

# From Boys to Men: How Do Women Communication Specialists Fit In?

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## 1. Introduction

Our contribution considers three groups of communities of different gender and age, which can be presented as follows (somewhat over-generalizing, of course, to be qualified below):

1. young boys in schools (or speech and language therapy clinics)
2. female professional mediators (namely, speech–language professionals)
3. adult male policy-makers (such as the education, health, and finance sectors)

The following presentation involves the inter-relationships and collaborations between these three groups. Sketching it chronologically, the inter-relationship begins with young children, predominantly boys, in schools or speech therapy clinics who are in need of therapeutic support and treatment on their speech and/or language abilities (including prior diagnosis). It carries over to the, overwhelmingly female, professional mediators who help them overcome their impairments (in ideal circumstances, certified and experienced speech and language therapists). And it finally reaches the adult, largely male, policy-makers who are instrumental in designing and implementing the legislation behind speech and language therapy service provision (usually through governmental agencies, such as ministries of Education and/or Health but also requiring the budgetary okay from Finance). This contribution comes from the perspective of a Speech and Language Therapist (henceforth, SLT), who has to show not only over 20 years of experience in Australia, Greece, and Cyprus but is also an active, academic researcher, and an academic linguist who initiated the first systematic study of (a)typical language development in the Republic of Cyprus.

The first aim is to highlight the fact that international prevalence figures of communication impairment across a wide range of conditions reveals an unequal ratio of male to female vulnerability. For example, autism is four times more likely to affect boys than girls of all levels of intelligence (<http://www.autismspeaks.org/whatisit/facts.php>). At a national level, for research carried out by the recently formed Cyprus Acquisition Team, or CAT for short (<http://www.research.biolinguistics.eu/CAT>), the informal finding of a greater prevalence of specific language impairment in boys than girls supports international prevalence data of at least a 2.3 to 1 ratio with females being significantly less unaffected than males (SLI Consortium, 2004, though see also Tallal et al., 2001); this research is currently being written up within the Gen-CHILD Project and further investigated in a nationally funded research project to start in 2011 (please refer to the CAT website for more information). To stay local, compare this with the 280 members of the Cypriot Association of Registered Speech-Language Pathologists, which is a female-dominant profession: 258 female versus 22 male members. Yet, up to 75% of speech pathology caseloads are male, depending on age of clients and work-setting.

This brings us to our second aim, which is to raise concerns regarding provision of SLT services to a predominantly male population in need by overwhelmingly female professionals, given the different discourse and interaction styles between boys and women communication specialists. However, little investigation has been undertaken to explore the impact of this male/female imbalance on patients, students, practitioners, or the profession at large.

Our third aim is to highlight the other angle of this inter-relationship, namely, the fact that policy-makers, individuals responsible for legislation and ministry decisions in Cyprus and elsewhere for speech–language communication services in schools (and hospitals) are largely male and have little exposure to or collaboration with female SLTs — other than perhaps services enjoyed as young boys...

Overall, taking the argumentation towards these three aims into consideration, we wish to lobby for a Communication Champion in Cyprus, similar to what has recently been initiated and implemented in the United Kingdom ([http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2009\\_0190](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0190)): a female mediator who will advocate for the SLT profession across all levels, from client contact to active involvement in policy-making and -shaping.

## **2. Communication, communication disorders, and some background on Cyprus**

Children must master language, the conventional code used to convey thoughts and ideas, and speech, the complex and rapid motor movements that translate such ideas into spoken words. Both language and speech are essential for sharing feelings, ideas, and information with others. Children that experience difficulties in learning to understand and use the language(s) they hear around them have speech and/or language disorders, which put them at high risk for associated learning, social and behavioural problems (Bishop & Leonard, 2000).

Internationally, speech delay in 6-year-old children is more prevalent in boys (ca. 4.5%, i.e. around 45 out of 1,000) than in girls (ca. 3.1%, i.e. around 31 out of 1,000). Specific sound disorders, articulation or phonological disorder, has a greater rate of impairment in boys than girls (depending on languages, between 1.5 and 2.4 times). Stuttering in boys is 3 times more likely than in girls and most frequently between the ages of 2 to 6 years as language is developing. Autism is 4 times more likely to affect boys than girls at all levels of intelligence.

