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Greek-Alphabet English: vernacular transliterations of English in social media

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'English' and Multilingualism on the Internet

In the early days of Internet communication, English appeared as the dominant language online. Regardless of Internet users' first languages, English has been found to be used as the 'vehicular language' (Leppänen and Peuronen 2012: 385) among members of online communities. The reasons for this dominance of English were partly technological, as the first character encoding set (ASCII) included only 128 characters based on the English alphabet and writing system, and partly social, as the participation structure favoured languages shared by majority of users.

Nevertheless, even in the early stages of English linguistic and 'typographic imperialism' online (Pargman and Palme 2004, cited in Danet and Herring 2007: 9), other languages made their appearance on the Internet beginning in the mid-1990s. As for non-Latin script languages, users have been found to improvise with available graphic resources and transliterate local language forms with Latin (or Roman) characters. In the early 2000s, and particularly after the development of Unicode affording the encoding of numerous scripts, the linguistic diversification of the Internet became a truism.

The study of multilingualism on the Internet has explored two distinct but inter-related phenomena: (a) the choice and diversity of languages on the Internet, with a focus on their relative visibility, accessibility and status; and (b) the multilingual practices of Internet users, with a focus on languages as resources that people draw on and use in their online activities. Both research areas, however, remain preoccupied with uses of 'English' in the study of multilingual phenomena online: for instance, studies of linguistic diversity engage with tensions arising from the relative status of local or minority languages and globally powerful languages, particularly English, while research on users' multilingual practices beyond Anglo-American contexts investigates online texts documenting instances of code-switching or mixing of English with other languages.

This study shares a similar preoccupation with uses of ‘English’ in social media practices among Greek Internet users. But rather than presupposing the relative status of global vs. local languages (as often postulated from a ‘global English’ perspective), the aim here is to investigate English-related forms as part of local and situated mixed-language practices. Indeed, recent research approaching the Internet as a ‘translocal affinity space’ (Leppanen and Peuronen 2012: 389) has already shifted scholars’ attention to the ways in which English is incorporated into a wider semiotic mix of communicative practices online (cf. Seargeant and Tagg 2011). This paper is designed to contribute to this line of research by investigating the new phenomenon of Greek-Alphabet English (GAE, or ‘Engreek’), i.e. vernacular transliterations of English into the Greek script. After a brief overview of the meanings associated with different languages and scripts in the Greek mediascape, the paper will focus on specific instances of GAE arising in social media interaction and will analyse the varying functions and meanings of such transliterations in the specific local and situated contexts.

Greek-Alphabet English and Latin-Alphabet Greek: vernacular transliterations in context

Greek-Alphabet English (or GAE) refers to English words and phrases written with Greek characters that increasingly appear in different forms of vernacular writing in Greece. Although such words and phrases appear graph(em)ically assimilated into the Greek writing system, they do not constitute English loans, and Greek speakers do not identify them as lexical items belonging to the Modern Greek vocabulary. Although my informants in Greece could describe and provide examples for this phenomenon, they could not come up with a single term to refer to the use of GAE. For lack of a better term, one of my informants used the neologism *ελληνοαλαμπουρνεζικά* (‘Greekogibberish’, my translation), foregrounding the absurdity and markedness of this phenomenon. Nevertheless, the term ‘Engreek’ for Greek-Alphabet English can be found in the online user-generated dictionary *slang.gr*. The specific entry has been listed since August 2008 and describes the use of Greek characters for writing English as ‘an Internet language, the opposite of greeklish. [...] It is not very widely used, but when it appears, it’s very funny and a good craic’ (my translation).²⁴

It is particularly interesting that the new phenomenon of GAE appears to be defined in relation to ‘greeklish’ or Latin-Alphabet Greek (LAG), i.e.

²⁴ The relevant entry is available online at: http://www.slang.gr/lemma/show/engreek_5869/ (last accessed 30 December 2013).

instances of vernacular transliterations of Greek. With regard to the official status of the two main languages we focus on, Greek is declared the official language of the state, whereas English is not officially recognised as either a first or a second language. Due to technological factors, vernacular transliterations of the official Greek language appeared in digital communication among Greek-speaking Internet users in the 1980s (Androutsopoulos 2009). Despite the introduction of Unicode, LAG persisted as a script choice throughout the 1990s and 2000s, leading to a state of ‘computer-mediated digraphia’. According to Androutsopoulos (2009: 227), LAG is restricted to contexts of computer-mediated interaction, such as echats and discussion forums, and primarily used in transnational communication both within the Greek diaspora and between Greece and abroad. At the same time, LAG also appears in other media contexts (e.g. advertising or lifestyle press), imbued with symbolic values associated with computer-mediated communication, such as ‘future orientation, technological competence and international outlook’ (Androutsopoulos 2009: 228).

