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Morphological interpretations of syncretism in the panorama of Greek

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Abstract: This paper explores the nuanced realm of case syncretism, focusing primarily on its synchronic presence in Modern Greek (dialectal variety) and on the diachronic emergence of the phenomenon, classifying the distribution of syncretic cells in the nominal inflectional system of the language. This analysis shows that syncretism has been extended over time to many nouns, no longer limited either to neuter nouns or to the cells for the Nominative and Accusative. I suggest that the distribution of syncretic cells in Greek is influenced primarily by grammatical gender, but it is also affected by the productivity of each inflectional class, which I attribute to the morphomic (in terms of Aronoff [1994]. *Morphology by itself: Stems and inflectional classes*, vol. 22. MIT Press.) nature of the phenomenon. I propose a decisive new factor preventing a cell from participating in syncretic patterns: inter-paradigmatic similarity of affixes appears to block syncretism. Further, I examine the factors facilitating the development and expansion of syncretic patterns.

Keywords: syncretism; morphology; Modern Greek; Modern Greek Dialects; blocking syncretism

1 Introduction

The phenomenon of syncretism, the morphological identification of two or more grammatical cases of a word (i.e., *ti'mes* 'price_{NOM.PL.}' = 'price_{ACC.PL.}' = 'price_{VOC.PL.}'), has been examined in the literature through the perspective of a variety of theoretical approaches.

However, quite often in the relevant literature, syncretism is almost unilaterally attributed to the internal structure of morphosyntactic features of the syncretic cases (i.e., Collins and Kayne 2020). This view implies that morphology does not have an independent design and autonomous role, but rather that its processes are determined solely by syntax. In order to explore the phenomenon of syncretism, this work

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considers data from *Modern Greek*¹ (MG) as a language features both a rich inflectional morphology and a plethora of available sources, both synchronic and diachronic. Thus, MG permits examination of the synchronic distribution of syncretism and its diachronic evolution, illuminating the factors affecting the phenomenon.

More specifically, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- i. How are syncretic patterns distributed in MG?
- ii. Have they changed through time? If so, in which direction?
- iii. Are some cases more easily affected than others by syncretism?
- iv. What factors seem to favor or hinder the development of syncretism?
- v. How can the syncretic patterns of Greek nominal inflection contribute to the debate on the general nature and causes of the phenomenon?

This work is structured as follows: In Section 2, in order to facilitate comparison among the various varieties of Greek, both synchronically and diachronically, I describe the framework and the premises of this study. In Section 3, I give an overview of the distribution of syncretic paradigmatic cells in MG. For each example of syncretism given in MG, I also cite its corresponding paradigm in *Classical Greek*² (CG). In Section 4, I discuss the syncretic patterns present in MG, examining the patterns participating more easily in syncretism and those resisting the phenomenon. In Section 5, I discuss the nature of syncretism, arguing for factors that have enabled, or hindered, the development of syncretic patterns in MG. In Section 6, the paper concludes with a brief summary of my main findings.

2 Syncretic inflectional paradigms

Standard Modern Greek (SMG), like *Modern Greek Dialects* (MGD), belongs to the class of fusional linguistic systems in which the same morpheme expresses more than one feature. In its nominal inflection, MG express two features, case and number. The case can have at least three values: nominative (NOM), accusative (ACC), and genitive (GEN). The number can have only two values: singular (S) or plural (PL).

A traditional representation of inflectional paradigms like those listed in Table 1 would imply that the paradigm of each Lexeme listed consists of -at least- six different morphological forms resulting from the combination of the two values of the number and at least three values of the case. However, a careful look at the examples from SMG in Table 1 reveals that within the data set the above provision is

¹ I will use the term MG as a generic term, including the *Standard Modern Greek* (hereafter SMG) and *Modern Greek Dialects* (hereafter MGD).

² Since there was no Standard Greek variety in the Classical period, the examples I cite from the CG come from the Attic-Ionian dialect, for which we can access a wealth of sources.

Table 1: Nominal inflectional paradigms with/without syncretism in SMG.

| 'likos 'wolf' | | | 'xora 'country' | | | pe'ðaci 'little child' | | |
|------------------|--------|--------|--------------------|--------|--------|---------------------------|---------|---------|
| | SN | PL | | SN | PL | | SN | PL |
| NOM. | 'likos | 'liki | NOM. | 'xora | 'xores | NOM. | pe'ðaci | pe'ðaca |
| ACC. | 'liko | 'likus | ACC. | 'xora | 'xores | ACC. | pe'ðaci | pe'ðaca |
| GEN. | 'liku | 'likon | GEN. | 'xoras | xo'ron | GEN. | – | – |

confirmed only for the noun *'likos* 'wolf'. In striking contrast, nouns like *'xora* and *pe'ðaci* do not confirm the expectation for six separate forms.

The 1:1 correspondence between the available paradigmatic cells and the morphological forms realizing these cells is violated in the noun *'xora* 'country' (Table 1), as there is a syncretism between NOM and ACC in both the singular and the plural. For these nouns, multiple cells in the inflectional paradigm are realized by a single morphological form. This phenomenon leads to an inflectional paradigm lacking orthogonality, as only four morphological types realize six separate paradigmatic cells. The reduction of available morphological forms is even more extensive in nouns such as *pe'ðaci* 'little child' (Table 1), for which, in addition to the syncretism between NOM and ACC, there are no morphological forms³ filling the cell(s) of the genitive.⁴

In Greek linguistic varieties, syncretism is a little-studied phenomenon despite its extensive presence in the nominal inflection systems of SMG and MGD (see the following sections). The comparison of the inflectional paradigm of the lexeme ΠΟΙΗΤΗΣ between CG and SMG, shown in Table 2, suggests the extent to which the phenomenon manifests currently. However, it should be noted that syncretism also occurred in CG, but only among the paradigmatic cells (a) of the nominative, accusative, and vocative (VOC) of neuter nouns and (b) of the nominative and vocative of the plural in the feminine and in certain classes of the masculine gender.

