

English in Cyprus

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The now and then of English in a former British colony

Introduction

Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean Sea where English has the status of the most popular and important foreign language (Tsiplakou, 2009; Fotiou, 2015) and the majority of its inhabitants are literate in English. While a former British colony, it is generally absent from discussions of places where English has had some special relevance due to historical, political, social and economic reasons. For example, while other small countries with a history of British rule, such as Malta and Seychelles, are part of Crystal's (2003: 62–5) list of English speakers in territories where English has had special relevance, Cyprus is absent from that list. This paper aims to fill this gap in the literature by providing an overview of the use of English in various domains, i.e. workplace, education, linguistic landscape, the media, and communication between Greek Cypriots, along with a brief historical background. The latter aims to illustrate how Cyprus was different from many British colonies and how this has affected the status of this language in this setting both now and during the colonization period.

The history of the English language in Cyprus dates back to 1878 when Britain took over the administration of the island from the Ottoman Turks. Cyprus remained part of the Ottoman Empire until it was annexed by Britain in 1914. It became a Crown colony in 1925 and gained its independence 35 years later, but some parts of Cyprus (the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia) remained British sovereign territory. The official languages of the newly proclaimed state became Greek and Turkish, which are the languages of the two main communities of the island. The official language of the Sovereign Base Areas is English.¹ From as early as 1963, the tension between the two main communities of the newly formed state materialized in a series of events which led to the Turkish military invasion in

1974. Due to the military occupation of the northern part of Cyprus that followed, there has been a de facto partition of Cyprus since then. As Figure 1 illustrates, Cyprus is a divided island. The part of Cyprus north of the UN buffer zone is the occupied area that is under the Turkish Cypriot administration. The area south of the UN buffer zone is that which is under the control of the Republic of Cyprus and where Greek Cypriots live. This is the area this article focuses on.

Despite its small size, Cyprus is a very rich place sociolinguistically. Apart from English and the two official languages mentioned above, there are other languages that comprise its sociolinguistic profile (see Figure 2).²

When it comes to English, there are some studies on English in Cyprus in the literature, many of which are consulted in this paper. One of the most recent and comprehensive studies is Buschfeld (2013), which mainly investigates whether there is a new variety of English in Cyprus (i.e. Cyprus English) and concludes that



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Figure 1. Map of Cyprus Source: <http://mapsopensource.com/images/cyprus-map.gif>

there is not. Buschfeld also examines the status that English has in Cyprus today and claims that it ‘can neither be categorized as a second-language variety (ESL), nor as a typical learner English (EFL)’ (p. 11). She argues that at the moment English in Cyprus is undergoing a ‘reversal from ESL to EFL status’ (ibid.). However, in another study on the status of English in Cyprus, Tsiplakou (2009) claims that ‘the historical evidence strongly

suggests that it cannot be plausibly argued that [...] English was ever a second language on the island’ (p. 76). The brief historical overview provided in this paper and a more comprehensive discussion in Fotiou (2015) also point in this direction, i.e., that English was never an ESL on the island.

Besides work on the status of English in this country, there have recently been quite a few

