

# THE CYPRIOT KOINE: A RECENT DEVELOPMENT?

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## Περίληψη

Η ύπαρξη μιας γενικευμένης Κυπριακής ποικιλίας, που χαρακτηρίζεται από απουσία τοπικών ιδιομορφιών μέσα στο νησί και συγχρόνως αποκλίνει με διάφορους τρόπους από την Κοινή Νεοελληνική έχει επισημανθεί επανειλημμένα. Με αφετηρία την ύπαρξη αυτής της γενικευμένης ποικιλίας, που στο εξής θα αποκαλώ Κυπριακή κοινή, στην παρούσα εργασία επιχειρώ μια πρώτη ανίχνευση της ιστορικής της εξέλιξης. Σε αντίθεση με την άποψη ότι πρόκειται για προϊόν των τελευταίων δεκαετιών, και υιοθετώντας το 'μοντέλο της πυραμίδας' (Trudgill 1983), υποστηρίζω ότι μια γενικευμένη, υπερ-τοπική ποικιλία χρησιμοποιήθηκε από τα ανώτερα στρώματα της κοινωνίας του νησιού ήδη από τα τέλη του 14<sup>ου</sup> αι. Η επαφή μεταξύ διαφορετικών γλωσσών και η αυξημένη πολυγλωσσία των κατοίκων, αποτέλεσμα της πολιτικής ρευστότητας και της κοινωνικής κινητικότητας, αποτελούν πιθανά αίτια της σταδιακής ανάδειξης αυτής της κοινής. Κείμενα γραμμένα σε μια ποικιλία που προσεγγίζει την καθομιλούμενη της εποχής, αναφορές στην προφορική γλώσσα, καθώς και οι γνώσεις μας σχετικά με τις κρατούσες δημογραφικές και κοινωνικές συνθήκες παρέχουν ενθαρρυντικές ενδείξεις για την περαιτέρω διερεύνηση αυτής της άποψης.

## Keywords

urban Cypriot Greek, koineisation, identity, network ties, social history

### 1. Defining the Cypriot *koine* <sup>1</sup>

The variety referred to as 'the Cypriot *koine*' may be circumscribed with reference to its relation with the Cypriot dialect. The latter denotes an abstract, over-arching variety, from which the localised varieties actually heard in various areas of the island may be generated (Newton 1972a:19; Contossopoulos 1969). The Cypriot *koine* is placed at the acrolect end of this dialectal continuum, areally covering urban areas of the island.<sup>2</sup>

This variety predominates in daily transactions among Cypriots of all socio-economic backgrounds. Its codification has not been systematised and its use by the media is restricted to short humorous pieces in the daily press, a handful of highly popular local TV productions, and a limited range of advertisements (Pavlou 1996), while its intelligibility to speakers of Standard Modern Greek (SMG) is higher than that of localised 'patois' speech.<sup>3</sup>

Awareness and use of this *koine* are central to Cypriot Greeks' linguistic identity, witness the existence of distinct names for the varieties used by different 'groups' (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985:182). Urban speech is referred to as *cipriaka*, a variant distinct from *kalamaristika* (=SMG) and also from localised patois speech commonly referred to as *xorkatika*.

## 2. A recent development?

The historical point of the emergence of this Cypriot *koine* is controversial. Some associate this with social factors such as urbanisation, technological progress, education, and the media, claiming a pivotal role of contact with SMG in this process (Contossopoulos 1969:92-3; Kolitsis 1986:215), to which others add the relocation of refugees to the south after 1974, and the establishment of the first University on the island in 1989 (Anaxagorou 1987:129; Panayotou 1996:122). For these authors, the emergence of the *koine* constitutes a recent development, the koineising varieties being SMG and localised patois (see appendix). While the impact of recent financial prosperity, demographic growth, urbanisation, and industrialisation is hardly deniable (St John-Jones 1983:39; Christodoulou 1992:xvii; 1994:614), the assumption that the Cypriot *koine* emerged under the influence of SMG in recent years as a result of these developments is open to scrutiny.