This paper explores syncretism within a framework of Syntax-Free Morphology, with the aim of conducting a comprehensive, long-term study of how syncretism influences Greek inflectional paradigms. I have chosen not to address the distinction between systematic and accidental homonymy noted by Zwicky (1991) since attention to this distinction would constrain the scope of our examination of the overall landscape of syncretism in Greek inflectional systems.

3 This phenomenon is termed *defectiveness*. For a thorough discussion, see Sims (2006, 2015) and, for Greek dialects, Marinis (2020: 49–50, 156–157).

4 Regarding the cell of the genitive in diminutive nouns, see, for example, Marinis (2024) and Kiparsky (1996).

Table 2: The inflectional paradigm of the lexeme ΠΟΙΗΤΗΣ ‘poet’ in CG and SMG.

| ποιητής ‘poet’, CG | | | pii’tis ‘poet’, SMG | | |
|-----------------------|---------|----------|------------------------|---------|---------|
| | SN | PL | | SN | PL |
| NOM. | ποιητής | ποιηταί | NOM. | pii’tis | pii’tes |
| ACC. | ποιητήν | ποιητάς | ACC. | pii’ti | |
| GEN. | ποιητοῦ | ποιητών | GEN. | | pii’ton |
| DAT. | ποιητῇ | ποιηταῖς | DAT. | – | – |

3 Syncretism in Greek nominal inflectional classes

To clarify the increased extent of syncretism in the inflectional paradigms of MG nouns, the tables in Section 3.1 list paradigms in MG and, in contrast, the paradigm of the same words in CG. CG was chosen partly for its temporal distance from MG and partly owing to the abundant sources and data available for the language of that period.

The research material cited here comes from (a) the fieldwork I conducted in the Greek-speaking areas of Southern Italy in the summer of 2016 and 2018 and (b) recordings I made during my visit to Greek-speaking villages in Southern Albania (2018). For the remaining dialects, I used (c) data and material from the Laboratory for Greek Dialectology at The Ohio State University (accessed in 2023), and (d) the available grammatical descriptions and dictionaries.

3.1 Syncretism in neuter nouns

The best-known case of syncretism in the history of the Greek language appears with neuter nouns. In neuter, the paradigmatic cells of the nominative, genitive, and vocative case consistently and systematically coincide in their morphological realization.

As shown schematically in Table 3, syncretism is a diachronic phenomenon in the Greek language. It applies to both MG (see *‘yrama*, *kor’mi*, and *‘θoro*, in Table 1) and CG (see *γράφμα* and *δῶρον*, in Table 1). The phenomenon in CG seems to go back to Proto-Indo-European (PIE, Bubenik 2021) from which it is descended. For the syncretic patterns of neuter nouns, it is striking that the inflectional paradigms remain almost unchanged, except for the phonological differences between CG and MG, and the historical loss of the paradigmatic cell realizing the dative case.

Table 3: Inflectional paradigms of neuter nouns in SMG and CG.

| | 'yrama 'letter', SMG | kor'mi 'body', SMG | 'ðoro 'gift', SMG | γράμμα 'letter', CG | δῶρον 'gift', CG |
|---------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| NOM.SN. | yrama | kor'mi | 'ðoro | γράμμα | δῶρον |
| ACC.SN. | | | | | |
| VOC.SN. | | | | | |
| DAT.SN. | | | | γράμματι | δῶρῳ |
| GEN.SN. | 'yramatos | kor'mju | 'ðoru | γράμματος | δῶρου |
| GEN.PL. | ya'maton | kor'mjon | 'ðoron | γραμμάτων | δώρων |
| DAT.PL. | | | | γράμμασι | δώροις |
| NOM.PL. | yramata | kor'mja | 'ðora | γράμματα | δῶρα |
| ACC.PL. | | | | | |
| VOC.PL. | | | | | |

3.2 Syncretism in feminine nouns

As shown in Table 3, with neuter nouns, the distribution of the syncretic cells remains constant over time. A different picture can be observed with feminine nouns.

Table 4 depicts the absence of the phenomenon of syncretism for feminine nouns in CG (see *χώρα, δύναμις, ψυχή*). The same nouns in MG (see *xora, ðinami, psi'çi*) show extended syncretic phenomena between the cells of the nominative, accusative, and vocative. This distribution remains constant for feminine nouns among all inflectional classes. The syncretism of the feminine in MG is so extensive that, today, the system only differentiates the genitive case morphologically, in both the singular and plural sub-paradigms.

Table 4: Inflectional paradigms of feminine nouns in SMG and CG.

| | SMG | | | CG | | |
|---------|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| | 'xora 'country', SMG | ðinami 'power', SMG | psi'çi 'soul', SMG | χώρα 'land', CG | δύναμις 'power', CG | ψυχή 'soul', CG |
| VOC.SN. | xora | ðinami | psi'çi | χώρα | δύναμι | ψυχή |
| NOM.SN. | | | | | δύναμις | |
| ACC.SN. | | | | χώραν | δύναμιν | ψυχὴν |
| DAT.SN. | | | | χώρα | δυνάμει | ψυχῇ |
| GEN.SN. | 'xoras | 'ðinamis | psi'çis | χώρας | δυνάμεως | ψυχῆς |
| GEN.PL. | xo'ron | ði'neameon | psi'çon | χωρών | δυνάμεων | ψυχῶν |
| DAT.PL. | | | | χωραῖς | δυνάμεσι | ψυχαῖς |
| VOC.PL. | 'xores | ði'namis | psi'çes | χωραί | δυνάμεις | ψυχαί |
| NOM.PL. | | | | | | |
| ACC.PL. | | | | χώρας | | ψυχάς |

3.3 Syncretism in masculine nouns

Masculine nouns constitute the only group for which the syncretic patterns are not inter-paradigmatically uniform but that show an internal sub-categorization. The syncretic cases differ between the nouns ending in *-as/-is* and those ending in *-os*.

