



On the diachrony of gender in Asia Minor Greek: the development of semantic agreement in Pontic



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Gender
Semantic agreement
Asia Minor Greek
Pontic

ABSTRACT

Alongside the syntactic agreement system that it inherited from earlier stages in its history as a Greek dialect whereby targets agree with the morphologically-assigned gender of their controllers (masculine, feminine, neuter), Pontic has developed an innovative semantic agreement system: nouns denoting inanimate and non-human animate entities trigger agreement in the neuter. Adopting the theoretical framework of Corbett (1991, 2006) and drawing on recent cross-linguistic findings on the development of gender agreement systems, syntactic and semantic; and (b) a diachronic account of the historical origin and subsequent evolution of the innovative semantic agreement system. It is shown that the synchronic distribution of the two systems confirms Corbett's generalisations: semantic agreement is found with targets syntactically distanced from their controller while syntactic agreement holds sway with those targets that appear syntactically nearer to it. It is further argued that the development of semantic agreement in the dialect followed the cross-linguistically well-observed path defined by Corbett's Agreement Hierarchy, starting from the personal pronoun and gradually arriving at definite articles with its completion attested in Rumeic, the dialect of the area of Mariupol (Ukraine). Finally, it is proposed that this innovation, whose earliest manifestations must be dated before the early 14th century CE, paved the way for the later loss of gender agreement in Cappadocian and Phrasiot, the other two Asia Minor Greek dialects to have undergone innovations in their gender systems.

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1. Introduction: a 'non-agreeing' group of Modern Greek dialects

Greek¹ is generally taken to be among the conservative members of the Indo-European language family as far as grammatical gender is concerned (Matasović, 2004, p. 74; see also Loporcaro and Paciaroni, 2011, p. 395 and references therein). Despite changes in the rules that govern gender assignment, which became increasingly morphological in the transition from the ancient to the modern language, Greek is indeed conservative in having preserved not only the three gender values – masculine, feminine, neuter – reconstructed for Late Proto-Indo-European (Luraghi, 2009, 2011) but also the scope and type of gender

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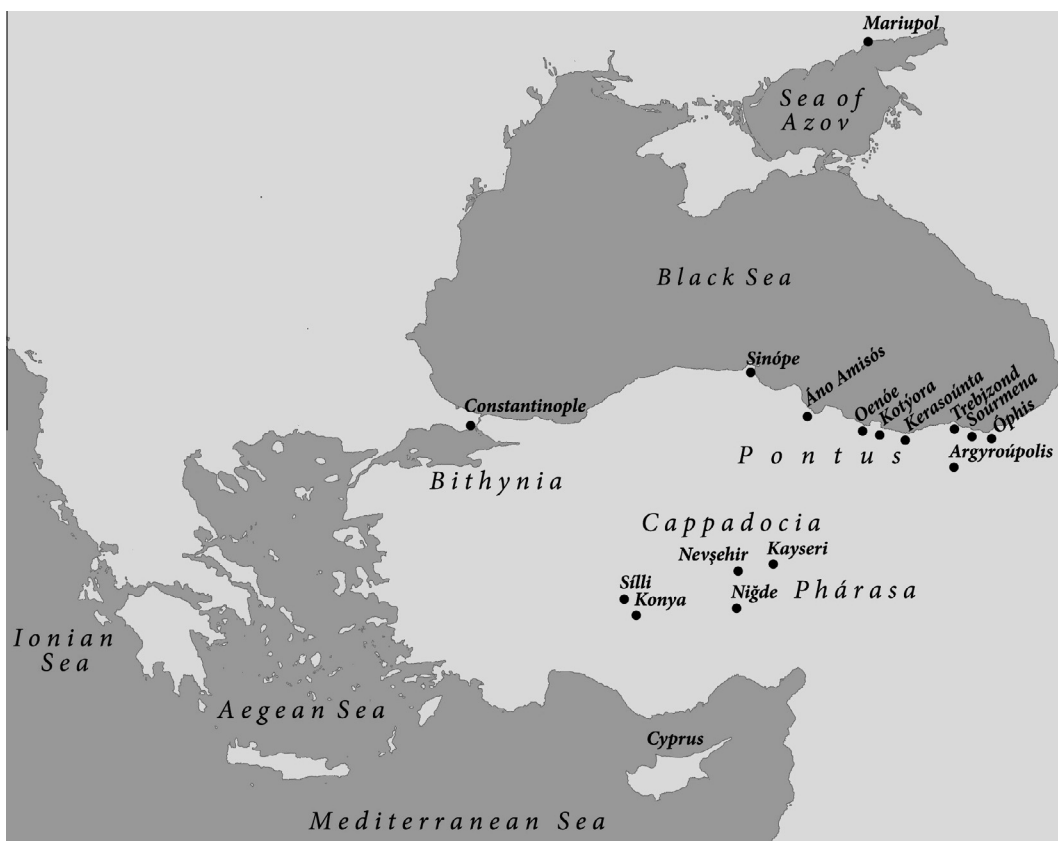
¹ Greek examples are given in broad phonetic transcription. The acute accent is used to indicate stress. Brackets include sounds that either do not surface due to phonological reasons or are subject to interdialectal variation. AMGr stands for Asia Minor Greek, ModGr for Modern Greek. The following glossing abbreviations are used in the examples: ACC: accusative; ART: article; AUG: augmentative; C: common; COMPL: complementiser; DEF: definite; DEM: demonstrative; DIM: diminutive; DIST: distal; F: feminine; FUT: future; GEN: genitive; IMP: imperative; INDF: indefinite; INTERJ: interjection; M: masculine; N: neuter; NEG: negation; NOM: nominative; PART: particle; PL: plural; PNP: perfective non-past; POSS: possessive; PROX: proximal; PRS: present; PST: past; REL: relative; SG: singular; SIM: simulative.