To begin with, not all features of the modern *koine* can be traced back to one of the assumed input varieties, for instance, extensive compounding yielding neologisms peculiar to Cypriot Greek (‘σοβαρομυλώ’, ‘πολλοέρκουμαί’ ; already commented on by Sakellarios, 1891:πβ’), or idiosyncratic accentuation of lexical items (e.g. ‘τωρά’; already found in the 16<sup>th</sup>c. *Love Poems*, Siapkarakas-Pitsillides 1952).

Cypriot Greeks’ awareness of *cipriaka* as distinct from both *kalamaristika* and from *xorkatika* poses a further problem. The naming of linguistic varieties is well known to follow developments at the structural level, sometimes many decades later (Wright 2003). Hence assuming that such developments are recent fails to explain how they have, in a mere three decades, already found their way into the Cypriot Greek vocabulary.

## 3. Earlier references to a *koine*

The delimitation of different varieties by different names dates before the assumed recent emergence of the *koine*. The term ‘*xorkatika*’ was current in 1963 when Newton (1972a:19) collected material for his study. Even before, references in manuscripts from the 16<sup>th</sup>c. onwards to ‘την ημετέραν ιδιωτικήν την των Κυπρέων γλώττα’ (Kakoulidi-Panou & Pidonia 1994:34) reveal the early linguistic awareness of the Cypriot dialect in its totality as distinct from Greek as spoken on the Mainland.

Newton’s study analyses a “local *koine*, heard commonly, especially on the lips of younger speakers, in villages whose indigenous dialect may differ in various respects from it” (1972a:21). Newton (ibid.) considers this *koine* to have provided the basis for the language of Cypriot communities in Britain and South Africa – migration to which largely occurred in the early 1900’s (St John-Jones 1983:99-100).

Attesting to the existence of a *koine* before the recent social changes, Christodoulou (1973:310) laments the receding of the “Lefkosia *koine*” in favour of local varieties over the preceding twenty-five years, while Vayacacos (1979:72-75) explicitly proposes three successive stages of a *koine* spoken on Cyprus (late 18<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup>, late 20<sup>th</sup>c.).

#### 4. The pyramid model

The suggested importance of urban speech in the development of the *koine* makes Trudgill's (1983:186ff.) 'pyramid model' a possible starting point for tracing its historical development (fig.1).

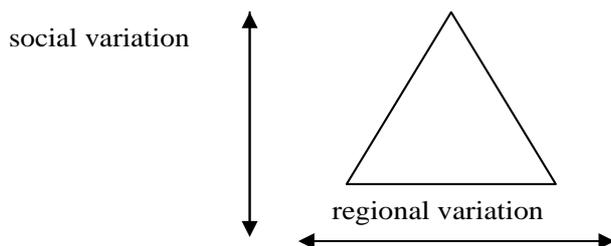


Figure 1: Dialect variation in the UK (Trudgill 1983:188)

According to this, regional differentiation is greatest among lower-working-class speakers, and smallest at the top of the pyramid, i.e. amongst speakers from the upper-middle-class.

Horrocks (1997:37) advances a related proposal for the Hellenistic *koine*: “[i]t is essential [...] to see the Koine not only as the standard written and spoken language of the upper classes [...] but also more abstractly as a superordinate variety standing at the pinnacle of a pyramid comprising an array of lower-register varieties, spoken and occasionally written.” Interestingly, Horrocks explicitly identifies the variety at the top of the pyramid as a *koine*, allowing for it both to incorporate features from regional varieties, and to be innovative with respect to them. The following section outlines several types of evidence suggesting that this model may be fruitfully applied to the evolution of today's Cypriot *koine*.