3.3.1 Masculine nouns ending in *-as, -is*

In contrast to CG, in MG, masculine nouns ending in nominative *-as* or *-is* have an obligatory syncretic inflectional paradigm.

In the singular sub-paradigm, a single form realizes the cells of the genitive, accusative, and vocative cases (see *ta'mias*, *pii'tis*, and *anðri'andas* in Table 5). Similarly, in the plural sub-paradigm, a single form realizes the cells of the nominative, accusative, and vocative (see *ταμίας*, *ποιητής*, and *ἀνδριάς* in Table 5). The extensive syncretism that occurs in the nouns of this category results synchronically in only the nominative cell for the singular and the genitive cell for the plural being distinguished morphologically.

3.3.2 Masculine nouns ending in *-os*

Masculine nouns ending in *-os* constitute the only group of nouns that, compared to the others, has strongly resisted syncretism over time. In MG, these masculine nouns display the greatest morphological differentiation among the cells of the paradigm.

Table 5: Inflectional paradigms of masculine nouns in *-as* and *-is*, in SMG and CG.

| | SMG | | | CG | | |
|---------|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| | ta'mias 'cashier' | pii'tis 'poet' | anðri'andas 'statue' | ταμίας 'cashier' | ποιητής 'poet' | ἀνδριάς 'statue' |
| GEN.SN. | ta'mia | pii'ti | anðri'anda | ταμίου | ποιητοῦ | ἀνδριάντος |
| ACC.SN. | | | | ταμίαν | ποιητήν | ἀνδριάντα |
| VOC.SN. | | | | ταμία | ποιητά | ἀνδριάς |
| NOM.SN. | ta'mias | pii'tis | anðri'andas | ταμίας | ποιητής | |
| DAT.SN. | | | | ταμίᾱ | ποιητῇ | ἀνδριάντι |
| DAT.PL. | | | | ταμίαις | ποιηταῖς | ἀνδριάσι |
| GEN.PL. | tami'on | pii'ton | anðri'andon | ταμιῶν | ποιητῶν | ἀνδριάντων |
| ACC.PL. | ta'mies | pii'tes | anðri'andes | ταμίας | ποιητάς | ἀνδριάντας |
| VOC.PL. | | | | ταμίαι | ποιηταί | ἀνδριάντες |
| NOM.PL. | | | | | | |

Except for the loss of the dative case and changes in the phonological system of Greek, the group of masculine nouns in *-os* retains an inflectional paradigm that has remained unchanged through time.

The diachronic stability of the inflectional class of masculine nouns in *-os* is the only exception among all MG inflectional classes. This single peculiarity should probably be attributed to the reduced productivity of the class of nouns in *-os* for MG. Indeed, as Marinis (2015) has shown, the class of masculine nouns in *-os* rarely incorporate new members and integrate few loanwords. Thus, the reduced productivity of this inflectional class has contributed to its greater resistance to language change compared with other classes. This conservatism partly accounts for the inflectional class of masculine nouns in *-os* failing to accord with the rest of MG nouns in developing extensive syncretism.

It should be noted that the resistance of the class of masculine nouns ending in *-os* to syncretism is not confirmed in all MGD's. In some of them,⁵ which I call MGD(2), the phenomenon is attested in the plural of masculine nouns in *-os*.

Italiot and the Tsakonian⁶ of the Peloponnese may be considered to present another case of nominative-accusative syncretism, restricted exclusively to the

Table 6: The inflectional paradigm of the masculine noun *'ponos* 'pain' in Lesbian, Italiot, SMG, and CG, respectively.

| | Lesbian ^a | Italiot ^b | SMG | CG |
|---------|----------------------|----------------------|--------|--------|
| NOM.SN. | 'ponus | 'pono | 'ponos | πόνος |
| ACC.SN. | 'ponu | | 'pono | πόνον |
| GEN.SN. | 'pon(u) | 'ponu | 'ponu | πόνου |
| DAT.SN. | | | | πόνω |
| VOC.SN. | 'poni | | 'pone | πόνε |
| VOC.PL. | 'poŋ | | 'poni | πόνοι |
| NOM.PL. | | 'poni | | |
| ACC.PL. | | 'ponu | 'ponus | πόνους |
| GEN.PL. | | 'pono | 'ponon | πόνων |
| DAT.PL. | | | | πόνους |

^aLesbian is the Greek variety spoken on the island of Lesbos. ^bIt is the Greek dialect spoken in Southern Italy, in two dialectal enclaves - in Apulia, where the local variety is called Griko, and in Calabria, where the local variety is called Greko.

5 Beyond Lesbos Island, the phenomenon is also attested in areas including Ainos, Velventos, North Evvoia, Evrytania, Zagori, Epirus, Thessalia, Thraki, Imvros, Kallipoli, Komotini, (the Greek dialect of) Istanbul, Kydonies, Kyzikos, Limnos, Lokrida, Madytos, Moschonisia, Xanthi, Samos, Saranta Ekkli-sies, Serres, Skopelos, and Skyros.

