

The degree of dialectal transference by Cypriots in a strict Standard Modern Greek context

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Abstract

This study seeks to quantify the prevalence of the local dialect in the environment of the school – an environment in which the sole use of Standard Modern Greek is strictly enforced. Linguistic data were collected from rural and urban areas and both the oral and written production of students was analysed. Dialectal transference was measured in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon. The results revealed that the highest degree of transference in speech occurred in morphology, followed by phonology, lexicon and syntax. In writing, lexical and morphological transference were most common, with syntactic transference occurring only rarely.

Key words: dialect in education, dialectal transference, oral and written performance

1. Introduction

The issue of dialect and education has generated much heated debate in bidialectal societies. Despite considerable effort spent researching dialect and education, a common concern remains: dialect speakers continue to underachieve at school and a realistic remedy for this has yet to be found (Cheshire et al. 1989).

Edwards (1983) notes that children who speak a dialect other than the standard face additional difficulties when compared with their standard-speaking counterparts. While even standard speakers experience instances of confusion (e.g. between formal and informal uses of language), non-standard speakers have many more instances of these differences to remember and are therefore presented with many more opportunities for error.

Corson (1993) makes a distinction between the receptive (reading and listening) and the productive (speaking and writing) use of the standard variety by dialectal users. He notes that, in the first case, non-standard users are faced with few practical problems because children nowadays have constant exposure to the standard variety through daily contacts with the mass media. Children have the opportunity to both read and listen to the standard frequently. Consequently, and provided that the mother tongue is maintained to a high level of proficiency, no threat to the interests of non-standard speakers results from the regular demand in schools that they engage in reading and listening (receptive exposure). While reading and listening may thus be mainly unaffected, oral and written production can nevertheless be problematic. Corson (1997) notes that this happens because a non-standard variety is usually the children's first language, so they cannot always depend on their knowledge of that variety to help them assess whether a piece of text in the standard variety is appropriate.

The present study investigates the issue of dialect and education in the bidialectal community of Cyprus. It is often observed that Cypriots include many dialectal features

in their production of Standard Modern Greek (Papapavlou 2004; Pavlou & Papapavlou 2004; Yiakoumetti et al. 2005). The degree of Cypriot students' dialectal transference from their mother tongue, the Cypriot dialect, to the standard is given special attention in this study. In other words, the current research seeks to quantify the prevalence of the local dialect in the environment of the school – an environment in which the sole use of SMG is strictly enforced. This is done in terms of phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical transference from students' mother tongue to the standard variety.

2. Methodology

Ninety-two final-year primary-school pupils participated in the study. These students belonged to four classes from two schools, an urban and a rural school from the Larnaca district. Evaluation of students' performance took the form of a three-minute interview for oral production and a language and geography essay for written production. The oral test was administered by the principal researcher who spoke SMG and asked each student individually questions about his/her everyday life. The three minutes allowed enough time for students to talk and express themselves freely. The written tests were administered in the same way as normal weekly in-class essays. The choice to assess students' geography essays and not only their language essays was made in order to investigate the degree of transference to other non-language topics. No instruction on the appropriate code of usage was necessary: students are always expected to use the standard variety in the classroom.

The criterion of assessment was clear and unambiguous. All dialectal transference was measured and categorised as phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical based on the differences between the CD and SMG listed by a number of researchers (Newton 1972, 1983/84; Κοντοσσόπουλος 1994; Papapavlou 1994).

3. Results

The number of CD occurrences per minute differed significantly according to linguistic category ($p < 0.001$, Figure 1) in the oral test. The most common CD occurrences were morphological and these were significantly more common than phonological occurrences (Tukey LSD, $p = 0.002$) which were the next most frequent. Lexical occurrences were the next most common, although their frequency was significantly lower than phonological occurrences (Tukey LSD, $p = 0.013$). Syntactic occurrences were the least common (at around 0.5 occurrences per minute) and were significantly less frequent than lexical occurrences (Tukey LSD, $p < 0.001$).