#### 5. Factors affecting koineisation

Tuten (2003:22ff.) analyses five factors determining the outcome of koineisation: a) isolation, b) weak network ties between community members, c) formation of a common identity, d) low norm enforcement, e) young speakers/ learners receiving rich and variable input. All of these were met in Cyprus already since the late 14<sup>th</sup>c., making it highly likely that a *koine* arose rather quickly as the language of the higher strata around that time, and has been constantly developing ever since. As hallmarks of koineisation, its rapid emergence and constant development support characterising the new variety as a *koine*.

##### 5.1 Isolation

Regarding isolation, Tuten notes: “especially in pre-modern societies ... contact and weak ties will be facilitated by smaller size of the region undergoing koinesation” (2003:82-83). Cyprus's island status easily confirms its small size and geographical isolation.

Moreover, Cyprus has a history of administrative isolation. Already in the first half of the 7<sup>th</sup>c., it was isolated from Constantinople, following the Arab conquests of Palestine and Syria. A peculiar regime of joint Arab-Byzantine sovereignty ensued (Browning 1977-79:105), lasting until

965 when the island returned under Byzantine control. Byzantine administration came to an end in 1911, with the establishment of the Lusignan dynasty. As the last refuge of western nobility in the Levant (Collenberg 1982:72-3), the Lusignan kingdom (1192-1489) became increasingly isolated from metropolitan France and western customs (Richard 1962:11). Isolation from the centres of political decision-making continued as the island passed from Venetian (1489-1571) to Ottoman rule (1571-1878), subsequently coming under British administration, with isolation now realised as exoticisation of the islanders by the newly-arrived Brits (Herzfeld 1987:73-4). Geographical isolation has not been irrelevant to the island's political fate since the formation of the modern state in 1960. The recent rise of an ideology of Cypriotism (Stamatakis 1991) cannot be seen separately from these developments.

## 5.2 Weak network ties

In historical terms, weak network ties result from urbanisation and/or massive influx of immigrants (Tuten 2003:52,82,45). Urban establishments are not found on Cyprus before the Lusignan period. Rather, "the formation of an urban bourgeoisie and development of the urban centres of the island ... were among the most important achievements of the Lusignan regime" (Papadopoulos 1995:765). The institutional organisation of the Lusignan kingdom was greatly influenced by that of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, with the nobility and the non-noble Frankish burgesses living in the towns alongside the non-Frankish indigenous population (Collenberg 1982:73-4). Initially distrustful of the locals, the aristocracy nevertheless needed to consolidate its rule and communicate with the labouring classes. Privileges known as 'bourgeoisies' were granted to inhabitants of the cities, merchants and artisans. By the 14<sup>th</sup>c., the new class of bourgeois also participated in political decision-making (Arbel 1986:204).

Furthermore, the demographic superiority of the indigenous population was actively mitigated by attracting settlers from Syria and Palestine with the promise of land, liberties and other privileges (Papadopoulos 1993:19). Waves of refugees from the Holy lands continued to arrive throughout the 13<sup>th</sup>c., while under Venetian rule a deliberate policy of re-populating the newly-acquired colony encouraged subjects of the Serenissima from Italy, Balkans and Greece (the Peloponnese and Corfu), as well as Christians from Syria, to relocate to the island (Arbel 1984:186-7).

The natural meeting place of these foreign settlers and the newly-formed local urban strata were the towns, where the gradual enfranchisement initially of a substantial servile population, and later of numerous rural land-labourers, produced an association of personal freedom with permanent town-dwelling (Arbel 1984:204). Thus, alongside the old dichotomy between feudal Western and Byzantine Eastern, a new dichotomy emerged between "the town, with its permanent and free inhabitants, enjoying particular privileges and participating ... in ... political life; and ... rural society, comprising serfs and free tenants, ... unable to enjoy urban privileges and ... barred from taking any part whatsoever in the public life of the kingdom" (Arbel 1986:204).

