The English Buffer Zone of Cyprus

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The small Eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus has made the news this week for a number of reasons. First, the body of former president Tassos Papadopoulos was stolen from his grave in Deftera cemetery late Thursday, December 10th or early Friday morning December 11th. There are as of yet no leads in confirming the identities or motive of the body snatchers.

“Papadopoulos died of lung cancer in December last year at the age of 74. He served as president from 2003 to 2008 and led Greek Cypriots in rejecting a UN plan to reunify the island in a 2004 referendum. Turkish Cypriots backed the plan in a simultaneous vote, but it failed and a divided island joined the European Union the same year. afp” (Charalambous 2009).

Secondly, on Monday, December 14th 2009, the UN Security Council voted to extend the Cyprus peacekeeping mission mandate, the UNFICYP, until June 15th 2010. During the council’s ‘roundtable’ Turkey was the only nation in disagreement. It is the hope of the UN that the resolution extension will push two ‘sides’ of the divided island to reunify. Both of this week’s events refer obliquely to the recurrent issue of border disputes, culture clash between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish populations, and also the difficulty the island nation has had in forming a national identity.

Over the past year, Greek Cypriot leader Demetris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat [and for many years before both Christofias and Talat were in power] have held countless meetings with guidance from the UN to work out the logistics of establishing a ‘bizonal, bicommmunal federation in Cyprus’. The island has been a nation in turmoil since the first waves of colonialism spread out across the Mediterranean in the early first millennium BCE. The UN buffer zone that runs through Nicosia, the last politically divided capital left in the
world, was established in 1974 as a result of the Turkish-led invasion and resultant conflict with the Greek Cypriot residents.

*Figure 1- divided Cyprus*

In the aftermath of numerous colonial invasions and imperial rules, such as: the Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Ptolemies (of Egypt), the Romans, the Ottomans, and the Turks, ‘sorting’ the identity of the ‘original’ Cypriots from such a cultural mixture is a nearly impossible task for historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists. Even the initial formation [rather than studies of the result] of a stolid national identity can be difficult for nations like Cyprus, having born the brunt of destructive implementations by colonial forces such as raw resource depletion, exploitation of labor coupled with intensely run production initiatives, and extensive obligations to Eastern Mediterranean trade networks.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theorized about the construction, perception, and reception of symbolic power, capital, and violence. Bourdieu’s theories fit well within the discourse of the effects of colonialism on national identity formation because his notions of symbolic power,
capital and violence can be used to discuss the influence of economic markets established or taken over by colonizers in addition to the integration (or assimilation) of the foreign and local peoples. The differentiation of spoken language is often one overt characteristic of national language.

For the purposes of this paper I will focus on the language differentiation and variation aspect of national identity formation; i.e. language formation, adoption, and exploitation. The case-study focus on Cyprus will be further contextualized by an investigation into the relative possibility that the competing Greek Cypriot and Turkish occupation areas have adopted English as a linguistic buffer, or even an identity safeguard. I will also question the possibility of this ‘linguistic English buffer’ as a neutral ‘zone’. In other words, relevant to the present, has the use of a ‘non-native’ language helped or hindered the reunification efforts?

The means by which English was incorporated into the linguistic market of Cyprus is particularly clear, as Cyprus was a protectorate of the British Empire until 1960. Upon British relinquishment and Cyprus’ inception as an independent nation, Great Britain instated a clause that stipulated their right to keep and maintain military forces on the island until all and every threat to the island from an outside incursion is eliminated (given Cyprus’ invasion history the British will hold the land forever). The darkened gray areas represented on the map above (figure 1) in the south west and south east of the island are still British occupied areas- an airforce base in the southwest and the naval base in the southeast.

