

GLOBAL ISSUES AND LOCAL FINDINGS FROM GREEK CONTEXTS: A POSTSCRIPT

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Any globally circulating piece of research that flags up a particular national-language context as its centre of attention is bound to raise a twofold expectation in this day and age: To discuss a specific state of affairs in a particular language/society, and to use this as a case in point to cast light on wider theoretical, methodological or empirical issues. The contributions to this issue take their cue from recent sociolinguistics and discourse studies to address aspects of Greek language and discourse, culture and identity in Greece, Cyprus, and the Greek diaspora. In reflecting on the preceding four papers, I shall be asking what they tell us as about Greek and Greekness, whether this Greekness is made relevant as discursive process or interpretive motif, and also how these Greek cases may contribute to our understanding of wider processes of language, society, identity and communication technologies.

Put in this perspective, the first thing that one notices is that all four papers engage with typically late-modern social and discourse processes, even though these are not made equally salient by the authors. They are probably most obvious with Spilioti and Tsiplakou who highlight the discursive phenomena of contact, intertextuality, hybridity and mixture that accompany the appropriation of digital interpersonal communication by Greek speakers. With Goutsos & Fragaki, the process at stake is the differentiation of contemporary mediascapes into niche segments, which, as they demonstrate, may host quite different identity displays than their mainstream counterparts. And the social actors whose narratives are examined by Archakis & Tzanne represent a Greek take on subcultural youth, in which the rejection of *status quo* in their narratives goes hand in hand with homologies of style and aesthetic orientations that presumably reach way beyond Greece, even though the narratives themselves address highly local conditions.

A second thread that runs through these papers is their rich theoretical grounding. One thing we learn is how differentiated the understandings of identity in language, society and discourse studies have become. They range from macro-sociological gender identities to situated, conversationally constructed in-group and discourse identities, and the linguistic means which index these identities range from lexis to narrative strategies to code-switching. As a consequence, the papers' engagement with the Greek language is equally diverse, encompassing script choice, lexicon and interaction processes, with some papers oriented more to the study of linguistic resources, others to speaker/writer practices. Beneath the blanket interest in identity, however, there are additional sources of inspiration and reference to narrative analysis (Archakis & Tzanne), corpus-based gender studies (Goutsos & Frangaki) and computer-mediated communication studies (Tsiplakou, Spilioti). The tension of global issues and local findings is, perhaps, most pronounced in these two latter papers, which

engage with what seems from the outside a quite similar phenomenon – how Greek speakers use English in texting and emails. But while the English used by Spilioti’s young Athenians is rather restricted to lexical borrowings, occasional routines and the odd intertextual reference, Tsiplakou’s English-bred, Cyprus-based, native Greek academics achieve a striking density and frequency of English/Greek code-switching. Both papers reveal how Greek and other linguistics resources are intermingled in mediating friendship and collegiality, and we might be tempted to place them in a cline of increasing intensity of Greek in contact. In so doing, they also disarm a medium-based interpretation of language use in CMC and deconstruct any supposed homogeneity of language in digital media. What they seek to shed light on is not the “Greek of texting/emails” or how Greek is “affected”, as it were, by English, but rather two complex situational constellations in which specific participants with specific backgrounds and role-relationships use digital communication technologies for specific interactional purposes.

In particular, Spilioti – whose research represents one of the few systematic studies of language and discourse of texting, and the first one for Greek – uses alphabet choice as a window into the relationship of written language, digital technologies, and linguistic/cultural contact. Choosing Latin instead of default Greek script often indicates a switch to the language(s) by default written in this script (here, English), thereby setting forth a mainstream practice in contemporary written Greek. In other cases it signals Latin-alphabetized Greek (‘Greeklisch’), a practice popularised in the early days of the Internet (cf. Tseliga 2007). While the fondness of the ‘texting generation’ for bits and pieces of global English is not specifically Greek in any respect, script variation allies the Greek case with a handful of non-Western languages in which the same process operates. Spilioti’s paper also demonstrates the merits of ethnographic insight, with contact to actors enhancing interpretation, shedding light on their motivations. From a bottom-up perspective, script choice might take on specific interpersonal meanings, signifying individual habits in a specific peer group context, though without completely losing its indexing of technological constraints. One more thing to learn from this paper is that even though technological affordances, themselves driven by the marketability of communication devices, do not shape meaning by themselves, they do constraint the range of repertoires and thus what in a given context is available as unmarked choice, against which other choices gain social meaning. Spilioti’s singular example of Greek-alphabetized English shows how, once the essential link of language and script is loosened up, script choice becomes an expressive resource that can be mobilised in doing diverse contextualization work. Here, choosing Greek script for an English chunk allows the texter both to render the precise phonological variant that is to be read as baby talk, and to alert the addressee to seek alternative playful readings.

