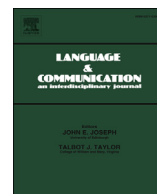




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Performing registers and registering performance: Young children's linguistic practices during play in the Greek Cypriot context



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ABSTRACT

The current paper explores language use among a group of preschool Greek Cypriot children during their play time at home. Based on theories of performance and register-formation the paper draws on ethnographic data in order to investigate the way Standard Modern Greek and the Cypriot Greek are used in children's micro-interactions. The methodology adopted was case study research of a network of five children for a period of eighteen months and the main data collection techniques were participant and non-participant observation of the children during their play activities, with audio recordings and rich field notes. Data analysis indicated that the two varieties were used in a dynamic way by the children to form collaborations during play time, to enact social roles, to reflect cultural values and ultimately to contribute through their performances in register (re) formation.

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1. Introduction

The current paper investigates preschooler's language use during play time, aiming to explore the way children use different linguistic varieties as performative tools in order to form collaborations and enact social roles during play time. The study aims to interpret ethnographic data from talk-in-interaction among a group of Greek Cypriot children (age three to six) during their play activities at home. The rationale is two-fold: first, the Cypriot context is multilingual with two distinct varieties of Greek; although there are sociolinguistic studies exploring language use in specific domains such as school (Ioannidou and Sophocleous, 2010; Charalambous, 2012) or social media (Sophocleous and Themistokleous, 2014), and among certain age groups (e.g. teenagers, school children), there are no studies on how younger children use the two varieties in out-of-school contexts and especially at home. Second, this gap is also noted in the wider literature of language use in early years: while there is a lot of work conducted in the context of education and classroom (Cazden, 1988; Freebody and Luke, 2003), there is admittedly limited research on linguistic and discursive practices of young children among themselves (Danby and Davidson, 2007), and language use during playtime has not been sufficiently explored.

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The current study is located in the Greek Cypriot context, a sociolinguistic space with two varieties of Greek, Standard Modern Greek (SMG/standard) and Cypriot Greek¹ (CG/dialect), which are ascribed different set of social values (Tsiplakou et al., 2006). The Standard Modern Greek is the formal variety of education and the written code associated with formality, prestige and appropriateness but it is often seen as distance or fake. Cypriot Greek is the everyday spoken variety, transmitted at home by the parents to the children, it is connected with informal domains and it is often characterized as less elaborated and peasantry but it has been rated as authentic and genuine (Papapavlou and Sophocleous, 2009). The Greek Cypriot context has been characterized as diglossic (Ferguson 1959) due to the clear functional differentiation between the two varieties (Arvaniti, 2006). However, the existence of a linguistic continuum between the two (Tsiplakou et al., 2006) and the fact that speakers move between standard and dialect variants in various domains (e.g. use of dialect features in social media Sophocleous and Themistocleous, 2014, code mixing and code switching in classroom talk, Ioannidou and Sophocleous, 2010) point forward to a dynamic plurilingual context where the distinction between two varieties becomes blurry. In fact many scholars argue that the diglossic dichotomy is oversimplified and it does not depict the complexity of the situation (Goutsos and Karyolemou, 2004). Recent studies of language use indicate to the existence of language alternation, especially in online contexts (Themistocleous, 2015) where the speakers–users use both varieties in more performative ways, renegotiating traditional linguistic norms. These results enhance the idea of a complex sociolinguistic context which diverges from the traditional diglossic situation.

Taking into consideration the shifts and changes that occur in the Cypriot sociolinguistic context and the gap in research regarding language use in early year, the current paper sets to explore early childhood language use in naturally-occurring talk in order to investigate the way young children make use of the two linguistic varieties in different situations during playtime. The study is theoretically informed by the concepts of register formation (Agha, 2003), indexicality (Silverstein, 2003) and performance (Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Bauman, 2002) and it sets out to investigate the way wider processes of discourse and register formation find their way in micro interactions via linguistic performances and vice versa. The methodology adopted is case study (Simons, 2009) of five preschool children who were systematically observed for a period of eighteen months during their play practices. Ethnographic data collection methods were employed, mainly participant observations. Data were analyzed within the framework of detailed micro-discourse analysis, focusing on critical incidents and bounded performance events (Berger and DelNegro, 2002).

2. Theoretical preamble

2.1. From discourse to performance and back

The interplay of the social and the linguistic has been long documented in the literature, focusing either on the concept of discourse or on performance; it is what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) have described as the semiotic being the trace or the window to the social. According to Fairclough (2012) the term discourse can be used as a category which designates the broadly semiotic elements of social life and it is often connected with genres and institutions (Christie, 2002). Fairclough (2012) argues that social change affects social practices and thus brings changes in semiosis and changes in discourse. Discourses become enactments as genres, in new ways of interactions and are inculcated in new ways of being, in new identities.

Connected to discourse but placing more emphasis on the individual and on specific communicative events is the concept of performance. Performance within interactional events is essential for understanding the interrelations between language, discourse and identities. As Goffman (1981) suggests, social life is like a stage and talk is like a big performance since it incorporates fundamental requirements of theatricality. Performance has three basic themes: ritualization, participations framework and embedding (Goffman, 1981). Consequently, talk-in-interaction is a highly performative event where those who take part are ascribed specific roles and participation membership, they follow certain rituals and rules and they embed contextual knowledge within the interaction taking place. To quote Halliday (1985) language is used for representation (ideational function) and for enacting roles and negotiating power (interactional function).

Although, it could be argued that discourse constitutes a macro realization of the role of language in society while performance constitutes a micro layer, this distinction has been criticized as oversimplified. Blommaert (2015) argues that the micro is fused into the macro and vice versa since often the contextual conversational inferences transcends the scope of the local/micro and needs to include broader sociocultural frames of contextual knowledge; by doing this the intrinsically historical nature of the linguistic/semiotic is emphasized (p.4).

This fusion of the macro/micro distinction brings the focus of attention to the speaker/performer for a deeper understanding of language in the formation of social relations and in the distribution and production of power. Bauman (2002) is

¹ The two varieties differ in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon (Tsiplakou et al., 2006). Cypriot Greek exhibits strong vitality compared to other linguistic varieties of the Greek language (Kontosopoulos, 2001) something that often makes Greeks from mainland Greece complaining that CG is unintelligible to them. Recent studies (e.g. Row and Grohmann, 2013) describe two distinct linguistic systems with differences across all linguistic levels, even pragmatics. Nevertheless, many scholars point forward to the existence of a linguistic continuum between the two varieties, which is often register-based (Tsiplakou et al., 2006; Themistocleous, 2015) and where on the one end there is CG as it is spoken in rural areas by older people with marked features (e.g. consonant hardening) and on the other end is SMG. On a political level, due to the unstable political context of Cyprus (ethnic clashes between the two communities of the island, Greek and Turkish Cypriots, de facto partition 1974), there are strong links of language with ideology (see Ioannidou, 2012). So, on a policy level SMG is considered the national language, promoted at school and associated with the Greek identity (Ioannidou, 2012) while CG is banned from formal education and is associated with informal communication.

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