In a more recent study by Koutsogiannis (2012), the use of LAG among Greek teenagers has been found to correlate with socio-economic variables. Students attending private schools and coming from middle and upper social class families report higher use of Greeklish in online communication, while they often recycle their parents’ views about the significance of ‘global literacies’ associated with digital media and English as a global language. In this context, the connotational significance of LAG again evokes discourses of translocal/transnational orientation and elite cosmopolitanism. Similar associations are also evident in public debates about ‘Greeklish’ or LAG, where it is often juxtaposed with the Greek script. In the majority of press publications on this issue in early 2000, such juxtapositions resulted in the representation of the Greek script “as a paramount national symbol” (Androutsopoulos 2009: 225), invoking tensions between competing socio-ideological discourses (i.e. translocal/transnational vs. local/national orientations). As it will be argued below, the rise of GAE in online environments and its local uses often need to be understood in relation to the wider competing discourses associated with the use of multiple languages and scripts in the Greek mediascape.

Functions and Meanings of GAE or ‘Engreek’

This section provides a preliminary analysis of a sample of social media texts in which Greek-Alphabet English has been found to be used by online writers in a range of contexts. The sample includes social networking pages that

explicitly address this phenomenon (e.g. the Facebook page of ‘Engreek’ or its entry on *slang.gr*), together with instances of GAE occurring in the everyday interactions of online writers on public or semi-public social network sites, such as YouTube and Facebook. The aim of this section is to provide a snapshot of the range of functions such vernacular transliterations fulfil in such contexts and to discuss the social meanings that GAE acquires in relation to the other languages and scripts it co-occurs with.

Slang.gr: representing Greek-accented English

The preliminary analysis of GAE instances starts with its oldest use in the sample (August 2008), which is included in the aforementioned *slang.gr* entry of the term ‘Engreek’. According to the user who updated the entry, the example allegedly appeared in a webchat exchange on Windows Live Messenger. The example is provided in Table 1 and is followed by two types of transliteration into English, based on (i) a simplified system of phonetic symbols²⁵ and (ii) a more standardised transliteration following the English writing system. Although we can never be certain about the authenticity or ‘naturalness’ of such examples, such illustrations do shed light onto what users perceive as representative or typical of a given phenomenon.

Greek-Alphabet English	Phonetic Transliteration	Standardised Transliteration
- Σόου, χάου ντου γιου ντού;	- σού, χάου du ju dú ?	- So, how do you do?
- Αι έμ φάιν, άι τζάστ χέντ ε μπάθ.	- άι έm fáin, άι tzást çéd e báθ.	- I am fine, I just had a bath.
- Αααα, νάις, άι ντιντ του. Γουάτ πέρφιουμ ντου γιου πουτ;	- αααα, náis, άι did tu. γυάτ πέρfjum du ju put?	- Ahhh, nice, I did too. What perfume do you put?
- Αι ντοντ.	- άι dod.	- I don't.
- ... Οοου. Οκέη. Γουίλ γιου καμ του δε πάρτυ τουνάιτ;	- ...ού. okéi. γυίλ ju kám tu δε párti tunáit?	- ... Oh. Ok. Will you come to the party tonight?
- Νόου, μεν, αι χεβ εν ινγκλις λέσον. Ιτ σαξ, μπατ άι χεβ του γκόου.	- νόου, men, άι çev en inglis léson. it saks, bat άι çev tu góu.	- No, man, I have an English lesson. It sucks, but I have to go.
- Γκάτ-ντέμιτ! Γιού αρ μίσιν δε τάιμ οβ γιούρ λάιφ, μπρο!!	- gát-démit! jú ar mísin δε táim ov júr láif, bro!!	- Goddammit! You are missing the time of your life, bro!!

Table 1: Example of GAE or Engreek on *slang.gr*

²⁵ The simplified system of phonetic symbols for transcribing Modern Greek conversations, used by Georgakopoulou & Goutsos (1998) and Georgakopoulou (2001), is employed here to shed light on the acoustic effect that the specific text would have if read aloud.