These are just some sample numbers that come from a rich and growing literature. For recent discussion of such findings, see among others Williams et al. (2006). For the purposes of this paper, we do not make a distinction between speech disorders and language disorders; neither will we engage in a discussion of atypical vs. typical development or the differentiation between a disorder and an impairment. Collectively, we refer to the object of study for those in need of, for those providing, and for those legislating as communication disorders, catching all of the above.

By comparing children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) to their typically developing peers, we may be able to differentiate with greater levels of sensitivity and specificity during language assessment. By identifying particular (grammatical) structures that are more likely to affect children (and adults) with language impairment. These (grammatical) structures that are most problematic for children with language impairment may then be incorporated into both formal and informal measures of language assessment. Note, however, that paucity of research into the subject in Cyprus leaves us with very little to go by; the knowledge base of communication disorders prevalence in Cyprus is rather low and only recently is there some research activity to be noted. In addition, rather little is known about the types of grammatical features or structures which are particularly vulnerable to (specific) language impairment. Other than ongoing research within CAT, the only published paper that deals with some relevant issues is Petinou & Terzi (2002). Current CAT research is intricately linked to COST Action IS0804 (<http://www.bi-sli.org>, funding period: 2006–2010), which deals with Specific Language Impairment in multilingual societies and which in itself builds on many of the results gained from COST Action A33 (<http://www.zas.gwz-berlin.de/mitarb/homepage/cost>, 2006–2010).

All this should be seen against the background of an intriguing and complex linguistic situation in Cyprus. Not only is the local variety of Modern Greek, Cypriot (Greek), rather understudied with respect to grammatical properties and structures (for a recent contribution and developmental study, see Grohmann, in press), but the plethora of other languages spoken in Cyprus is completely overlooked. For language development, this is a crucial aspect, since many children born to parents who may speak languages other than Cypriot (or Standard Modern) Greek will grow up with at least one other language — and for a variety of reasons, such children are often also the most vulnerable for language delay or developing some form of communication disorder, such as Specific Language Impairment.

### **3. Specific Language Impairment (SLI)**

SLI is a severe limitation in language ability in the absence of other factors that typically accompany language problems, such as hearing impairment, low non-verbal IQ, or neurological damage. SLI is the most common, and also most studied, type of developmental language disorder, yet research that explicitly compares monolingual, bilingual, and even multilingual development is surprisingly lacking — leaving potential implications of multilingualism for children with language disabilities an under-explored area.

Addressing one aspect of this paper, the inter-relationship between SLTs and policy-makers (with a clear implication for children and their families), there are two main issues for SLI. One concerns the assessment and diagnosis, to be then followed up by appropriate professional treatment, i.e. speech and language therapy; the other relates to prevalence figures, that is, how common a particular communication disorder is. We briefly address both and concentrate on Cyprus for obvious reasons, also in line with the suggestion to policy-makers raised in and by our paper towards the end (see section 5).

As for appropriate identification of children and young people with speech, language, and/or communication disorders (SLCDs), we aim to develop and use culture- and language-specific assessment tools for developmental screening and diagnostic assessment. Our ongoing developmental assessment is sensitive to linguistic differences across languages as well as cognitive and social factors. These tools are currently developed within the Gen-Child Project (see Acknowledgements for details) and will be expanded in a new research project soon to start, funded by the Cyprus Research Promotion Foundation, also awarded to the second-named author and involving close collaboration with the first-named author.

Once properly identified, we will need to record (and possibly report) prevalence of SLCDs: How many children are affected and for/with which conditions? This is an important question to parents, but it is also relevant for professionals (such as SLTs), researchers (such as linguists, and everyone working in CAT), and, of course, policy-makers. National prevalence figures are not yet available for Cyprus; this should be an aim. Note that not all EU member states have national prevalence figures, neither for SLI nor for SLCDs in general — and at an even wider-ranging international level, our knowledge base is even less solid.

We would also like to stress the importance of prevalence for service provision and, intimately tied to it, funding — another issue for policy-makers at large. We take these as our key starting points for other important enquiries, such as lifespan prevalence data, which are valuable in understanding the natural history, course, and prognosis of SLI and other SLCDs. This kind of information will then lead us to be in a better position to make an accurate assessment of possible risk and protective factors, and finally address the overall issue of effectiveness of services that can, and should, be provided. Once again, such provision will be carried out by practitioners and professionals (i.e. SLTs for SLCDs), ideally based on solid research — but worked out and approved by policy-makers.

