

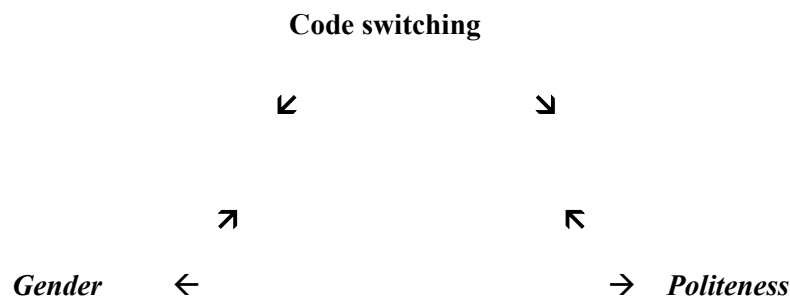
## CODE-SWITCHING, GENDER AND POLITENESS: A STUDY IN THE LONDON GREEK-CYPRIT COMMUNITY<sup>1</sup>

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### 1. Introduction and aims of the study<sup>4</sup>



In this study we explore the three-way link between three topics which are usually studied independently in Sociolinguistics, namely code-switching (CS), gender and politeness. Each of these has been extensively studied in its own right, but the interaction between them has not been paid the same degree of attention. Indeed, both gender and politeness have overwhelmingly been studied in monolingual contexts; we wish to argue that studying them in bilingual communities can throw a lot of additional light on each topic. In particular, our purpose here will be to explore whether bilingual women and men, in the community we have studied, make different use of CS in relation to their politeness strategies.

As Brown & Levinson wrote (1987, 1999), politeness is in itself a universal aspect of human language, but different societies place different emphasis on *positive*

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<sup>1</sup> A fuller version of this paper can be found in *Estudios de Sociolingüística* 4(2), Special issue on “Language and gender: An interdisciplinary perspective”, 2003.

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*politeness* (expressions of sympathy, approval, interest, agreement, etc) and *negative politeness* (respecting the interlocutor's autonomy, their need for personal space and freedom of action). Code-switching patterns also vary widely from community to community and often even within the same community. Gender, too, has increasingly been shown to be a relative concept in relation to linguistic behaviour, with norms for men and women's speech being sharply differentiated in some communities and overlapping extensively in others, to the point where it is not always clear whether it is gender roles as such, or some other factors, which are responsible for the differences which are found.

Before describing our study carried out in the London Greek-Cypriot community, we make brief reference to some of the principal works in which code-switching, gender and politeness have been discussed or studied in relation to at least one of the other categories.

### **1.1. Gender and politeness**

Brown (1994), in a study of a community of Mayan Indians in Tenejapa (Southern Mexico, observes that women show more positive politeness (PP) to friends than men do, and more negative politeness (NP) in public. Holmes (1995) argues that, overall, women are more likely than men to express positive politeness in their use of language. Women and men have different norms when it comes to what is polite or appropriate for a given context, but overall women show more concern for the feelings of their interlocutors. Deuchar (1991) offered an explanation for this finding, which has often been repeated in different forms. She suggested that owing to their more powerless position in society, women need to pay closer attention to their own *face*, and that of their interlocutor –the notion of face referring back to Brown & Levinson (1987). It is in order to safeguard *face needs* that women tend to use more *politeness strategies* than men.

### **1.2. Gender and language choice/CS**

Gal's classic study (1979) of the speech of men and women in the Austrian village of Oberwart, showed that women were spearheading the shift from Hungarian,

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<sup>4</sup> The financial assistance of the Leventis Foundation in collecting and analyzing the data presented here

the traditional language with peasant connotations, to German, the national language and the language of economic and social advancement. Gal did not, however, generalize the finding so as to make a general comment about gender differences. She presented the finding as linked to conditions in this specific community, where Hungarian represented a traditional mode of life, which did not favour women. They therefore preferred to use German, which for them represented a more urban and modern lifestyle.

