

Psilo-: exploring the case of a “diminutive” in Modern Greek

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Abstract: In this paper I explore the semantic and morphological properties of the “diminutive” use of the bound morpheme *psilo-* in Modern Greek (MG). First, I consider the basic lexical information recorded in dictionaries and then its equivalents (if any) in other languages like English and French. Second, I present its rich distribution across different kinds of lexical categories, its rather fuzzy morphological status, as well as its loose relation with ordinary diminutive morphemes in terms of their semantic and pragmatic functions. Third, on the basis of these observations, I argue that *psilo-* is not a proper diminutive morpheme, but a marker that carries pragmatic features such as those of informality, non-seriousness and mitigation of negative semantic effects in a communicative situation.

Key words: diminutive, pragmatic marker, confix, relexicalization, hypocorism, informal speech

1. Preliminary remarks

According to Modern Greek general dictionaries, *psilo-* is a polysemous “compounding item” that can modify the stem it attaches to in different ways: (a) by expressing fineness in terms of structure (e.g. *psilófluðos* “thin-peeled”) or complexity (e.g. *psiloðuljá* “intricate work”), (b) by expressing slow rhythm or low energy (e.g. *psilovréçi* “drizzling”, *psilotrayuðó* “mumble a song”), (c) by expressing intensivity in an action (e.g. *psiloeksetázo* “scrutinize”), (d) by expressing the action of turning something into small pieces (e.g. *psilokóvo* “chop finely”), and (e) by diminutivising what the stem denotes (e.g. *psilozimjá* “slight damage”). In etymological terms, the item appears to have originated from the stem of the ancient Greek adjective *psilos* meaning “bare”, “treeless” or “lightly armed” (see Μπαμπινιώτης 1998: 1989-1990; IMT 1998; Σταματάκος 1972: 1133; among others).

2. *Psilo-*, other equivalent items and the English *-ish*

In its diminutivising function, *psilo-* means “a bit” and is synonymous with the adverbial *liço*. *Psilo-* appears to be synonymous with the adjectival suffix *-opós/i/ó* and, so, is equivalent to the English suffix *-ish* (e.g. *warmish*, *reddish*, *wellish*) and the French suffix *-âtre* (e.g. *jaunâtre* “yellowish”, *rougeâtre* “reddish” etc.), for example:

(1) *psilokócinos/i/o* ≡ *kocinopós/i/ó* ≡ *liço kócinos/i/o* ≡ *reddish* ≡ *rougeâtre*

However, the distribution of the equivalent suffixes *-opós* in Greek, *-ish* in English and *-âtre* in French is quite limited compared to that of *psilo-*, as they are only compatible with adjectives. The Greek suffix *-opós* appears as a suffix to adjectives of ancient Greek / puristic origin and expresses a reduced intensity of defining properties:

(2) *ayriopós* = somewhat wild, *ayuropós* = somewhat unripe etc.

However, its most productive use is found with adjectives of colour, with the same meaning, as is also the case with the French *-âtre* and partly with the English *-ish*:

- (3) *citrinopós = jaunâtre = yellowish = tending to be yellow*

The English *-ish*, although fully compatible with colour adjectives, as are its Greek and French equivalents, can also appear, mostly in informal uses, with other adjectives and cardinal numbers in time expressions, expressing approximation (i.e. to some degree, quite or partly):

- (4a) *wildish, oldish, biggish, hottish, deadish, funnish* etc.
 (4b) We'll start at *sevenish* = about 7 o'clock

Interestingly, in English informal uses (including slang) *-ish* can also appear as a free morpheme, meaning "sort of" or "kind of", at the end of statements where it functions as an interjection:

- (5a) A: How was the opera? B: It was good. *Ish*.
 (5b) A: Well, did it work? B: Yes! ... *Ish*.

So, unlike the French *-âtre* and the Greek *-opós*, the English equivalent *-ish* displays a generalized use across different categories and contexts. As we will see next, a similar behaviour to that of *-ish* is also found with the Greek equivalent *psilo-*.