Such creative exploitation of the associative and inferential potential of languages, dialects and styles is taken to the extreme by Tsiplakou. The qualitative part of her analysis, on how switching and mixing practices in email interaction are used to act out “localized performativities” (i.e. contextually constructed social identities), offers textbook examples for code-centered choices of the sort that characterise informal computer-mediated discourse (Georgakopoulou 2003). It also takes to the internet what Jørgensen terms “poly-lingual languaging” – the use by interlocutors of whatever resources available to them, in a playful, inference-loaded, reflexive manner, regardless of boundaries of competence, inheritance or conventional situational adequacy. One cannot but marvel at the wit, elegance and everyday poetics of these writers who

juxtapose resources as diverse as mock Cypriot Greek with learned English, flagging up identities that range from local to international and peasant to intellectual. Significantly, while such languaging is to be regarded as a broader process in late-modern communication landscapes, the codes used here and the contrasts they create, are highly locally significant, as e.g. the juxtaposition of “westernness and orientalism” makes clear. However, by this point we have moved way beyond the initial, neat picture of Greek/English in contact. Looking at Tsiplakou’s quantitative part brings this again into the foreground, as the task there is to identify “variables predicting the degree of code-switching on email”. Tsiplakou’s combination of methods illustrates what may be gained by joining quantitative and qualitative techniques in CMC studies (Georgakopoulou 2006), yet it also produces a tension around the relationship of online and offline bilingual practices. While we learn from the questionnaire study that what people do in their emails significantly correlates with particular offline practices (i.e. using English at home), the qualitative part concludes with (anecdotal) evidence for a *disjunction* between on- and offline language practices. Thus half of the evidence stresses the similarities between email and informal orality, while the other half joins other recent calls to regard email as highly planned, which in turn facilitates hybridity and stylization (cf Hinrichs 2006). This tension, reflecting a larger open question in the field, remains unresolved in this paper.

But resonances to current research forefronts run through all four papers. For Goutsos & Fragaki, the point of reference is the combination of corpus linguistics & gender (socio-)linguistics. “Gender identity” here refers to prototypical gender descriptors (*man/woman, boy/girl*), analysed with regard to their range of contextual meanings and collocates. Surely this is quite a different take from the rest, but nonetheless compatible with a constructionist, anti-essentialist approach, by which gender stereotypes are discursively reproduced through, among other things, lexical choices. Goutsos & Fragaki’s paper, the only one in the set to examine public, mass-mediated discourse, appeals through the focus on Greek vocabulary as well as its massive amount of data and variety of sources. At first sight, their key finding is little more than the Greek take on a wider pattern of “fundamental asymmetry”, by which male descriptors take on more positive, powerful and prestigious, female ones more negative, powerless and stigmatised meanings and collocates. Beneath the machismo surface, however – and this is where the variety of data sources plays out its strength – there is a crucial difference between general audience and niche audience media, and, within the latter, between male and female magazines. Corpus linguistics is here the tool by which to pinpoint those niche public spheres, in which different gender representations are evoked and predictable stereotypes avoided. As the authors point out, such alternative semantic and co-textual shadings of *woman* or *girl* reflect (and no doubt co-construct) the dynamics surrounding female identity in contemporary Greek society. No doubt more could be done here, and much could be gained by both deploying a more fine-tuned understanding of genre (even female magazines contain a variety of genres in which quite diverse identity work might be in progress) and mobilizing notions such as audience design and style in a more dedicated way (e.g. Machin & van Leeuwen 2005). The paper invites us to hypothesise a path from conservatism to innovation in media discourse, with general audience media tending to reproduce the crudest stereotypes, which are challenged and rewritten in niche media. And while, again, there is presumably nothing specifically ‘Greek’ in this relation

between gender stereotypes and audience reach, Goutsos & Fragaki's paper makes us anticipate how a Greek case might be instrumental in illuminating it.

The contribution by Archakis & Tzanne is the one in which the problematic issue of Greekness – as discursive process or interpretation motif – is addressed head-on. Framed as a contribution to identities in narrative, its centre aim is to work out a set of storytelling techniques which function as in-group identity markers. The notion of identity shifts, once again, to situated, conversationally constructed and managed identities. By a strict conversational approach, Greek identities are not relevant here, as they are not evoked by participants who are instead preoccupied with rejecting and distancing themselves from adult figures of authority in their community. It is not as “Greeks” that these speakers construct themselves and their interlocutors, but as “anarchists”, “good mates”, “co-narrators” and so on. But the question of what these narratives might tell us about Greekness is particularly pressing here, not least because of the substantial body of previous research on Greek narrative, a research which, significantly, begun by contrasting how “Americans” and “Greeks” narrate, i.e. by extrapolating from individual practice to national-cultural characteristic (e.g. Tannen 1980). Clearly, such an extrapolation would be particularly premature here, given the narrative stances taken by these youngsters. Archakis & Tzanne establish the link between these narratives and the notion of Greekness via the notion of in-groupness, i.e. the importance of interpersonal relations in Greek society. Even though the young anarchists clearly distance themselves from what very much feels like a typical – provincial, conservative, religious, “respectable” – Greek setting, the way this is accomplished responds to what researchers from all walks of method have flagged up as important to Greek communities: Cultivating interpersonal bonds, giving and taking positive politeness, seeking and offering solidarity, which interestingly extends to contributions by the (student) researcher. Perhaps it is not incidental that the primacy of the interpersonal is also to be noted in the papers by Spilioti and Tsiplakou as well. Thus the authors manoeuvre their way so as to extrapolate from their data to larger – in this case necessarily ‘etic’ – identities, all by avoiding an all too crude ‘this is how Greeks do it’ type of conclusion. But then again, this is an important contribution of this special issue as a whole: Showing how one can nowadays engage with national-language contexts without tapping into the pitfall of essentializing national characteristics.

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