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The weirding of English, trans-scripting, and humour in digital communication

Tereza Spilioti

School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, Wales

Correspondence

Tereza Spilioti, School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University, Wales, UK.

Email: spiliotit1@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract

The paper examines local appropriations of English-related forms in digital communication, especially (re)appropriations that play with and modify significantly what we conventionally recognize as English ('weird English', Chi'en 2005). It investigates a case of trans-scripting where English-related forms are respelled with Greek characters in a series of memes and YouTube comments shared among primarily Greek-speaking Internet users. Drawing on the notions of indexicality and enregisterment, it analyses the global and/or local orientations of such humorous acts of respelling, their indexical values in online participatory formats and their potential to function as register alerts that point to particular voices and ideological positions. While moving between (and beyond) language structures and writing systems, internet users are found to engage in playful, dialogic and reflexive acts of identity in the multilingual social mediascapes. By paying attention to the local uptake of global flows through which language resources move around the world, we gain an insight into how such global processes are responded to and reworked by ordinary people on the ground.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In conditions of globalization and mobility, languages, dialects and styles move around the globe, together with their speakers. Digital technologies contribute further to the production and circulation of texts, images, and other semiotic products between members of globalized networks. While computer-mediated communication research has paid attention to multilingualism online and the local-global interplay in digital environments, we still know little about local appropriations of English-related forms, especially (re)appropriations that play with and modify significantly what we conventionally recognize as 'English'. This is important to explore because even if the use of English language resources in the context of language mixing is by now quite well described in relation to processes of global flow, the local uptake of such global flows in language forms that are seemingly unintelligible and often inaccessible (to some speakers) – what Ch'ien (2005, p. 3) calls 'weird English' – are far less understood.¹ The paper contributes to this under-researched area by examining the weirding of English through spelling manipulation in digital communication. It investigates a case of trans-scripting where English-related forms are respelled with Greek characters in a series of

memes and YouTube comments shared among primarily Greek-speaking Internet users. Through a qualitative analysis of the data collected, the paper is set out to address the following questions: (1) in which contexts the respelling of English-related forms in the local script is done; (2) what global and/or local orientations are conveyed through the specific acts of respelling in digital communication; and (3) what indexical values the particular forms of 'weird english' take in online participatory formats such as the YouTube comment threads.

In the following sections, I will critically discuss the two main theoretical lenses through which the circulation of English language resources around the world has been investigated and I will justify the translocality lens adopted in this paper. Then, I will present the local linguistic and cultural background first before introducing my sample and methodology. The analysis is organized into two parts with a focus on the analysis of memes, on the one hand, and on YouTube comments, on the other. In the conclusion, I will return to the key issues of (1) humour and language play in relation to which the specific English-related forms are attested; (2) the local-global orientations of such creative acts of respelling; and (3) the relevance of this line of research to the study of indexicality through a focus on spelling and orthography.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalization and Englishes: Key approaches

The unprecedented mobility of people and products that was hailed as the hallmark of recent social changes, especially in the Western world, has also been accompanied by increased circulation of a more diverse range of languages, dialects, styles, and other semiotic resources used for communication purposes. In this age of mobility, communications technologies and digital media play a significant role. They represent not only commodified products circulated in markets around the world but also the very means through which written texts, images, videos, and other semiotic artefacts are exchanged daily – or, to echo the very discourse of social media, are 'shared daily' and 'on-the-move'. Similarly, though, to inequalities in access to digital technologies and products around the world, the circulating linguistic and communicative resources may be diverse but not equally mobile. It is by now a truism that resources related to hegemonic languages and particularly English can spread more widely and quickly than others. Yet, the ways in which such resources are adapted and used in different localities around the world are far from uniform, challenging the idea of English as a single unified entity and acknowledging, instead, multiple (global) Englishes.

Previous research on the ways in which English language resources spread around the world has approached this topic through two main theoretical lenses. The first theoretical lens (world Englishes lens) presupposes a particular directionality in the spread of English, moving from certain linguistic, as well as socioeconomic, centres to more peripheral areas. Kachru's (1985) work and well-known terms of 'Inner', 'Outer' and 'Expanding' Circles illustrate the underlying assumptions as to how English moves on the world's map. Although this line of work acknowledges diversity in language use, it transpires that we can only capture part of the story through a world Englishes lens. More importantly, we capture the story told from a particular position which has also been associated with discourses that triggered moral panic reflexes in countries belonging to Kachru's Outer and Expanding Circles; a movement of English from certain centres to the world's peripheries can be reframed as an invasion or threat to these areas. Even when the movement is understood as a process of localizing global

English (glocalization; Robertson, 1995), the focus is on the 'global-in-the-local' (to use Blommaert's words, 2010, p. 79)

The alternative theoretical lens (translocality lens) acknowledges that any global processes may be happening at a higher (language-ideological) scale. The social capital associated with English as a global resource for communication and success, for example, is a testament to such forces. At the same time, though, attention to small-scale phenomena as manifested in real-world interaction reveals that English as a resource is never global. Linguistic resources are always locally meaningful, produced and interpreted with respect to local rules, norms, and conventions. In their movement, they tend to lose some of these associations and enter a process of delocalization. Delocalization is, then, followed by a process of relocalization through which linguistic signs enter again 'local systems of meaningfulness, where they are changed and interpreted on the basis of such systems' (Blommaert, 2010, p. 79). In contrast to a world Englishes lens that sees English language forms moving linearly from certain geographical areas to others, the translocality lens offers a more complex picture according to which such forms may be orienting simultaneously to various and different geographical centres.