The latter dichotomy persisted under subsequent regimes. Such rift separated urban and rural populations during the Ottoman conquest (1570/71) that wholesale war broke out, with the

peasants receiving the Ottomans as liberators, and the aristocracy and urban bourgeoisie being persecuted (Kyrris 1984, 1988). When the Latin faith was officially banned and the Orthodox one re-instated, non-indigenous members of the higher strata were faced with a choice: either be Hellenised and join the new secular Greek elite, or be Islamised. By introducing the Muslim-Greek dichotomy, the Ottoman regime brought about a novel weakening of networks within the urban establishment.

At the same time, the dichotomy between rural and urban populations persisted. The Turks being almost exclusively involved in administration, urban populations became predominantly Turkish, with Greeks concentrated in the countryside (Georgallides 1984:17). “[T]he most populous group”, the predominantly Greek peasantry, were again “the most disadvantaged”, being subject to disproportionate taxation (Kyrris 1988:262). However, wealth continued to be concentrated in the hands of the new Greek elite through commerce and manufacture. The founding of town municipalities in the mid-19<sup>th</sup>c. further strengthened the urban establishment and Greek representation therein (Maratheftis 1987:150).

The dichotomy between rural and urban populations persisted under the British (Katsiaounis 1995:249). Benefiting from an entire infrastructure comprising road and communications networks, the Greek elite developed into local elites in the coastal towns (Maratheftis 1987:137ff.). Changes in the Turkish community were less pronounced, and the absence of a rising bourgeoisie therein signified a new weakening of urban networks. This was accentuated after WW1, when a wave of expropriations drove large numbers of rural labourers to either emigrate abroad or immigrate to the cities, forming a working class for the first time. Traditional networks broke down once more, and new ones, based on class and ethnic conscience, emerged.

### 5.3 Formation of a common identity

Reciprocal accommodation between speakers of mutually intelligible varieties accompanies the emergence of closer-knit networks from initially weak ones, and is realised through both avoidance of marked features and learning new ones, thus explaining how new social and linguistic norms arise (Tuten 2003:29,53-4).

During the middle period of the Lusignan kingdom (1291-1374), Hellenisation of the higher strata on all levels of private and public life (Nikolaou-Konnari 1993:34,43) produced a common Cypriot identity, not identical in every respect to either of the Greek Byzantine and Franco-Levantine original ones.

After the Frankish conquest, the majority of the population, especially in rural areas (80-85% under Venetian rule, Arbel 1984) continued to be Orthodox and Greek-speaking. Their language would have been some form of the Cypriot dialect, “the first modern dialect to appear in its distinctive modern guise” (Horrocks 1997:284) following its early detachment from the Byzantine core (7<sup>th</sup>c. onwards). On the other hand, with an ethnic composition of 50% French or Flemish, 25% Provençal, 10% Norman, and 15% Italian (Papadopoulos 1995:792), the newly-arrived aristocracy had also taken up the ways of the Levant in several respects, including customs and the language (Richard 1962:75,130). By 1350, the French of Cyprus, a direct

descendent of the French of Terra Santa, showed many dialectal features, including Italianisms and Greek loanwords (Richard 1983:xxix; 1962:15).

From 1350 onwards, a steady decline in numbers compelled the Frankish aristocracy to open its ranks to the indigenous Greeks (Papadopoulos 1995:769). Greek aristocracy is reported in 1367, while marriages between Franks and locals before 1400. As a result of these, and of numerous births out of wedlock, a new class of Greek-speaking nobles rose by the 15<sup>th</sup>c. Greek was spoken also at the highest echelons of this aristocracy and adopted in written acts (Richard 1983:xxix), while spoken French declined (Nikolaou-Konnari 1993:40). Central to this process of Hellenisation was the old aristocracy's conscious choice to take in indigenous Greeks but not Venetians or Genoese, which allowed it to remain Orthodox and Greek-speaking (Papadopoulos 1995:790,835,839), syncretism also occurring in the religious, legal and artistic spheres, as well as physical appearance.