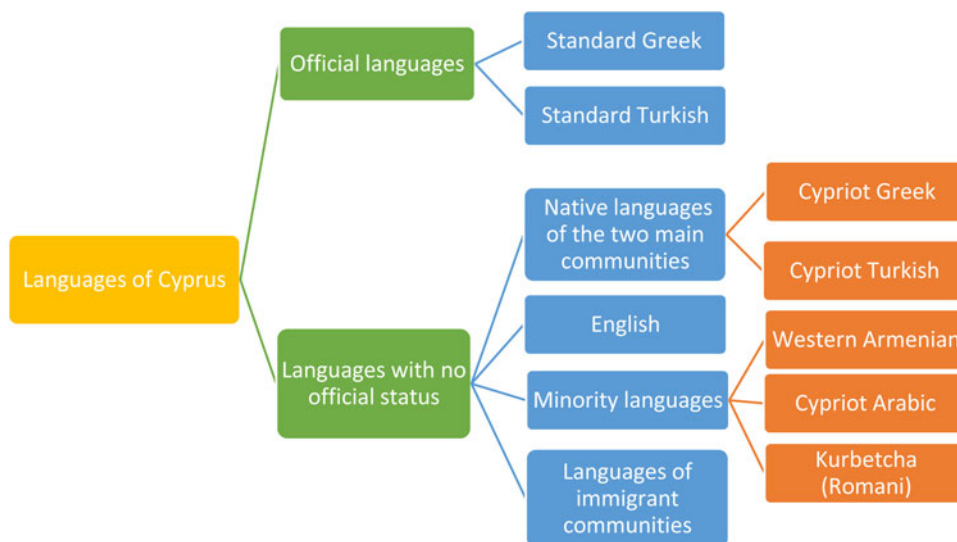


Figure 2. Languages of Cyprus

studies on the use of English as a form of borrowing and codeswitching in interactions between Greek Cypriots (Papapavlou, 1994; Goutsos, 2001; Terkourafi, 2011; Fotiou, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2020; Armostis & Terkourafi, 2019). These studies show that the use of English in Cyprus in the form of borrowing and codeswitching is not as extensive as some would argue. This shows how ‘accusations’ of extensive use of English by Greek Cypriots in their everyday speech are unsubstantiated. This is not unrelated to ‘the construct of Cyprus as an ESL country [since the latter] goes hand in hand with phobic reactions towards the alleged threat posed by English for Greek on the island’ (Tsiplakou, 2009: 84).

A brief history of English in Cyprus

According to Buschfeld (2013), Cyprus is best characterized as an exploitation colony. There was a small number of British settlers on the island whose ‘interest was mainly of instrumental, power-political nature’ with no aim ‘to impose the British language and culture on the native population’ (Buschfeld, 2013: 200). Cyprus also differed from many British colonies in that the society was not segregated into tribes or castes, and Western education was not deemed a danger to its composition (Persianis, 2006: 61–2). While in many other British colonies, the missionaries founded schools before the arrival of the British governors or took control of education afterwards, in Cyprus neither of these happened because the majority of Cypriots were Christians (Persianis, 2006: 67).³ As Morgan states, ‘the fact that it was not possible to convert the “natives” and bring about religious salvation undermined one of the ideological cornerstones of British imperialism’ (2010: 13–14).

When the British arrived in Cyprus in 1878, there were two main ethnic and religious communities, i.e. the Orthodox Greek and the Muslim Turkish. During the British colonization period, these two very distinct communities, differing ideologically, religiously and ethnically, fought to retain their identity intact from both the colonizers and from each other; in fact, for both communities preserving their ethnic language was important for securing their identity and survival (Karoulla-Vrikki, 2004). As such, the English language was mainly seen as a danger to the two communities’ ethnic identity and realization (Georgiou, 2009; Fotiou, 2015).

At the same time, communication between the British and the native populations was generally

limited (Persianis, 1996: 48). While English was the official language of the colonial government, the Greek and Turkish varieties were used by the native populations, and governmental translators would translate any documents into English for the British officials. Crucially, the requirement for translators shows that the people of Cyprus were not ‘competent in English and that English did not function as a lingua franca’ (Karoulla-Vrikki, 2004: 22).

The use and influence of English in education was also limited, at least before the island officially became a British colony in 1925. Cypriot scholars divide the British educational policy on the island into two periods, i.e. 1878–1931 and 1931–1960. The first is a period of relative *laissez-faire* (Tsiplakou, 2009) during which Britain’s intervention in education was minimal. Greek students received Greek education and Turkish students received Turkish education and they were supported financially by Greece and Turkey (Varela, 2006: 204). The British considered the two communities to be religious communities; thus, the latter had educational freedom under the Elementary Education Act of 1870 (Persianis, 2003: 355). This was a misconception on the part of the British since they had not realized that their differences were not just religious (Persianis, 2006).

Towards the end of the first period, things began to change. In 1923, education came under the control of the colonial government, while, in 1929, teachers became civil servants appointed by the Governor (Fotiou, 2008: 5). In October 1931, massive riots broke out with Greek Cypriots demanding *enosis*, i.e., union with Greece⁴, during which the Government House was burnt down. This marked the onset of the second period of British educational policy during which measures were taken to diminish the ‘power’ of the Turkish and Greek languages. For example, in 1932, it became obligatory for teachers to know English in order to get promoted, while the curriculum of 1935 introduced the teaching of English in the last two grades of primary school. In the curriculum of 1949, the teaching hours of English increased, and it was taught on a trial basis from the fourth grade of primary school (Polidorou, 1995: 94–8). In secondary education, English became a compulsory course both in Greek and Turkish state schools. Moreover, English language qualifications were required in order to be hired as a civil servant and for teachers’ promotion.

All these occurred while Cyprus was developing economically. During this period, many schools were founded whose main aim was the teaching

of English (Persianis, 2006). The British government indirectly promoted the English language by offering scholarships to British universities for Cypriots who would then be appointed in high positions as civil servants. A British university degree was required for freelancers, and from 1936 onwards for lawyers too (Persianis, 2006). As a result, the English language and culture acquired prestige: by acquiring the language, one could have a better living and a higher social status (see Tsiplakou, 2009).