3. Distribution

The distribution of *psilo-* is quite rich as the item can combine with stems of verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbials, locatives, loan items and interjections.

Starting with verbs, *psilo-* can combine with any dynamic verb expressing some sort of reduction or diminution in the verbal action (examples listed in Μπαμπινιώτης 1998: 1990):

- (6) *psiloayanaktó* (to be a bit angry), *psiloksexnáo* (to forget a bit), *psilovrízo* (to swear a bit), *psilothélo* (to want something a bit), *psilozitáo* (to ask for something a bit), *psilokatalavéno* (to understand something a bit), *psilonevriázo* (to get a bit angry) etc.

With nouns, *psilo-* is only compatible with the ones that have abstract meaning, as in (7a), and is totally incompatible with nouns of concrete meaning, except in some cases of metaphorical uses, as in (7b):

- (7a) *psiloxáos* (a bit of chaos), *psiloxamós* (a bit of havoc), *psiloistería* (a bit of hysteria), *psiloánxos* (a bit of anxiety), *psiloelefthería* (a bit of freedom), *psiloérotas* (a bit of love), *psiloiponoúmena* (a bit of implication), *psiloskotáði* (a bit of darkness), *psilopsáksimo* (a bit of searching) etc.
 (7b) **psilotíxos* (a bit of wall), **psiloánthropos* (a bit of a man), **psiloaftokínito* (a bit of car), **psilotileórasi* (a bit of TV), **psilopsári* (a bit of fish) etc. BUT *psilopatáta* (not literally as "potato", but metaphorically as "rubbish").

Psilo- can also appear with various adjectives:

- (8) *psiloapótomos* (a bit abrupt), *psiloilíthios* (a bit idiot), *psiloxazós* (a bit stupid), *psiloaristerós* (a bit leftist), *psilofragátos* (a bit loaded), *psilokaθimerinós* (a bit daily), *psilokrioménos* (have a bit of a cold) etc.

and adverbials, like manner adverbs and time adverbials:

- (9) *psiloxáljia* (a bit awful), *psiloapótoma* (a bit abruptly), *psiloaδέksia* (a bit clumsily), *psiloepítiðes* (a bit on purpose), *psilotixéa* (a bit by chance) etc.

Psilo- is also compatible with locatives:

- (10) *psilomakriá* (a bit far away), *psilokondá* (a bit close), *psiloanáποδα* (a bit upside down), *psilodípla* (a bit adjacent) etc.

with loanwords of various categories (see also Sifianou 1992: 157):

- (11) *psilogéi* (a bit gay), *psilosóul* (a bit soul), *psilorók* (a bit rock), *psilopóint* (a bit of a point), *psilomínimal* (a bit minimal) etc.

with adjectives, verbs and nouns of indecent meaning:

- (12) *psilomalákas* (a bit of a wanker), *psilopústis* (a bit of a faggot), *psilogamiése* (you are a bit fucked) etc.

and with interjections:

- (13) *psiloxaxá*, *psiloóx*, *psiloópa*

Interestingly, as shown in (14), *psilo-* can also be found as a standalone/unbound item as a tag to statements, equivalent to the use of the English *-ish* we saw earlier in (5):

- (14) A: *Perásate kalá sto jámo tu?* (did you have a nice time at his wedding?)
B: *Psiló* (sort of)

4. A bound or a free morpheme?

Having examined the distribution of *psilo-*, let me now explore its morphological status. According to Γιαννουλοπούλου (2003), *psilo-* along with other items like *mikro-* and *psefto-*, is a confix (or an affixoid, in the sense of Boij 2005), i.e. an “intermediate” morpheme that is neither a stem nor an affix that is currently being grammaticalized, gradually acquiring a functional role as an affix and losing its lexical status as a stem. Expanding the arguments of Γιαννουλοπούλου and Boij on the non-stem status of *psilo-* Pάλλη (2005: 169-170; 2007: 54-55, 125-127; see also Ralli 2004) considers *psilo-* formations as being pseudocompounds and not real compounds, despite the presence of the vowel [o] which, in this case, is not the overt compounding marker of Greek, but the last segment of the confix.