Evidence from Swigart's (1991) study in Dakar shows that even within the same "community", women do not behave as a monolithic group. Whereas women were, on the whole, thought to act as champions of the traditional language, Wolof, Swigart found that young mothers code-switched intensively between Wolof and French. On the other hand, a prominent group of younger, fashion-conscious girls ('les disquettes') distinguished themselves by conspicuous monolingual use of French, to the exclusion of Wolof. This shows that the linguistic varieties available within a society's linguistic repertoire may carry quite different social meanings for sub-groups within that society.

Cheshire & Gardner-Chloros (1998) tested whether apparently well-established findings on differences between men and women's speech were supported in bilingual contexts. In particular, they investigated whether the *sociolinguistic verity* (Chambers, 1994) that men use more non-standard speech-forms than women was reinforced by a finding that men, overall, used CS –generally viewed as a non-standard form of speech– more than women as well. But no significant differences were found in the quantity *or* type of CS produced by women and men in the two communities studied, namely the Greek Cypriot community in London and the Punjabi community in Birmingham. Instead, there were highly significant differences in type and quantity of CS *between* the two communities, and a remarkable amount of variation, as well, between individuals, regardless of gender. They concluded that CS, like other forms of "non-standardness", has different meanings in different communities and within sub-groups in the same community.

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is gratefully acknowledged.

### 1.3. CS and politeness

There is a considerable literature on CS and conversational functions, best represented in Auer (1998). These studies do not focus in particular on CS and politeness, but they do show how CS fulfills a wide variety of conversational functions in bilingual settings.

More specifically, Stroud (1998) made use of an analysis of CS in order to understand how change is coming about in Gapun, a Papua New Guinean village. In a speech-mode known as Kros, an exclusively female discourse associated with anger and self-assertion, women switch from one variety to another in order to ‘shift authorship’, thus making their attack less direct. For example, by switching from Taiap to Tok Pisin to carry out a threat, the female speaker disguises her own agency in the punishment procedure which she is advocating. CS is then a form of “double-voicing” in the sense that a code-switched utterance is an appropriation of the words, but implies the ownership or authorship of the words lies with someone else.

Li Wei’s (1994) book-length study of the Chinese community on Tyneside shows how language choices in a bilingual setting can be an indicator of co-operativeness, via the pragmatic notion of *preference organization*. For example, the younger, more English-speaking generation was found to mark *dispreferred responses* (i.e. responses other than those expected/desired by the previous speaker) by replying in English to a question asked in Chinese.

However, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have brought together the three topics, (gender, code switching and politeness), as is our purpose here.

## 2. Language and gender

In recent years, a shift has taken place within language and gender studies from essentialist to constructionist views of gender (Winter & Pauwels, 2000; Coates & Cameron, 1991). Therefore while, along with many others, we are continuing to explore links between gender and speech, we do so in full awareness that gender is a complex, culturally and socially constructed category, and we are wary of any suggestion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between gender and linguistic behaviour, including CS.

The rigid and essentialist approach to language and gender was given an early blow by Milroy (1980), who, in Belfast, found the usual gender differences in the use of vernacular forms to be *reversed* in cases where women were connected by dense multiplex *networks*, traditionally more typical of men.

The *cultural* relativity of Western findings on language and gender has been highlighted by studies carried out in Muslim societies, where men have been found to use more the standard variants than women of the same social class (Bakir, 1986; Khan, 1991) - the opposite of the pattern of sex differentiation normally found in the West.

We can see clearly that each community has its own gender patterns when it comes to language choice, by looking at different ethnic groups within the same overall social structure, as in the case of *domain-based surveys* carried out in Australia (described in Winter & Pauwels, 2000). Here it was found that different communities manifest different patterns: in the Vietnamese community, the “neighbourhood” domain was more associated with the use of Vietnamese for men and boys than for women and girls whereas in the ‘transaction’ domain (ie market places), women used the minority language more (Pauwels, 1995). However, in the Greek community, this pattern was found to be reversed (Tsokalidou, 1994).