6 It is the Greek dialect spoken in Kynouria, a district on the eastern coast of the Peloponnese.

singular sub-paradigm. However, the behavior of the forms in these dialects should not be considered to represent an endogenous tendency of their paradigmatic inflection but rather to be a byproduct of an extra-paradigmatic, general phonetic change. In particular, as Marinis (2020) has shown, the silencing of the ending segments *-s* and *-n* in these dialects has stimulated a morphological change leading to a syncretism of the nominative and accusative cells in the singular sub-paradigm of these nouns (see, for example, the paradigm *'pono*, in Table 6).

4 Which cases are subject to syncretism?

4.1 Syncretism between the nominative and the accusative

Diatopically and diachronically, Greek's most frequent syncretic phenomenon occurs when the forms morphologically expressing the nominative and the accusative case coincide, usually in the plural sub-paradigm (see Tables 3–5, and Lesbian in Table 6), and sometimes in the singular sub-paradigm (see Tables 3–4, and Italiot in Table 6).

The phenomenon varies both in intensity and extent throughout the evolution of the Greek language. For example, as clearly shown in the comparative tables in Section 3 (Tables 3–6), syncretism in MG is notably more intense and widespread than in CG, affecting a wide range of inflectional paradigms. Table 7 illustrates that in CG, systematic syncretism between nominative and accusative cells was found only in the inflectional paradigms of neuter nouns. In contrast, in MG, the phenomenon extends to all three genders across all inflectional classes, except for the masculine in *-os* in SMG and most MGD's. In Table 7, I call these dialects MGD(1)'s. Yet, even this

Table 7: Distribution of nominative-accusative syncretism in the nouns of MGD, SMG, CG and PIE., respectively, as derived from Tables 3–6.

| | | Greek | | | | PIE |
|-----------|----------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----|-----|
| | | | | | CG | |
| | | MG | | | | |
| | | MGD(2) | MGD(1) | SMG | | |
| Neuter | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Feminine | | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | – | – |
| Masculine | -ας, -ης | ✓ | ✓ ^a | ✓ ^b | – | – |
| | -ος | ✓ ^c | – | – | – | – |

^aThe phenomenon occurs only in the plural sub-paradigm. ^bThe phenomenon occurs only in the plural sub-paradigm. ^cThe phenomenon occurs only in the plural sub-paradigm.

exception seems to be absent in some MGD's. In Table 7, I call the latter MGD(2)'s. Also, the phenomenon is attested in some other MGD's, such as Tsakonian and Italoit. Marinis (2020: 166–179) maintains that in these cases the phenomenon is a byproduct of phonology.

However, although the syncretism between the nominative and the accusative is undoubtedly more widespread today than in antiquity, it should be noted that the phenomenon is neither new nor exclusive to Greek. This type of syncretism is the most common among languages belonging to the Indo-European family (Baerman et al. 2005), probably dating back to PIE (indicatively, see Bubenik 2021), from which it was inherited by the newer members of the Indo-European family.

However, in PIE, the phenomenon seems limited to the inflectional classes of neuter nouns (Ringe 1995). Tables 3–6 show that the distribution characteristic of PIE remains common in CG as well. However, due to extensive inter-paradigmatic leveling on the time axis, today, the syncretism of nominative and accusative has become inter-paradigmatically dominant in Greek.

4.2 Syncretism between genitive and accusative

4.2.1 The sub-paradigm of the singular

Syncretism between the accusative and the genitive is minimally present, if at all, in MG nominal morphology,⁷ while it is completely absent in CG. In SMG, the phenomenon is restricted exclusively to the class of masculine nouns ending in *-as* and *-is* (see Table 5). Even in this inflectional class, however, the phenomenon occurs only in the singular sub-paradigm and never in that of the plural.

The syncretism of genitive and accusative in the class of masculine nouns in *-as* and *-is* must be interpreted as the product of an extensive intra-paradigmatic uniformity. Since the segment *-a-* already existed in antiquity in all the cells of the singular sub-paradigm except the cell realizing the genitive case, it also passed into the cell of the genitive singular through paradigmatic leveling. The process was triggered by the need for the system to have a 1:1 correspondence between meaning and function. Here, this meant reducing the amount of stem allomorphy available in the singular sub-paradigm. The described paradigmatic leveling was facilitated by the reanalysis that *-a-* underwent at some point in its history so that it is now

7 Certain inflectional paradigms of Greek pronouns, in which there is a syncretism between the accusative and the genitive, are exceptions. According to Friedman and Joseph (2024), these instances of syncretism result from the extensive linguistic contacts that took place in the Balkans and support their notion of “Balkan Sprachbund”.

considered part of the stem (see Marinis to press; Marinis 2020; Ralli 2022). Thus, the cell of the genitive singular ceased to be morphologically realized with the suffix *-u*, whose use was specialized for names in *-os*. Today, in the class of masculine nouns in *-as* and *-is*, the genitive singular is realized with *-a* or *-i*, respectively, due to intra-paradigmatic leveling.

4.2.2 The sub-paradigm of the plural

Upon careful examination of all the data from MG, as shown in Tables 3–6, one observes that, in MG, the syncretism between the accusative and the genitive cells is utterly absent from the sub-paradigm of the plural. This is true for all the inflectional classes available in the system, and in the data shown in Tables 3–6, it is without exception. At the same time, in the singular sub-paradigm, accusative-genitive syncretism is possible but restricted exclusively to the inflectional classes of masculine nouns ending in *-as* and *-is*.

