

NOUN LOANWORDS IN AMERICAN GREEK

Lazaros A. Varnas

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

I have made it a habit for some time to record the English loanwords used in American Greek, a type of Greek spoken by over 1,000,000 people.¹ My informants have been speakers of Greek who use their native language at home and in most of their social functions. In order to make my list as comprehensive as possible, I have also searched for loanwords in Greek newspapers and other Greek publications, all of them published in this country, and in various studies on² American Greek, especially those dealing with loanwords.

My purpose in this paper is rather limited. I do not intend to present a study, both phonological and morphological, of all the loanwords I have collected. I will discuss the endings of the nouns only, including a brief discussion of the possible reasons for the introduction of noun loanwords into American Greek. I will also try to show, in discussing the nominal endings, that most of the reasons for gender assignment are to be found in the nature of the Greek language.

The number of noun loanwords in American Greek cannot be determined. My list is rather long. It contains well over one thousand words. But it is not easy to decide how many of them have become part of the American Greek vocabulary, or even how many of them are not commonly used in Modern Greek. Those which take on Greek endings are considered as integrated loanwords by those who speak American Greek, who do not hesitate at all to use them. But there are many words, some of which are frequently used, which do not undergo any changes according to the inflectional system of Greek nouns. Such words as heat, operator, sewer, stock, etc., either remain unchanged regardless of case or number, or have the English ending -s in the plural regardless of case. It is questionable whether all these words are established loans. Only those that are frequently used, and which seem unlikely to be replaced by Greek words in the future, may safely be considered as having been integrated into American Greek. As for the others, only time will tell.

All the reasons for the introduction of these words are not clear. Obviously, the main reason must be the immigrant's need to find words to designate new objects and discuss new concepts. Since his own language can be of no help, he finds it convenient to learn the English words (e. g. county, township, city manager, penny, quarter, ketchup) he will need when referring to these objects or discussing these concepts. Another reason is the lack, real or imaginary, of Greek words that are exactly equivalent to English words. If the immigrant feels that the meaning of a particular English word cannot be faithfully rendered by any of the Greek words he knows, he will not hesitate to use, in order to make sure that the exact meaning is conveyed, this English word in a Greek context. Such words as boy (girl) friend, bum, chef, deal, deal, etc., seem to have found their way into American Greek this way. Low frequency words, including scientific terms, that are not easily remembered are frequently replaced by their English equivalents. Such words as boss, elevator, gall bladder, stock market, etc. have been perhaps introduced for this reason.

Ease of pronunciation also contributes to borrowing. Many polysyllabic Greek nouns, although well known to immigrants, are replaced by their corresponding English words. A few examples of this category are: bus for /léoforío/, mop for /sfúgarópano/, bill for /loxariazmos/.

The need for effective communication very often introduces words in another way. When a speaker feels that his listener may not know a particular word he is about to use, he may substitute for it the corresponding English word, which, he assumes, his listener knows. It is, of course, difficult to distinguish the words entered this way from those that replace low frequency Greek words. Words which probably belong in this category are check for /epitaxí/, lease for /simvóleo/, tuxedo for /smókin/ (itself a loan), immigration (office) for /yrafío aloçapón/.

These seem to be the main reasons for the introduction of noun loanwords in American Greek. They do not account, however, for all the words. In fact, there are many words which seem to have been needlessly introduced. They have replaced well known and frequently used Greek words. Some examples are: /baskéta/ 'basket' for Greek /kaláði/, /báksi/ 'box' for Greek /kuti/, /jara/ 'jar' for Greek /vazo/, /píkla/ 'pickle' for Greek /tursi/.

Of the words that have been integrated into American Greek, those that take on Greek endings follow, as one would expect, the common patterns of spoken Greek. The inflectional system of these nouns is very simple, but in spite of its simplicity it should be studied in relationship to the inflectional system of Modern Greek. The purpose of the following brief description of the Greek nominal endings is to show this relationship.

Greek is an inflectional language. Unlike English, it makes very little use of position as a syntactic device. There are only a few structures in Greek in which the order of words cannot be changed. When, for example, the unstressed form of the demonstrative pronoun is used as an object, it is always placed before the verb. In order to show syntactic relationships, therefore, Greek relies heavily on its endings. Nouns, our concern here, are inflected to show gender, case and number.

Greek has three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. They are determined by endings and the various forms of the definite article. Human nouns are usually masculine when the sex of the person they designate is male; they are usually feminine when the sex of the person they designate is female. A few human nouns are also neuter. Some examples of neuter nouns are: /aʎóri/ 'boy', /kóriči/ 'girl', /palikári/ 'young man'. Inanimate nouns are either masculine, feminine or neuter. Nouns used to designate animals may also be masculine, feminine or neuter.