Globalization and Englishes revisited: CMC research

The two aforementioned approaches to the spread of English have been influential to research developments on the mobilization of English resources in digital communication around the world. By taking issue with early claims about the dominance of English on the Internet (Crystal, 1997; Specter, 1996, cited in Lee, 2016), Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) research has contributed to acknowledging linguistic diversity online and offering more nuanced understandings of the interplay between English and other linguistic resources in digital communication. From a world Englishes perspective, attention was given primarily to post-colonial contexts where digital communicative environments, with their emerging and more relaxed writing norms, opened space for multilingual speakers to write and experiment with the local versions of spoken English. For example, Fung and Carter (2007) investigated the emergence of a hybrid spoken-written variety of English in online interactions of Hong Kong university students. From a glocalization perspective, Lee and Barton (2011) examined how members of globalized social media like Flickr negotiate language choices in accordance with the global, local, or glocal identities they wish to project to their imagined audience. Furthermore, Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou (2007) explored the glocal at a more language-ideological level; popular discourses about English and its impact on digital literacy in local (as in Greek) contexts take at times a glocal position acknowledging the 'dynamic negotiation between the global and the local, with the local appropriating elements of the global that it finds useful, at the same time employing strategies to retain its identity' (p. 143). In sum, this line of research argued about the global, local, as well as glocal, identities emerging not only in the multilingual networks users participated in but also in the discourses about the Internet circulated especially in countries where English is understood as a 'foreign language'.

A translocality perspective, on the other hand, has been adopted in studies that foreground the use of English as a local resource among multilingual speakers on the Internet. Drawing on notions like (trans)linguaging and metrolingualism (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), the focus is on how English-related forms are only one among an array of resources multilingual writers deploy in online settings. For example, Leppanen's (2012) study of fan fiction communities reveals how the mixing of certain styles and registers of English and Finnish

becomes a means for connecting with diverse audiences that can engage with some (but not necessarily the whole array) of these linguistic resources. Kytola (2012, 2014) also demonstrates how the mobilization of certain kinds of non-standard English enables members of Finland-based football online forums to create globally oriented but locally meaningful blends of identification and performance. Research on multilingualism and English through a translocality lens acknowledges the need to probe more into the specific styles and registers of English that are deployed by multilingual speakers in digital communication. More importantly, it foregrounds the local meanings that such forms may take in the context of globalized social media platforms and the diverse audiences they afford. While previous research has covered the mobilization of local varieties of English – or, at a smaller-scale, of English-related forms (words, phrases) – together with other language and semiotic resources in digital communication, the focus was still on elements that could be recognised as ‘English’ by those who identify themselves as speakers of that language. In this paper, I will foreground cases where English language resources have taken a form that may be unintelligible and unrecognizable by certain English-speaking Internet audiences, similar to the type of ungrammatical and patchworked ‘weird english’ Ch’ien (2005) finds in postcolonial literatures.

In this study, I refer specifically to cases where English-related forms are spelled with non-Roman characters, following a writing system that is normally associated with another language (trans-scripting; Androutsopoulos, 2015; Spilioti, 2019). As a result, the need to adopt a (trans)locality lens in my research is driven not only by recent advances in globalization theory but also by the very phenomenon under study that resists its categorization within existing labels like ‘Global English’. What is distinctive of the relocalization of such English-related forms as words written in the local alphabet is the fact that their transformation makes them less mobile in a global world; they are recognizable only by the local multilingual audiences and probably meaningless to a range of speakers who would claim competence in the English language. Yet, they are equally contingent upon the wider global processes that made them available as resources for the local speakers/writers in the first place.

3 | RESEARCH CONTEXT AND DESIGN

Language resources and ideologies in Greece

Before presenting the research design, I will discuss critically the local socio-cultural context in order to situate briefly the phenomena under study within the wider picture of language resources and ideologies circulating in the Greek context. Based on the official language policy, Greece falls within the Expanding Circle of English, to use Kachru’s terms. Since the birth of the modern Greek nation-state (19th century), the Greek language (or, rather, a particular variety) has been constitutionally acknowledged as the state’s official language. English, on the other hand, is recognized as a foreign language that has, nevertheless, a high status in Greek society. For example, the recent educational reforms resulted in all pupils at the age of eight being taught English as a compulsory subject in primary schools. In the public sphere, English is also employed as the additional language in which business transactions can be made and into which public documents as well as signs are often translated.