agreement. No agreement-bearing categories lost their ability to agree in gender in the history of the language; on the contrary, when Greek acquired (definite and indefinite) articles, they too came to agree in gender with the nouns they modified, having developed out of previously agreement-bearing categories (a demonstrative pronoun and the numeral for 'one', respectively). As Matasović (2004, p. 73) correctly points out in this connection, Greek in fact extended the scope of agreement, which has remained overwhelmingly of the syntactic type in that, throughout the history of the language, agreement targets have agreed with the formally (i.e., morphologically) assigned gender of prototypical controllers and not with the gender they would be assigned to by virtue of their semantic content. In Dahl's (2000) terms, agreement in Greek has always in principle operated on the basis of the lexical properties of nouns and not on the semantics of their referents.

However, not all dialects of the modern language are as conservative as the introductory paragraph suggests. In this paper, I draw attention to the dialects of the Asia Minor Greek (henceforth AMGr) group that have undergone major innovations in the domain of gender. The group is comprised of the following dialects that are or were spoken by the Greek Orthodox communities native to the respective locations in inner Asia Minor (today's Turkey) as shown below (see Map 1):

- (a) Pontic: the dialect of numerous towns and villages dispersed along the long and narrow strip of land on the southern coast of the Black Sea traditionally known as Pontus;
- (b) Cappadocian: the dialect of twenty villages located in the rural area between the Cappadocian cities of Nevşehir, Kayseri, and Niğde;
- (c) Pharasiot: the dialect of the town of Phárasa (today's Çamlıca) and five neighbouring villages in the area between the Ala Dağ and Antitaurus mountains; and
- (d) Silliot: the dialect of the village of Sílli, found in the environs of the town of Konya.

These were spoken in the various Asia Minor enclaves until 1923, when all Orthodox Greek citizens of Turkey, with the exception of the Istanbul population, were forced to relocate as refugees in Greece in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne. At present, those AMGr dialects that have managed to survive homogenisation pressures within Greece, Pontic being the most robust, are spoken in dialect pockets mainly in rural areas of the north, with moderately large speaker communities found also in cities elsewhere in the country. Due to the population exchange having used religion as the criterion for dis-



Map 1.

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