

## Linguistic self-regulation: the case of Greek gender change in progress

Anna Anastassiadis-Symeonidis ([ansym@lit.auth.gr](mailto:ansym@lit.auth.gr))

Department of Linguistics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH)

Maria Mitsiaki ([mmitsiak@lit.auth.gr](mailto:mmitsiak@lit.auth.gr))

PhD Candidate of Applied Linguistics, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH)

We report on a morphological change in progress emerging from the high frequency of Greek masculine gender use (instead of feminine), which is based on the statistical analysis of natural discourse data.

In Greek, one can find nouns that tend to change their gender due to morphological pressure or due to obedience to the principles of prototypicality and neutralisation (Anastassiadis-Symeonidis & Chila-Markopoulou: 2003). Nouns that end in *-os* are prototypically masculine, e.g. ο φίλος [**o** 'fil**os**] 'the friend', ο δρόμος [**o** 'drom**os**] 'the street'. Nevertheless, a few Greek words with the same suffix are feminine or neutral (as the article before the noun reveals) e.g. η ψήφος [**i** 'psif**os**] 'the vote'– το κράτος [**to** 'krat**os**] 'the state'. Abiding by the prototypical rule of gender, the feminine nouns tend to be used as masculine ones, especially in accusative plural where the phonetic environment is suitable, e.g. τους φίλους [**tus** 'fil**us**] 'the friends', τους δρόμους [**tus** 'drom**us**] 'the streets'.

We will present: a) evidence for the existence of a gender use change in progress, b) the motivation behind this change and c) basic hypotheses about the way this change is being diffused.

Our data is derived from electronic texts (via the Internet) and from recorded TV broadcasts. The analysis of the instances of the nouns that undergo gender change gave us the following results: a) the phonetic similarity of the masculine article *o* [o] and the inflectional morpheme *-os* [-os] motivates change, b) the change is being consolidated by the high frequency of a word, especially in its accusative form which is both more frequent and phonetically/morphologically similar, g) similarity and frequency influence the subjects' judgements of acceptability (see also Bybee: 2006), allowing a wide use of the nouns with new genders, d) due to its high frequency the noun is resistant to change in formal conversational contexts (e.g. state media), e) young people tend to use the less prestigious new gender form, and f) left-wing parties, considered to be progressive in their politics, exhibit a wide use of the nouns in their new gender form.

Gender change reflects the way use is imposed on linguistic structure, restructuring the linguistic system (self-regulation) and it is interpreted as follows: a) the high frequency exemplars of masculine gender constructions has an impact on the representations that are evidenced in speaker knowledge, and b) morphological change is being gradually diffused from highly frequent nouns [o 'psifos] to less frequent ones [o 'methodos] 'the method' (analogy).

Therefore, we define linguistic self-regulation as a process that reveals the tendency of a linguistic system to adjust to the regularities imposed by intralingual factors, i.e. analogy, economy, etc. Linguistic self-regulation displays the following characteristics: a) it is observed in cases of difficult and/or infrequent (non-prototypical) linguistic structures, b) it reflects community members' ambivalence toward a standard as well as a vernacular linguistic form that are competing with each other, c) it modifies native speakers' linguistic selections leading to variation based on style and prestige, and d) it provides us with apparent time evidence suggesting language change in progress.

#### References

- Anastassiadis-Symeonidis A. & D. Chila-Markopoulou. 2003. "Synchronic and diachronic trends in gender of Modern Greek (A theoretical proposition)". In Anastassiadis-Symeonidis A., A. Ralli, & D. Chila-Markopoulou (eds.). *Gender*. Athens: Patakis, 13-56. [in Greek]
- Bybee J. (ed.). 2006. *Frequency of use and the organisation of language*. Oxford University Press.
- Chila-Markopoulou D. 2003. "Gender and agreement in Modern Greek". In Anastassiadis-Symeonidis A., A. Ralli και & D. Chila-Markopoulou. *Gender*. Athens: Patakis, 132-167. [in Greek]
- Christofidou A. 2003. "Gender and inflection in Greek: A natural approach". In Anastassiadis-Symeonidis A., A. Ralli και & D. Chila-Markopoulou. *Gender*. Athens: Patakis, 100-131. [in Greek]
- Coker A. 2009. "Analogical change and grammatical gender in ancient Greek". *Journal of Greek Linguistics*, 9, 1, 34-55.