As a starting point for the first of these issues for the future, we take it that prevalence figures are particularly interesting for Cyprus for a variety of reasons. Leaving aside the fact that CAT research on (a)typical language development is primarily carried out on the island, the small size (close to 8,000 km<sup>2</sup>, according to the World Factbook entry on Cyprus; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cy.html>) and population (just shy of 800,000, according to the Wikipedia entry, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyprus>) makes it an ideal place to get in-depth data. In 2008, there were 9,894 five-year-olds in public nurseries and kindergartens all across Cyprus. The potential number of children with SLI, only at age 5, in Cyprus alone could thus be around 700. And this with an expected ratio of 2.3 boys to every girl!

Note that these figures do not tell us how many of these children are bi- or even multilingual. Identification of children with SLCDs that are bi- or multilingual is dynamic and requires speakers with native-like proficiency of the languages spoken to either conduct the assessment or assist in the diagnostic process. Members of CAT working with multilingual children speak a range of languages: Cypriot, Greek, Russian, English, German, French, and Spanish, with easy consulting access for a number of additional languages. Also through our research we are beginning to collaborate closely with interpreters of different languages (unavailable to us directly, such as Romanian or Bulgarian) and follow guidelines in the literature on how to foster productive collaborations such as the three-step process of: briefing, interactions, debriefing (Langdon, 2002; Kambanaros & van Steenbrugge, 2004). Specifically, we train our (female) interpreters on the protocol used in assessing and working with children with SLCDs, and we provide ample time for the SLT to meet before and after each interaction, with the interpreter even though the particular team has worked together before.

#### **4. Speech Therapy and Developmental Language Research in Cyprus**

The Cypriot Association of Registered Speech-Language Pathologists is a member of CPLOL, the Standing Liaison Committee of EU Speech and Language Therapists and Logopedists. Practitioners received their training in a large variety of countries — ten different countries, in fact, and most did thus not get acquainted with the properties of the Greek language as would be relevant for the majority of their clientele. (Up to very recently, Cyprus did not have its own SLT-training program and so far has not produced a single graduate yet.) Males make a meager 22 representatives, with female SLTs being the majority in Cyprus at 258 out of 280 registered SLTs.

Low male participation rates are an accepted fact in a range of female dominated professions, such as nursing and teaching. Males represent 1–5% of student enrolments in the only existing speech and language therapy program in Cyprus at the moment. Male participation rates in speech pathology are lower than in both nursing and teaching as well as other allied health professions. This said, 75% of SLT caseloads are male!

Any person, especially any parent, director of a nursery or kindergarten or elementary school or secondary school or any other member of their education staff, doctor, psychologist, social worker, is responsible to acknowledge to the District Committee each case that came to their knowledge or notice or attention of any child who may have special needs. The District Committee then has the duty to efficiently evaluate the needs of any child considered to have special needs, wherever that child attends classes or stays, and provide all the necessary measures in terms of (i) curriculum adaptation as well as (ii) technical and staffing support for the effective education of these children within a mainstream setting. This evaluation is conducted by a multidisciplinary team, including a child psychologist, an

educational psychologist, a teacher of special education, a doctor, a speech therapist, and/or any other specialist, as the case may require.

The parents of the child to be evaluated have the right to attend during the evaluation and to participate alone or with a specialist. After the evaluation, parents are informed of the decisions concerning their child, taken by the Committee, and have the right of appeal to a Central Committee for special education and training. The District Committee decides that a child is in need of special education and training or facilities. It also decides where special education and training shall be provided — in mainstream classrooms, in a special unit in mainstream schools, or in a special school.

## **5. (Special) Education and Policymaking in Cyprus**

By the new millennium, a balance has emerged between mainstream placement and specialist schools. The whole philosophical trend in Cyprus, which led to the implementation of the new Law of 1999, is that children with special needs have the right to education as any other child and should be provided with all the opportunities for an equivalent education, training, guidance and rehabilitation so as to improve their abilities to the maximum. The State is responsible for safeguarding the rights of children with special needs and is responsible to place those children in the united body of training.

In Cyprus, the 113(I)/1999 Special Education Law gave a statutory basis for the provision of special education based upon the individual needs of the child. Whilst actively supporting the philosophy of integration and inclusion of children with special needs into mainstream education, it recognizes that not all the highly specialized needs of all these children can be met within the mainstream classroom. The development of the special units ensures that only the most demanding and specialized needs cases are referred to special schools.

An educational research enquiry was set up, by the Minister of Education and Culture, to the University of Cyprus jointly with the Pedagogical Institute, in order to research and find possible problems children with special needs are facing in their schools and also possible problems faced in the implementation of the Special Education Law in both Primary and Secondary Education and to make suggestions for improvement.