Proposals to deconstruct macro-entities such as “speech communities” in favour of productive and dynamic analytical tools such as the notion of *community of practice* have been put forward by Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1999) and Holmes & Meyerhoff (1999). A community of practice is described as:

[...] an aggregate of people who, united by a common enterprise, develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs and values-in short practices.  
(Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1999: 186)

Last in this section we would mention the study carried out by Freed & Greenwood (1996), whose findings derived from a study of conversations between 4 male and 4 female pairs of American students. Freed and Greenwood analysed the speakers’ speech in 3 different conversational contexts: spontaneous speech, considered talk (whereby the speakers were asked to discuss a particular topic), and collaborative talk (whereby the speaker were engaged in conversation whilst filling in questionnaires). Their findings indicated that the type of talk, and not the sex of the speaker, motivates and thus explains the language forms that occur in their speech.

### 3. Politeness and gender

It has often been suggested that politeness is linked to *powerlessness* rather than to gender as such. Brown & Levinson (1999) point out that not only do men interrupt women, but high-status men interrupt low-status men, high-status women interrupt low-status women, adults interrupt children, etc. Classic studies such as Zimmerman & West (1975) confirm this picture.

Complementing this picture, other studies show women as more *cooperative* in conversation, such as the study by Fishman (1978), which showed the women in white middle-class American couples making greater efforts than the men to keep conversations going, by initiating and building on topics more frequently than the men when the conversation faltered. In single-sex groups, Coates (1991) has shown *collaborativeness* to be an essential feature of conversations between women in their friendship groups, with overlapping speech considered a way of building up joint meanings, as opposed to the more adversarial style of men in their single-sex interaction.

However, in Freed & Greenwood (1996), both men and women came across as being cooperative. Their findings indicated that the *type of talk*, more than the sex of the speaker, motivates and thus explains the language forms that occur in their conversations.

Also, in Brown's 1994 study, while on the surface cooperative strategies are being used, what is being achieved may be opposition and disagreement rather than compliance.

So, overall, while women may be using more overt polite or cooperative strategies, whether they are in fact using these for compliance needs to be decided in context, in the light of the norms of the community under investigation.

### 4. The Greek-Cypriot community in London

Greek Cypriots started arriving in London in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but the main flow of immigration took place in the 1950's and 60's for economic reasons, and after the Turkish invasion of the island in 1974. While the earliest migrants were generally peasants in Cyprus, and often illiterate, the second group of refugees was much more

varied in its social and educational circumstances. Nowadays, the population of Greek-Cypriots living in London is estimated at around 180-200,000 (Christodoulou-Pipis, 1991), comprising 3 to 4 generations.

**4.1.** The first wave of migrants generally spoke the Greek Cypriot Dialect (GCD) only; due to lack of education, they were not competent in Standard Modern Greek (SMG), which was, and remains, the language of education and the official language in Cyprus. Their knowledge of English remained minimal, as their lives in London revolved around the Greek Cypriot community. Subsequent generations brought up in London acquired GCD in the home environment and had the opportunity to learn SMG at Greek schools run by the Greek Cypriot Education Mission and the Church. Today, the generation of Greek Cypriots born in the UK is educated in English, and so English-dominant, although most are fairly fluent in GCD, which, in Gumperz (1991) terms, acts as a “we” code (the ingroup variety, used mainly in the home).

As regards code switching, earlier studies (e.g. Gardner-Chloros, 1992) have shown that the older generation speaks primarily GCD, incorporating certain English terms, or creating new words within the dialect based on English ones. The middle generation (made up mainly of 2nd generation migrants) uses both, and code-switches copiously, including within the sentence in many instances. The younger generation is dominant in English and switches to GCD in certain contexts, depending on the interlocutor and their own competence in the dialect.

**4.2.** Gender roles used to differ markedly in the community, a social configuration which the Cypriots brought with them from Cyprus, with the men playing the role of authority figures in the family, and women being responsible for bringing up the children. Nowadays we found a tension between parents and children, revolving around issues to do with sexual freedom, arranged marriages, dowries and socializing with non Greek Cypriots. These observations are important for this study, as there are still expectations regarding role differentiation and the amount of freedom appointed to young Greek-Cypriots, depending on their sex.