On the basis of the phonetic transliteration, we observe that the use of Greek characters impacts upon the ways in which a Greek-literate person would read the specific text. Aspects of Greek pronunciation become prevalent, including, among others, the conflation of the English vowel system into the Greek equivalent of five overall phonemes and the dropping of any distinction between alveolar and palatoalveolar fricatives (see /inglis/ for ‘English’ vs. /leson/ for ‘lesson’, l. 6). Such features are considered as ‘typical’ of Greek speakers of English and have also been identified in Canakis’s (2004) study of English used in Greek public transport announcements. In this context, the Greek script indexes a range of pronunciation features associated with Greek learners/speakers of English as a second language. This claim is further reinforced by the occurrence of word-for-word translations of Greek lexico-grammatical constructions (see ‘what perfume do you put’, l. 3) and the fact that one of the interlocutors is portrayed as a person who receives formal tuition in the English language. The attitudes echoed in this extract, especially the learning of English as a necessity today (see ‘I have to go’ l. 6), are reminiscent of findings in Koutsogiannis & Adampa’s (2012) study in which the development of ICT skills and English language competence were considered paramount, especially in discourse among teenagers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Thus far, ‘Engreek’ or Greek-Alphabet English appears as another case in which the graph(em)ic mode is manipulated to “enhance readers’ and writers’ ability to experience the words as if they were spoken” (Danet 2001: 17). But an approach to ‘Engreek’ as a mere representation of Greek-accented English would provide a rather restricted understanding of the phenomenon. In fact, it would limit the discussion to what Street (1984) has coined as an ‘autonomous’ perspective to writing. An autonomous perspective approaches spelling, punctuation, etc., as neutral technologies for representing spoken language and overlooks the social and cultural contexts in which writing practices take place.

YouTube: play and discrimination

Although user-generated dictionary entries are created by online writers, the aim of an example in such entries is to provide a rather idealised – and often decontextualized - instantiation of a given phenomenon. In order to gain a better understanding of how GAE is used in social media interactions, we will now shift our focus to YouTube comments and the co-deployment of linguistic and script resources in such naturally-occurring public interactions. In the sample, GAE has been found to be deployed as a resource in comments

targeting people who are again perceived as speaking ‘bad English’ or English with a Greek accent. This is illustrated in the comments of a YouTube video, featuring a Greek singer doing a cover of the song ‘Breathless’.²⁶ The top comment with 105 likes is written in Greek and reads as follows: ‘Are you working at a job where you have to speak English? Are you taking an English oral exam? Are you concerned about your accent? Listen to this and build some confidence :D’ (my translation).

Within a context of play and banter, the messages following and commenting on the video target the singer’s performance and particularly his accent while singing the English song. As shown in example 1 (translation/transliteration is provided in brackets), GAE is used for writing the English words heard in the video, with quotation marks demarcating this part of the post from the following representation of laughter. In this context, representing English in the Greek script allows the commenter to assume the ‘voice’ of the singer, while maintaining distance from and evaluating this voice as laughable and a source for ridicule.

Example 1

“γιου λιβ μι μπρεεεεεεθλες εν αλον” χαχαχαχαχαχαχα
(‘you leave me breaaaaathless and alone’ hahahahahahaha)

Kytölä (2012: 120), who studied Finnish football forums, also found that deliberately non-Standard English ways of writing were playfully used in order to ridicule those who used any ‘bad English’ unintentionally. Therefore, computer-mediated environments can serve as spaces where varying competences of English become foregrounded and vernacular ways of writing English are used as a resource for targeting and ridiculing people who are perceived to be ‘bad English’ speakers, especially in the translocal public settings of web 2.0.

Facebook: play and indexing ‘Greek-ness’

In more private settings, such as Facebook communication among friends, Greek-Alphabet English has been found in posts where users negotiate and invoke their ‘Greek-ness’. Example 2 is a sequence of Facebook wall posts (22 February 2013), starting with a Facebook update from Ioanna who contemplates ‘when’s the right time to start packing for a transatlantic journey’ in English (the ‘vehicular language’). It generates a number of responses from non-Greek (Aisha and Amy) and Greek (Manos, Dimitris,

²⁶ The video was uploaded on Mar 29, 2011 and is available at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytZ_amr55PU (last accessed 30 December 2013).

Manolis, Margarita and Eleni) Facebook friends of the user. In terms of linguistic resources, English appears to be the preferred code in all responses.

Example 2

1. Ioanna: when's the right time to start packing for a transatlantic journey?
2. Aisha: The night before ;)
3. Amy: As soon as you like; it's part of the fun, no? Have a great trip.
4. Manos: Any time bab..
5. Dimitris: no more than an hour before leaving for the airport, thats two hours before the plane is scheduled to depart.
6. Manolis: today
7. Margarita: νέβερ (never)
8. Eleni: Λαστ μίνιτ! Γουάτ κάϊντ οβ Γκρικ αρ γιου;;; :P
(Last minute! What kind of Greek are you??? :P)
9. Ioanna: I'm glad you're all in agreement :P

What is notable is the switch to the Greek script in posts 7 and 8. The switch to a different script does not co-occur with code-switching: English remains the main linguistic resource for interaction in this sequence. GAE, however, indexes a shift to a more jocular frame, further reinforced by the use of multiple punctuation marks and emoticons. In line with previous examples, such vernacular transliterations abound in playful contexts.

