The Loss of the Genitive in Greek: A Diachronic and Dialectological Analysis (La Trobe University, 2014)*

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Abstract

This summary presents the main findings of my 2014 Ph.D. dissertation (La Trobe University) on the diachrony of the genitive case and its dialectal evolution in Greek.

Keywords

case marking – genitive – morphology – dialectology – markedness – historical linguistics

1 Introduction

The diachrony of the Greek language is largely characterized by the transitional period between the ancient and the modern period of the language during which a great number of changes took place in all levels of linguistic analysis. During this transitional period, which encompasses late Hellenistic Koiné (LHellG) and early Medieval Greek (EMedG, 5th–10th c. AD), the case system was restructured due to the loss of the dative (c. 6th–8th c. AD) and the loss of

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the polysemy of the oblique cases (accusative, genitive), which became almost exclusively grammatical (cf. Luraghi 2003).

In this restructured case system of late Medieval (LMedG, 11th c.–1453) and Modern Greek (MG), the position of the genitive was crucially altered, as the genitive was restricted to marking prototypical possessive functions almost exclusively in (most) northern varieties and Asia Minor (dialect groups with accusative indirect object marking), while in Southern Greek it also marks indirect object functions. Furthermore, a series of phenomena of morphological loss have occurred in various diachronic stages and areas of the diatopy of the language:

(1) a. **Syncretism with the accusative:** the genitive plural of personal pronouns has been replaced by the accusative in almost every MG dialect:

\[ \text{AG τὰ παιδία ἡμῶν [GEN] → MG τα παιδια μας [ACC] “our children” } \]

ii. In some dialects, the accusative replaces the genitive plural in the nominal inflection as well, cf. Cypriot: \[ \text{τα σπίτια των ανθρώπων [GEN]} \rightarrow \text{τα σπίτια τους ανθρώπους [ACC] “the houses of the people”} \]

(1) b. **Paradigmatic gaps:** in almost every MG variety there is a number of nouns that cannot form the genitive, either in the plural or at all:

\[ \text{παιδάκι “little child” → gen.sg *παιδακιού/ gen.pl *παιδακιών} \]
\[ \text{κοπέλα “young woman” → gen.pl *κοπελών} \]

(1) c. **Complete loss of the genitive plural in Northern MG:** the use of the preposition από “from”, which governs the accusative, as a possessive marker has resulted in the loss of the genitive plural with all nouns in the majority of the varieties of the northern dialectal group: \[ *\text{τα σπίτια τουν ανθρώπων} \rightarrow \text{τα σπίτια απ’ [from] τ’ς ανθρ’ς [acc] “the houses of the people”} \]

(1) d. **Undeclined possessors:** in dialects that are exposed to extreme degree of contact with other languages (cf. Central Asia Minor, Mariupol and Southern Italy), nominal possessors can be left without genitive marking:

\[ \text{Salento, Southern Italy: τως [GEN] αττρέφιο [GEN]} \rightarrow \text{τως [GEN] αττρέφια [NOM] “of the siblings”} \]

This thesis aims to provide a unified account for these phenomena of case loss, given the fact that previous studies have dealt with isolated aspects of
the genitive (cf. Hatzidakis 1928, Tsamadoú 1984, Kavoukópoulos 1990, Niki- foridou 1991). As opposed to other studies of case loss, which mainly examine cases that have already been lost (cf. Humbert 1930, Allen 2008 etc.), this dissertation deals with an incomplete development, as the genitive is never entirely lost as a grammatical category in any variety of Greek, which allows for greater understanding of the nature of case decline through the examination of its crucial intermediate stages. The main goal of this thesis is to determine the common source that lies behind these developments of loss, since they have occurred with consistency over one thousand years after the EMedG period and can be found in the majority of the Greek-speaking world. Even though this historical study is largely language-internal, the matter of case loss will also be approached from a wider perspective, as similar phenomena of inflectional loss can be found in the vast majority of European languages.

This thesis is structured in two parts; Chapters 2–4 set the background to the diachrony of the genitive and Chapters 5–9 constitute the main analysis of the study. Chapter 2 presents the broader setting of the case system of Greek, such as the loss of the dative and the structural coding of the cases (e.g. the stress patterns of the genitive). Chapter 3 deals with the functional diachrony of the genitive and the reduction of the various uses of the ancient genitive in Med and Mg. In Chapter 4 I examine the dynamic relations between the genitive and the other members of the case system under the notion of markedness. Chapters 5–8 deal with the specific phenomena of inflectional loss that are mentioned in (1a)–(1d), the examination of which is summarized and synthesized in Chapter 9.

2 The Genitive in the Case System of Greek: The Role of Markedness

A prerequisite for the determination of the causes of the loss of the genitive in Greek is the examination of the broader case system and the position of the genitive in it. The dynamic and hierarchical relations between the genitive and the other members of the case system (nominative, accusative and the lost dative1) can be interpreted through the notion of markedness, according to which the properties of a category can be divided into unmarked, namely

1 The vocative is not dealt with in this study, as it does not constitute a true case (cf. Blake 1994: 9).
prototypical or default, and marked members, which are more peripheral and complex.

The marked position of the genitive in the case system of LMedG and MG can be determined by five criteria of markedness (cf. Elšík & Matras 2006): i) conceptual (cognitive) complexity (semantics), ii) structural complexity (morphology/phonology), iii) inflectional potential (morphology), iv) distributional potential (syntax) and v) text (token) frequency.

2.1 **Conceptual Complexity**
After the loss of the dative in EMedG, the genitive became the most conceptually marked case in the system, as the nominative and the accusative encode core roles, such as subjects/agents and objects/patients. As shown in Chapter 3, the conceptual complexity of the ancient genitive, which could express ablative and partitive relations, played a significant role in the loss of a great number of the uses of the case.