## 5. Definition of CS and two relevant assumptions

In this study we have looked at CS between English and the GCD in a broad sense encompassing language choices between conversational turns, as well as what some would consider “real” CS, that is language changes *within* turns (or utterances) and within sentences, which some authors (e.g. Muysken, 2000) have termed *code-mixing*.

Unlike the case in grammatical studies, where only CS within sentences may be of interest, from a Conversational Analytic (CA) point of view, both types of switch may be of interest. Although we did find a regular association between the varieties at play and the meanings to which they are put –prompting us to talk of GCD as a “we-code” above– we were open to the Conversation Analysts’ claim that a particular variety need not invariably be associated with a particular type of meaning, but that switches may instead be significant for the contrast which they bring about, such contrasts being exploited in order to create local effects and meanings.

In understanding the role and associations of the two varieties in the community, we found Sifianou’s study (1992) particularly relevant, even though it focuses on mainland Greek as opposed to the transplanted Greek Cypriot Dialect which we were studying. Sifianou discusses the contrasts between English and Greek culture in matters of politeness, and argues that English culture places greater value on distance and Greek culture on intimacy. Consequently, the cultural norm in England is more oriented to NP and not imposing on the interlocutor and their private space; for example in English speakers make use of very indirect requests such as “You don’t have a pen, do you?”. Greek, according to Sifianou, is more of a PP language, using more direct forms of speech, such as imperatives (“Give me a pen”), which are not seen as impolite. PP markers such as diminutives and terms of endearment are also much more common in Greek (though there are exceptions, like the ‘chirpy Cockney’ or ‘warm-hearted Northerner’s’ stereotypical use of *darling*, *love*, *sweetheart*, etc. to complete strangers).

The reason why this difference is relevant, as will be seen, is that in this community, women in particular seem to switch to GCD first as a means of legitimizing direct statements, commands, etc and, secondly, in order to indicate support, solidarity, intimacy, etc.

## 6. The data

Two main bodies of data have been used. The first consists in transcripts of 30 interviews carried out in the community in 1990 with informants from the working class or lower middle class. The subjects were 15 men and 15 women, from three different age groups: over sixty, between thirty-five and fifty, and between fourteen and eighteen.

The second body of data consists of 12 hours of recording of meetings of a Youth Organization at one of the North London community centres. The participants were 5 females and 5 males between the ages of 23-29. The meetings are relatively informal, and the topics of discussion revolve around organising community activities.

Initially, we were looking out for four possible cases where it seemed likely that CS would coincide with PP or NP strategies:

1. Cases where the speaker switches to the “we” code (GCD), in order to express solidarity, bonding, empathy etc. This would constitute one way of using CS to express PP.
2. Cases where the speaker switches to a variety which *distances* her from the interlocutor (e.g. for scolding or indicating disapproval), or from the speech act she is performing. In this case CS is used for NP, as the reproach/reproof etc is *depersonalised* by the switch.
3. Thirdly, we expected a mixed mode to be used sometimes to include a variety of interlocutors of differing linguistic competence –for example young and English-dominant, as well as old and GCD-dominant. This NP strategy respects the interlocutor’s right to choose whichever variety s/he wishes.
4. Finally, the CS mode can be used to express PP in cases where the mixed variety, and not the GCD in its pure form, which carries the ingroup connotations, i.e. when it is itself the “we-code”.

In relation to each of these possibilities, our aim was to see whether these strategies were exploited differently by men and women.

As this study represents work in progress and not all the transcripts have as yet been fully analysed, we have chosen to concentrate on three functions, which figured prominently in the code-switching patterns of the participants, which we have labeled *humour*, *bonding*, and *dampening directness*. These do not correspond in a one-to-one fashion with the categories above, as they are drawn directly from the data and the same speech act sometimes has multiple motivations. Readers will also notice that there are significant overlaps between the three, which reinforces the idea that there is a general politeness function associated with CS. In particular, while there is a clear division between PP and NP strategies, the categories we have called “bonding” and “humour”

(in which PP strategies are used) are very close, the one being almost a subcategory of the other.

