The analysis and classification of non-standard occurrences in the writing of Greek Cypriot primary-school children

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the use of written standard language of speakers of a non-standard variety in a bidialectal setting. Although occurrences from the non standard (Greek Cypriot Dialect — GCD) to the standard (Standard Modern Greek — SMG) are normally anticipated in the early years of schooling, one expects that non standard forms would be marginal after six year of instruction in the standard form. However, primary-school teachers often complain that in the final year of schooling students still commit many errors that should not be present in their writing at such an age.

This study examines the written performance of sixth-grade Greek Cypriot students who have been instructed in SMG in the last six years of their schooling. Specifically, (a) it collects the non-standard GCD occurrences that appear in the students' writing and are attributable to the students' mother tongue, and (b) classifies these occurrences into different linguistic categories (phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical) in an effort to ascertain the residual problems for each category. Such findings can be useful for gaining a better insight into the issue of language in education and for the preparation of appropriate teaching material that can facilitate the reduction of non-standard occurrences in the writing of students.

INTRODUCTION

Two linguistic varieties are used in the daily conversational interactions of Greek Cypriots; Standard Modern Greek (SMG) and the Greek Cypriot Dialect (GCD). The linguistic variety used for educational purposes (i.e., the language of instruction) is not the one used at home. Thus the linguistic situation in Cyprus offers a great opportunity for the investigation of the relationship between bidialectism and linguistic competencies.

Primary school children in Cyprus undergo a rigorous immersion programme in SMG and, as long as they go to school, education is conducted entirely in Standard Modern Greek. Primary school teachers

noted, however, that children face problems in oral and written production of SMG (Pavlou and Christodoulou, 2001). This is hardly surprising since pupils have to communicate in a code that, in many ways, is different from their own mother tongue.

Recently the Cypriot 'language issue' has attracted a great deal of attention, both in the national press (e.g. Moschonas 2000, Rousou 2000) and in international academic circles (e.g. McEntee 1999, Papapavlou 1999, Papapavlou & Pavlou 1998, Pavlou and Christodoulou 2001). The issue of pupils' language achievement has once again become the target of public attention and concern. Current language teaching approaches and curriculum content are under scrutiny, calling for more efficient methods and new syllabuses (Circular by Ministry of Education, 1999). Furthermore, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) carried out a study that examined the literacy level (comprehension and written production) of students between the ages 9 to 14, and compared the standards across many countries. The study revealed that Cypriot students perform poorly in the language class in comparison to their Greek counterparts despite the fact that language instruction, as well as teaching materials, are almost identical in the two countries. Specifically, the study shows that nine-year-old Cypriot students rank 22nd in a league table but Greek students 14th. However, the difference narrows when comparisons are made with older children (Papanastasiou 1998). This is an important issue that requires attention and further investigation.

Taking into consideration previous research findings, the present study attempts to (a) identify the occurrences in students' writing that can be attributed to the dialect and (b) to classify these occurrences (which are not necessarily 'errors') into different linguistic categories — phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical. It is hoped that the findings may contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue of language in education and for the preparation of appropriate teaching material that may facilitate the reduction of non-standard occurrences in the written performance of students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bidialectism is a phenomenon that exists, to varying degrees, in many countries. There is an extensive literature on the issue of bidialectism and linguistic compendency similar to that of bilingualism (e.g. the Groningen and Amsterdam projects in the Netherlands (Calcar *et al.* 1989); the project on the Flemish language situation (van de Craen and Humblet 1989); the Bilingual Awareness study (Francis 1999)). A brief review of a project carried out on the issue of dialects and education offers much to the present

study. Other situations may differ from the Cypriot linguistic landscape but the similarities are far more noteworthy and there is sufficient common ground to justify comparisons.

The 'Kerkrade Project'

The Kerkrade project (reported in Stijnen and Vallen 1989; van den Hoogen and Juijper 1989), is a very well-planned and methodologically sound project, that took place in the Dutch town of Kerkrade between 1973 and 1982. The project was triggered by a survey that suggested a link between the relatively low levels of educational achievement by the majority of students and their use of the Kerkrade dialect. Dutch and the Kerkrade dialect differ in that the Kerkrade dialect has lower prestige and fewer functions, whereas standard Dutch is the high-prestige variety with a wide range of functions. For this study, standardised tests and assessment procedures were developed and put to use; language tests included both spoken and written assessment. The following results were obtained (Stijnen and Vallen 1989: 140):

1. Dialect-speaking primary-school pupils in the Kerkrade area had greater problems with their grammatical command of standard Dutch than their non-dialect counterparts, as far as oral and written language production was concerned. For oral production, the average percentage of deviation from standard grammar was approximately 5% for dialect speakers and 2% for standard speakers. For written production, the percentages were 9% and 7% respectively.

