Is there a non-colonial language in Cyprus? And if yes, should we all speak Eteo-Cypriot?

nvp

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No one can argue that language is not, at a certain level of analysis, a political tool. People in Cyprus intuitively know this, and that's why I won't go into the theory, but instead focus on the practical.

Language is political, and we, as individuals and groups, are doing politics. Sometimes consciously, other times less so. This website was also created by a series of political decisions, some of which quite conscious (it is a website which doesn't limit itself to one part of Cyprus, even though the default option is to segregate). It is, among other things, a spiritual successor of an older political project, the 35–33 Media Collective, but it's not the same as 35–33 for many reasons. Among them: language policy.

The 35–33 website was trilingual, in Greek, Turkish, and English — that was a very explicit decision, and one that failed to be implemented in practice. Kontrasusta consciously doesn't take a stance on language. It doesn't have separate language versions, it doesn't aspire to make every article available in multiple languages, it generally avoids setting clear-cut boundaries. As a result, it accepts that English is its predominate language because this is what its people currently want. What for 35–33 was a failure to follow through and implement, for Kontrasusta is not a problem.

But in my experience doing politics in the progressive milieu of Cyprus, the use of English is not entirely uncontroversial. I have sympathy for some reasons and I am frustrated by others, and I think that Kontrasusta's early days is a good opportunity to discuss this.

The reason that I consider the least legitimate is that which presents English in Cyprus as a colonial language, and therefore undesirable, especially in the political groups you will find me working with (even at the cost of losing a catchy slogan for the next banner we will march under).

Of course, English was the language of the administration during the British colonial rule. The British did introduce it in the Greek and Turkish educational systems of Cyprus as a second language without a lot of success though, and after the Republic of Cyprus was proclaimed, English remained dominant in the areas of law and trade. But it never become a threat to the local languages, in the way it did in settler-colonies like the US, Australia, and Ireland (yes, Ireland too). And across the world, with many languages dying every month, the culprit is not the inter-

national nature English, but the languages of stronger socio-political groups around them. This is important, keep it in mind while reading what follows.

Usually this negative reaction to English is followed by a suggestion to use both Greek and Turkish in our material, or at the very least, to use shared words, or mix the two (Bırleşık Κύπρος Parkı, never forget!). This is in itself a political statement, and one I totally agree with. But is Greek and Turkish really non-colonial languages in the context of Cyprus?

Speakers of Cypriot Greek feel it in their bones that Hellenic Greek was imposed on them through the educational system by the use of force, psychological and quite often physical too (and the theoretical linguist in me also wants to point it out that it wasn't even imposed with serious pedagogical methods that had any chance to produce learning outcomes). Hellenic Greek, or rather an approximation of it produced by teachers who also never acquired it, is mostly the language of Greek nationalism in Cyprus. For very few Cypriots is Hellenic Greek a native language, one acquired without long-lasting trauma (and those people acquired Hellenic Greek by either living in Greece, or having Hellenic Greek family members, not through the educational system of Cyprus). But that's not the end of it. Greek in Cyprus claimed a lot more victims.

Contrary to the bi-communal Imaginary, Cyprus was never reciprocally bilingual (reciprocal bilingualism is by far not the norm, ask a Flemish person for the long version of this). While a lot of different communities lived together in Cyprus, Greek (notably, vernacular Cypriot Greek), was the hegemonic language for a very long time, and it wasn't threatened by any colonial ruler. You can see in Issue 9 of Syspirosi's Entropia Magazine how Cypriot Greek was widely spoken by Turkish Cypriots, while the opposite was rare – very few Greek Cypriots were ever bilingual. In the same issue you can also read how the Greek of the nationalist educational system was imposed upon the Cypriot Maronites, driving their native Sanna, a Levantine Arabic language, to near-extinction. "The Third Motherland" is an excellent documentary that touches upon this issue too.

So Greek, even Cypriot Greek, is as colonial as English, and we don't have enough fluent speakers of Sanna to organise with. But Turkish is okay, right? You know it's not. Turkish was also imposed upon a lot of Turkish Cypriots during the several rounds of nationalist violence. Socially hegemonic as it was, Cypriot Greek was either the only native language of many Turkish Cypriots 50 years ago, or their more fluent language among those available to them. Turkish nationalism, much like Greek, also imposed linguistic homogeneity. There's also Cypriot Turkish of course, for which I am not qualified to talk, but which seems not to be stubborn enough, unlike Cypriot Greek which simply refuses to die.

