

Bilingual dictionary reflects Cypriots' common words and memories, authors say

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Two Cypriots from across the divide have come together to produce a joint dictionary of the dialects of their respective communities.

The result provides an insight not only into the linguistic similarities of the two dialects but also it could serve as a spring board for increased rapprochement in particular among the younger generation, they said.

The 'Joint Dictionary of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot Dialect' was written by Iakovos Hadjipieris, a Greek Cypriot Turkologist, and Orhan Kabatas, a Turkish Cypriot teacher of geography and history with a Masters degree in ancient Turkish. The dictionary has brought the common Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot words in a bilingual publication with some 3,500 entries reflecting commonality in our everyday language.

The dictionary was launched at special events organised across the government-controlled areas and similar events will follow soon for the Turkish Cypriot community.

"The number of participants in the presentations exceeded our expectations," Hadjipieris said and pointed out that people of all ages, young and old alike, appeared familiar with the theme of the dictionary. They all seemed to be aware of the existence of our common linguistic richness, which however has not been listed or written down and its etymology is not included in any scientific publication."

They had started working on the project thinking it would generate interest in the fact that so many words are used in both the dialects and the public in the Greek Cypriot side reacted positively, Kabatas said.

The dictionary goes beyond the listing of words and beyond a thesaurus. It is not confined to the etymology of words.

"For us this dictionary touches upon a common world of images, experiences and apperceptions. When for example a Cypriot – either a Greek Cypriot or a Turkish Cypriot – reads the word 'palouzes' or 'halloumi' he thinks of images, of production processes, recipes and these words evoke even memories. The bottom line is that each separate word is a representation of memories, a common story, a common place, a joint experience for each and every one," said Kabatas.

Hadjipieris also pointed out that the public appreciated the fact that the dictionary was a scientific work that would add to Cyprus' bibliography as well as to research related to language and dialect.

"It is also evident that the dictionary performs a social and historical role, contributing to the effort for peaceful co-existence of the two communities in Cyprus," he said, adding that all Cypriots shared a common objective and desire to create channels of communication between the two communities that will help the effort to straighten out their relations.

Hadjipieris said that in only few months of its publication the book was embraced by readers both in Cyprus and the diaspora.

"This is the main characteristic of our work," he added, explaining that while it is a purely scientific project, contributing to the science of linguistics and dialectology it did not however ignore the history and social conditions of Cyprus or the need to promote peace and peaceful coexistence.

Asked whether the dictionary was presented to the Turkish Cypriot community and their reaction, Kabatas said it would be published in the north soon. He noted that in the meantime interest in the Turkish Cypriot community is limited to a small group of intellectuals.

However, he was optimistic that when the dictionary was published the response of the Turkish Cypriots would be equally positive.

Hadji pieris said the current edition was addressed to the Greek Cypriot community and a new edition is being prepared for the Turkish Cypriot community. The only difference between the two is the order of the two sections. In the first publication, the section with the Greek Cypriot dialect is first, followed by the Turkish Cypriot dialect's dictionary. In the new edition, this will be reversed.

Turkish Cypriots became aware of the first publication since it appeared in the media, he says and adds: "We have already received comments by friends and we expect a similar warm welcome," Kabatas said.

Hadji pieris pointed out that a number of common words have ceased to be in use and nowadays the dialect is mainly used as the language of communication between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots who were born before 1974, whereas younger people opt for English as the language of communication. Hadji pieris and Kabatas devoted five years of their lives to compiling the dictionary and are both known for their love of the dialects.

"Indeed, it seems that a big number of common words in both dialects are no longer in use. Other words are heading towards the same direction. Nonetheless we must not overlook the common words still in use by both communities," Hadji pieris said.

Kabatas on the other hand spoke of an erosion of the common words' pool which took place after the communication channels closed. "We observe that the older generations have reserved and safeguarded the common vocabulary, values, attitudes and speech," he said.

Regarding the communication between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, Hadji pieris said that the over-55 age group had lived in mixed communities. Therefore, there are Greek Cypriots, not in big numbers though, who speak the Turkish Cypriot dialect and can communicate with ease.

Turkish Cypriots are more knowledgeable about the Greek Cypriot dialect than the other way round, he noted. The contact between the youth of the two communities began in 2003 with the opening of the crossing points, along the UN-patrolled buffer zone which separate the northern Turkish occupied areas of Cyprus from the southern government controlled part of the island.

Their command of the English language is good enough to enable them to communicate freely, whereas their parents and especially grandparents communicate through the dialect. This phenomenon should not be interpreted as a threat to the dialect, he says.

Kabatas said the goal was to create historical memory for the young generation. Despite existing differences in the feelings of the two communities as regards nationality and beliefs, he noted, these common words are real proof of how they can create a climate of peace.

Asked whether increased contacts between the two communities or a Cyprus settlement could contribute to the preservation of the dialect, Hadji pieris said the reunification of the island could lead to a new linguistic and cultural beginning, which would not be confined to the framework of the dialect but it would also be based mainly on the educational system. Nowadays the Greek Cypriot dialect is poorer and Modern Greek has gained ground among the younger generations. A similar phenomenon is observed in the Turkish Cypriot community where the dialect is losing ground to the Turkish language.

Education is called upon to ensure that during the learning process of the official language the dialect is not forgotten. In this context, Kabatas suggests that poems, theatrical plays and other texts in the dialect are included in school anthologies.

Since the syntax of the two dialects is so close, it is only a matter of learning words in order to have everyday conversation, he says. Now one can understand the value of the Joint Dictionary, he added.

“I would also like to note that this joint richness is a point where the two dialects meet. While the mother languages, Modern Greek and Turkish, move in parallel and they do not meet, the local dialects, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot, intercept each other and this is attributed to the elements comprising their common cultural tradition,” he explained.

Kabatas expresses the opinion that the common vocabulary was created at a time when prejudices did not prevail but nowadays it is difficult to give life to words in the two communities, which have been affected by historical developments.

Asked if one could trace through the etymology of words included in the Dictionary not only the linguistic past but also the historic and cultural past of the island, Hadjipieris said that in fact, while conducting research to establish the origins of a word, they crossed paths with Cyprus` history. In other words, he says, “we could say that through that process we could chart the historical periods that different languages and dialects met in Cyprus.”

“We have come to the conclusion that it constitutes a marvelous historical and cultural mosaic full of diverse influences and inter-lending, which is generally accepted as a natural rule that applies to every living language and dialect. Both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot dialects could not have been an exception to this rule. They carry a vocabulary which is the strong historic product of a cultural coexistence and a cultural crossover of four centuries in the area of Eastern Mediterranean.” (CNA)

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