In addition to play and banter, Greek-Alphabet English also invokes features stereotypically associated with the 'Greeks'; not necessarily a Greek accent (as in example 1) but the behavioural trait of doing everything at the last minute (see post 8). The use of GAE in contexts where Greek cultural stereotypes prevail (e.g. Greek accent, lack of organisation) suggests that this type of vernacular transliteration becomes gradually imbued with symbolic values associated with assumed local values, in contrast with the values of 'future orientation, technological competence and international outlook' that are associated with the use of LAG in the Greek mediascape.

Facebook page: ideological meanings of GAE

A discussion of GAE or 'Engreek' cannot overlook the eponymous Facebook profile page. The page, albeit not vastly popular (only 20 likes), was created anonymously in January 2012 and attests to the spread of GAE in diverse social and cultural contexts. In the 'about' section of this profile,

the Greek script is used to encode the following English words: ‘This page had been made, to oppose the bad habit of writing the Greek words with Latin characters’. Otherwise put, Greek-Alphabet English is found to be widely used on a profile page with a clear anti-LAG stance.



Figure 1: Facebook page of ‘Engreek’

Such uses of GAE suggest that vernacular transliterations of English gradually are gradually gaining a more ideological meaning, indexing an oppositional stance to LAG and, perhaps, to discourses of the translocal orientation and elite cosmopolitanism it is associated with. As a result, the previous state of ‘computer-mediated digraphia’ (Androutsopoulos, 2009) and the relative tension between Latin-Alphabet and Greek scripts have now become intertwined with playful appropriations of English, while evoking ongoing discourses about language and wider ideologies in Greece.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on a new form of vernacular transliterations of English found primarily in social media environments. The mixing of English-related forms with other languages in computer-mediated communication has been previously documented, but, to my knowledge, limited attention has been given thus far to instances in which such English-related forms are mixed with a script associated with another language. The study of Greek-Alphabet English in diverse social media contexts brought to the fore the local functions and complex meanings assigned to such English-related forms, ranging from playful uses with a discriminatory effect against speakers of ‘bad English’ to creative means for indexing ideological positions vis-à-vis the presence of different languages and scripts in the Greek social mediascape.

Reflecting on the theme of the conference – ‘opening new lines of communication in applied linguistics’ – it is worth pointing out some of the challenges as well as opportunities such phenomena present for the field of applied linguistics. First and foremost, they do challenge the very assumption of languages as distinct entities. Although terms like ‘Latin-Alphabet Greek’ or ‘Greek-Alphabet English’ aptly describe such phenomena, such categorisations may appear problematic as they still presuppose distinct boundaries between languages and privilege a specific linguistic code. The uses of ‘English’ this paper focused on beg the question ‘English to whom?’, as such English-related forms are certainly unintelligible to any social media user unfamiliar with the Greek alphabet.

In a similar vein, the mixing of English-related forms with local languages in media contexts has often been approached from a global English perspective. But how can we use a similar perspective here when the graphemic manipulation of such words strips them from any ‘global’ recognition, addressing primarily or exclusively the local Greek audience? For this reason, voices have already been multiplying in arguing for a paradigm shift that moves away from theorising languages as distinct systems or varieties (Jørgensen et al 2011; Seargeant and Tagg, 2011). Research on social media and other instances of translanguaging or ‘trans-scripting’ (Androutsopoulos, 2013: 4) can certainly play a role in such reconceptualisations, as groups with rather diverse positionings and ideological agendas aggregate online (as well as offline) and profusely experiment with scripts, styles and languages.

It seems that a superdiversity framework, as outlined by Blommaert and Rampton (2011), paves the way for such reconceptualisations and foregrounds key areas for future developments in applied linguistics that include, among others:

- (a) attention to multimodal meaning and graphic resources, in particular. As shown in my sample, normative associations between scripts and linguistic codes are often transgressed, with graphic resources (such as orthography and spelling) pointing to socio-cultural associations distinct from those associated with the language of the verbal content.
- (b) focus on the connotational significance of signs and indexicality. It is hard to assign a specific and stable symbolic meaning to vernacular transliterations of English. Their functions and social meanings are multiple, locally emergent and indexically motivated, linking with

previous discourse and indexing varying positions vis-à-vis other social groups and domains of use.

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