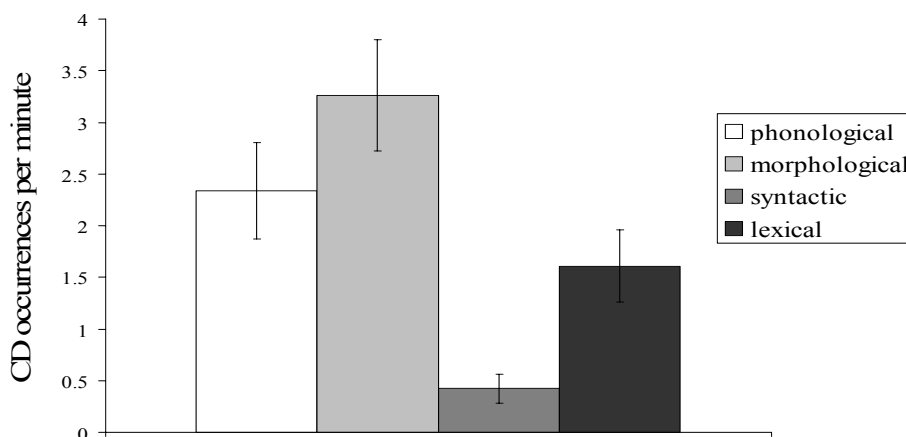


Figure 1. Performance of students in an oral test in terms of four linguistic categories, measured as the number of CD occurrences per minute.

For the language essay, it was again found that the number of CD occurrences per 100 words differed significantly according to linguistic category ($p < 0.001$, Figure 2). The most common CD occurrences were lexical. Occurrences of this type were significantly more frequent than morphological occurrences which were the next most common (Tukey LSD, $p = 0.001$). Syntactic CD occurrences were prevalent at low frequencies. The frequency of both morphological and lexical occurrences was very significantly less than the frequency of syntactic occurrences ($p < 0.001$).

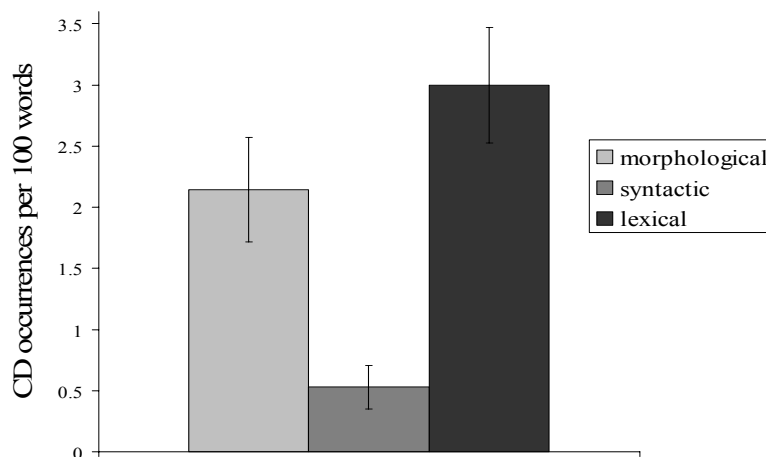


Figure 2. Performance of students in a written language essay in terms of three linguistic categories, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words.

In the geography essay, the number of CD occurrences per 100 words also differed significantly according to linguistic category ($p < 0.001$, Figure 3). Lexical and morphological occurrences were the most common and equally frequent (Tukey LSD, $p = 0.993$). Syntactic occurrences were the least frequent.

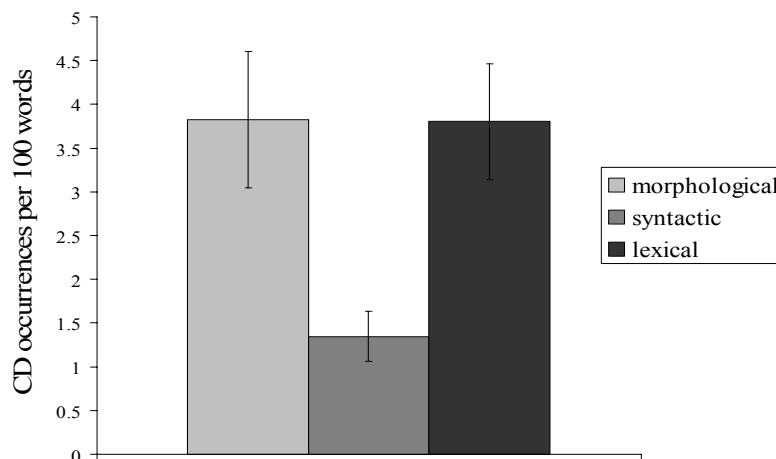


Figure 3. Performance of students in a written geography essay in terms of three linguistic categories, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words.