Prior to British rule Cyprus had been part of the Ottoman Empire; Ottoman rule introduced Islamic religious practices and architectural styles along with a population who spoke a mixture of languages familiar to Anatolia (modern day Turkey). The Ottoman ‘impression’ is still very visible on the built landscape; mainly in the form of minarets that stand tall above
mosques and converted Christian churches and cathedrals. Since the most recent Turkish invasion in 1974 many more cultural icons, traditions, and superstitions have worked their way into the cultural atmosphere. It is important to remember the political and socio-cultural climates of each colonial incursion, because none of the invasions or retreats suggests ‘complete’ hegemony or removal- but rather integration and dispersal are better terms and most well illustrated by the island’s linguistic heritage of variation.

Both the Turkish and English languages were introduced in Cyprus through the mouths of the colonizers. Both languages represent Bourdieu’s linguistic market as they operated within the colonial economic structure. As a unit, the linguistic market has come to be defined as a cultural process by which a dominant force within society drives the formation, framing, and selection of both spoken and written language. The dominant force can thus be situated within the metaphor as the “symbolic domination” or hegemonic structure as equated by Linguistic Anthropologist Kathryn Woolard (1985: 740). The solidification of political power by the impending dominant power of a geographical region provides a pathway for language assimilation and then linguistic hegemony.

The linguistic incorporation of Greek in Cyprus, on the other hand, cannot be pinpointed to a modern colonial effort, but rather to a mixture of ancient history, myth and legend. If Turkish and English are the new linguistic traditions working to gain hegemony, Greek has had the linguistic market of Cyprus cornered for much longer. In 1963 when Turkey began to threaten the safety and independence of the young nation, Greece sent military force the five hundred miles east to Cyprus’ aid. Did Greece feel obligated to aid Cyprus because the two nations shared a dominant language- Greek? However the linguistic dominance of Greek has been swayed by colonial force, the ability of the Cypriot people to identify with Greece on the
level of national pride has not been challenged. If anything the Greek and Cypriot relationship
has been strengthened by shared memory of Turkish subjugation.

The social historic memory necessitated the need for communication between the two
sides to be in an alternate language. But why do nation-states chose to have one ‘supreme’
language that is to be spoken for business and diplomatic relations? In terms of colonialism and
colonial conquest a chosen dominant language and its integration ‘into the mouths’ of the
captives or subsidiary populations can be factored into the solidification of political hegemony.
It is in this way then that the linguistic market self-modifies within power structures and over
time becomes integrated into the culture group- eliminating the notion of the integrated language
as foreign.

The integration of English into a prominent position in Cypriot society is evidenced most
clearly in the primary and secondary school curriculums:

“When more emphasis started being placed on English and the subject was upgraded to
one of the most important in the syllabus, English found itself in the middle of a political
campaign called EOKA. During the EOKA struggle (1955-1959) the anti-British feeling
had a very negative influence on the learning and teaching of English at schools was seen
as a British imperialistic instrument and students and parents at all levels reacted against
it (Matsangos 1990:2)… Due to close relations with Britain [after Cyprus gained its
independence in 1960], English was chosen, and in 1956-66, it was officially part of
every school syllabus. Pupils started learning English at the age of 9 until 18 years of
age” (Yazgin 2007: 2).

In the case of Cyprus as I have situate it as a linguistic ‘melting-pot’, English has
become more deeply entwined in business and diplomatic relations. Could this be because the
Greek and Turkish political powers on the island supposed to be and therefore selected English
as an unbiased medium for communication? The UN sponsored reunification coalitions have
seemingly strong-armed the participants to use English as lingua franca for the talks; because
English is the chosen business language of the UN. “First of all it should be underlined that
Cyprus is probably one of the very few countries where English moved from the ‘Expanding Circle’ to the ‘Outer circle’, which is to say, English used to be a second language, but now it is used as a foreign language and as *lingua franca*” (Yazgin 2007: 5). “Bourdieu suggests that a standard dialect gains its legitimacy from state-sponsored institutions such as education, which inculcate the dialect’s authority, imposing it even on speakers of dominated classes who never master it” (Gal 1987: 638).

