words often feeling inferior or non-refined merely because they use their 'native' language.

On the other hand the Greek-Cypriots do not want to use the SMG variety because by doing so in more informal events one can be perceived as a snob and can even be ridiculed among friends. A nickname used for people trying to exclusively use the SMG variety is 'kalamaras' which is a negative interpretation for a Greek. According to a research conducted by Andreas Papapavlou where Cypriots had to compare SMG to the GCD it was discovered that the GCD guises were more sincere, friendlier, kinder and more humorous. The SMG variety remains academic and distant for most Greek-Cypriots (Papapavlou, 2004). This is another issue that confuses the notion identity for Cypriots since they cannot 'officially' use the language variety of their country: Cyprus, an independent state.

Turkish-Cypriots

The same linguistic situation applies for the Turkish-Cypriots too. The official language taught in schools is ST (Standard Turkish) and the TCD (Turkish-Cypriot Dialect) is used for more informal events and with the family. Also, When the Turkish-Cypriots use the ST variety they are seen as 'phony' and 'pretentious' (Kızıyürk, N-Kızıyürek, S 2001) . The only difference with the Turkish-Cypriots compared to Greek-Cypriots is that during the years 1963-1974 their only aim was to be identified with Turks and did not recognize themselves as Turkish-Cypriots. Their political aspiration in contrast to the Greek- Cypriots' was *Taksim* i.e. division of the island and the denial of the existence of Turkish-Cypriots as such was a way to legitimize the division of Cyprus. It was seen as treason towards the Turkish nation to look at the Turkish-Cypriot community as different from the Turks. However, after the war in 1974 and the *de facto* division of Cyprus and the settlement of Turks from Anatolia in Turkey on the Northern part of the island showed that their cultural differences were more than obvious. (Kızıyürek, N-Kızıyürek, S 2001) The Turks were seen upon as 'oriental' and 'uncivilized' whereas the Turkish-Cypriots were seen as 'not pure' Turks and as having been influenced by the Greek-Cypriots. The process of differentiation from each other had a linguistic connotation too and therefore the use of the TCD and of Anatolian dialects is a way to mark their

differences. Another important turning point for the Turkish-Cypriots is that they have started looking upon themselves as Cypriots and want to show this in their contemporary literature and poetry. (Kızıyürek - Kızıyürek,2001)

The extremely strong national and ethnic identity in Cyprus has had tremendous effects on both communities. The mere fact that they have been segregated for 28 years has had an alienating effect bringing the two hostile communities even further apart from each other. A major problem contributing to this is the fact that today -excluding only a few- they don't speak each other's language.

Another consequence of this segregation is that both SMG/GCD and ST/TCD are diglossic in their own region. There is no interaction of either SMG/GCD and ST/TCD. They are exclusively used in their own geographic location and they do not in any way interact with each other. The fact that they have been segregated for so long using their language in their geographical region gives us a good reason to wonder whether English will be used in future as a 'linking' language between both communities. It has been noticed that after the borders had opened and both communities could cross the buffer zone, there was no other way to communicate other than by using English. The very few people who speak Greek or Turkish could communicate by using each others language but the numbers are small.

Whether English will gradually take over as the 'linking' language is a very interesting issue since it did not manage to do so during the colonial years in Cyprus for the following reasons:

a) The Greek-Cypriots felt that the local language was threatened by the substantial use of English and in protest they asked for more use of Greek than English in legislative notices.
b) There did not seem to have been any willingness to adopt English as a second language and neither Greeks nor Turks ever became competent in English. This is verified by the fact that the British created posts for Greek and Turkish translators, but these posts were not easy to fill 'due to the lack of competence in English' (Karoulla-Vrikki, 2004 p. 23)

c) The strong ethnic identities on the island Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot did not allow for English to become a lingua franca.

The fact that not any of the local languages developed into a pidgin or any other form of English as has been developed in South Asia for example is due to the fact that the Greek-Cypriots' and the Turkish-Cypriots' ethnic identity was too strong to allow to English to replace it as for both communities 'language was a prime indicator of ethnicity' (Karoulla-Vrikki p30) The Greeks felt threatened by the English language but not by the Turkish and the Turks by the Greek and not by the Greek. There was a continual battle between languages where both communities were mainly concerned in preventing any language shift.

Political situation in Cyprus

The continuous hostility between both communities and different political aspirations has created a situation where both are suspicious of each other's intentions.

Maybe the biggest problem of all in all aspects –language, political- is the fact that not all Cypriots embrace the island as theirs. The reason for this paradox is the fact that the Constitution of Cyprus was based on communal dualism. Both communities look up to their 'motherlands' Greece and Turkey respectively. Cyprus has no national song of its own, the Turkish-Cypriots use the Turkish one and the Greek-Cypriots the Greek one. They have four flags, The Greek one the Turkish one the Cypriot one and the Turkish-Cypriot one. They have different national days, which are directed against each other, The Turkish-Cypriots celebrate the Turkish national days as their own and the Greek-Cypriots the Greek ones. This has contributed to the extended loyalty of both communities to their motherlands. Also, how can these two communities come together when one side celebrates the 20th of July (day of the Turkish invasion in Cyprus) as their liberation and precisely on the same day the other side mourns?

All the above mentioned facts brings us down to the same 'core' i.e. that the political situation for the last four decades have only contributed in creating hostility for each other's ethnic community and it has created unjustified suspicions and fears

for each other. The only way of communication for both communities was through bicommunal activities and although their efforts were not on wide scale projects their achievements were notable especially in overcoming fears and biases for each other and respecting each other's ethnic identity. Nevertheless all this deep rooted hate towards each other's ethnic group has passed on from generation to generation and the loss of notion of islandness i.e that both groups embrace their two main components (Greece-Turkey) rather than the island is a very important issue in the construction of identity and this will consequently affect Cypriots on a sociolinguistic level too.

Conclusion

Cyprus, due to its geographical position has always been attractive to various invaders. The ones that have determined its modern history though are the Ottoman (1571-1878) and British (1878-1959) Empires. During the British colony the Cypriots' national identity was formed and both communities had different national aspirations and interference by Greece and Turkey in Cyprus only managed to strengthen the national identities of the Greek-Cypriots towards Greece and the Turkish-Cypriots towards Turkey. This interference along with the Constitution of Cyprus which was based on communal dualism, only managed to widen the gap between both communities. The political situation in Cyprus was such that it led to the war in 1974.

Both communities have -due to the war and partition of the island in 1974- grown apart from one another. They do not longer speak the same language despite the fact that both Greek and Turkish are the official languages in Cyprus. On the Greek part few speak Turkish and on the Turkish part few speak Greek. Also, the fact that they have been divided for so long has only led to biases and suspicions for each other. Bicommunal activities, which were the only way of communication prior to 2003, have managed to bridge part of the gap between the Greek-Cypriots and the Turkish-Cypriots. Nevertheless the language issue is a problem since the only language of communication today between both communities –excluding the few who speak Greek and Turkish- is English.

The question that remains to be solved is whether English will continue to be used as the language of communication on the island and whether the status it enjoys as a global language of communication will affect the Greek and Turkish Cypriots in using it more or whether they will both strive to learn each others language instead; given the fact that both Greek and Turkish are the official languages of Cyprus.

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