In terms of writing, the Greek alphabet represents the official writing system that appears to have been in use since ancient times. Despite small reforms such as the wider use of lower-case letters and diacritics (since 9th century AD) and the simplification of the accent system

(in 1982), the alphabet serves nicely the narrative of continuity in Greek language and culture. The official history of writing in the Greek context privileges an ideological construct that sees a one-to-one mapping between a language and a writing system where the latter gains national symbolic status through its association with the national language. What the official history of writing fails to recognize, though, is that the construct of the official Greek ‘linguascript’ does not represent the everyday language experience of certain speech communities in the same geographical area. Notable examples are Latin-Alphabet Greek (*Francochiotika*) used in telegrams by traders living in the Aegean islands during the nineteenth century (Tseliga, 2007, p. 117) and Greek-Alphabet Turkish (*Karamanlidika*) found in 1930s newspapers and electoral campaign leaflets of Northern Greece, addressing Turkish-speaking Christians who had been forced to leave Anatolia in early 1920s (Balta, 2010). More recently and beyond the mobile speech communities of previous eras, internationalization has also driven the appearance of Latin-Alphabet Greek, as well as Greek-Alphabet English, French, or German in certain limited and highly regulated institutional domains. For example, the representation of Greek names with Latin characters in translations of official documents is regulated by a standardised system approved by the United Nations since 1987 (see ELOT743). Similarly, translations of foreign names in EU documents should also follow the Union’s Interinstitutional style guide which, albeit not as complete and standardised as the UN system for Latinization, offers guidance as to how to represent foreign place names with Greek letters.²

In the context of digital communication, we notice similar phenomena of multilingual writing among members of globalized platforms. Motivated initially by technological software limitations, Greek users have employed Latin-Alphabet Greek (popularly known as ‘greeklish’) to exchange emails, text-messages, and social media posts (Georgakopoulou, 1997). Although Latin-Alphabet Greek is no longer imposed by software limitations since the introduction of Unicode, it remains in use particularly in transnational communication within the Greek diaspora, between Greece and abroad and among Greek teenagers. With its use in a range of digital genres and popular hype about Internet language, Latin-alphabet Greek is now indexically associated with values related to digital media, such as technological competence, cosmopolitan outlook, and global orientation (Androutsopoulos, 2009; Koutsogiannis & Adampa, 2012). At the level of language-ideological debates, it is commonly framed as an external force that poses a threat to the continuity and survival of the national language (Moschonas, 2009). While the use of Latin characters for local languages has been widely studied and attested online, we have witnessed recently a surge in reverse phenomena; global language resources (such as English) are transliterated in local scripts such as Greek, Arabic, or Chinese characters. In this paper, we shed light on precisely such uses, particularly the use of Greek-Alphabet English (or also known as ‘engreek’) that does appear in digital communication among Greek users, as the following definition on slang.gr informs us:

engreek: Internet language, the opposite of greeklish. Engreek is English written with Greek characters. It is not widely used, but when people do use it, it’s very funny and a good craic. (original in Greek; author’s translation)

With respect to the top-down regulated transliterations of foreign place names in local alphabets, the data analysed in this paper foreground a different aspect of internationalization. They enable us to investigate the uptake of global flows as they are reworked on the ground (bottom-up) and in specific localities, an area that is largely underexplored (Blommaert, 2010, p. 79).

Research design

The current study is part of a wider project that focuses on multilingual phenomena in digital communication and undertakes a multi-sited approach for the study of respellings of English-related forms with Greek characters (Spilioti, 2019). During the four-year research journey, I have observed, followed, and documented ‘engreek’ uses across multiple media and platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, online dictionaries, webpages, social media marketing campaigns, and popular memes. For the purposes of this paper, engreek uses will be analysed in digital texts that are public and highly shareable, namely, memes and YouTube. The meme data set consists of memes from humorous web sites (such as luben.tv) that compile lists of popular memes, for example, ‘2015 Year in review: The best memes on our site’. In this paper, the analysis focuses on 8 ‘best of’ meme lists (109 memes overall) that were generated in relation to political and media events that captured the attention of Greek-speaking audiences (for example, Greek Prime Minister’s meeting with Angelina Jolie, Barack Obama’s visit to Greece, Brexit, and Greek TV shows). The language resources used for the meme captions draw primarily on Greek and English; more specifically, standardised Greek is employed for the majority of the memes (n=67, 62%) and ‘standard’ English is found in only 10% (n=12). The rest 28% (n=30) of the collected memes exhibit some form of linguistic hybridity, evident in mixing language forms associated with Greek and English. The following analysis will focus primarily on this latter category and particularly on hybrid forms that are generated through manipulation of spelling and orthography.

The YouTube data set consists of comments that respond to popular humorous videos that show media footage of Greek politicians and singers speaking English at public engagements, for example, ‘Tsipras forgets his English in front of Bill Clinton’. In this paper, the analysis focuses on 7 videos that generated 2,686 comments where YouTube users comment on the accent and language employed by the Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras, and the popular singer Lefteris Pantazis. Similarly to the meme data set, Greek and English are the main language resources employed in the comments. The analysis will focus on 92 comments where users display language hybridity by means of respelling English-related forms with Greek characters, while supplementing the analysis with comments featuring overt metalinguistic content, written primarily in Greek and Greeklish.