However the language barrier would hinder the reunification efforts if either side insisted upon dealing in an alternate *lingua franca*, English is a third-party representative language acting as a buffer. Bourdieu does not discount the use of Greek and Turkish languages on either side, but rather he outlines the inclusion of private markets- or forums where the national languages are acceptable for communication. “He characterizes the private markets as arenas where the vernaculars may be used because they are free from the comparative logic of distinction and valuation” (Bourdieu 1982:66; Woolard 1985: 743). Ironically, the UN occupied buffer zone that divides the Turkish occupied North from the Greek-Cypriot South houses many international language instruction schools- German and English the most prominent. Education in the geographical buffer zone proposes a physical forum for an intermediate linguistic dialogue.

Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes the dialogue as available to all languages and thought therefore related. This means that everything anybody ever says always exists in response to things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. We never, in other words, speak in a vacuum. As a result, all language (and the ideas which language contains and communicates) is dynamic, relational and engaged in a process of endless redescriptions of the world. [Languages working in relation to one another] These include qualities such as perspective, evaluation, and ideological positioning. In this way most
languages are incapable of neutrality, for every word is inextricably bound to the context in which it exists (Holquist 1981: xxi). Bakhtin suggests that in this instance English is not capable of serving as a neutral ‘buffer’, instead the use of English has most likely caused animosity on both sides of the divide.

In what seems like an effort to ‘keep up’, Turkey has also incorporated English into its school curriculum. Susan Griffith has published urging Americans to apply to teach English to Turkey’s eager to learn growing middle class. With its sights set on joining the European Union eventually, Turkish parents and Turkish young people are more eager than ever to promote the English language. Turkey has cooperated willingly in efforts to reunify Cyprus because their admittance into the EU also rests on the reunification of the island. The alteration of Turkish national identity so as to prepare for inception into the ‘globalized’ conscious of the EU readies the avenue for ideological change. “All countries are prone to a tendency towards either stability or change, “… because the individuals in the society or the ‘cultural architects’ constantly modify their cultural plans, improve and adapt their behavior to the caprices and exigencies of their physical, social and ideological milieu” (Mbakogu 2004: 38). In other words, Turkey will ‘change’ to get what ‘it’ wants.

The Greek/Turkish culture clash and conflict have become manifest in many ways. Most visibly at the buffer zone crossings in the form of state issued signs and graffiti. The use of English on these signs overtly references the language boundary/barrier and dichotomizes the Greek and Turkish peoples. Are the signs and graffiti an outlet meant to neutralize the conflict? If the visual outlets point to the necessity to vent on both sides, then whose/which national identity will ‘come out on top’? And considering the use of English to convey the buffered
messages, do these outlets also point to the loss of national language? And if so does the shift in linguistic hegemony point to the decline of a nation?

I will now turn to an analysis of a sampling of these visual outlets representing the use of English as a buffer. Irvine and Gal suggest “ideological aspects of that linguistic differentiation— the ideas with which participants and observers frame their understanding of linguistic varieties and map those understandings onto people, events, and activities that are significant to them” (Irvine and Gal 2000: 35). The graffitists frame and map their emotions—happiness, strength, and hatred— in paint.

*figure 2- English Graffiti in Northern Nicosia*

Nicosia is similar to many cities, and other capital cities, in many respects. In fact the division may remind many Germans of their once divided capital city. Southern Nicosia is a thriving metropolis with a healthy tourist industry as well as many local hotspots and hangouts—nightclubs, discos, cafes, etc. On the other hand, crossing the green zone into Northern Nicosia

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1 *Photographs taken by the author, 2003 and 2008*
any visitor might think that he/she had stepped back in time or even into a war zone; the Turkish occupied portion of the city has not undergone the modern transformations to the same degree as the south. Whereas southern Nicosia has high-end shopping malls and quaint boutiques Northern Nicosia has ‘name brand knock-off’ street vendors and convenient stores. Does the weak economy of the northern Nicosia lend itself to increased street crimes, including graffiti?