However, for some MGD's, a very interesting phenomenon has been observed regarding the genitive plural cell of masculine nouns. The phenomenon has been extensively discussed for Cypriot (Cy.), but it also occurs in other linguistic varieties of Greek.⁸ For the purposes of this paper, let us focus our interest on Cy. as an exemplar for which we have good long-term documentation. Note examples 1–4 below, in each of which a structure is first given in Cy., as it occurs in sources, and then is contrasted with SMG:

1. Cy. *'ta* *ve'loŋa* *'tus* *'raftes*
the_{.NOM.PL.NEUT.} needles_{.NOM.PL.NEUT.} the_{.ACC.PL.MASC.} tailors_{.ACC.PL.MASC.}
'the needles of the tailors'
(Menardos 1969 [1896]: 440)
- SMG *'ta* *ve'loŋa* *'ton* *ra'fton*
the_{.NOM.PL.NEUT.} needles_{.NOM.PL.NEUT.} the_{.GEN.PL.MASC.} tailors_{.GEN.PL.MASC.}
'the needles of the tailors'
2. Cy. *'ta* *'mnimata* *'tus* *'turkus*
the_{.NOM.PL.NEUT.} graves_{.NOM.PL.NEUT.} the_{.ACC.PL.MASC.} Turks_{.ACC.PL.MASC.}
'the graves of the Turks'
(Symeonidis 2006: 197)

⁸ The phenomenon is documented in several MGD's. For example, the phenomenon is exclusively manifested in masculine nouns in Cyprus (Symeonidis 2006) and Maniatika of Corsica (Blanken 1951). In other linguistic varieties, for example, in Aegina (Pantelidis 2019), Northern Evia (Settas 1960), Samos (Zafeiriou 1914), in the Sarakatsan variety of Thessaly and Epirus (Høeg 1925), and in Sporades (Samson 1972), the phenomenon extends to feminine nouns as well. Finally, in the variety of the village Vourbani of Ioannina (Anagnostopoulos 1929), the phenomenon extends to neuter nouns.

- | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| SMG | <i>'ta</i> | <i>'mnimata</i> | <i>'ton</i> | <i>'turkon</i> |
| | the _{NOM.PL.NEUT.} | graves _{NOM.PL.NEUT.} | the _{GEN.PL.MASC.} | Turks _{Gen.PL.MASC.} |
| | 'the graves of the Turks' | | | |
3. Cy. *'ta* *sku'fca* *'tus* *'naftes*
the_{NOM.PL.NEUT.} caps_{NOM.PL.NEUT.} the_{ACC.PL.MASC.} sailors_{ACC.PL.MASC.}
'sailors caps'
- (Symeonidis 2006: 197)
- | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| SMG | <i>'ta</i> | <i>sku'fja</i> | <i>'ton</i> | <i>'na'fton</i> |
| | the _{NOM.PL.NEUT.} | caps _{NOM.PL.NEUT.} | the _{GEN.PL.MASC.} | sailors _{GEN.PL.MASC.} |
| | 'sailors caps' | | | |
4. Cy. *ðe'ftera* *'mera* *'tu* *xri'stu*
Monday day the_{GEN.SG.MASC.} Christ
'triti *'tis* *pana'ias*
Tuesday the_{GEN.SG.FEM.} Virgin Mary_{GEN.SG.FEM.}
te'traði *'tus* *amarto'lus*
Wednesday the_{ACC.PL.MASC.} sinners_{ACC.PL.MASC.}
'Christ's Monday, Virgin Mary's Tuesday, Sinners' Wednesday'
(Symeonidis 2006: 197)
- | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| SMG | <i>ðe'ftera</i> | <i>'mera</i> | <i>'tu</i> | <i>xri'stu</i> |
| | Monday | day | the _{GEN.SG.MASC.} | Christ |
| | <i>'triti</i> | <i>'tis</i> | <i>pana'jias</i> | |
| | Tuesday | the _{GEN.SG.FEM.} | Virgin Mary _{GEN.SG.FEM.} | |
| | <i>te'tarti</i> | <i>'ton</i> | <i>amarto'lon</i> | |
| | Wednesday | the _{GEN.PL.MASC.} | sinners _{GEN.PL.MASC.} | |
| | 'Christ's Monday, Virgin Mary's Tuesday, Sinners' Wednesday' | | | |

In all the above utterances (1-4) from Cy., there is an accusative where we would expect a genitive in the corresponding utterance in SMG. Indeed, as illustrated in (1), the phenomenon is not recent; it has been present in Cypriot since at least the late 19th century.

Based on utterances 1-4, the main question is the morphological nature of the structures marked with bold typeface. Earlier literature (notably Mertyrís 2012; Symeonidis 2006) treats forms such as those in 1–4 as genitives. They imply that the cell of the plural genitive is syncretic with that of the plural accusative. For this to be true, at least the four criteria I propose in 5 would have to be met simultaneously:

5. a. The forms morphologically marked as accusative occur in syntactic positions denoting the possessive, whose realization would be expected to be made by the genitive.

- b. A separate form realizing the cell for the genitive case in plural is absent.
- c. If the article for the genitive case is available in the variety, it will be used with the accusative form, expressing the genitive.
- d. A parallel second form, morphologically marked as genitive (-on) and filling the cell of the genitive in the paradigm, will not exist.