The classification of *psilo-*, according to Γιαννουλοπούλου (*op. cit.*) and Pάλλη (*op. cit.*), as an item undergoing grammaticalization is indeed supported, at least, by the fact that *psilo-* formations cannot be paraphrased by a corresponding phrase:

- (15a) *psilothélo* (V) → **thélo psilá* [_{VP} *thélo* [_{ADV} *psilá*]]
 (15b) *psiloxamós* (N) → **psilós xamós* [_{NP} [_{ADJP} *psilós*] *xamós*]]
 (15c) *psilokrioménos* (Adj) → **krioménos psilá* [_{ADJP} *krioménos* [_{ADV} *psilá*]]

given that the resulting adverbial or adjectival item cannot mean “a bit of” but, instead, it carries the literal meaning of the original lexical item *psilós*, as “thin” or “intricate”, that obtains in the non-diminutive readings of the item:

- (16a) *psilófluðos* (Adj) → *me psilí flúða* “with a thin peel”
 (16b) *psiloduljá* (N) → *psilí ðuljá* “intricate job”

Interestingly, the case we saw earlier in (14) concerning the possibility of having *psilo* as a standalone item, might indicate that *psilo-*, having undergone grammaticalization and, thus, resemanticization (from a concrete to an abstract sense; see Γιαννουλοπούλου *op. cit.*), is also in the process of being relexicalized on the basis of its novel use as meaning “a bit”. To put it in another way, we can say that in morphosemantic terms, *psilo-* has undergone bleaching, that is, it has lost some of its semantic features and become more and more abstract (see Jurafsky 1996: 551).

5. Just a diminutive?

In all cases we have seen so far, the import of *psilo-* to the stems it combines with could be taken to be that of a “diminutive”, as reported in Greek dictionaries, but is this true? Can we treat it just as a diminutive?

5.1 “Real” diminutives

Before attempting to answer this question it is useful to see a few things about the status of “real” diminutives in Greek. They appear as nominal suffixes with different forms for each gender and are extensively used in the language, especially in oral and informal speech (Alexopoulos 1994: 283). According to the relevant literature, the basic function of real diminutives is to refer to an entity by, first, literally diminishing its size or quantity (for nouns) or intensity (for adjectives) and, second, by metaphorically turning the expression into a term of endearment or a derogatory term. This twofold distinction is sometimes termed differently in the literature as “diminution” (as a mere reduction in size) versus “hypocorism” (as the expression of endearment). The diminutive suffixes that are available and productive in Modern Greek today are as follows:

- (17a) Masculine: *-úlis, -ákis, -ákos, -útsikos*
 (17b) Feminine: *-úla, -ítsa, -áka, -útsiki*
 (17c) Neuter: *-úli, -áki, -éli, -útsiko*

These suffixes can attach either to nouns or adjectives, as we can see in (18) (see e.g. Daltas 1985: 68-69 and also Φλιάτουρας 2002):

- (18a) Masculine: *mikrúlis* (small+DIM), *Kostákis* (Kostas+DIM), *levedákos* (strapping man+DIM), *glikútsikos* (sweet+DIM)
 (18b) Feminine: *kondúla* (short+DIM), *patatítsa* (potato+DIM), *mamáka* (mother+DIM), *kalútsiki* (good+DIM)
 (18c) Neuter: *morúli* (baby+DIM), *kutáki* (box+DIM), *peðaréli* (child+DIM), *xazútsiko* (stupid+DIM)

Apart from the above, there also some diminutive suffixes that come from the puristic form of Greek (Katharevousa), although their meanings are equivalent to the ones used today in the language, they are not productive anymore and combine with noun stems of “puristic” origin, e.g. *-ídi(o)* (e.g. *çiríðio(n)* (piglet)), *-iskos/i* (e.g. *pirjískos* (small tower), *peðíski* (small girl)) and *-áριο(n)* (e.g. *çipáριο(n)* (small garden) (see e.g. Daltas 1985: 72-73; Eloeva 1997: 250-251).