Turning my attention to the graffiti on the wall in figure 2, “Kill ‘em all”, many questions come to mind: I wonder first why it is in English, how long it has been there, why has no one painted over it, and who does the statement reference? All of these questions assume the consciousness of the person who wrote it and the people who read it, unless all who come in contact, i.e. read the wall perceive it as an idle threat. “The concept of ‘consciousness’ in Marxist thought would seem to provide an analytical locus at which material and the symbolic sides of human adaptation could be linked” (Hill 1985: 728). Is this just a symbol of high emotion and lashing out, if so why did the perpetrator use such a passive method as graffiti? Did the perpetrator assume that because the statement is in English it holds less veracity?

*figure 3- ‘85 Boom’ graffiti on elementary school complex wall, Dali, Cyprus 2003*
Another graffiti example from the Greek Cypriot area in the village of Dali also assumes cultural knowledge on behalf of the reader by the perpetrator. In this instance ‘85 boom’ represents the birth year of an 18 year old male who entered the beta or ‘boom’ class of military initiates in 2003 [around the same time as I took the photograph]. There is a long tradition of the rebellious teenage boys holding a ‘coming of age’ farewell gathering the night before their military induction- the festivities include each initiate spraying graffiti around town. Both instances of graffiti represent hostility, rebellion, and dissatisfaction with a higher authority and the use of visual symbols to make a statement.

The graffiti in figure 2 may not have been the handy work of an 18-year-old Greek Cypriot military initiate, but the slang, English language and the medium suggest a young adolescent possibly male or female. Both instances call to mind Bakhtin’s ‘objectivized word’, which assigns a ‘particular character’ to the word itself and the way in which inflection is attached (Hill 1985: 729). “It seems clear that the perception among speakers that a symbolic code is also a ‘position’ must be shaped by the material forces of power; what can be done with this perception will then be shaped by the systematic forces of ideology and of grammatical practice.” Can we contrive further meaning from the graffiti statement ‘Kill ‘em all’ because it is not only in English in an area where English is not the hegemonic language but also it is grammatically incorrect but evokes a particular American Cowboy slang. The symbolic meaning of both statements speaks volumes about the political and social unrest in Cyprus’ capital city of Nicosia.

*figure 4 and 5- Flag of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus

*painted on the hillside north of Nicosia, 2008*
Having worked with an archaeological excavation in the village of Dali, about 15 kilometers south of Nicosia, for four seasons I have had many opportunities to contemplate the painted flag of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, the flag is so large and ‘bright’ that it can be seen from the hill of Idalion (the ancient city next to which the modern village of Dali lies), even though it lies almost 10 kilometers outside of Nicosia on the side of the Kyrenia range. The Turkish symbol of national pride, by extension since it is the flag of an occupied territory without sovereignty, serves no real function other than to offer the proverbial ‘middle finger’ to the Cypriot south attesting to the 1974 Turkish gain and Cypriot loss of the northern third of the island. Is it okay for non-sovereign squatters to show ‘national pride’ in such an overt manner? Unfortunately while it seems wrong from the Cypriot point of view, similar
military victories on the part of Great Britain, Germany, the USA have also included similar obnoxious signs of national pride.

In July 2008, in the midst of heightened of reunification efforts, I returned to Cyprus to find that the flag now has lights that surround and illuminate the flag at night. Consciously Turkey must understand that their actions revive strong emotions, the flag seems to only hinder reunification efforts after thirty plus years of cultural conflict. The crescent moon and star on the flag also symbolizes the national observance of Muslim faith by Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and calls into consideration the religious contrast with the Cypriot South as its population is predominantly Greek-Orthodox Christian. The ringing of the church bells in the South compete with the muezzin’s calls to prayer projected from the minarets in the North.

Nicosia has literally become a ‘cultural crossroads’ the where tourists can easily pass from the European Union into Western Asia in only a couple footsteps—much to the amusement of the struggling economy and stagnated tourist industry of the North and displeasure of the yayas (elderly ‘mothers’) who beg each tourist not to cross into the place with the people who ‘stole’ their sons in the 1974 skirmish.