## 7. Humour

As several authors have remarked, telling jokes and being humorous is traditionally considered unfeminine and so is generally less common amongst women. At the same time, several of the subjects we interviewed mentioned that they used GCD or switched to GCD for humorous effect. We therefore looked at whether this was equally so among women and among men, and found a number of examples of women in particular using GCD for humorous effects. Not only do they use references to Greek cultural concepts or stereotypes to make the others laugh, but, more significantly, the *actual fact* of CS allows women to make jokes by defusing any seriousness, by referring to shared knowledge, and thirdly by allowing them a second “voice”, as in the example given by Stroud above (see p. 2).

In Example 1, the speakers are talking about hiring a boat for a Greek party which they are organising.

Female speakers are designated F1, F2, etc and male speakers M1, M2 and so forth, and xxx indicates inaudible passages.

### Example 1

1. F1 Does it look like you can have a Greek night in it?
2. M1 Yeah, yeah, it looks very nice inside
3. F1 Ok...
4. M2 xxx
5. M1 Well... its quite wide...
6. F1 th- th- that ψαροβάρκα that me and Poly went and saw, I  
[*fishing- boat*]  
just did no see a Greek night going on there

In line 6 the speaker switches to Greek to refer to the boat she saw as a fishing boat. The term used has connotations of peasantness, conjuring up images of traditional fishing villages in Cyprus. The incongruous connotations of the word in the context of a party in London create a humorous effect, and there is general laughter.

Example 2 is taken from another youth meeting. The speakers are talking about finding a laser printer in order to print out flyers to distribute to their members. As in

the example above, the (female) speaker switches to Greek to insert playful discourse into the interaction.

Example 2

1. M1 xxx happen to know anyone that has like a colour laser jet...
2. F1 I know a place where they do xxx
3. M1 yeah
4. F1 xxx
5. M1 what make are they?
6. F1 Εν ηξερω, εν λεπτομερειες  
[I don't know, these are details]

In this case, the speaker is relying on her interlocutors' familiarity with Greek culture, in that she is adopting the voice or persona of a particular Greek stereotype, that of a laid-back type who won't bother with detail. In this way, she justifies her ignorance technical detail by bringing in another "voice" which represents this particular Greek attitude –and causes general hilarity through her "acting" of this part.

## 8. Bonding

A second important function of CS, which appears to be linked to gender in our data, is the use of GCD by women to indicate solidarity, identification or sympathy. In Example 3, the speakers are discussing potential topics for a conference. F1 makes reference to a traditional aspect of the Greek Cypriot culture: mothers' concern about their daughters finding a husband and getting married:

Example 3

1. F1 Am I the only person that gets xxx by their parents already?
2. M1 What, about getting married?
3. F1 Yeah, she started today.
4. F2 xxx μανα σου?  
[your mother?]

F2 responds to F1's utterance by switching to Greek in line 4. This can be viewed as an act of PP, in that she is identifying with speaker F1 as another female Greek Cypriot. Her switch indicates solidarity, using the language of the culture in which such traditional maternal ambitions towards the marriages of daughters prevail. Gender therefore plays an important role in this switch. Whilst the topic of marriage within the community is relevant to all its members, it has much greater consequences

for women, and, as such, requires more positive politeness strategies in order to indicate solidarity.

Example 4 illustrates the same function in a cross-gender context, containing a similar “sympathetic” use of CS. The conversation took place in M’s car, driving from one of the meetings to a train station.

Example 4

1. F I’ve been a bit stressed lately
2. M γιατί?  
[why?]

Prior interaction has been predominantly in English, but M switches to Greek to shift towards a more intimate level. Use of Greek, the “we code”, to indicate this solidarity constitutes an act of PP. As we can see, both female and male speakers switch to Greek to indicate sympathy or identification and to minimise distance between the speakers, though this function seemed particularly common among women. This function is often remarked on by speakers themselves, as in the following discussion of text messaging:

Example 5

- F1. English letters, but we do a little joke in- in you know, Greek but with the English letters, just text each other  
“καλημερα κουμπαρα, πως παει?”  
[good morning, friend, how’s it going]  
just occasionally, you know... it’s just
- F2. Yeah, it’s a kind of bonding thing, isn’t it?
- F1. It’s a bonding and playful thing... yeah, but definitely there is more of a bond if you can speak... if they can understand... if they are also Cypriot

### 9. Dampening directness

The third particularly “female” use of CS which we noticed is one we have termed *Dampening directness*. Switching to GCD seems a way of allowing women to be forthright in various ways which they would find more difficult in English. This may seem to be at odds with the fact that women’s roles in the Greek Cypriot community are less “liberated” than among most English people: in the examples below, they are using the switch to GCD to break out of the submissive female role, not to conform with it. We deduce that this is partly because, as Sifianou pointed out, the actual language is



- M1 It will be around four days, I imagine  
 F1 Ok, four days, good... and what time?

The potentially face-threatening act –an escalation of repeated questions which had already been phrased pretty directly– is carried off thanks to the switch to Greek, which not only allows greater directness but is also the we code and the language of humour.

### 10. Discussion and conclusions

As in many other communities, Greek Cypriot speakers in London, who have two languages available to them, can express PP or NP through use of CS, in accordance with the topic of conversation, the context, the interlocutor, and numerous other factors. The possibilities afforded by a. the different connotations and conventions associated with English and GCD, combined with the possibility of “double-voicing”, constitute a powerful toolkit for women in particular, who, through the use of CS, can get away with jokes, curses, strong repartee, commands, etc while mitigating any aggressive or unfeminine implications of such behaviour.

The use of CS for *humour* and for *bonding* appears to be a way of reaching out to the interlocutor and respecting their positive face needs. Its use in *dampening directness* has to do with allowing the interlocutor freedom of action to respond as they wish to a command or other direct speech act, and thereby a way of respecting their negative face. Switching to the GCD from English can mark PP by the use of diminutives or terms of endearment or expressions of sympathy or interest. NP can be marked by shifting authorship and thus allowing the addressee more leeway as to how he/she understands the comment, or by adopting a more authoritative voice without assuming the role of the agent.

Our observations, taking into consideration the fact that directness is more acceptable in Greek, suggest that women in this community make particular use of CS as a softening device to carry out certain direct speech acts, which require NP and PP strategies to attenuate their directness. Their switch to Greek in such cases adds humour or “shifts authorship” (for example by bringing in voices associated with Greek culture). The directness in itself seems to be a way of holding their own when they are interacting with men. Thus they can both stand up to the opposite sex through their

forthright repartees, and avoid sounding overbearing thanks to the humorous undertones brought in by CS. Women also used CS for solidarity in certain contexts which are directly relevant to them, e.g. in talking about mothers and their attitudes towards their daughter's marital status. It could be that women talk about these issues more than men, and so have occasion to use these PP strategies to a greater extent –but this is an empirical matter which is beyond our scope here.

This limited study therefore indicates that women make particular use of these strategies to get round some of the traditional constraints on women's discourse, such as the expectation that it will be less forceful, pressing or direct than that of men, or that women should avoid being humorous. In other forms of humour, which we have not discussed here, e.g. the use of coarseness and references to peasantness, CS appears to be more of a male strategy.

Overall, in spite of the remarks above, gender in itself would appear less important than other factors, such as the power relationship between the speakers and the conventions governing behaviour (which of course include gendered behaviour), in the community. Finally we should not forget the possible influence of individual/personality factors, which we have not attempted to describe here, but which may exercise considerable effect on the use of politeness as well as on CS.

This exploratory study provides an interesting extension to the findings in Cheshire & Gardner-Chloros (1998), which suggested that women were just as likely as men to use CS in spite of its non-standard image. In fact they may even be particularly drawn to it, if it allows them an escape hatch from certain gender-related expectations. We believe that this study also confirms the value of studying both politeness and gender not only cross-culturally, but specifically in bi/plurilingual contexts, as the switch-points allow particular strategies and constraints, which could pass unobserved in monolingual speech, to be clearly highlighted.

## **Appendix**

Transcription conventions:

xxx	unintelligible speech
...	pause

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