2. The problem for dialect speakers with oral and written language production was chiefly due to *interference* of the dialect with the standard. Although dialect interference tended to decrease in the speech of students during the course of their schooling, it continued to be an important source of error up to the highest grade in primary school. In the children's written standard Dutch, however, dialect interference did not decrease at all during at the course of children's schooling.

3. The influence of the dialect was seen not only in interference but also in the frequency of *code switching*; dialect speakers often switched from standard Dutch to the local Kerkrade dialect.

The present study follows a pattern similar to that of the Kerkrade project. It attempts to discover the linguistic areas that present problems in the writing of Cypriot final year primary-school students that are attributable to the dialect. Despite differences in the nature of the relationship between the dialects and standard languages involved in the two places, there are shared educational implications for dialect speakers around the world.

METHOD
Subjects
The study took place in Larnaca in the spring semester of 2000. Forty-nine pupils, consisting of 25 male and 24 female, enrolled in two sixth-grade classes from the 'Archbishop Makarios III' primary school participated in the study. Pupils with non-Cypriot parents were excluded from the analysis, even though they carried out the assessment procedures. The school was randomly selected from other state schools that follow a similar curriculum.

Assessment Procedure
Having been granted permission by the school principal, we conducted the study on the school premises. A written essay functioned as the assessment material; students were asked by the classroom teachers to write in Greek on the topic of 'A remarkable Easter'.

RESULTS
The responses of the 49 students were tabulated and analysed by using the SPSS statistical package. It must be noted that the performance of students in the written essay is measured in total number of errors per 100 words. Firstly, the performance of the two classes was compared in order to examine whether the two classes were of equal standards. This was done in order to be able to treat both classes as one group. The independent-samples t-test analysis revealed no significant difference in the students' performance between the two classes ($t=-1.734$, $d.f.=46.998$, $P=0.089$ [two-tailed]). Students committed around 6 Cypriot 'errors', ranging from 3.5 to 9.5, for every 100 words (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Comparison in students' performance in the two classes
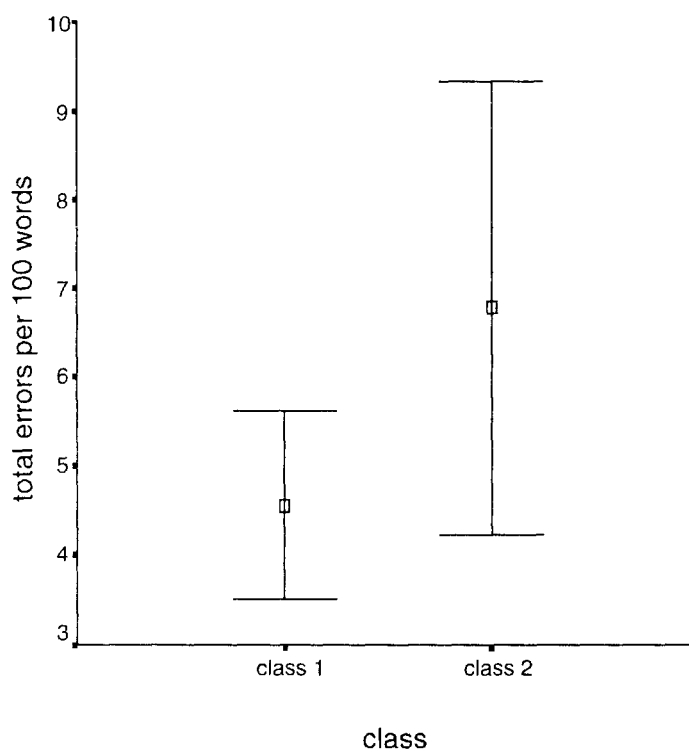
As the performance was almost equal, subsequent statistical analyses treated the two classes as a single group. First, students' occurrences (i.e. errors) that are due to 'interference' from the Cypriot Dialect were classified and placed into four categories: phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical. On average, students committed 0.5 syntactic errors, 0.5 phonological errors, 3 morphological errors, and 5.5 lexical errors per 100 words. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Occurrences attributed to the
Cypriot dialect in four categories