Thus, interpreting the phenomenon as a syncretism between the genitive and accusative cells of the plural would be particularly problematic, primarily because this analysis would violate the criteria 5b, 5c, and 5d. Specifically, in all the utterances 1–4 cited above, the article used is that of the accusative plural ('tus), even though the article of genitive plural ('ton) is available in the dialect. Moreover, the earlier analysis does not take into account the fact that in the same sources from which examples 1–4 are drawn, a parallel 'second form' frequently exists, representing the plural genitive. This second form is morphologically marked as a plural genitive (6, and CyP_b in Table 8).

| | | | | | |
|----|-----|-----|----------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 6. | Cy. | 'o | 'yamos | 'ton | ar'kondon |
| | | the | wedding | the.GEN.PL.MASC | lords.GEN.PL.MASC |
| | | | 'the wedding of the lords' | | |
| | SMG | 'o | 'yamos | 'ton | ar'xodon |
| | | the | wedding | the.GEN.PL.MASC | lords.GEN.PL.MASC |
| | | | 'the wedding of the lords' | | |

Furthermore, a close examination of 1–4 as a genitive-accusative plural syncretism would raise serious questions about the methodological consistency and theoretical elegance of the analysis. For example:

- i. What causes the systematic syncretism (assuming that it is, indeed, syncretism) not only of the noun but also of the article?
- ii. Why does this phenomenon occur only in masculine nouns but not feminine and neuter nouns for which the plural cell is absent?
- iii. What is the factor that causes the alleged syncretism among the cells of genitive and accusative in masculine nouns?

Table 8: A paradigmatic representation of example (1): In CyP_a, according to the previous analyses^a; in CyP_b, a second, parallel form, which morphologically realizes the genitive, is shown. In CyP_c, the hypothetical form we would expect for the paradigm if syncretism were present is shown.

| | CyP _a | CyP _b | CyP _c |
|---------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| GEN.PL. | *'tus 'raftes | 'ton rafton/raftadon | 'ton 'raftes |
| ACC.PL. | 'tus 'raftes | 'tus 'raftes | 'tus 'raftes |

^aFor example, see Mertyris (2012) and Symeonidis (2006).

Table 9: An overview of inflectional suffixes in SMG. For the classification of nouns in IC's, following Ralli (2022: 163–165).

| | IC1 | IC2 | IC3 | IC4 | IC5 | IC6 | IC7 | IC8 |
|---------|-------|-----|-----|-------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| NOM.SN. | -os | -s | -∅ | -∅ | -o | -∅ | -os | -∅ |
| GEN.SN. | -u | -∅ | -s | -(o)s | -u | -u | -us | -os |
| ACC.SN. | -o(n) | -∅ | -∅ | -∅ | -o | -∅ | -os | -∅ |
| VOC.SN. | -e | -∅ | -∅ | -∅ | -o | -∅ | -os | -∅ |
| NOM.PL. | -i | -es | -es | -is | -a | -a | -i | -a |
| GEN.PL. | -on | | | | | | | |
| ACC.PL. | -us | -es | -es | -is | -a | -a | -i | -a |
| VOC.PL. | -i | -es | -es | -is | -a | -a | -i | -a |

I maintain that what really causes phenomena like those appearing in examples 1–4 is the general weakness of the cell for the genitive plural in MG. The genitive plural cell seems to be in retreat,⁹ as evidenced, among other things, (a) by the inability of native speakers to determine the position of the stress (i.e., '*anθropu* and/or *anθ'ropu* 'human-_{GEN.SN.}'; see Sims' [2015] extensive analysis), and (b) by the defectiveness of the diminutive *-aci* (and some other lexical categories) for the genitive plural.¹⁰ For example, although based on its *inflectional class* (IC), the word *miha'naci* 'motorbike' should form the genitive singular **mihana'ciu* and the genitive plural **mihana'cion*,¹¹ these cells in fact cannot be realized, so the inflectional paradigm remains defective.

A more tenable hypothesis to explain these phenomena would be that the failure of the genitive plural to be realized allowed the less marked case (i.e. the accusative) of the plural sub-paradigm to express the functions of the genitive by default. Genitive still exists morphologically in the Cypriot system but is problematic for speakers.

Moreover, if indeed, in examples 1–4, there were a syncretism between the genitive and the accusative plural, we would expect it to be in the form CyP_c (Cypriot Paradigm, Table 8) and not in the form CyP_a (Table 8), as reported by Symeonidis (2006), Mertyrís (2012), etc.

⁹ The gradual retreat of the genitive is documented in the sources from very early on. Indicatively, see, Chatzidakis (1928); Friedman and Joseph (2024); Jannaris (1897); Joseph (1983); Kavoukopoulou (1990); Marinis (2020), (2024); Nikiforidou (1991); Sims (2019); Thumb (1912).

¹⁰ This phenomenon, however, is removed for other homonyms of diminutive names, such as place names, a phenomenon for which Marinis (2024) proposes the term "anti-defectiveness".

¹¹ Cf. the inflectional paradigm of the word *kor'mi* 'body' in Table 3.

If the analysis I propose above is correct, the following question arises:

How is it possible that the cell of the genitive plural, the structural weakness of which has been noted repeatedly,¹² is not syncretized and, indeed, remains the only cell of the nominal paradigm of the Greek language that resists any syncretism?

The phenomenon does not appear to be coincidental. To understand what is happening, we need to consider a paradigmatic peculiarity of the genitive plural cell not usually mentioned in the literature. Consider Table 9, which lists all the inflectional suffixes of the nominal system of SMG, by case and by IC, based on the classification of nouns proposed by Ralli (2022: 163–165).

A comparative examination of the inflectional suffixes of SMG makes it clear that the cell of the genitive plural is the only one in the entire nominal inflectional system marked inter-paradigmatically with the same inflectional suffix, namely *-on*. I believe this is the reason the genitive plural cell is never syncretized in Greek. However, at times, the genitive plural cell is not realized at all (cf. *-aci*), but it still never participates in syncretism with other paradigmatic cells.¹³

4.3 Syncretism among all the cells of a (sub)-paradigm

An extreme case of syncretism occurs in the inflectional paradigms of Greek dialects, spoken mainly outside Greece but also within Greek borders. Some inflectional paradigms of these dialects are moving towards major syncretism, as they now distinguish morphologically only between singular and plural. See indicatively the paradigms in Table 10 from Italiot, the dialect of Mariupol,¹⁴ and Tsakonian of the Peloponnese.