Although the majority of diminutives in Greek are suffixes, there are also a few prefixes (or confixes in the sense of Γιαννουλοπούλου 2003) that qualify as diminutives, e.g. *mikro-*, *xamo-*, *psefto-*, *ipo-* etc., and can also combine with nouns and adjectives (and maybe adverbials in some cases), but their current meaning is derogatory rather than properly diminutive:

- (19) *mikrópsixos* (small-minded, petty), *xamóspito* (hovel), *pseftómangas* (mock hero), *ipoanáptiktos* (underdeveloped) etc.

5.2 Psilo- and “real” diminutives

Coming back to *psilo-*, we saw that it can, in principle, qualify as a type of diminutive; however, its function is directly hypocoristic and not diminutive, given that by attaching it to a noun or adjective stem it cannot be concrete and express reduction in size/quantity/intensity and the like, which is literally the case with diminutive suffixes. *Psilo-* is rather abstract in that it produces some sort of partition or mitigation in the effect of the meaning of an abstract entity, in the sense of “a bit of X”. Let us now compare *psilo-* combinations with proper/morphological diminutives.

Morphological diminutives can have both a literal and metaphorical use:

- (20a) *kukláki* (count noun) = a doll of small size / term of endearment
 (20b) *zaxarítsa* (mass noun) = a small quantity of sugar / term of endearment
 (20c) *kalúlis/a/i* (adjective) = a little good / term of endearment
 (20d) *mamáka* (noun) = term of endearment / *a mother of small size
 (20e) *peðaréli* (noun) = a young and (therefore) inexperienced young person (derogatory)

Here, the literal meaning of morphological diminutives is “reduction” in size, in quantity or in intensity and, consequently, a metaphorical expression of endearment (i.e. hypocorism). For example, in (20b) the form *zaxarítsa* refers to a small quantity of sugar, also expressed as *liji záxari* (a little sugar) or even by the combination *liji zaxarítsa* (a little little sugar). The use of the diminutive here adds some essence of politeness (maybe by enhancing familiarity and friendliness) or non-seriousness in the situation, a general tendency found with food diminutives in Greek, a fact linked with the politeness strategy of Greek, as argued by Sifianou (1992), Daltas (1985: 85), Alexopoulos (1994: 285), Makri-Tsilipakou (2003: 700), among others. According to Crocco Galès (2002: 153-154), this strategy is aimed at minimizing or preventing the possibility of refusal in the socio-cultural frame of “offering food or drink” to a guest.

On the contrary, none of the forms with *psilo-* as given below can be taken to express reduction in size or the like (NB: we cannot have a form **psilozáxari* in the place of *zaxarítsa*):

- (21a) *psilovarjémei* (verb) = feeling a bit bored
 (21b) *psilofonázo* (verb) = shout a bit
 (21c) *psiloxazós* (adjective) = a bit stupid

- (21d) *psilomalákas* (adjective) = a bit of a wanker
 (21e) *psiloanarçía* (noun) = a bit of anarchy
 (21f) *psiloásçima* (adverb) = a bit badly
 (21g) *psilomakriá* (locative) = a bit far away

