Greeklish/Greenglish: The Advent and Popularization of an e-Language through Social Networking, Social Media and Telecommunication Technologies

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate a recent phenomenon of the written Greek Language which appears when human communication occurs through social media and other digitally-mediated communication technologies. Greeklish, the Greek Language written using Latin characters, is said to have begun when Short Message Service (SMS) became available on mobile phones. The initial reasoning was that most of the phones came already setup in the English language, the Greek language option was not always available, and/or the switch between the languages took too many steps. The objective of this study was to find out the extent of the use of Greeklish in our society today through a case study and comparisons with other studies. Results show a very high use of Greeklish in all cases where technology was involved, while conclusions attribute this to be due to a conscious decision for convenience rather than just a technological constraint.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Networking, Telecommunication Technologies, Greeklish, Greenglish

1. Introduction

Greek is the official language of Greece and Cyprus and uses the Greek alphabet. It is estimated that the Greek alphabet has been in use since the eighth century BC and although there were debates regarding the establishment of either 'Demotic' (closer to the everyday language used by most of the population) or 'Katharevousa' (closer to ancient Greek), the Greek writing system had not undergone significant changes since ancient times, while the Greek alphabet served as a national symbol (Spilioti, 2009). The Greek alphabet consists of some letters which look similar to the letters in the Latin Alphabet, however even though they look the same, some of these letters have different pronunciation sounds in Greek. For instance, Greek A is pronounced like English A, whereas Greek B is pronounced like English V. Furthermore, the Greek language makes use of accents, some letters produce the same sounds as others, and the character of a letter may depend on where the letter is located in a particular word.

Greeklish (also referred to as Greenglish and Grenglish) comes from the words *Greek* and *English,* and is basically **Greek** written with Eng**lish** letters (Latin Alphabet).

At the moment, Greeklish may be termed as an electronic language (e-Language) since it exists as an unofficial written "language" that occurs through social media, digitally-mediated communication, and other electronic social networking technologies. The use of Greeklish is considered to have begun when SMS services became available on mobile phones (Laghos et. al, 2012), and the initial reasoning was that most of the phones came already setup in English, the Greek language option was not always available, and/or the switch between the languages was too complicated or took too many steps. It was then further popularized in the early days of the Internet (Tseliga, 2007; Androutsopoulos, 2009).

The transliteration of Greek into Greeklish may be phonetic, orthographic or a mixture of the two. The phonetic transliteration comes from the pronunciation sounds of the original Greek letters. For example the Greek 'o' and 'ω' (which are pronounced similarly) both can transliterate into the Roman 'o'. On the other hand the orthographic transliteration comes from the visual representation of the Greek letters with Roman equivalents. For example the Greek 'ω' can be transcribed as the Roman 'w' (Androutsopoulos, 2009; Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou, 2003; Spilioti, 2009). Words written in Greeklish may also include numbers to resemble Greek letters, such as the number "8" for the letter "θ".

Currently, Greeklish is an open and unrestricted language with no official rules. Very often transliterations of the same words from Greek to Greeklish are depicted differently from one person to another. This is mainly because each person has the freedom to transcribe it according to what sounds or seems right to them. This is not usually a problem however since the receiving person reading the message in Greeklish is usually able to immediately recognize and understand what the other person meant to communicate, even though he/she might have written it differently him/herself.

An example of how the expression "I want" translates intro Greek, and examples of the variety of the ways it can be written in Greeklish are shown below:

- English   – I want
- Greek   – θέλω
- Greeklish – thelw, thelo, 8elo, 8elw, …

Several discussion boards on Greek websites require their users to type in Greek and may ban users who type in Greeklish. Many people have a negative view on Greeklish and there exist several groups on Facebook who are against the use of Greeklish. In addition using Greeklish for business communications and other formal purposes is considered unprofessional.

However despite the negative attitudes towards it, the impact of Greeklish is so strong that apart from technology-mediated communication, other observations of its use include a few books written in Greeklish, the availability of summer schools to learn Greeklish, automated online Greeklish translation and converter tools, as well as uses in advertisements (Laghos et. al, 2013).

In public perception, the use of Greeklish has now reached worrying proportions. Questions arise such as: Is the Greek language under threat or is Greeklish just a fad that will pass? Through our study we present insights regarding the characteristics of Greeklish, its popularity and its perceived future.

2. Background Literature

As a result of the increased use of Greeklish on the Internet, in 2001 the Academy of Athens issued a statement which was released to the press concerning the rise of Greeklish and the possible substitution of the Greek by the Latin alphabet. The outcome was a heated debate where TV time was devoted to discussions and extensive coverage of the topic appeared in the press (Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou, 2003).