The following qualitative analysis focuses on key examples from my data set, selected for their potential to represent the range of language resources mobilized in the sample and the range of contexts in which the respelling of English-related forms in the local script is done. The analysis is organized in two parts. The first part focuses on memes and draws on the notion of indexicality (Silverstein, 2003), in order to investigate the global and/or local orientations that the specific acts of respelling convey in the meme captions. The second part focuses on YouTube comment threads and investigates what is achieved with the range of comments that include English-language forms respelled with Greek characters. By taking into account the metalinguistic content found in such comments, we probe into the process by which a linguistic (written) repertoire, such as the respellings of English-related forms in the local alphabet, comes to be associated with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices (enregisterment; Agha, 2003).

4 | ANALYSIS

4.1 | English as a local resource for humour in memes

In March 2016, the Hollywood actor Angelina Jolie visited Greece in her role as UNHCR Special Envoy and on behalf of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The local media intensely covered her visit to the presidential mansion and her meeting about the refugee crisis with the Greek Prime Minister, Alexis Tsipras. Pictures and video footage from their initial chat were widely circulated in newspapers and on the Internet. At the same time, the specific event gave rise to a series of humorous memes that poked fun at the meeting by offering alternative scenarios as to what was actually said by the two public figures. For the meme visuals, web users capitalized on the set of pictures that featured repeatedly in the mainstream reporting of the event including local newspapers and TV news, for example, the Prime Minister and Angelina Jolie shaking hands (Figure 1) or chatting seated on the mansion's white sofas (Figure 2). In terms of the visual representation of the text captions, the memes follow generic conventions, such as all capital letters (white fonts against coloured background) arranged in two lines, one at the top and one at the bottom of the picture.

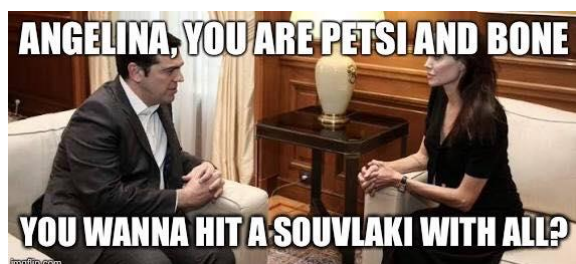


Meme caption:
NISE [sic] TO MEET YOU
MADAM LARACROFT

FIGURE 1 Tsipras and Jolie shaking hands

Although the memes target local audiences that are familiar with the specific pictures, as well as local political and media events, the meme captions appear in standardised Greek in only half of the sixteen memes, shortlisted as the best memes on the Alexis Tsipras and Angelina Jolie meeting. English-related forms and hybridity in terms of mixing English and Greek language resources are documented in the captions of the other memes. As illustrated in the examples, a key resource for the construction of hybrid forms is the manipulation of spelling and orthography, namely, the use of Greek characters to spell English-related forms and phrases. Considering that the captions represent what could have been said by the main protagonists at the meeting, we will look into who is represented through the specific script and how.

Figures 1 and 2 are illustrative of the setting that is typical of memes that mobilise both Greek and English resources; it features interactions between a local Greek speaker and a 'foreigner', particularly a person perceived as a native speaker of English. Taking the Tsipras-Jolie memes as an example, we note a pattern in the distribution of such language resources between the two main protagonists. While captions attributed to Angelina Jolie are in standard Greek or English, language hybridity in the form of mixing linguistic resources is found in the words allegedly uttered by the (Greek) Prime Minister. Hybrid forms, thus, become indexical of a particular voice, the voice of the local Greek in interaction with a foreigner.



Meme caption (gloss):
ANGELINA, YOU ARE JUST SKIN AND BONES
FANCY A SOUVLAKI WITH ALL?

FIGURE 2 Tsipras and Jolie chatting

Linguistic hybridity in such memes seldom takes the form of code switching that combines recognizable linguistic forms. Instead, language resources merge into a unique voice that appears to transgress language boundaries. Figure 2 illustrates how transgression is achieved through literal translation of colloquial expressions that appear nonsensical to a monolingual English speaker (*you wanna hit a souvlaki with all* meaning ‘fancy a souvlaki with all condiments’). For a bilingual, local, audience, though, such transgressions, achieved at times by incomplete translations (*you are petsi* [=πετσί, meaning *skin*] and *bone* meaning ‘you are just skin and bones’), produce humorous calques that can be appreciated only if one has access to the meaning of the local expression.

Figure 3 as well as Figure 1 illustrates how transgression is also achieved through trans-scripting, that is, the use of local spelling and orthography for English-related forms. Unlike translation where language play capitalizes on semantic meaning, trans-scripting alters the visual form of the linguistic items, rendering them opaque to readers who are not familiar with the local (Greek) alphabet. Trans-scripting, thus, achieves a visual exoticization of English that can be appreciated by bilingual, local, audiences.