The ensuing Hellenisation of the hitherto largely heterogeneous urban classes made necessary the translation of the *Assises*, the Lusignan code of laws, into the Cypriot vernacular. Subsequently, this was cultivated initially in original works (the *Chronicles* of Machairas and Boustronios), and later also in translations of foreign ones (*Fior de Vertu*, *Love Poems*, Lusignan's *Chorographia*) and of older Greek texts (*Apostles' Deeds*, *Speech by John Damascenus*).

Study of these works' language allows some assumptions about their target audience: a mixed public of Greeks and Franks, who by and large knew only the dialect (Nikolaou-Konnari 1993:51) – hence all words foreign to it, including puristic Greek ones, are translated (Kyrris 1993:172). Extensive use of French loanwords – often as explanations of Greek words – indicates their currency, especially in the towns. Uninflected rendition of loanwords and synonym citation reveal degrees of contact and of linguistic assimilation between Greeks and Franks. This is also confirmed by the mostly non-dialectal and influenced by scholarly Greek language of the *Love Poems*, claimed to represent cultured Cypriot of the time (Siapkaras-Pitsillides 1952:20).

The common Cypriot identity of the higher strata left its traces on language up to modern times. Farmakides's early 20<sup>th</sup>c. *Compilations of words* contain many instances where the variant used in the cities is a generalised variant non-existent, or different from that used, in the countryside. This city variant is (a) either closer to the underlying phonological form, hence closer to the standard, or (b) a French or Italian loanword (i) rendered differently in the countryside, or (ii) referring to an object not known therein. The former possibility confirms Siapkaras-Pitsillides's (1952:20) claim that the Greek of educated Cypriots was mostly non-dialectal, while the latter, the assumption that proportionately more loanwords were used in the cities, thereby jointly supporting our hypothesis of an early urban *koine*. Its unbroken transmission in the cities from the late 14<sup>th</sup>c. to the present day is argued for by *koine* elements in early 20<sup>th</sup>c. urban speech which have also survived in today's *koine*.

This is not to say that this *koine* has not undergone new influences since then. Turkish numerical supremacy in the cities under Ottoman rule (1571-1878) makes greater impact of Turkish on urban rather than rural speech highly likely. However, linguistic assimilation toward Turkish models appears restricted to the lexical level. This is because no common identity was

formed between the urban Turkish populations and the Greek elite (Maratheftis 1987:150), such that the *koine* handed down to the emerging bourgeoisies in the coastal towns may be considered—at least structurally, if not lexically—close to that of the pre-Ottoman period.

Koineisation was favoured again during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>c., this time between the urban *koine* and SMG. The advent of British administration saw an increase in ethnic awareness in both the Greek and Turkish communities (Kyrris 1984:82), while the lower urban strata had also acquired a Greek national consciousness and political awareness (Katsiaounis 1995:224-5). The urban *koine* attested by Newton and Christodoulou emerged in the light of these developments.

#### 5.4 Low norm enforcement

In a koineising context, norms refer to “social conditions that limit speaker actions as well as the end-products of collective speaker activity on the macro-level”. They are associated with correction and stigmatisation, providing the context of acquisition for children and adults (Tuten 2003:49,50,56).

Low norm enforcement in Cyprus during the first stage of koineisation claimed concerns both Greek and French, and is externalised in three ways: (a) mediocre quality of Greek educational establishments under Lusignan rule (Kyrris 1993:169); (b) widespread bilingualism of the scribes (Richard 1983:xxix, Nikolaou-Konnari 1993:45) producing divergences from established usage in Greek and French manuscripts (phonetic rendition of French and Italian loanwords, intense iotacism, sandhi phenomena, lack of accentuation, alphabet mixing); (c) lack of codification of the emerging *koine*, leading to common developments such as extensive sandhi phenomena and non-standard accentuation.