Since the popularization and globalization of the Internet, people have increasingly been using computers to communicate with each other (Laghos, 2011). These Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) activities happen mainly through written communication (e.g. forums, emails, online chats and instant messaging) and through audio and video (e.g. video-conferencing). CMC can be defined as "the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems (or non-networked computers) that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages" (December, 2011, pp1). A characteristic of CMC is that the time lapse between messages allows for reflection (Scotcit, 2003). CMC also stimulates linguistic interactions in a way which produces similar benefits to the ones generated by face-to-face collaborations (Blake, 2005). Through the use of CMC, online communities emerge (Laghos and Laghos, 2008). Preece (2002) states that an online community consists of people, a shared purpose, policies and computer systems.

Researchers note that there is a growing need for sociolinguistic research on how people actually communicate on the multilingual Internet (Danet and Herring, 2003). However, very little attention has been given to culture and communication in relation to CMC (Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou, 2003).

Tsiplakou states that "In the slowly-growing body of literature on linguistic practices in computer-mediated communication (CMC) or computer-mediated discourse (CMD) it is emerging that concomitant aspects of linguistic performance relate to the construction of particular sociolinguistic identities relevant to the medium, or, to adopt a less radical perspective, that sociolinguistic identities typical of face-to-face or written interaction are mediated by the social/communicative practices and norms relevant to, or accruing to, types of CMD" (Tsiplakou, 2009, pp. 361). Research literature on CMC has focused almost exclusively on English and has neglected development within populations communicating online in other languages (Danet and Herring, 2003). In more recent years however, researchers have begun showing interest in investigating the phenomenon of Greeklish, and results are already being published.

A study by Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou (2003) explored social attitudes towards Greeklish as they were represented in the Greek press identifying three main trends: "The first, a retrospective trend, views Greeklish as a serious threat to the Greek language; the second, prospective trend, approaches Greeklish as a transitory phenomenon which will soon become negligible due to technological advances; the third, resistive trend, points to the negative effects of globalization and relates Greeklish to other communication and sociocultural practices" (Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou, 2003, pp.1).

In a case study by Spilioti (2009), it was observed that when participants send SMS messages, their use of one or the other alphabet was a consistent choice for each participant, meaning that the each participant sticks to their usual choice of alphabetical encoding when sending SMS messages.

Laghos et al. (2012) investigated the use of Greeklish in the Social Network Site (SNS) YouTube by analyzing user comments on Greek videos. The audio of all selected videos was in Greek, and the people posting the comments had to be Greek-speakers living in Greece or Cyprus. The results showed that the vast majority of the messages (83.3%) were written in Greeklish, whereas only 9.3% were written in Greek, followed by 6.9% in English. In another study on Greeklish, Laghos et al. (2013) investigated the use of Greeklish in a more formal Greek language environment. More specifically, the study analyzed the language encoding of email messages exchanged between staff (academic and administrative) at the public universities in Cyprus, where results showed that 1 in 3 emails were written using Greeklish. The results of these studies show that the Internet has played a significant role in keeping Greeklish popular.

3. Methods and Results

Our case study looks into the current use of Greeklish in mobile phone communications (SMS messaging) and compares these results with the use of Greeklish in Internet Communications. 100 Greek-Cypriot people living in Cyprus took part in the study. They were all university students, aged between 17-23 and included both males and females living in all of the cities of the island. The participants took part in a short interview (carried out in person and on the telephone) were they were asked anonymous questions regarding their use and reasoning of Greeklish when sending SMS messages with their mobile phones.

Figure 1, shows the participants' responses to the question "When you send SMS messages to other Greek-speaking university students do you usually type your SMS messages using" where they could choose between the 3 options: Greek, English and Greeklish. The results show a dominating score for Greeklish in SMS communication where 91% of the respondents use this encoding. No significant differences in the choice of Greeklish were found regarding the gender of the respondents at this age group. Similarly, the type of mobile phone that the respondents had (smart phone or other) did not produce any significant difference in their choice of typing their SMS messages in Greeklish.
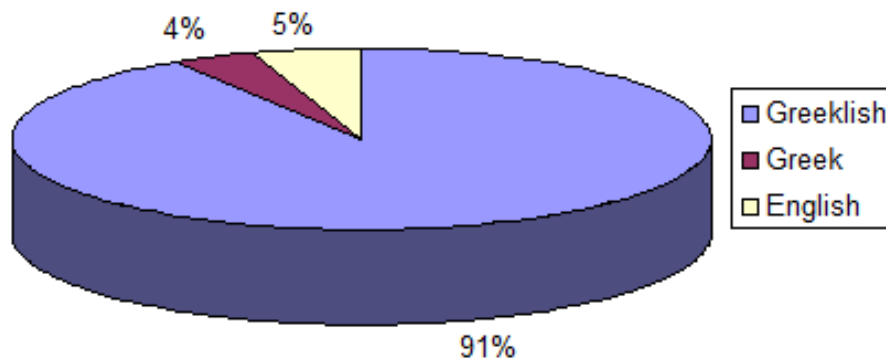
Figure 1 – Results of SMS message sending by Greek-speaking university students