Meme caption:
THIS IS
A SOFA

FIGURE 3 Tsipras and Jolie at the PM office

Furthermore, the manipulation of alphabetic writing and its affordances that associate letters with particular sounds results in representing not just a voice but a voice with a particular accent. Drawing on the local alphabet ‘letter-sound’ associations, the meme consumers will end up sounding out a (stereo)typically Greek-accented voice, while reading the engreek forms. The perception of this voice as non-standardised – as well as ‘non-native’ vis-à-vis the foreigner, native speaker of English – is further accentuated by minimal manipulations of spelling that distance individual items from typically sounding English forms (NAIZ /naiz/, instead of NAIΣ /nais/, see Figure 1).

Drawing on the notion of (de/re)localization processes of translocality theory, we notice that the delocalization of English forms is achieved through a process of exoticization whereby English-related forms take on other meanings through humorous calques or ‘weird’ visual

representations through trans-scripting. While such forms are (re)localized in intercultural settings such as the meeting between the Greek Prime Minister and the US Hollywood star, they are used as local resources for authenticating Greek-ness in juxtaposition with the native speaker of English. This argument is further reinforced pragmatically, when, for example, the alternative meme scenario features the Prime Minister offering a *souvlaki*, the globally known local dish, to Angelina Jolie (see Figure 2). Such representations, of course, authenticate a particular type of Greek-ness, the Greek-accented voice with exaggerated, non-native like, uses of English, as evident in the nonsensical calques. In the context of memes, the directionality of such humorous representations of the political figure and the media event is not clear. Are we meant to be laughing at – or with – the Prime Minister? Is the use of engreek as a meme script aimed at critiquing language styles and local voices or at convivially sharing a humorous representation? Considering the rather innocuous meaning of the words attributed to the Prime Minister ('this is a sofa' in Figure 3; 'nice to meet you' in Figure 1), I argue that the linguistic meaning of the trans-scripted words is less important compared to their aesthetic potential. What gets shared through such memes is the transgression of norms and the enjoyment that arises from transgressing pragmatic norms through the creation of alternative scenarios, on the one hand, and linguistic norms through translation and trans-scripting, on the other. In order to make claims about the directionality of potential critique through such practices, one needs to pay attention to any metapragmatic discourse generated online, as evident, for example, in metalinguistic comments on YouTube.

4.2 | Engreek and YouTube: Metalinguistic comments and language ideologies

In order to probe further into the metalinguistic discourse that such practices may give rise to in digital communication, the focus of the analysis in this section shifts to the social media platform of YouTube. As previous research has shown, YouTube is rife with metalinguistic discourse where social media users themselves engage in folk linguistic lessons, comment on and evaluate dialects and accents (Androutsopoulos, 2013). With respect to local uses of English, videos entitled 'The English of ...' are popular among Greek-speaking Internet audiences (Spilioti, 2017). Such videos include media footage of politicians, singers, and other media personalities speaking in English at a public function. The videos are followed by numerous comments that target primarily the local accent of the speakers. In this section, I will analyse material from two such YouTube videos in order to investigate the types of comments generated, the language resources mobilized, and any language ideological positions that may become more prevalent.

Lefteris Pantazis – Breathless

In early 21st century, the local music scene witnessed a surge of classic rock covers performed by popular singers who are known for a type of music that is highly commercial and combines modern pop with elements of urban folk music. The covers transformed the original rock songs into this type of local commercial folk pop but retained the original lyrics in English. One such cover was Dan Wilson's rock ballad 'Breathless' performed by Lefteris Pantazis (also known as LEPA), a Greek singer born in the former Soviet Union and repatriated to Greece as a child in the 1960s. The YouTube video features media footage from the singer's performance on a morning TV show; it numbers 742,651 views and has generated 1,482 comments since March 2011. In terms of language resources, comments appear in Greek and English, at times in their conventional script and at times respelled as Greeklish (Roman-

Alphabet Greek) or engreek (Greek-Alphabet English). As a result, the YouTube comment space abounds with language hybridity in terms of combining and mixing resources. At the level of spelling and orthography, I have found that English-related forms are respelled with Greek characters in 53 out of the 1,482 comments. Having coded these comments in terms of their function in the thread, I discovered three main types of comments encoded in the hybrid script: (1) comments that represent in writing what the singer says on the video; (2) comments that represent what the singer could say/have said; (3) comments that explicitly evaluate the singer's accent and/or singing.

Examples (1) and (2) illustrate the use of the local alphabet for representing the English lyrics sung by the Greek performer. Similar to what was argued about the memes, the letter-sound associations that the local alphabet generates allude to a particular pronunciation of the specific language forms. Here, the hybrid script is mobilized in response to the video and is employed to represent the sounds and English-related forms one can hear on the YouTube clip. For the local audiences that identify such sounds as Greek-accented English, the script becomes indexical of that particular local accent.