What these formations express is, rather, a kind of a partitioned meaning that leads to the expression of a degree of non-seriousness and informality in the interaction, in the sense of Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994) and Crocco Galèas (*op. cit.*) as well as a mitigation of negative effects. Besides, all formations with *psilo-* are frequent in strictly informal uses of the language, while proper diminutives are also tolerated in formal uses. So, for example the item *psiloanarçía*, in (21e), does not mean that the situation is described as including “a little quantity of anarchy” but rather that the speaker does not want to clearly say that the situation was indeed “anarchic”. In other words, by using *psilo-* the speaker chooses to distance him/herself from the situation by mitigating the effect of the word combined with *psilo-*. The same can be said about the combinations of *psilo-* with impolite words like *psiloxazós* in (21c) and indecent words such as *psilomalákas* in (21d). In these cases, the speaker arguably wants to pretend to be somewhat “more positive” towards the person s/he qualifies with the impolite/indecent word by reducing its derogatory and offensive effect with *psilo-* and expect some encouraging feedback from his/her interlocutors. This is supported by the fact that, in informal interactions of this type, interlocutors when replying often choose to use the antonymic items *xondro-* or *kara-* (a lot):

- (22) A: Kalá o Kóstas ine *psilomalákas*. (Well, Kostas is a bit of a wanker!)
 B: *Xondro-/Karamalákas*, ðes na pis! (No, he is a complete wanker!)

This is done so as to reestablish the intensity of the semantics of the bad word to its full extent, accept and agree with the opinion of the speaker and relax the whole communicative situation. In Sifianou’s (1992: 161) words, the speaker here wants “to establish and maintain common ground and solidarity with the addressee”, albeit a function generally found with diminutives.

The assumption that *psilo-* is not a proper diminutive affix is also supported by the fact that it does not compete with diminutive affixes. If we take noun and adjective stems that can accept either *psilo-* or a proper diminutive affix, we will see that *psilo-* cannot appear with all stems that accept a proper diminutive affix and vice versa. This is supported by the following examples:

Nouns

- (23a) *levénd-is* → *levénd-ákos* BUT ??*psilo-levéndis* (only metaphorically)
 “strapping man”
 (23b) *patát-a* → *patat-ítsa/patat-úla* BUT ??*psilopatáta* (only metaphorically)
 “potato”
 (23c) *mor-ó* → *mor-úli/ mor-áki* BUT **psilo-moró* “baby”
 (23d) *ánx-os* → ??*ánx-áki* AND *psilo-ánxos* “anxiety”
 (23e) *isteri-a* → ??*isteri-úla* AND *psilo-istería* “hysteria”
 (23f) *elefθerí-a* → **elefθeri-úla/ *elefθer-ítsa* BUT *psilo-elefθeria* “freedom”

Adjectives

- (24a) *mikrós* → *mikrúlis* BUT ??*psilomikrós* “small, little”
 (24b) *xazós* → *xazúlis* AND *psiloxazós* “stupid”
 (24c) *kalós* → *kalúlis* BUT ?*psilokalós* “good”

Furthermore, *psilo-* can attach to items that already bear a diminutive suffix (see Daltas 1985: 71-74; Sifianou 1992: 157; Makri-Tsilipakou 2003):

- (25) *psiloxazúlis* (a bit stupid+DIM), *psilonevrosúla* (a bit of neurosis+DIM),
psiloastiáci (a bit of a joke+DIM), *psilogrupácja* (a bit of groups+DIM)

However, this cannot stand as an argument favouring the idea that *psilo-* is not a proper diminutive, as, in Greek, it is possible to have multiple suffixation of proper diminutives:

- (26) *γlik-ul-íts-ikos* (sweet+DIM+DIM), *γlik-ul-ítsa* (sweet+DIM+DIM),
patat-ul-ítsa (potato+DIM+DIM), *man-ul-ítsa* (mother+DIM+DIM),
mam-ak-ul-ítsa (mom+DIM+DIM+DIM)

and still *psilo-* can combine with some of these forms:

- (27) *psilo-γlik-ul-íts-ikos*, *psilo-γlik-ul-ítsa*, *psilo-patat-ul-ítsa* (metaphorically),
psilo-man-ul-ítsa (metaphorically), *psilo-mam-ak-ul-ítsa* (metaphorically) etc.

and with diminutives of loanwords:

- (28) *psilo-xangover-áci* (a bit of a hangover+DIM)

On the basis of the relevant data, I believe that the co-existence of *psilo-* with proper diminutives in (25) through (28) suggests that speakers add *psilo-* in order either to further mitigate the semantic effects of the particular diminutivised word or in order to push forward a metaphorical meaning, by further partitioning the meaning of the word; moving from a concrete to an abstract semantic domain. It is important to note here that this process applies recursively, by adding the degree adverbial *λίγο* (a little) to the already complex formation we saw in (28):

- (28') *λίγο psilo-xangover-áci* (a bit of a bit of hangover+DIM)

Finally, as we saw earlier in examples (6) through (13), *psilo-* has a much freer distribution than diminutive suffixes and prefixes, as it can also attach to non-nominal stems, like verbs, adverbials etc. When *psilo-* combines with verbs (of various meanings) it adds to them particular implicatures pertaining to the stance of the speaker towards the event expressed by the verb. This is an instance of implicature conventionalization in the sense of Jurafsky (1996: 549 and references therein; see also Γιαννουλοπούλου 2003). This is clearly shown in the following examples:

- (29a) *ton psilopístepsa* (I believed him a bit)
 (29b) *me psiloévriσε* (he swore at me a bit)

In (29a), the speaker adds *psilo-* to the verb stem in order to avoid admitting the fact that s/he believed what “he told him/her” so the implicature is “I don’t want to tell you that I believed him to a certain extent but I did so”. This implicature appears to emerge mainly with verbs that have more neutral or positive connotations when prefixed with *psilo-*:

- (30a) *psiloéfaya* (I ate a bit) = I don’t want to tell you that I ate (a lot) but I did so”
 (30b) *psiloípja* (I drunk a bit) = I don’t want to tell you that I drank (a lot) but I did so”
 (30c) *to psiloθélo* (I want a bit) = I don’t want to tell you that I want it (a lot) but I do so”

In (29b), the particular verb has negative connotations so the main implicature here will be something like “I can’t believe how badly s/he swore at me”. This implicature usually obtains with verbs of negative connotation or indecent and offensive meaning, as the examples in (31):

- (31a) *me psiloésprokse* (s/he pushed me a bit) “I can’t believe how strongly s/he pushed me”
 (31b) *psiloyamíthika* (I was a bit fucked up) “I can’t believe how much I was fucked up”
 (31c) *psilotsadístika* (I got a bit pissed off) “I can’t believe how much I got pissed off”

6. Conclusions

Closing this exploration of the use of the item *psilo-* in Greek I can draw the following conclusions:

(a) *Psilo-* has similar functions and is undergoing a morphosemantic change analogous to that happening with its English equivalent *-ish*. Tentatively, we could say that the tendencies of “*-ish*” are being transferred from English into Greek maybe, through the sociolect of young people which is quite open to external borrowing.

(b) Its rich distribution across various categories, its high productivity and its fuzzy morphological status, given that it can appear as a bound grammatical morpheme almost with any lexical category (including interjections) as well as as a free morpheme, indicate that, through grammaticalization, *psilo-* is acquiring the role of a pragmatic marker, mainly acting as a mitigator of semantic and pragmatic effects (this could also be seen within a morphopragmatic analysis, in the sense of Crocco Galèas (2002)).

(c) Its incompatibility with concrete nouns indicates that it is not a proper morphological diminutive that also has hypocoristic readings, as is the case with most proper diminutives, but is instead a pragmatic marker by default; besides, this is the case with the fossilized diminutive prefixes like *mikro-*, *xamo-*, *psefto-*, *ipo-* that are not proper diminutives but derogatory markers.

(d) Its status as a pragmatic marker is further supported by the semantic effects it has on indecent vocabulary.

(e) Finally, the whole morphosemantic profile of *psilo* justifies both its productivity in informal speech, slang and language play and its high frequency and popularity in the language of young people.

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