To conclude this section, the particular characteristics of Cyprus as a colony and the existence of two communities who fought to retain their identity intact from the colonizers and from each other (Karoulla–Vrikki, 2004) played a decisive role in restricting the power and influence of the English language on the island. Despite that, the British administration succeeded in promoting the English language indirectly by making sure that acquiring English meant personal progress and social advancement (see Tsiplakou, 2009). Thus, even though English was abolished in primary schools upon the island's independence due to its perceived threat to the Greek language (Persianis & Polyviou, 1992: 150–1), and as a means to show the change of the political situation (Polidorou, 1995: 102), four years later steps were taken to reintroduce it.

English in Cyprus today

English in education

For the vast majority of Greek Cypriots, English language acquisition is school-based (Buschfeld, 2013: 34). Exceptions to this may be Greek Cypriot children for whom one parent is a native speaker of English or of another language, and English is the language of communication in the house – although in many such cases it is often observed that the non-Greek-speaking parent learns Greek.

In state education, English is taught from as early as the first year of primary school, while it is also common for children to attend private English language schools in the afternoon. In private education, the model of the English 'grammar school' was proven effective for the social mobility of the young and was expanded after the end of British colonization (Persianis, 2006: 93). With the creation of English-based elementary and, more recently, nursery schools, the English language has consolidated its position on the island. Further, while the main language of instruction in

the three state universities is Greek, there are now many private universities on the island where English is either the sole language of instruction or is used alongside Greek. British universities are also a favourite destination of Greek Cypriot students (Karyolemou, 2001: 30). As an indication, in the academic year 2010–2011, approximately one-fifth of Cypriot students studied in the UK (Fotiou, 2015). It remains to be seen how these figures will change after Brexit.

English in the media

There are quite a few media outlets in Cyprus that produce English-only content, such as radio stations and newspapers. English-speaking movies and TV series are not dubbed into Greek; they are offered with Greek subtitles. English is also used in the form of codeswitching in print media whose (main) language is Greek. A study conducted by Fotiou (2017b) showed that while such use is limited, English is found in prominent places in the print media – usually in magazine titles and headlines – and it serves a variety of discourse functions. More specifically, it is used because it symbolizes progress, success, cosmopolitanism, and exclusivity, and because it indexes knowledge and association with specific domains which are internationally expressed and circulated in English (Fotiou, 2017b: 23). Interestingly, in a similar study conducted in Greece (Seiti & Fotiou, 2022), which focused on Greek fashion magazines, the form and discourse functions of English in the Greek fashion magazines shows very similar patterns of use and functions. Since Greece was never a British colony, this demonstrates how the use of English in some domains may have nothing to do with a country's colonial past but with the status that English has nowadays worldwide.

English in the linguistic landscape

English is also the most prominent language in the Cypriot linguistic landscape (LL). In the LL of two of the busiest streets in the capital of Cyprus, Nicosia, signs that are entirely in English account for 38% of the total number of signs, while those entirely in Greek come second at 20%. The rest of the signs are multilingual, while signs exclusively in languages other than Greek and English amount to just 4.6% (Karoulla–Vrikki, 2016: 154). In a tourist street in Limassol, the second-largest urban area after Nicosia, 60% of the signs are in English, while just 6% are in Greek; the remainder are multilingual signs or monolingual signs in other languages (Kuznetsova–Eracleous, 2015). Finally, a

more recent and comprehensive study which focused on the main shopping streets and highway billboards in six areas in Cyprus (Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Agia Napa, Pafos, and Troodos) confirmed that the most popular choice in the Cypriot LL is the monolingual sign in English at 63% (Karpava, 2022).

English in the workplace (public sector)

As Buschfeld (2013: 200) points out, ‘when in 1960 the island was released into independence, the English language was deeply rooted in the major domains of public life’. Replacing English with the official languages of the state was not an easy task. According to the Zurich Agreement (1960), public servants working before 1960 were to be kept in their posts. This resulted in the preservation of the English language as a means of communication in public administration and the government. It was not until the mid-1980s that legal measures were applied to replace English with Greek in various sectors of public administration and government (Karyolemou, 2001). Eventually, in 1994, the Council of Ministers voted for the establishment of Greek as the official language in all governmental and semi-government organizations (Pavlou, 2010).

English in the workplace (private sector)

Cyprus’ economy is dominated by services in tourism, finance, and real estate. The service sector accounted for 83.4% of Cyprus’ GDP in 2019 (CYSTAT, 2020). So, while measures were taken to remove English from the state machinery, the nature of the economy suggests that English is used in the private sector of business and industry (Davy & Pavlou, 2001: 213). This is also confirmed in a recent study conducted by Theophanous (2020). English is widely employed in places where foreign employees work, such as offshore companies, hotels, and firms that cooperate with foreign investors.

The use of English in interactions between Greek Cypriots

The final section of this paper is dedicated to the linguistic processes of codeswitching and borrowing. Most Greek Cypriots are speakers of at least three linguistic varieties – Standard Greek (SG) and English which they learn at school, and Cypriot Greek (CG) which is their native language. As such, codeswitching practices involving English and the two Greek linguistic varieties are not unexpected.