In an open-ended question "For what reasons do you choose to type in Greeklish instead of Greek" the respondents' answers were mostly centered around the following reasons:

- Its easier
- Its faster
- I prefer it
- I never looked in to how to change the language on my phone
- I don't know how to write in Greek on my phone
- I can't be bothered to switch languages

Table 1 shows a comparison of the use of Greeklish in informal social media environments (YouTube), more formal social networking environments (university emails), and mobile telephone communications between students (SMS messages). The use of Greeklish is highest (91%) when sending SMS and in informal Social Media messages (83.8%) (Laghos et al., 2012), followed by formal Social Networking (33.5%) (Laghos et al., 2013). It was expected that the use of Greeklish would be higher in the social media environment than the social networking one as YouTube is a relatively informal environment where users can freely posts comments as they wish, however in the social networking case study (emails in formal working environment) the use of Greeklish was higher than anticipated. It should also be noted that Greek was used more than English in YouTube and emails, whereas English use was slighter higher than Greek with SMS use.

Table 1 – Comparison of the use of Greeklish in different environments

Transcription	Social Media Informal (YouTube) (Laghos et al., 2012)	Social Networking Formal (emails) (Laghos et al., 2013)	Mobile Phones Students (SMS messages)
Results			
Greeklish	83.8%	33.5%	91%
Greek	9.3%	49.7%	4%
English	6.9%	16.8%	5%
Keyboard/pad			
Greek	9%	50%	4%
English	91%	50%	96%
Communication			
Greek	93%	83%	95%
English	7%	17%	5%

The keyboard/pad language refers to the selected language on the users' typing interface when sending their messages. Therefore "English" included the English and Greeklish messages which are both written with the English language selected on the keyboard. Figure 2 shows the results. With mobile phones and social media, Greek was the selected language in only 4% and 9% of the cases, while in the email social networking cases Greek accounted to 50%. Not a surprising result considering that computers at these institutions are equipped with Greek support, and given their nature, a more formal communication is expected.
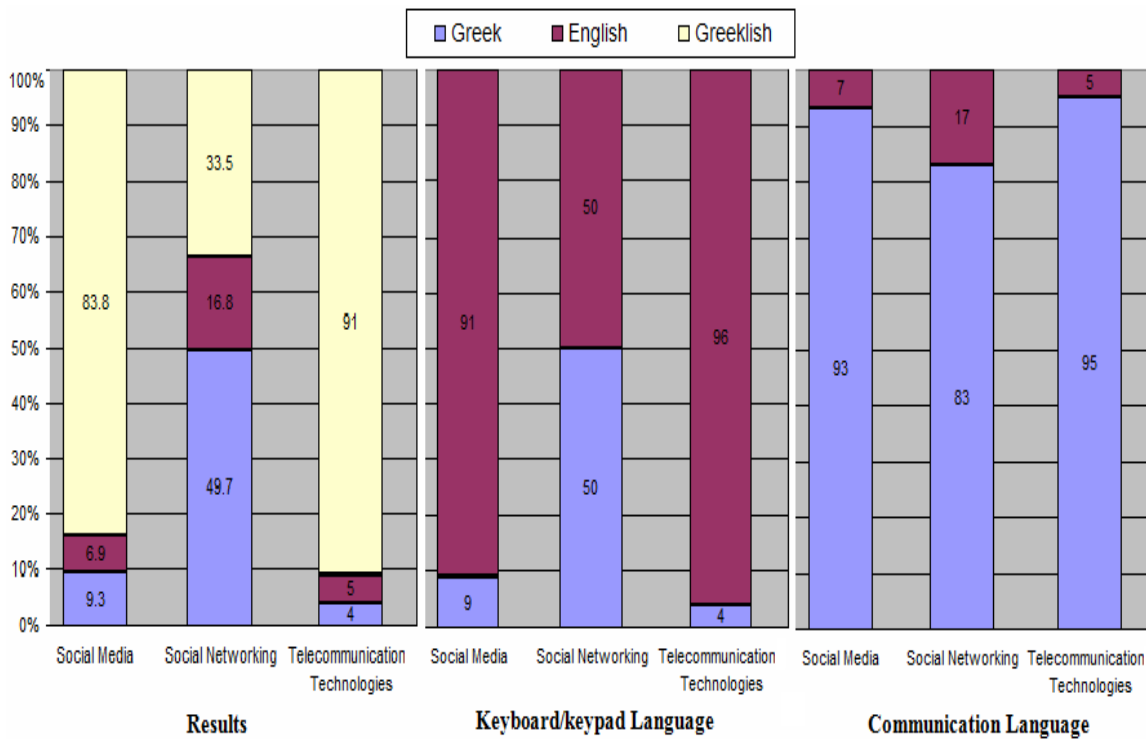
Figure 2 – Results, Keyboard/keypad Language, and Communication Language