The difference between rural and urban learners in the oral test was statistically significant ($p = 0.041$), with rural school students having a greater number of CD occurrences in their speech (Figure 4).

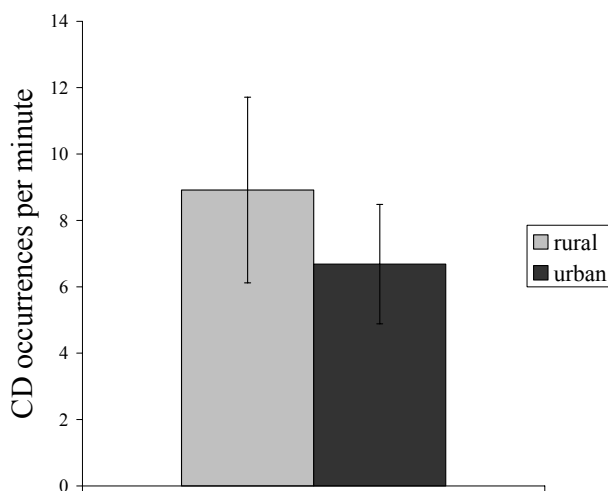


Figure 4. Performance of students from rural and urban schools in an oral test, measured as the number of CD occurrences per minute.

No difference in the performance of rural vs urban students in the written language essay was detectable ($p = 0.70$).

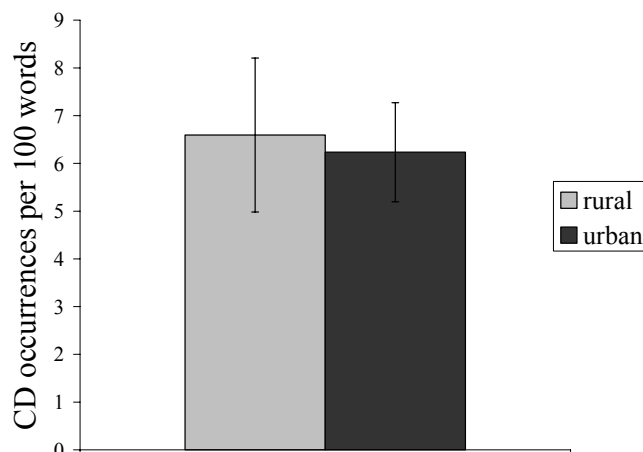


Figure 5. Performance of students from rural and urban schools in a written language essay, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words.

There was a highly significant difference between the written production of rural and urban students as measured by the geography essays ($p < 0.001$, Figure 6).

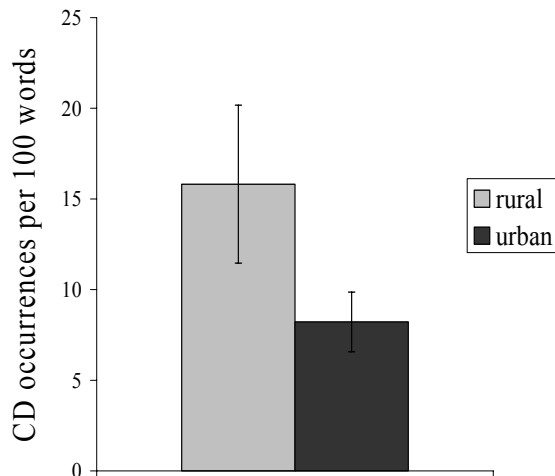


Figure 6. Performance of students from rural and urban schools in a written geography essay, measured as the number of CD occurrences per 100 words.

4. Discussion

4.1 Oral performance

Morphological occurrences were the most common types of dialectal transference, with an average of just over 3 per minute. This is not surprising, given that many of the

differences between the CD and SMG are morphological in nature. After morphology, the category with most occurrences was phonology¹ (around 2.5 per minute), followed by lexicon (around 1.5 per minute) and finally syntax (less than 0.5 per minute).

Qualitative analysis revealed that the most common CD feature in learners' oral production of SMG was the use of final *-v* in the accusative singular – a feature which persists from Classical Greek (e.g. μου αρέσει να παίζω σχινάκι-*v*, λάστιχο-*v*, κρυφτό-*v*; I like skipping rope, playing French elastic and playing hide-and-seek). This morphological item is not, however, a strong indicator of dialectal production in the speech of Cypriots. This is perhaps why students used it extensively without even trying to avoid it, yet consciously avoided phonological CD features (e.g. /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/ and /f/). The final *-v* is an especially difficult case because it is also used in SMG in certain occasions. Although there are clear rules as to when it should be used in SMG and when it should not, students show a limited awareness of these rules.