In fact, Greek Cypriots have been accused of ‘destroying’ the Greek language because they supposedly heavily mix it with English in their communication with each other (Ioannou, 1991; Αληθεινός, 2018). Until recently there have not been many empirical studies on this topic. However, now we have a clear understanding of the nature and extent of codeswitching between Greek and English in the Greek Cypriot community. It has been shown that codeswitching practices are not extensive, contrary to what language purists believe (Goutsos, 2001; Fotiou, 2015, 2019). As far as the nature of codeswitching in this community is concerned, it mainly takes the form of noun or noun phrase insertions in an otherwise CG grammatical frame (Fotiou, 2015, 2019). Two examples are given below, with English insertions given in *italics*:

- (1) zun mesa se celifi, se *shells* pu peθamena *snails*
‘They live inside shells, in *shells* of dead *snails*’ (cited in Fotiou, 2019: 1370)
- (2) en eçis ute overt^haim ute *allowances* ute *night stop allowances* ute *dress allowances* tipote.
‘[You] have neither overtime, nor *allowances*, nor *night stop allowances*, nor *dress allowances*, nothing’ (cited in Fotiou, 2019: 1371)

Further, an interesting linguistic construction, which has been characterized as a potential codeswitching universal (Edwards & Gardner-Chloros, 2007: 74), is frequently used in this community, too: the so-called Bilingual Compound Verbs. These are periphrastic verbal constructions which involve a Greek light verb, mainly the verb *kamno* ‘do’, which bears the required grammatical inflections and another part, usually an English uninflected verb, which bears the semantic load of the construction (Fotiou, 2018). An example:

- (3) en tuti pu kamni⁵ usiastika *drive to force*
‘This is what essentially *drives the force*.’
(cited in Fotiou, 2018: 10)

Finally, as expected, there are borrowings from English in the Greek varieties spoken in Cyprus (see Papapavlou, 1994) such as *ράνταπαουτ*, *πάρκινγκ*, *κομπιούτερ*, and *λοκντάουν* borrowed from *roundabout*, *parking*, *computer*, and *lock-down*, respectively. Of particular interest are borrowed politeness discourse markers from English to Cypriot Greek such as *sorry*, *thank you*, and *please* which are used along the Greek politeness markers but bear different discourse functions (Terkourafi, 2011; Armostis & Terkourafi, 2019;

Fotiou, 2017a). However, it should be noted that English borrowings into Cypriot Greek are limited in number in comparison to borrowings from other languages.

Final remarks

This paper aims to fill a gap in the literature concerning the use and status of English in Cyprus which is, perhaps surprisingly, a neglected case of a former British colony in the literature of English around the world. The brief historical overview on the use and presence of English on the island during the colonization period suggests, in agreement with Tsipoulakou (2009), that English was most likely never a second language on the island.

In Cyprus today, English is not an official language but the most popular and important foreign language (Tsipoulakou, 2009; Fotiou, 2015). It is a language present in a variety of domains of use to various degrees, not only because of the country's colonial past, but also because of the nature of its economy and the role that English plays as the global lingua franca.

Notes

1 The official languages of Cyprus are Standard Greek and Standard Turkish. In the Greek-speaking community of Cyprus, Standard Greek stands in a diglossic relationship with the native language of Greek Cypriots, which is Cypriot Greek, while in the Turkish-speaking community of Cyprus Standard Turkish stands in a diglossic relationship with the native language of Turkish Cypriots, which is Cypriot Turkish.

2 Please note that while English does not have an official status in Cyprus – as shown in Figure 2 – it is the official language of the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia. For more information on the languages of Cyprus and its sociolinguistic profile see Fotiou and Ayiomamitou (2021) and Hadjoannou, Tsipoulakou & Kappler (2011).

3 When the first population census was completed in 1881, the population was 186,173. Almost 74% were Greek Orthodox, 24.5% were Muslims, and the remaining percentage people of other religions. By 1960, the percentage of Greek Orthodox people rose to 77%, that of Muslims decreased to 18.3%, while the proportion of other religions increased to 4.7% (Verropoulou, 1997: 179).

4 *Enosis* was considered the natural outcome of Greek Cypriots' long struggle with foreign rulers under the belief that the island was Greek from 'the beginning of history' (Papadakis et al., 2006: 6). The reality of Cyprus as an independent state was hardly envisioned prior to its independence. During the first years of independence, most

Greek Cypriots 'considered independence to be only a first stage towards *enosis*' (Papadakis, Peristianis & Welz, 2006: 103). This was, of course, not the wish of the Turkish community.

5 *kamni* ('does') is a third-person singular verb in the present tense.

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