

Does writing matter? Entanglements of materiality and writing in Cypriot Greek

Marina Terkourafi
Leiden University, The Netherlands
m.terkourafi@hum.leidenuniv.nl

This talk is placed within the materiality turn in (socio-)linguistics, which challenges the view that language is a self-contained system cut-off from the interdependencies (of time, place, and objects) in which it comes into existence (materializes), and emphasizes language as substance (sounds, letters) with palpable qualities in its own right that can stir the affective and bodily involvement of speakers. From this vantage point, which treats sense-making as necessarily multi-modal, I broach the question of written Cypriot Greek -- a question that has been brought to the foreground with some urgency by the technological developments of the past 25 years. I outline four reasons why writing matters, and examine the current state of affairs with respect to Cypriot Greek in each of these dimensions. These reasons touch on historical, social and technological, but also ideological and cognitive aspects that are affected by whether, and how, a language variety is represented in writing.

Cypriot Greek (CG) uses a number of phonemes that set it apart from how Greek is spoken in Greece, especially in the capital Athens. Some of these, such as geminates and aspirated voiceless stops, correspond to the historical orthography that Greek normatively adopts (e.g., θάλασσα, κύτταρο, CG άππαρος) more closely than their current (non-geminated, unaspirated) pronunciation in Standard Greek. Others, however, such as the palato-alveolar fricatives and affricates [ʃ], [ʒ] and [tʃ], [dʒ], which occur in many everyday CG words, cannot be represented within standard Greek orthography and a number of conventions have developed over the years to capture these sounds of the dialect in print. After a brief overview of the solutions proposed at different times and the surrounding (sometimes heated) debates about them, I conclude with the findings of a focus group discussion about a creative writing project using GPT 2 that took place in Cyprus in 2021-22. These findings illustrate how technology can provide new reasons for (and new means of) standardizing orthography, functioning as an agent that can lead to new outcomes, possibly beyond the intentions of the human agents proposing and adopting these solutions.