A characteristic of Greeklish is that a reader must know Greek in order to be able to understand a message written in Greeklish since Greeklish is basically Greek just written with Latin characters. Non-Greek speakers may be able to read most Greeklish, however what they read will make no sense. Therefore in the Communication Language (Figure 2) the Greek category includes Greek as well as Greeklish messages. Greek was by far the preferred communication language in all 3 cases.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study addressed the issue of Greeklish and examined its current popularity through literature review and a case study investigating SMS usage by university students. The results were then compared to other studies and useful trends were identified. With regards to our original question: Is the Greek language under threat or is Greeklish just a fad that will pass?, Spilioti points out that "the surviving of local, national languages is claimed to be threatened by the dominant status of English as a lingua franca" (Spilioti, 2009, pp.396). First indications might be worrying as in our case study 91% of the SMS messages were written in Greeklish, however 95% of the messages were communicated in Greek as was the case with YouTube (93%) and the emails (83%) (Laghos et al, 2012; Laghos et al, 2013). This shows that the Greek language is not under threat as people want to and are communicating with each other in Greek.

The same does not apply to the transcriptions of the messages where the results show that in environments where it's not required to type in Greek, as was the SMS and YouTube case studies, Greeklish accounted for 91% and 83.8% (Laghos et al., 2012) respectively. Even in more formal environments as was the case with email exchanges, Greeklish accounted for about 1 in 3 emails. This indicates that given the option, people seem to prefer to type in Greeklish.

Very often technical difficulties and technical limitations are given as the reasons which make people resort to the use of Greeklish. And since using Greeklish is considered unprofessional, many people do not admit to using it themselves. However, research, case studies, and responses to anonymous interviews and questionnaires, are showing the opposite. As far as technology mediated communication environments, which were initially English language oriented, Greek language support has increased significantly over the years, but the high use Greeklish still remains. It is becoming apparent that it is not just the social media or technical limitations that encourage the use of Greeklish, it's also Greeklish itself. One of the characteristics of Greeklish is flexibility, as there are many ways to write the same words, and spelling is not as important as long as the message can be understood. This makes using Greeklish easier and faster than typing in Greek.

In addition, when people are communicating through electronic technologies there are times where they will also want to use English words (e.g. to refer to the names of movies, links to websites, etc). By typing in Greeklish, they can do this without having to keep switching between the languages on their mobile and computer devices. Some might see this as being lazy, while others will argue that it's being practical and effective since they communicate what they want with each other faster.

Another factor that appears to support the use of Greeklish is Cypriot Greek. Cypriot Greek is a variety of Greek spoken in Cyprus, while Cypriot-Greek speakers are perceived as kind, friendly, sincere and humorous (Themistocleous, 2010; Papapavlou, 1998; Papapavlou and Sophocleous, 2007). Cypriot Greek is used in informal, oral communication and does not have a standard, official orthography (Themistocleous, 2010). Its phonetic apparatus includes geminate sounds, post-alveolar fricatives and affricates, which do not exist in standard Modern Greek (Themistocleous et. al, 2012). On the other hand, the English letter J for instance, can be used to represent one of these post-alveolar sounds making this Roman character a ready-made solution for Greek-Cypriot Internet users (Themistocleous, 2010), and hence Greeklish a likely choice for such transliterations.

Formal documents like for example online newspapers, sports sites, and country portals are written in the Greek language with Greek fonts. While standard Greek is the medium of instruction in public education and serves formal functions (Themistocleous, 2010), Greeklish is highly used in informal e-communications. As SMS, Youtube comments, and email communication are just a few of the many ways that people can communicate through digitally-mediated communication, more research in the area of Greeklish is necessary. For instance, similar studies can be carried out to investigate the use of Greeklish in different settings and other social network sites like Facebook in order to determine whether the websites or environments also play a role in how much Greeklish is used. Future research directions can also compare the use of Greeklish by participants' age groups, gender, location, occupation and other characteristics, in order to confirm its driving factors. Whether Greeklish is a just a fad or will continue to penetrate into written Greek communication remains to be seen. Finally, although mobile phones, social media, and other social networking technologies may have been the initial cause of the creation of Greeklish, the characteristics of Greeklish itself also contribute to its widespread use. This study will be repeated periodically over the years to investigate whether any standards for the transliteration of Greeklish will arise. In addition, the continuation of this study will enable us to identify any trends in the use of Greeklish and follow its rising or declining popularity. In conclusion, at the present, using Greeklish appears to be a conscious decision for convenience rather than just a technological constraint.

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