Greek nouns may be divided according to gender into three declensions: first declension for masculine nouns, second declension for feminine nouns, and third declension for neuter nouns.⁵ The nouns of each declension are further divided into classes according to endings. There are, for example, eight classes of masculine nouns. Since this has to be a bare outline of the Greek nominal endings, I list below for each declension only the endings that are most frequently used.

| Masc. | Fem. | Neut. |
|----------------------|----------|----------|
| Singular | | |
| Nom. /-as, -os, -is/ | /-a, -i/ | /-o, -i/ |

| | | |
|-------------------|------------|-----------|
| Gen. /-a, -u, -u/ | /-as, -is/ | /-u, -ju/ |
| Acc. /-a, -o, -i/ | /-a, -i/ | /-o, -i/ |

Plural

| | | |
|----------------------|------------|-------------|
| Nom. /-es, -i, -es/ | /-es, -es/ | /-a, -ja/ |
| Gen. /-on, -on, -on/ | /-on, -on/ | /-on, -jon/ |
| Acc. /-es, -us, -es/ | /-es, -es/ | /-a, -ja/ |

English nouns that have been fully incorporated into American Greek take on the nominative endings, and are declined accordingly, of the most frequently used nouns in Greek, /-is/, /-os/ for masculine, /-a/ for feminine, and /-i/, /-o/ for neuter. The other Greek endings do not seem to be productive. Although, for example, there are perhaps hundreds of neuter nouns in Greek ending in /-ma/ in the nominative singular, I have not found any loanwords with this ending.

Nouns that are frequently used in American Greek without receiving Greek endings sometimes remain unchanged -- the singular English form is used everywhere regardless of case or number -- or take on the English plural ending for all plural cases. These nouns are more frequently used by bilingual speakers who have a good knowledge of both languages. It seems that these speakers are reluctant to violate certain rules of the English language which they know well.

Once a gender ending (the nominative ending) is assigned to a noun loanword, the other endings are added as a matter of course. But the factors that determine the assignment of gender endings are not always clear. It appears certain that only explanations in terms of semantic similarity and the grammatical structure of Greek seem to be satisfactory. But there are many loanwords in American Greek, and other immigrant languages, for which gender assignment cannot be explained in terms of these two factors only. Some other factors seem to have been at play when these words were integrated into American Greek.

The inflectional system of loanwords is simple. Of the three common Greek endings of the nominative singular

of masculine nouns, /-as, -os, -is/, American Greek mainly uses /-is/ with nouns designating persons of the male sex and /-os/ with a few inanimate nouns and nouns with the Greek suffixes /-anos/ and /-ðoros/. There is a tendency by speakers of American Greek to simplify the inflectional system of the borrowed nouns. Concerning masculine nouns, this is shown in the high frequency of the ending /-is/, the limited use of /-os/ and the almost complete absence of /-as/.⁶ The limited use of /-os/ with inanimate nouns seems out of place in American Greek, which generally uses the neuter ending /-i/ with inanimate nouns, and suggests analogical influence from Greek in which there are many inanimate nouns ending in /-os/. A few examples are:

1. Proper nouns: /xáris/ for Harry, /jimis/ for Jimmy, /stivis/ for Steve;
2. Common nouns naming a person: /bósis/ for boss, /bámis/ for bum, /séfis/ for chef;
3. Nouns with the Greek suffix /-anos/ or /-ðoros/: /bangaðoros/ for banker, /farmaðoros/ for farmer, /poliçmanos/ for policeman;
4. Inanimate nouns: /blókos/ for block, /bólos/ for bowl, /rólos/ for roll.

Masculine nouns which do not take on Greek endings usually indicate profession, occupation or some other activity (e. g. boxer, dentist, manager, plumber, etc.)

Of the two common Greek endings of the nominative singular of feminine nouns, /-a, -i/, American Greek makes frequent use of the ending /-a/. The ending /-i/ is very rarely used and in most cases becomes a substitute for /-a/; it is common only in personal names. Since the ending /-a/ has been established as the main ending of feminine nouns, and since in Greek there are hundreds of inanimate feminine nouns ending in /-a/, this ending may easily be used with loanwords that designate objects, although these words are neuter nouns in English. Some examples are:

1. Personal names: /débi/ for Debby, /méri/ for Mary, /ánjela/ for Angela;
2. Common nouns naming a person: /kasiéra/ for cashier,

- /operé'ta/ for operator;
3. Nouns that end in -a in English: /kám'era/ for camera, /pí'ča/ for pizza, /só'da/ for soda;
 4. Nouns that correspond semantically to feminine nouns in Greek: /án'ča/ for ounce, /mark'é'ta/ for market, /ví'zita/ for visit;
 5. Nouns with the suffix /-ria/: /kefeterí'a/ for cafeteria, /frutarí'a/ for fruit store, /ǵrosarí'a/ for grocery store;
 6. Nouns referring to objects for which Greek equivalents are not easily remembered or do not exist: /bára/ for bar, /fé'na/ for fan, /ǵrí'la/ for grill;
 7. Many city names, as in Greek, are feminine and end either in /-a/ or /-i/: /atlánt'a/ for Atlanta, /né'a iórki/ for New York; /vostóni/ for Boston.