*figure 6 - Car ‘crossing’ into the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 2003*
The border crossing patrols require a passport for each person in the car and a temporary insurance policy for the vehicle. Passports are not stamped, rather each person is issued a temporary visa—a stamp on the passport would not only raise concern but is considered illegal because the Northern Republic is not officially or politically recognized. The Northern Republic’s border crossing authority has wasted little chance to welcome and inform each and every visitor of his/her departure from Southern Cyprus (figure 6). And yet the welcome signs do not seem out of place if you can call to ‘welcome to’ signs on state borders in the US and country ‘welcome’ signs in Europe. The Cypriots identify as Greeks because they speak Greek; animosity between Greece and Turkey has been thick since before either was a sovereign nation (since antiquity). Is it the ‘adopted’ Greek identity of the Cypriots that is truly in opposition to the Turkish occupation? Or do the lines of hatred still run deep for the loss of so many lives in the 1974 conflict? Turkey has become more earnest in talks considering reunification of the island, since the formation of the EU and Turkey’s desire to become part of it. [Turkey will not be allowed to joint the EU until Cyprus is reunified]. But seemingly until the two sides are reunited, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus will continue to show Turkish pride.
From my perspective as an American tourist, as I was returning to the South I could not help but wonder if I had somehow offended the Cypriots by visiting their ‘lost’ land and endorsed the Turkish occupation by ‘feeding’ their economy. The signs suggest Turkish national pride, but the largest and most prominent signs such as the banner above the ‘exit’ lanes, are in English (figure 7). Is this a subversive attempt to smooth over the conflicting national identities and languages with English as a ‘buffer’? Or more likely the signs are blatant symbols of Turkish national pride- as they comfortably occupy land ‘won’ through military insurrection.

Conclusions

Throughout this paper I have considered the ‘native’ language of the island to be Greek, however this is a partial misnomer because its integration into the linguistic market on the island was also the result of colonial efforts in probably around 1200 BCE, the late bronze age, with a Minoan occupation and a later Mycenaean influx both Colonial Aegean colonial powers ‘brought with them’ the earliest spoken and written forms of Greek. It is thought that Eteo-Cypriot, an as yet untranslated language was the first spoken Cypriot language spoken; while the first written
language was Cypro-syllabic- a combination characters influenced by both the Minoan (Linear A and B) and Phoenician alphabets. It was not until 10,000 years into the island’s history of human occupation that Greek became the most prevalent language.

Given the nature of the conflict and the island’s long history of ‘changing hands’ amongst political powers, the ‘tug of war’ within the linguistic market (Bourdieu and Woolard). Bahktin offers the best theoretical framework within which to discuss the dynamism and dichotomy of multi-lingual societies along with the objectivism of linguistic material artifacts. In this linguistic, semiotic case study of Cyprus it is my hope that I have outlined the political implications of using a politically ‘neutral’ language as a ‘buffer’ between to conflicting national identities.

In another vein of research I am using the archaeological record of one ancient city kingdom in Cyprus to contextualize colonialism in antiquity and the assimilation, or melding, of Cypriot identity with the colonial powers. Contemporary discourse that characterizes globalization has influenced my research because of the strong comparisons that can be made with the political and economic networks of ancient complex societies. Comparing globalization in antiquity with the present substantiates the conclusion that Cypriot identity has not been lost, rather it is constantly in flux. Therefore national language, whichever it might be at the time is not lost but rather tailored to suit the modified national identity.

This adaptation raises the question: Is there a linguistic trend similar to the political trend characterized by the shift of the parties toward the center from the outlying extremes? In a similar fashion it seems that a nation in flux may tend to shift its political and linguistic scale into the moderate realm- allowing leeway for a neutral zone accessible by a ‘bridge’ language-English in the case of Cyprus. The moderate realm offers relative stability.
Cultural consciousness of political affiliation and linguistic market in everyday life manifests itself in a variety of ways. In 2005, the Mediterranean nations convened a Linguistic committee to discuss the language and syntax of the region. The committee reports were published in three volumes in *Foreign Language Study*. Greek represented Cyprus linguistically, but it was recognized that the island also linguistically incorporates Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, and other ‘immigrant’ language variations. But the consciousness of the society is still saturated by Greek; it seems it will remain the hegemonic language even after the reunification.

Bibliography


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