- (1) ΓΙΟΡ ΒΟΙΣ ΙΖ ΕΚΟΙΝΓ ΕΓΚΑΙΝ ΘΡΟΥ ΚΑΤΑΚΟΜΠΣ ΙΝΣΑΙΝΤ ΜΑΙ ΜΑΙΝΤ³
 'YOUR VOICE IS ECHOING AGAIN THROUGH CATACOMBS INSIDE MY MIND'
 (2) αουτ οφ δε ρουμ γουιθ γιου
 'out of the room with you'

Examples (3) and (4) illustrate comments where users employ the hybrid script to create alternative scenarios. Similarly to memes, they voice words that Lefteris Pantazis could have said but does not actually say in the video. In (3), for instance, the commenter suggests how the singer would bring the performance to a closure: they translate and respell a phrase well known as typical of the singer's live performances in Greek, that is, the exhortative, *όλα τα μωρά στην πίστα*, that invites all women to the dance floor (see 'all the babies on the floor' respelled as *ωλ δε μπεϊμπις ον δε φλορ*). The intertextual allusions to expressions that are known to Internet audiences familiar with the local culture further support the argument that such playful manipulations of English-related forms target primarily local, rather than global, audiences. At the same time, the ways in which users represent the singer by writing up his allegedly spoken words do not only index a particular accent but also a particular persona. For example, they select to foreground aspects of the singer's hybrid identity or humble origins ('former Russian shoe polisher' in example 3) and present him as knowingly producing a bad cover of the original song ('raping this song' in example 4).

- (3) [...] *Και στο τέλος θα έκλεινε ως εξής: "Μενι κισες του ωλ δε μπεϊμπις ον δε φλορ (πίστα) φρομ α φορμερ ράσσιαν σου πόλισερ!!!"*
 '[...] *And at the end, he would close [the song] as follows: "Many kisses to all the babies on the (dance) floor from a former Russian shoe polisher!!!"*
 (4) εντ ναου αη εμ ρέηπινγκ δις σόοοοονγκ
 'and now I am raping this soooooong'

While the study of memes also revealed the indexical and representational uses of the hybrid script in humorous performances on the Internet, the shift of focus to YouTube comments shed light on potential links between spelling choices on social media and language ideological positions towards local uses of English. Examples (5) to (8) illustrate such

comments that take a rather negative stance towards the singer's performance of Greek-accented English. With respect to the language resources employed to voice such evaluations, users often employ Greek; see example (8) where the local accent is playfully attributed to cheap English learning courses. At the same time, though, the practice of respelling English-related forms with Greek characters is also found in comments criticizing Lefteris Pantazis's language and singing performance, either explicitly by addressing him as a 'butcher' of the English language and song (example 5) or implicitly through ironically positive evaluations respelled with Greek characters (example 6). Although the hybrid script is used, such evaluations still reveal a rather purist language ideology according to which hybrid and local English uses are to be ridiculed, sanctioned and rectified, as commenter (7) is wondering in fluent engreek 'why didn't someone coach him?'

- (5) Του φιουτσερς.... *Τί λες ρε μπούτσερ?!*
'To futures... Hey butcher what are you talking about?!
- (6) περφεκτ μαρβελους φαμπγιουλους!
'perfect marvellous fabulous!'
- (7) Ιζ δις φορ ρήαλ? Γουάι ντιντν'τ σάμουαν κοουτς χιμ?!
'Is this for real? Why didn't someone coach him?!
- (8) *Μάλλον αγόρασε μέθοδο αγγλικών απο τα Lidl ..* [laughing tears emoji]
'He probably got an English course from Lidl .. [laughing tears emoji]'

Tsipras speaks English

In addition to memes about the Greek Prime Minister, YouTube also includes a range of videos with comments that target Alexis Tsipras's English. The analysis will focus on a video featuring Alexis Tsipras giving a speech in English at a younger age uploaded five years before his election as Prime Minister. The video is accompanied by the YouTuber's caption 'Well... since you don't know, why do you pretend that you know?' (author's translation from original in Greek); it numbers 229,916 views and has generated 297 comments of which 14 include English-related forms respelled with Greek characters. Similarly to the aforementioned classification, YouTube comments fall within three general categories. Example (9) illustrates the first category of comments that include the hybrid script in order to represent actual words uttered by the Prime Minister on the video. As previously argued, it indexes the particular style of local, Greek-accented, English. Example (10) illustrates the second category of comments where the anonymous YouTube users offer alternative scenarios as to what the Prime Minister could say or have said. The hybrid script becomes a resource for representing a particular persona, the persona of non-fluent speaker of English, indexed through the use of ungrammatical constructions such as 'I speak the England very best'. The mobilization of ungrammatical constructions in order to reinforce the representation of non-fluent, non-native speaker of English has also been noted in the analyzed memes about the meeting between Alexis Tsipras and Angelina Jolie.

- (9) του θαουζαντς...σεβεν
'two thousands...seven'
- (10) αι σπικ δε ενγκλαντ βερυ μπεστ
'I speak the England very best'

Examples (11) and (12) illustrate the third category of comments that explicitly evaluate the politician's language performance on the video. English in either its conventional (example 11) or hybrid script (example 12) is one of the key resources users employ to express their negative evaluation (such as 'Tragic' in example 12) and their lamenting of the status of English ('RIP English' in example 11). Such comments reveal again that YouTube audiences evoke particular language ideological stances that draw on ideologies of purism and monolingualism. Although they may enjoy watching hybrid linguistic performances or even engage in hybrid written practices (see example 12), the ideological frames according to which hybridity is perceived as a threat to a particular language appear to prevail in the comments collected. Such purist ideologies also indicate that local uses of English are evaluated against an externally defined and aspiring norm that is defined in terms of native-like competence.