Another common feature found in subjects' speech was the augmentative *ε-* prefix in the past tense (e.g. *επαίξαμε ποδόσφαιρο*; we played football). Again, this item is not as strong a dialectal indicator as the phonological features that are not part of the SMG phonetic inventory (e.g. /dʒ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/ and /f/). It must be noted that, for both features (*-v* and *ε-*), teachers on the island stated that although they appear consistently in students' production, they are features that they wouldn't normally correct. This is so because these two morphological items are relatively unimportant when viewed in comparison to phonological differences which are highly stigmatised.

Despite the fact that phonology was only the second-most common source of transference (after morphology), it is generally accepted that this component is what makes students' speech sound dialectal. The most common sound found in students' interviews was /dʒ/. Another phonological item which is equally indicative of dialectal speech is the sound /f/. Both sounds appear only in students' speech and not their writing because there is no alphabetical symbol in SMG to capture the sound. Teachers are most eager to prevent students from using /dʒ/ and /f/.

4.2 Written performance

Students made an average of 7 CD occurrences per 100 words in the language essay and an average of 11 CD occurrences per 100 words in the geography essay. Lexical and morphological occurrences were the most common types. This is not surprising given the high number of foreign loanwords found in the CD but not in SMG (Papapavlou 1994). However, this finding is notable because one would expect to find little lexical transference in writing as pupils have time to think before constructing their essays (in contrast to oral production where the element of spontaneity is very high).

The most frequently occurring feature of the CD in written production was morphological: the use of final *-v* in the accusative singular in the CD. This is particularly interesting as this feature was also the most problematic item in oral usage. Interviews with teachers indicated that, although this item occurs commonly in students' written production, teachers are willing to overlook its occurrence and only occasionally correct its usage. The fact that it is overlooked by the teachers – or, at the very least, its 'correct' usage is not emphasised by them – possibly contributes to its frequent use.

¹ Suprasegmentals did not form part of the analysis.

4.3 Factor of location

The reason for choosing to include both a rural and an urban group of students was to permit the detection of any difference between their performances. It must be emphasised that the mother tongue of both rural and urban Cypriots alike is the regional Cypriot dialect and not SMG. Everyone learns Greek at school and all schools follow the same teaching methods. There is thus no *a priori* reason to expect greater dialectal transference in the classroom production of rural pupils than that of urban pupils. Any difference between the two groups should be related more to the frequency of dialectal occurrences rather than to differences in the incidence and diversity of the various types of transference.

Location affected students' oral performance, with students from the urban school displaying less transference ($p = 0.041$). Urban students produced an average of 7 CD occurrences per minute, unlike rural students who produced an average of 9. Students' written performance in the geography essay was also affected by location, again with urban students producing fewer CD occurrences ($p < 0.001$). However, there was no statistical difference between the two groups for the language essay ($p = .70$). This may suggest that, when students from both rural and urban areas are aware their language is being assessed, they perform similarly. When they are unaware that their language use is of immediate importance, rural students exhibit increased transference from the mother tongue to the standard.

The above findings are in accordance with Cypriot teachers' views who believe that rural children include more CD items in their school language use. The reasons for rural pupils' linguistic behaviour remain unknown. No research in Cyprus has been carried out to explain why children from rural areas use CD features more frequently in their SMG production. More research is needed in this area. Perhaps teachers need to take a different approach depending on whether they work in a rural or an urban school. Maybe the solution lies in the material students use; different textbooks might prove to be more appropriate in rural and urban schools.

5. Conclusion

This study provided the first empirical quantification of CD transference in Cypriot pupils' linguistic performance in the classroom. Teachers in Cyprus strongly assert that a serious language problem exists. The oral and written tests carried out helped to identify the exact nature of this problem. Instead of abstract definitions such as lack of fluency and hesitations in speech, the assessment material revealed that, in speech, the problem lies mainly in morphology and phonology while, in writing, lexicon and morphology are problematic. The most common CD item (in both speech and writing) is the final -v.

The above findings can be useful for gaining a better insight into the issue of language in education and for the preparation of appropriate learning material that can facilitate the reduction of non-standard occurrences in the speech and writing of students.

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