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Jannis Androutsopoulos (Hamburg)

Practices and ideologies of computer-mediated digraphia: lessons learnt from ‘Greeklish’

The notion of computer-mediated digraphia emerged out of my research on Latin-alphabetized Greek ('Greeklish'), but may in principle be applied to any language that experiences persistent vernacular Latinization in the era of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Digraphia is usually defined as the use of two different scripts for the representation of the same language, and computer-mediated digraphia may be broadly defined as the simultaneous use of native and Latin script for the same language in CMC. Its scope is thus restricted to one particular domain of written language, in which both scripts are in competing use in a range of discourse environments such as chat channels, discussion boards, personal emails, social networking platforms and so on.

In Greek, like in other languages, computer-mediated digraphia emerged as a response to technological constraints and quickly gained wide societal awareness. The lack of institutional acquisition of Greek-to-Latin transliteration norms gave rise to a range of vernacular responses to the transliteration problem. My analysis distinguishes between broad transliteration schemes, individual transliteration styles, and the emergence of local transliteration norms. At the core of 'Greeklish' lies a dichotomy between phonetic and visual transliteration that shapes people's literacy practices and ideologies. While the logic of phonetic transliteration is ‘global’, instrumental and standardization-friendly, visual transliteration ignores official representations of Greek with Latin characters and engages in an aesthetically-driven creativity that aims at maximising the iconicity of 'Greeklish' to the Greek alphabet. Its outcomes include innovative correspondences of native letters to Latin numerals, a remarkable similarity of the Greek case to e.g. Russian and Arabic.

Digraphia *in statu nascendi* gives rise to a range of metalinguistic discourses, which include both ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ understandings of orthography and are shaped by stances of power and resistance. In mainstream public discourse 'Greeklish' is often ‘technologized’ or constructed as a threatening ‘exterior’ within the ‘interior’ of the Greek language. In metalinguistic debates among users, opponents of 'Greeklish' draw on aesthetic and identity-related arguments in order to legitimise its banning from web discussion boards, whereas supporters of 'Greeklish' challenge the articulation of script, language, and national identity. One lesson to be learned from the ‘Greeklish’ case is that in the era of computer-mediated communication, practices and ideologies of script choice and Latinized spelling are shifting along with technological developments, and cannot be understood without taking the evolution and social spread of technology into account.