During the second stage of koineisation claimed (late 19<sup>th</sup>c.), infrequent contact with the Mainland and the scarcity of Greek newspapers on the island (Beaudouin 1884:16) left the spoken language largely unaffected by the linguistic debate unfolding on the Mainland (Horrocks 1997:344ff.), and free to develop toward an independent urban *koine*.

#### 5.5 Young speakers/learners receiving rich and variable input

Latest research views koineisation as a rapid and abrupt process taking place over no more than two generations (Tuten 2003:67ff.) The timescale proposed for the first stage of koineisation falls within this range, roughly extending from 1291 till 1374. During this time, children growing up in the higher strata were exposed to various forms of Greek spoken as an L1 or an L2. Similarly, the second stage of koineisation extends roughly from 1880 till 1950. Under British rule, multilingualism (in Greek, Turkish, English and Armenian) remained a stable feature, norms not being greatly enforced outside of formal education. On both occasions, there is reason to expect that all five factors favouring koineisation were instantiated in urban environments, prompting the initial emergence of a *koine* in the late 14<sup>th</sup>c. and its continuous development ever since.

## 6. The Mesaoria variety, basis of the urban *koine*

Evidence that the main structural features of the Mesaoria variety (see appendix) survive in the modern *koine* (Terkourafi 2001:60ff.) supports the origin of the Cypriot *koine* in this variety. If so, this is an instance of “elevation of a dialect to a position of *primus inter pares*” (Jones 1998:289; *pace* Karyolemou 2000) as opposed to koineisation (Trudgill 1986:107; Kerswill & Williams 2000:66), when “the proliferated variety is [...] a non-geographically locatable amalgam in which the regional dialects have been reduced to a common core” (Jones 1998:290). Nevertheless, the two processes need not be mutually exclusive. Thus, distinctive phonological features of the Mesaoria variety (e.g. /tt/ in *πεττερά*; Menardos 1969:99fn.3) were lost in the *koine* as predicted by Principle 2 of Kerswill & Williams (2000:85-9: “[m]arked regional forms are disfavoured”), while ‘levelling’ of minority lexical forms (cf. their Principle 1: “Majority forms found in the mix, rather than minority forms, win out”) also occurred.

Selection of the Mesaoria variety, spoken in the capital Lefkosia, confirms the influence of “factors such as political centralisation, with the language of the power-base often gaining in importance” (Jones 1998:261). Geographical centrality, abundant waters and fertile soil contributed to making Lefkosia the administrative centre of the island at least since the Lusignan times. Subsequently the seat of the Venetian administration, its financial prosperity attracted settlers from across the island and from abroad, as well as refugees after the Ottoman invasion (Arbel 1984:197-8). At the beginning and again by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>c., population was evenly split between Greeks and Turks, while Turks predominated around the middle of the century. This predominantly Turkish character ensured its continued selection as seat of the government under Ottoman rule. A small Greek elite of merchants and government officials nevertheless continued to live there. The Lefkosia district thus dominated the urban system throughout the years, already accounting for approximately 30% of the island’s population at the first census of 1881 (Constantinou 1994:222).

## 7. Conclusion

Historical and structural evidence places the formation of the Cypriot *koine* in the late 14<sup>th</sup>c. during the Lusignan period. Geographical and political isolation, weak network ties as a result of urbanisation and successive immigrations, the formation of a common identity between higher strata, as well as low norm enforcement and a rich linguistic input provided over a short time-span support this proposal. This *koine* was inherited by the urban middle-class across the island, and underwent, in the early 20<sup>th</sup>c., a second stage of koineisation with SMG.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> For descriptions of its main features see Terkourafi 2001, Arvaniti 2002.

<sup>3</sup> I.e. regional varieties which are not written (Haugen 1972:99).