The Cypriot Sign Language is also facing pressure from spoken languages, especially the dominant Greek and Turkish, because of the unfortunate assimilationist stance of many in the Deaf Community and the wider society, who limit the ability of Deaf children to acquire a native language, instead expecting them to find a way to learn a spoken language through lip-reading, much later in life, and with horrificly low success rates, for pretty obvious reasons.

Western Armenian, Kurbetcha, and other more recent minority languages are also facing various levels of either threat, or societal pressure, but importantly, not from English. And of course all those languages are all standing on the long decomposed body of Eteo-Cypriot, a language so dead that we hardly know anything about it, so there's no chance we all learn it and truly be linguistically "decolonised" — if we are to take the whole 'colonial language' argument seriously (also, if we start as adults, we will need to try really hard to reach fluency, children have

it so easy when it comes to learning languages, but until they grow up, or we find endless time to devote to second language learning, we are stuck with what we already speak).

Maybe so far you get the impression that I believe that we should also just speak English, or perhaps another international language, even an artificial one. There's some intersections between anarchism and Esperanto after all!

But no. I don't want us to all speak English, or Esperanto. The point is much simpler: using English is not more colonial than using Greek or Turkish, and it's much more achievable than learning Sanna, or Western Armenian, or Russian and Kurdish (which are actually the native languages of a lot of people in Cyprus) before we design our next banner. And since not everyone speaks Greek, and not everyone speaks Turkish, but 75% of Cypriots have communicative knowledge of English, I don't think English should be shunned as colonial when it gives us access to the people we want to communicate our ideals to.

Languages are regularly used to make political statements — having a banner in Greek and Turkish, instead of one in either language, or in English, says a lot about your political stance on nationalism. But we also want to communicate more than our stance on nationalism, and we also want to communicate more substance than just "I'm using both languages in an environment where this is frowned upon".

With the useless colonialism argument out of the way, there's some real language issues we must deal with. The people who do not want our movement to rely solely on English are not wrong.

Previously I wrote that 75% of Cypriots have communicative knowledge of English. The keyword here is communicative. Not everyone can follow highly specialised discussions or texts in English, and many among those who can follow, do not feel comfortable replying in English instead of their native language. Most of us learned English as a second language, and usually in an educational system that used terrible pedagogical methods, and was also not aiming for proficiency.

Also, for a lot of people, English was not their international second language. For people who came to Cyprus from the ex-USSR, Russian is, not English. For people who came from our neighbourhood in the Middle East, often Turkish is. From people who came from certain parts of Africa, French is still more widely used than English. No country is ever really monolingual, and Cyprus is a good example (not the most extreme though, say hello to Papua New Guinea with 832 native languages). There have been occasions our knowledge of English was simply not enough to communicate with people who approached us.

There is need for translations of written texts, and there's need for interpretation. Few groups make translations a priority, and even among those who do because it is politically desirable, do not always do it enthusiastically, because translations are hard — a bilingual is not automatically a translator. Interpretation is even harder, it's an amazing but mentally demanding skill, and those who posses it are disproportionately asked put it in use. Importantly, those translations almost never happen between Greek and Turkish, because, as mentioned before, reciprocal bilingualism is almost non-existent in Cyprus, and Turkish Cypriots who natively know Greek are getting older and older.

It is a challenge to those who want to reduce the milieu's reliance on English, especially those who are fluent multilinguals, but also to all of us. Can we succeed where 35–33 failed? Can we develop a robust network of radical translators that will make sure most of our political work is accessible in as many languages relevant to Cyprus we want to target?Will we dedicate time in

learning new languages? We need infrastructure, and we need dedication to acquiring the necessary knowledge of both the languages, and techniques. And we need to make promoting early childhood multilingualism a political principle, even if on the face of it looks like a surprising priority for a political movement to have.

And in the mean time, English is still better than linguistic isolation.

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