Two factors seem to have contributed this change: (1) The complete loss of the cells realizing the genitive singular and the genitive plural, and (2) the systematic syncretism among the cells of the nominative and the accusative (see Section 4.1), for the sub-paradigm of each of the two numbers inflected in MG. It is characteristic that, for example, in the dialect of Mariupol, the distinction between nominative and accusative singular has been lost for all inflectional classes with the unique exception of the class of masculine nouns ending in *-os*, which, as noted above, is hardly a productive and therefore the most conservative IC, particularly with syncretism.

¹² See the references in Section 4.2.

¹³ Recently, Marinis (2024) proposed the term *anti-defectiveness* to describe the filling of the defective cell when the homonym in *-aci* has the status of a toponym. (He compares the name *kolonaci* as a diminutive, ‘little pillar’, with it as a toponym for a ‘famous area of Athens’). In fact, as a place name, the cell is normally formed with the expected inflectional suffix *-on*.

¹⁴ It is the Greek variety spoken in the wider area of Mariupol in Ukraine.

Table 10: Some indicative inflectional paradigms that have undergone extensive morphological shrinkage.

| | 'tripi 'hole', GRI. | 'pua 'foot', TSAK. | 'mina 'month', MAR. | piθi'ra 'mother in law', MAR. | pi'ði 'child', MAR. |
|---------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| NOM.SN. | tripi | pua | mina | piθi'ra | pi'ði |
| ACC.SN. | | | | | |
| GEN.SN. | | | | | |
| GEN.PL. | tri'po | | | | |
| NOM.PL. | tripe | | mini | piθi'res | pi'ðja |
| ACC.PL. | | | | | |

5 What does Greek teach us about the factors that favor or inhibit syncretism?

The preceding analysis makes it clear that syncretism has been present as a phenomenon throughout the historical development of the Greek language in its written form and was probably inherited from PIE. However, while in CG, the phenomenon is minimally observed (see Tables 3–6), in the diachronic development of the language, syncretism has been extended to such a degree that, today, in some MGD.s, it is morphologically possible to distinguish only between the singular and plural (see, for example, the paradigm from Tsakonian, in Table 10).

In some works in the literature, syncretism is almost entirely attributed to the internal structure of morphosyntactic features (e.g. Collins and Kayne 2020). This view implies that morphology does not have an autonomous role, but rather that its processes are determined by syntax. However, based on the synchronic and diachronic data presented in Section 3 and the analysis given in Section 4, the attribution of syncretism only to the internal structure of morphosyntactic features presents an incomplete picture of this complex phenomenon.

The remainder of this section focuses on examining the factors that, for the Greek language, have either favored or inhibited the development of syncretic phenomena.

5.1 The role of phonological change

Many of the cases of syncretism discussed in the previous sections are byproducts of phonological changes that took place at an earlier stage in the historical evolution of

the Greek language. Recall, for example, the case of the noun *pono* ‘pain’, in Italiot. As Marinis (2020) has documented, the silencing of ending segments *-s* and *-n* in Italiot occurred primarily because of the system’s endogenous preference for open syllables. The fact that Italiot came under long-term, intensive language contact with Italian, which also lacks consonants at the ends of nouns (with Salentino¹⁵ in the case of Grico,¹⁶ and Bovesse¹⁷ in the case of Greco,¹⁸ cf. Marinis 2020), allowed the Italiot to generalize this change even more extensively than the change which took place in the Proto-Romance case system and its daughter languages (Barðdal and Kulikov 2009: 471). Tsakonian also exhibited this change but did not generalize it for all its inflectional paradigms. However, in both Italiot and Tsakonian, silencing the ending consonant led the inflectional paradigm to a syncretism between the nominative and accusative.

5.2 The role of underlying semantic features

It would, of course, be naïve to assume that all cases of syncretism are caused by phonology, overgeneralizing from the cases discussed in Section 5.1. At the same time, one should not overlook the fact that the most inter-dialectically and inter-paradigmatically common type of syncretism occurs between the nominative and the accusative, a cross-linguistically dominant trend¹⁹ confirmed for the Greek language as well. This syncretism is particularly interesting because the nominative and the accusative are the only two core cases²⁰ available in the Greek nominal paradigm that express structural grammatical roles, namely, subject and direct object, respectively.

One explanation for the phenomenon could be sought in the underlying semantic features of cases, as first discussed in the seminal work of Jakobson (1936 [1971]), which has remained influential in the subsequent literature even to the present day. In studying syncretism in the nominal system of Russian, Jakobson analyzed each of the main cases that Russian realizes morphologically in terms of the presence or absence of three primary semantic features: directionality, scope, and

15 The Italian dialect spoken in the area of Salento.

16 See the footnote 5.

17 The Italian dialect spoken in the area of Bova.

18 See the footnote 5.

19 The syncretism between the nominative and the accusative was firstly observed by Meillet (1936: 81–82, 91). For documentation of its exceptionally high cross-linguistic frequency. See, for example, the typological research of Baerman et al. (2005), which is based on an analysis of 199 different languages.

20 For a discussion of the term *core cases*, see Spencer (2008).

Table 11: Application to Greek of the underlying semantic features of the cases proposed by Jakobson (1936 [1971]) for Russian.

| | nominative | accusative | genitive |
|----------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Directionality | – | + | – |
| Scope | – | – | + |
| Peripherality | – | – | – |

peripherality. In Table 11, I have adapted Jakobson’s proposal for the cases available in the morphological system of Greek.