Feminine nouns which do not receive Greek endings usually indicate occupation or profession (e. g. /nors/ for nurse, /tí'čer/ for teacher). If a city name is used without a Greek ending, it is usually feminine or neuter since in Greek masculine city names are very rare.

The neuter nouns found in American Greek are many. There may be twice as many of them as there are masculine and feminine nouns combined. As in Greek, they end in the nominative singular in /-i/ and /-o/. /-i/ is most frequently used and is added to nouns that refer to objects. Examples are: /bási/ for bus, /bí'li/ for bill, /flóri/ for floor.

Of the neuter nouns that end in /-o/, very few refer to objects. Most of them end in -ion in English. Because this ending is frequently pronounced /o/ by Greek Americans, they associate this /o/ with the Greek neuter ending /-o/. Some examples are:

1. Object nouns: /ká'ro/ for car, /karpé'to/ for carpet, /tá'laro/ for dollar;
2. Nouns that end in -ion in English: /imí'grésio/ for immigration (office), /korpore'sio/ for

corporation, /lokésio/ for location;

3. City names that end in -o in English:
/sikáfo/ for Chicago, /torónto/ for Toronto.

Neuter nouns which do not take on Greek endings usually refer to objects (e. g. can, corned beef, ketchup), but they may also indicate actions, ideas, qualities, etc. (e. g. break in, driving, insurance, picnic).

Certain conclusions, both in reference to gender assignment and to endings, may be drawn from this brief discussion. It is clear that gender assignment, with the corresponding endings, is determined to a great extent by the grammatical structure of Greek. This explains why nouns designating objects, and hence neuter by nature, sometimes receive either feminine or masculine endings. Only nouns without Greek endings appear to remain unaffected by Greek. They are assigned gender, in the form of the definite article, according to their natural characteristics. It is also clear that semantic considerations play an important part in gender assignment. Very often a loanword receives the ending, and, of course, the gender, of a Greek noun that is similar in meaning. This explains why so many inanimate English nouns become either masculine, only a few of them, or feminine when they are incorporated into American Greek.

As for the inflectional system, the few loanwords that have been discussed clearly show that there are many differences between Greek and American Greek. Speakers of American Greek have a tendency to simplify the inflectional system of noun loanwords. They use fewer endings and distribute them differently. Of the seven nominative endings of spoken Greek, they make maximum use of three only: /-is/ for masculine nouns, /-a/ for feminine nouns, and /-i/ for neuter nouns. Phonetic similarity -- the English endings -a, -i, -ion, -o become identified with the Greek endings /-a, -i, -o/-- and the influence of the Greek language account for the limited use of the endings /-os/ for masculine nouns, /-i/ for feminine nouns, and /-o/ for neuter nouns.

NOTES

¹This is an educated guess based on information derived from unofficial sources. Neither the number of Greek immigrants living in this country nor the number of people, immigrants and their descendents, who speak American Greek can be determined. According to the United States Census of Population: 1970, Final Report PC (1)-D1, U. S. Summary, 1973, p. 59, Greek was reported as the mother tongue of 458,699 people. But this is considered a conservative figure and does not give a true picture. Many Greeks, it is argued, being unable to understand the written instructions, simply did not fill out the Census forms.

²The most detailed of these studies are P. D. Seaman 1972 and James A. Macris 1955.

³A great number of English loanwords found in American Greek are also common in Modern Greek. Such loans as cafeteria, film, tram, trolley, for example, are well known in Greece.

⁴Greek words are written phonemically. The phonemes of Greek are as follows.

| | Consonants | | | | | Vowels | | |
|-------------|------------|-------|------|------|------|--------|---|---|
| | Lab. | Dent. | Alv. | Pal. | Vel. | | | |
| Stops | p | | | t | | k | i | u |
| | b | | | d | | g | e | o |
| Fricatives | f | θ | | s | | x | a | |
| | v | ð | | z | | ʃ | | |
| Affricates | | | | ç | | | | |
| | | | | ʝ | | | | |
| Nasals | m | | | n | | | | |
| Lateral | | | | l | | | | |
| Trill(Flap) | | | | r | | | | |
| Glide | | | | | | y | | |

⁵This is the way grammars of Demotiki, a name given to the spoken standard Greek, classify nouns. Grammars of Katharevousa, the literary standard Greek, also divide the nouns into three declensions, but the classification is based on endings, not gender. Since most of the immigrants speak Demotiki, the classification according to gender is used here.

⁶Macris reports two nouns ending in -as/, /lonbras/ for laundry man and /pinocas/ for peanut vendor. My list does not contain even one.

REFERENCES

- Macris, James A. 1955. An analysis of English loanwords in New York City Greek. Columbia University dissertation.
- Seaman, P. David. 1972. Modern Greek and American English in contact. The Hague: Mouton.
- Weinreich, Uriel. 1974. Languages in contact: findings and problems. The Hague: Mouton.