(11) RIP English xD

(12) TPATZIKKKK

'Tragicccc'

While the comments responding to the singer's performance focus primarily on issues of language and accent, the video featuring politicians' talk generates comments that touch upon political issues as well. The YouTubers do not only evaluate Alexis Tsipras as an English speaker but also as a politician. Example (13) is typical of the discourse that considers 'poor English' as a sign of poor political skills, especially at an international level. The YouTuber is questioning the Prime Minister's ability to negotiate with EU officials in comment (13) uploaded in 2015, that is, the year of intense negotiations between the Greek government and the EU in light of a potential Greek exit from the union.

(13) ME AYTA TA AΓΓΛΙΚΑ ΘΑ ΠΑΕΙ ΝΑ ΚΑΝΕΙ ΔΙΑΠΡΑΓΜΑΤΕΥΣΕΙΣ????????????????

'Is he going to negotiate with this type of English????????????????'

Although such debates tend to happen primarily in Greek, the hybrid script also provides an additional resource for voicing such criticisms and engaging with the political debate. Example (14), for instance, uploaded before the rise of Alexis Tsipras to power, encodes such criticisms in Greek-Alphabet English. It appropriates the politician's voice, indexed by the specific script in other comments (see examples 9 and 10), in order to criticize the value of the specific politician; his young age and poor language skills are indicative of his inability to 'save the country'.

(14) Αϊ θίνκ δατ δε σουϊτκάις ιζ λόστ...Ιβεν κίντζ λαϊκ tsipras θίνκ δατ δέϊ καν σέϊβ δε κάντρι.Μαϊ ντίαρ ουί αρ σκρούουντ.

'I think that the suitcase is lost[sic]...Even kids like Tsipras think that they can save the country. My dear we are screwed.'

(15) ΟΝ ΤΖΟΥΝ ΤΣΙΠΡΑΣ ΓΟΥΙΛ ΜΠΙ ΠΡΑΙΜ ΜΙΝΙΣΤΕΡ ΕΝΤ ΓΟΥΙΛ ΦΑΚ ΓΙΟΡ ΑΣΙΣ ΜΑΔΕΡΦΑΚΕΡΣ ΠΑΙΤΣ

'On[sic] June Tsipras will be prime minister and will fuck your asses right wing motherfuckers'

While the specific script appears to be mobilized by YouTube commenters who are laughing at such language performances and their speakers, example (15) illustrates one of the few cases where the hybrid script is reappropriated by the opposite camp, that is, the politicians' supporters. The comment was uploaded before the June 2012 election when the political party led by Alexis Tsipras saw an unprecedented increase of support among the Greek electoral force. The comment is explicitly addressing those who criticize the politician in the previous comments, and it portrays them as supporters of right wing policies. In other words, it reappropriates the language resources used in such critique to perform an explicit political attack.

The association of language with politics is not new in the Greek sociocultural context. Language ideological debates related to the diglossic situation during most of the 20th century were closely linked with clashes of specific political orientations and ideologies. What is new, though, is that the debate in such online performances does not focus on the speakers' fluency in Greek – or to use the evaluative terms of such language-ideological debates, the quality of their Greek (as in debates about 'good' and 'bad' English). Instead, the language-cum-political debate focuses on speakers' fluency in English and, particularly, in an abstract ideal of 'native-like' English. Overall, there is an interesting paradox in the analysis of the comments; while users assess English in terms of an external ideal that is assumed to bring success in the new global world of internationalization, the 'English ideal' becomes a local resource for criticizing local politicians and taking part in the national political debates.

5 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Drawing on insights from previous research on multilingualism and translocality, I set out to explore local uses of written English in digital communication. While previous research has focused on the (re)localization of particular registers, dialects, and styles, my study is original in investigating English-related forms that are respelled in local writing systems and, thus, appear opaque to global Internet audiences who are not familiar with the particular alphabet. My analysis of respelled English-related forms with Greek characters in memes and YouTube comments has attested to the prevalence of linguistic hybridity as a key resource for the production and circulation of humour on social media. In the context of memes, in particular, I showed that this form of 'weird english' becomes a resource for representing local voices in highly mediatized political events. Considering that such memes are rather empty in terms of content (see the use of phatic and formulaic phrases in meme captions, as in 'nice to meet you' in Figure 1), what they achieve is primarily a feeling of conviviality, defined by Varis and Blommaert's terms (2015, p. 43) as a form of engagement that loosely structures online audiences into focused collectives. The virality of the memes and the associated hybrid script hinges upon the ability of the local audiences to recognize the media pictures employed for the meme visuals and appreciate the language play by deciphering the Greek-alphabetized English forms.