Based on Table 11, one can interpret the syncretism between the nominative and the accusative as the product of a need to suppress the expression of directionality. Similarly, syncretism between the accusative and the genitive can be explained as the result of a need to suppress the expression of the field.

However, such a semantic analysis could not explain why syncretism between the accusative and the genitive is extremely rare in Greek, and indeed, fails to account for the complete absence of syncretism between the accusative and the genitive in the plural sub-paradigm, while the same syncretism is allowed in the singular sub-paradigm. At the same time, this analysis cannot explain why, in all the examples presented in this study, syncretic patterns seem not to apply generally, but rather to be dependent on the gender and (within gender) the IC marking every noun.

5.3 Syncretism as a morphomic phenomenon

5.3.1 The role of IC

This dependence of syncretic patterns on the lexeme’s IC is relevant only for morphology and not for any other level of linguistic analysis. The dependence of syncretism on the particular IC should, therefore, be considered a *morphomic*²¹ phenomenon. As is shown in subsection 3.3.2, the only IC of SMG that comes close to completely resisting syncretism is that of masculine nouns in -os, which has very little productivity as it is marked as [+learned], and is applied to only a few loanwords.

²¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the term, see Maiden (2021) and Aronoff (1994), the latter of whom initially proposed it. For insights into the typological distribution of the phenomenon, see Herce (2023).

5.3.2 The role of inter-paradigmatic similarity

At the same time, the resistance of the cell representing the genitive plural to engage in any syncretism cannot be entirely explained by the underlying semantic features of cases (see Section 5.2); rather, it can better be accounted for by paradigmatic morphology. As shown for SMG in subsection 4.2.2, the failure of the cell of the genitive plural to be syncretized into any of the inflectional classes available in the system occurs because the cell for the genitive plural is always inter-paradigmatically marked with the same inflectional suffix. It is no coincidence that, of all the cells in the SMG inflectional paradigm, the genitive plural is the only one that:

- i. is never syncretized, and
- ii. carries the same suffix inter-paradigmatically (see Table 9).

Based on these observations from the nominal inflectional system of Greek, I propose a decisive new inhibitory factor to account for the emergence of syncretism:

- *The inter-paradigmatic similarity of a cell, achieved through the inter-paradigmatic realization of the cell with the same inflectional suffix, prevents this particular cell from participating in (intra-paradigmatic) syncretism.*

This mechanism works exceptionally well for Greek, but the extent of a broader application needs to be tested by further typological research.

This story becomes more intriguing if one considers that the cell of the genitive plural is the weakest in the entire nominal system of Greek.²² Thus, we would expect for the genitive plural to be the cell most easily participating in syncretic patterns. Notably, instead of this, the genitive plural cell is easier to be defective²³ (see, for example, Table 10) than participating in syncretism since the latter phenomenon is prohibited by the inter-paradigmatic realization of the cell with the same inflectional suffix, namely -on.

5.3.3 A highly unnatural case of syncretism

Finally, as noted by Marinis (2020), although historically triggered by phonology, the most unnatural²⁴ syncretism among the cells of the genitive singular and accusative plural in what Marinis defines as IC1 of Italiot (cf. *ponu* ‘pain’^{-GEN.SN./ACC.PL.}), still

²² See footnote 9.

²³ For a state-of-the-art theoretical discussion about the relationship between syncretism and defectiveness, see Sims (2023).

²⁴ This case of syncretism is “unnatural” in the sense that the syncretized cells do not share a common feature. For an attestation of the (un)naturalness of learning syncretic patterns, see Saldana et al. (2022).

synchronically creates a particular kind of syncretism which also has a morphological character.

From standpoint, I argue that even if a phenomenon diachronically has its roots in phonology, at a synchronic level, it is still entirely possible to create associations in the system that, for the native speaker, no longer have phonological explanations. The accumulation of such associations, which are no longer phonologically interpretable, can, in turn, cause the restructuring of the inflectional system through the mechanisms of intra-paradigmatic and inter-paradigmatic uniformity.²⁵

6 Conclusions

The phenomenon of case syncretism has been present since the time of Proto-Indo-European, from which it was inherited by and remained stable in Classical Greek. However, this study shows that, in Modern Greek dialectal varieties, there is a broad expansion of syncretic patterns not only in the grammatical genders involved but also in the cases that are syncretized. In other words, syncretism no longer affects only neuter nouns, nor is it limited only to the nominative and accusative cases. It can appear in and affect the nouns of many nominal inflectional classes.

Grammatical gender emerges as a dominant factor influencing the distribution of syncretized cells in Modern Greek inflectional paradigms. At the same time, the distribution of syncretic patterns is particularly sensitive to the productivity of the individual inflectional classes of nouns, even within the same gender, a fact which I attribute to the morphomic nature of the phenomenon.

This paper proposes a new factor inhibiting the participation of a paradigmatic cell in syncretic patterns. In Greek, cross-paradigmatic similarity prevents a cell from engaging in syncretism. The possible universality of this factor is worth investigating cross-linguistically in the future.

Finally, the causes triggering the emergence of syncretism are not uniform and standard in all cases. Syncretism is often precipitated in the diachronic axis by prior phonological changes. For example, in Italiot, silencing the final -s and -n stimulated syncretism among previously distinct paradigmatic cells. Other cases of syncretism are triggered by morphosyntax, as one or more features of the feature bundle identifying each cell have a shared value for all syncretized cells. Finally, the causes of some cases of syncretism cannot be traced back either to phonology or to morphosyntax; instead, their nature is morphomic. These cases are significant as they confirm morphology's autonomous role as a level of linguistic analysis.

25 For an illustrative presentation, analysis, and discussion of phenomena like these in Italiot, see Marinis (2020: 166–171).

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