category of error
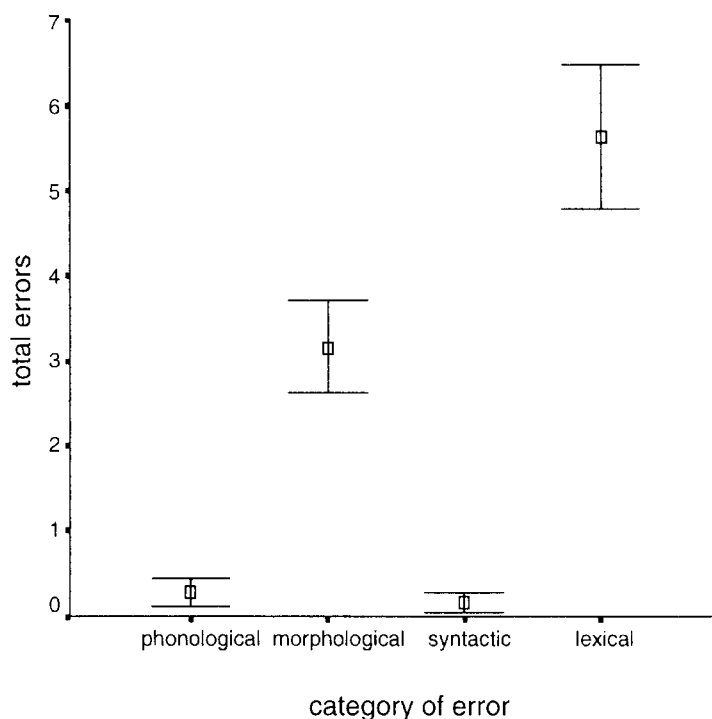
DISCUSSION

This study has aimed at collecting and classifying the non-standard Cypriot Greek occurrences found in the Standard Modern Greek writing of sixth-grade Cypriot students. A limitation of the study was the small number of classes used (only two) and whether these classes were fully representative of all Cypriot schoolchildren. Nevertheless, the results reveal some important findings.

Error classification

Students' non-standard occurrences were assessed and placed into four categories (types):— phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical. Subsequent analysis has shown that *morphology* and *lexicon* were the two areas that showed the highest occurrence of errors. Specifically, the following comments can be made for each category:

(i) *Phonology*: Phonological mistakes were very rare, partly because differences in phonology are reflected much more in the *oral* rather than

the *written* production of students. Examples: retention of word final ending [v] in Cypriot as in σπίτιν; gemination as in θάλασσα; assimilation as in γεναίκες; voiced fricative deletion of [β] in intervocalic position as in κα(β)ούρους and φο(β)ήθηκα; voiced fricative deletion of [γ] in intervocalic position as in μά(γ)ουλο, and μά(γ)ος.

(ii) *Syntax*: Syntactic mistakes were again very rare. An explanation for this finding might be that syntactic differences between GCD and SMG are very few (mainly concerning the position of clitics). Example: clitics go after the verb in Cypriot as in μιλώ **της**, θέλω **τον**, φορώ **το**.

(iii) *Morphology*: There are numerous differences in morphology between GCD and SMG which are possibly the main reason for the large number of morphological occurrences in the written performance (For a detailed linguistic analysis, see Horrocks 1997; Holton *et al.* 1997; Newton 1972). Examples: the use of final [v] in the accusative as in την μικρή, την γιαγιά; the augmentative [ε] prefix in the past tense as in επήγα, ετραγούδησα, εμελέτησα; the morphological ending [ούσιν] in Cypriot rather than the SMG ending [ούν] as in τραγουδούσιν, πίνουσιν, κρατούσιν, παίζουσιν.

(iv) *Lexicon*: As is well known, lexicon is an area that SMG and GCD differ the most (Papapavlou 1994). Indeed, this is shown to be a problematic area for students; choosing between what is considered to be an authentic Greek lexicon from Cypriot terms does create insurmountable problems for Cypriot students. Examples: ππιριλλί instead of βόλος; καράολος/σαλιγκάρι; σύκλα/κουβάς, χωστό/κρυφτό, βουρητό/τρεχτό, χρυσόμηλο/βερίκοκο, λίμπουρος/μυρμήγκι, ρότσα/πέτρα, λάκκος/πηγάδι, φακκώ/κτυπώ, κκέλης/φαλακρός, κολάνι/ζώνη.

In conclusion, we may state with some certainty, that morphology and lexicon are the two main areas which Cypriot students have many difficulties with. It is, therefore, recommended that primary school teachers can assist their students in overcoming problems of non-standard usage by developing various appropriate exercises. Undoubtedly, as Walmsley (1997) and Wright and Bolitho (1997) suggest, the difficulties faced by bidialectal speakers, as well as, how these difficulties can be overcome, need further systematic research in all types of bidialectal settings.

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