With respect to the local-global interplay, there is a volume of research on digital communication that has associated English uses with global orientation and identities. In contrast, my study adds empirical weight and evidence about the need to question this assumption. In the light of my findings, English-related forms are mobilised as local resources; they co-occur with other local uses (for example, literal translations of colloquial phrases), represent local characters and voices, and are appreciated by local audiences. The argument about the use of English as a local resource does not, of course, deny the processes of global

flow and internationalisation that have made certain English-related forms mobile and, thus, available to very diverse speakers and audiences. What this study sheds light on is the uptake of such global forces in specific environments of digital communication, and it is in such reworkings of global processes *on the ground* that a (trans)locality lens is needed (Blommaert, 2010). My work joins recent calls about the significance of turning to ‘the translinguistic resourcefulness of *ordinary people* in their everyday social interactions’ (Wei & Hua 2018, p. 158), in order to capture people’s engagement with top-down processes at a higher (language-ideological) scale.

Examining the use of engreek in YouTube comments proved fruitful in terms of gaining insights into the process of enregisterment that local uses of English, particularly Greek-accented English, may be undergoing. The three distinct functions that the hybrid script achieves in the YouTube comments appear to map onto the three orders of indexicality, as defined by Silverstein (2003). Comments that represent the words uttered by the speaker on the video are indicative of 1st-order indexicality; through observation, users employ the hybrid script to represent the voice of certain speakers in real contexts (as in the Prime Minister meeting Angelina Jolie). In comments where we find words that could be uttered by the speaker, users show elements of reflexivity (2nd-order indexicality); the hybrid script becomes a contextualisation cue to signal particular types of speakers (e.g. non-fluent local speaker of English) in specific contexts (such as in intercultural encounters). 3rd-order indexicality is evident in messages that evaluate and comment on the linguistic performance featured on the YouTube video; users employ the hybrid script to voice particular ideological stances towards the local uses. Paradoxically, hybridity in writing serves to playfully voice criticisms towards hybridity in speech, as such comments tend to evoke language ideologies that privilege monolingualism or assess language performances vis-à-vis an external ideal of ‘native English’.

A final implication concerns the link between language and politics and, particularly, the embedding of language ideological stances in public political debate. In the age of globalization, political capital appears to accrue not only from political actions but also from language skills. Regardless of their political orientations, users seem to associate fluent bilingualism as a socio-ideological construct with particular political stances that aspire to internationalisation. Against this backdrop, local uses of English function as ‘register alerts’ (Silverstein, 2006, p. 486), signaling expectations regarding the occurrence of such uses, on the one hand, and their social effects in given contexts, on the other. While there is scope to examine further the role of the humorous performances in current political engagement afforded by social media, this study suggests that the viral circulation of local performances of English through memes and YouTube facilitate the recognizability and sedimentation of such register alerts.

NOTES

¹ Many thanks to Crispin Thurlow who brought Ch’ien’s work to my attention.

² For more information about the EU interinstitutional style guide regarding transliteration of foreign names into Greek, see: <http://publications.europa.eu/code/el/el-4100500el.htm#fnl>.

³ English text with Greek characters is transliterated below in the standard Roman-alphabetized script. Any Greek text that requires translation appears in italics in the original.

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APPENDIX – PRIMARY SOURCES

Sources of memes

15+1 best of memes from the fabulous Alexis Tsipras-Angelina Jolie meeting at Maximou (<https://luben.tv/nerdcult/web/75402>)

The internet cried with the trolling of the Tsipras-Jolie meeting – See the epic photos (<http://www.thestival.gr/xallara/item/229323-dakryse-to-internet-me-to-trolarisma-gia-ti-synantisi-tsipra-tzoli-deite-tis-epikes-foto>)

“Exclusive”: What Cameron and Tsipras said on the phone and the best of memes of Brexit (https://www.athensvoice.gr/viral/viral-now/131771_apokleistiko-ti-eipan-sto-tilefono-kameron-tsipras-kai-ta-kalytera-memes-toy)

15 presidential memes about the visit of the world leader Barack Obama to our humble country (<https://luben.tv/stream/memes/96758>)

15+1 festive memes for the new TV licenses (<https://luben.tv/stream/memes/89081>)

15+1 memes for the great exit of Great Britain from the EU (<https://luben.tv/stream/memes/83178>)

10 memes ONLY LOVE from the macho winner of the youth (<https://luben.tv/stream/78388>)

2015 Year in Review: The best of memes on our site (<https://luben.tv/originals/69271>)

Sources of YouTube videos and comments

RADIO ARVYLA – The English of Alexis Tsipras (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vd4Nhr1R1EY>)

RADIO ARVYLA – The English of Alexis Tsipras / 12-5-2014 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpZpL7lm_ZQ)

RADIO ARVYLA – The English of Alexis Tsipras / 28/01/2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SngbTHzznyo>)

Tsipras forgets his English in front of Clinton (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLurmhbN_o)

Tsipras rocks their world with his English at Poseidonia 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fowxRn-hXkc>)

Tsipras speaks English (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1pjyh-Cm1M>)

Lefteris Pantazis – Breathless (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytZ_amr55PU)