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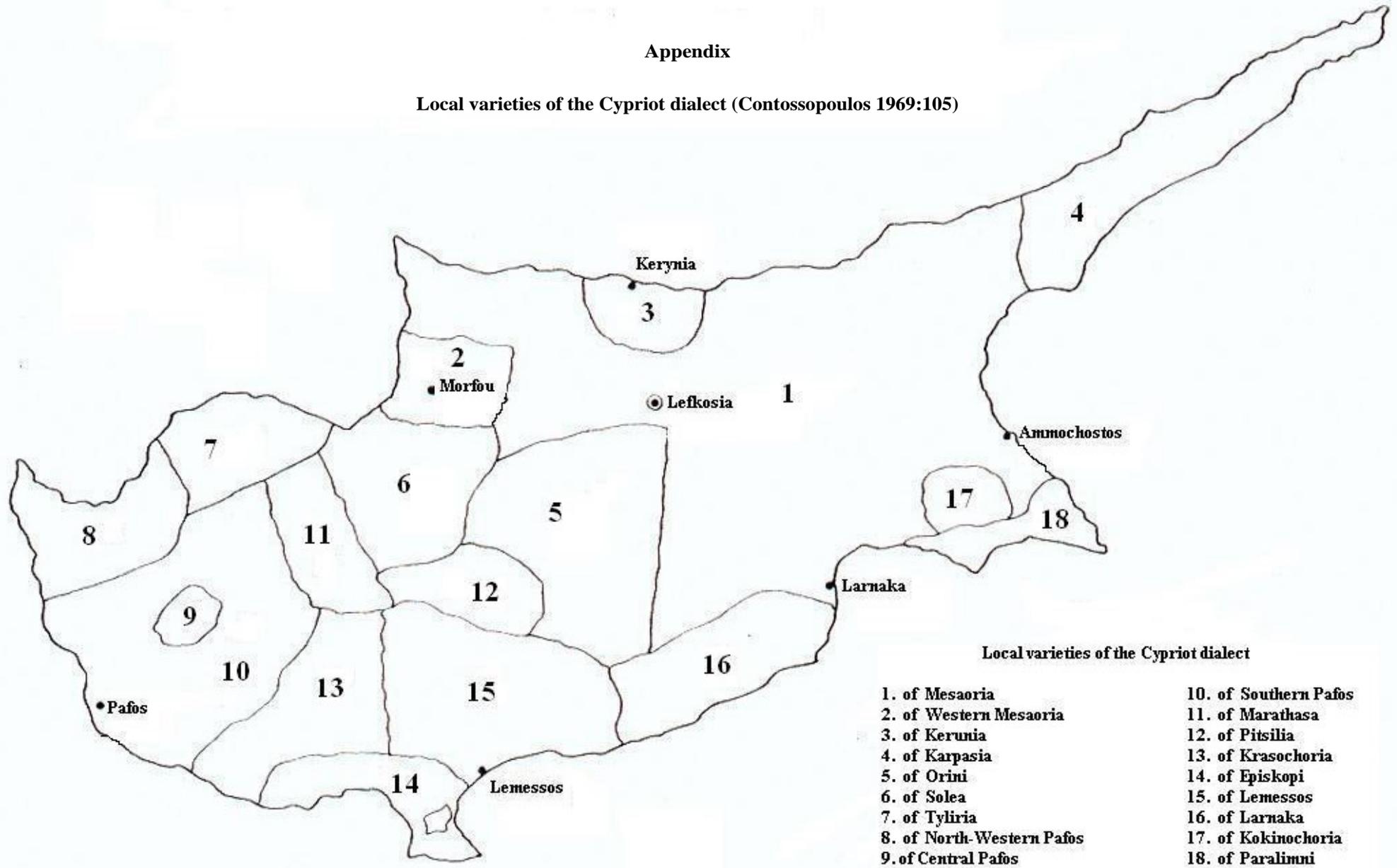
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Appendix

Local varieties of the Cypriot dialect (Contossopoulos 1969:105)



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