This research has now been completed for both primary and secondary education. The Ministry of Education and Culture has also produced a Strategic Directions Paper for Inclusive Schooling Practices in Cyprus, prepared by an external consultant. These documents will be considered as a basis for development and improvement of Special Education within the process of the Educational Reform.

Before we reach our recommendation to the special education policy-makers in Cyprus, we would like to briefly present the relevant background where this recommendation is drawn from — a brief “view from the UK” where John Bercow, MP, recently highlighted the importance of speech, language, and communication in the July 2008 Bercow Report (which is freely accessible at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/slnaction/bercow-review.shtml>). It identified the areas where services need to improve to help children and young people with speech, language and communication needs to get the best out of life.

Following the Bercow Report, the British government published Better Communication December 2008, the Speech, Language and Communication Needs Action Plan (as can be followed up in detail at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/slnaction/actionplan.shtml>). The action plan makes commitments to carry out a range of initiatives across government, culminating in the National Year of Speech, Language, and Communication in 2011 focusing on the importance of communication and related areas, such as special educational needs and SLT intervention

(see the website of the Department for Children, Schools, and Families for more information at [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2009\\_0190](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0190), even if some information may not be updated due to the recent change in government in the UK). This action plan also met the recommendation of the Bercow Report to appoint a Communication Champion; Jean Gross took on the role of the first Communication Champion in the UK (see her profile at the Communication Trust: <http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/bcap/champion.aspx>).

Why a Communication Champion? Or perhaps: What is a Communication Champion? The appointment of a Communication Champion was a recommendation in the 2008 Bercow Report on services for children with speech, language, and communication needs and forms part of the government's Better Communication Action Plan developed in response to the Bercow review. The appointed Communication Champion, funded jointly by the Department for Children, Schools, and Families and the Department of Health, will be responsible for working across government, delivery partners, and other stakeholders to co-ordinate and build on initiatives to improve services for children and young people with speech, language, and communication needs. The Communication Champion will also plan, organize, and lead the National Year of Speech, Language, and Communication in 2011 focusing on the importance of developing children's communication skills.

To quote from the press release of the Communication Champion's inauguration (<http://www.ace-north.org.uk/documents/CommunicationChampionDCSFPressRelease15October.pdf>):

The Communication Champion will be independent of Government and will play a key role in promoting the importance of communication skills to children and in helping us to make a success of the action plan commitments. The Champion will work to inspire commissioners and service providers to develop services that improve outcomes for children with communication needs and spread good practice to support the development of effective communication skills. They will provide a strong independent voice for children with communication needs, driving improvements in services by working across England with the full range of national, regional and local partners in the voluntary, public and commercial sector.

The obvious conclusion we will draw presently is that Cyprus could benefit greatly from appointing its own Communication Champion. We believe it is obvious that any country would benefit from such an institutionalization, but as we hope to have shown, Cyprus is a special case: It is a small country with a relatively low, yet culturally and linguistically very diverse population. Note in closing, however, that as of today, there is no EU consensus on any of the following issues concerning SLI, often even SLCDs in general:

- definition and diagnosis
- terminology and classification
- aetiology
- prevalence
- early signs and clinical marker(s)
- co-morbidity
- intervention
- education and academic attainments
- social and emotional aspects
- consistency of symptoms across life span
- health-related quality of life

## 6. Conclusion

Addressing the needs of children and young people with speech, language and communication as their primary or secondary need *must* achieve high political prominence in Cyprus beyond gender roles and power struggles. Speech-language therapists, parents, afflicted individuals, and policy-makers must collaborate and agree on a common approach to address the needs of communication-impaired citizens in our community. The current situation in Cyprus reflects scientific and conceptual challenges concerning the nature of these children's problems and a lack of collaborative practice between all interested parties. This relative lack of development, especially after the new millennium and Cyprus' (not so recent anymore) EU membership, is very disappointing. To achieve a systemic change across all responsible agencies and authorities (ministries) is likely to require a major government initiative — leaving this to the “pace of the island” (σιγά-σιγά) has so far been ineffective. In short: We need our own communication champ!

## Acknowledgements

This research is part of the Gen-Child Project (<http://www.research.biolinguistics.eu/Gen-CHILD>), internally funded by the University of Cyprus with grant no. 8037-61017 and awarded to the second-named author.

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