2.2 **Structural Complexity**
Genitive forms have required various patterns of stress shift during the entire diachrony of Greek, which is a clear instance of the structural complexity of the case, as opposed to the nominative and the accusative. More specifically, genitive plural forms may take four different stress patterns in MG: i) no stress shift, e.g. λύκος/ gen.pl λύκων “wolf”, ii) penult → ultimate, e.g. ώρα/ gen.pl ωρών “hour”, iii) antepenult → penult, e.g. άνθρωπος/ gen.pl ανθρώπων “human”, iv) antepenult → ultimate, e.g. θάλασσα/ gen.pl θαλασσών “sea”.

Moreover, the advanced neutralization between the nominative and the accusative (with all feminine and neuter nouns and in all plural paradigms apart from o-masculines) in most late medieval modern varieties created a very frequent -genitive/+genitive distinction in the nominal morphology of the language.

2.3 **Distributional Potential**
The loss of most non-possessive functions of the ancient genitive limited the syntactic domains in which the genitive is used to a great extent. The distributional potential of the Greek genitive:

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2 Barring the accusative plural of o-masculines.
Ancient Greek

A. Predicative possessive (copular clauses)
B.i Adnominal (anchoring possessive)
B.ii Adnominal (non-anchoring possessive)
B.iii Adnominal (true/pseudo-partitive)
C. Adjectival
D. Adverbal (partitive/ablative)
E. Adverbal adjunct (time, cause etc.)
F. Adverbal prepositional
G. Prepositional

Late Medieval/Modern Greek I

A. Predicative possessive (copular and existential)
B.i Adnominal (anchoring possessive)
B.ii Adnominal (non-anchoring: time and quality)
C. Adverbal (indirect object)

Late Medieval/Modern Greek II

A. Predicative possessive (copular and existential)
B.i Adnominal (anchoring possessive)
B.ii Adnominal (non-anchoring: time and quality)

2.4 Frequency

The reduction of the distributional potential of the genitive in such domains as the prepositional phrases and complements of monotransitive verbs had an extremely important effect on the text frequency of the case as a head of a nominal phrase, as can be seen in the following table:

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3 Heptanese, Peloponnese, Western Epirus and Northern Greek dialects with genitive indirect object marking (Central Greece, Eastern Epirus, the Sporades and Lesbos). It should not be omitted that in South-Eastern dialects (Chios, Ionia, Icaria, Dodecanese), Cyprus, Cyclades and to a lesser extent Crete, the genitive has maintained archaic syntactic distributions of the genitive, such as the use of the genitive as the complement of adverbal prepositions or the use of genitive direct objects (mostly with partitive dative meaning, e.g. Kýthera ακλουθώ του γέρου [gen] “I follow the old man”).

4 Northern Greek dialects with accusative indirect object marking (Macedonia, Thessaly, Thrace, Northern Aegean), Bithynia, Livisi, Vourlás, Kydoniés, Eastern Asia Minor, Mariupol.
### Table 1

**The diachrony of the frequency of the genitive in Greek**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>NOM:</th>
<th>ACC:</th>
<th>GEN:</th>
<th>DAT:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Greek</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Greek I</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Greek II</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.5 Inflectional Potential

The increased markedness of the genitive in LMedG and MG can be clearly shown in the reduction of the inflectional potential of the case, as seen in (1a)–(1d), given the fact that in AG and EMedG such phenomena have nowhere been documented. Apart from these main four phenomena (syncretism with the accusative, paradigmatic gaps of the genitive singular and plural, complete loss of the genitive plural and the use of undeclined nominal possessors), there are other developments of lesser significance which are covered in Chapter 2, cf. overlap with other case forms due to accidental phonological changes or analogical developments, e.g. Chios ο λύκος/ gen.sg του λύκον/ acc.sg τον λύκον “the wolf” (< MedG ο/ του/ τον Λέων “Leon”).

### 3 The Loss of the Genitive in Medieval and Modern Greek

#### 3.1 Syncretism with the Accusative (Chapter 5)

The first phenomenon of genitive loss dates back to the end of the EMedG period, as the innovative first and second person accusative plural clitics μας and σας replaced the ancient genitives ἡμῶν and ὑμῶν respectively. This syncretism reflects the changes in the case system of Greek after the loss of the dative, as the genitive retreated to the lowest position of the case hierarchy, since after the formation of the accusative plurals μας/ σας speakers extended their use for all oblique functions without developing distinct genitive forms (cf. Mertyris 2011). This replacement might also reflect the avoidance of the overlap between the innovative (largely unattested) genitives ἐμῶν-*μων/ *ἐσῶν-*σων and the neuter singular form of the possessive adjective ἐμόν/ (ἐ)σόν.

This change can be found in all modern dialects apart from Pontic, while the pattern was extended to the third person with the possessive use of the masculine accusative plural τους for all genders in more than half of the MG-speaking dialects.

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6 Minotou (1929: 381–391). Modern Greek I refers to the ‘Southern’ dialects with genitive indirect objects.
world. Quite interestingly, in a few of these varieties the syncretism is extended to masculine nouns, such as in Cypriot (cf. ib.ii). What is more, in some dialects with overlap of the masculine τος with the feminine accusative plural τις due to deletion of unstressed /i, u/, the pattern was extended to feminine nouns as well, cf. Sarakatsan τα φτάνια τις γυναίκες "the dresses of the women".

3.2 Paradigmatic Loss of the Genitive (Chapter 6)

The second phenomenon that reflects the shifted position of the genitive in the case hierarchy of MedG is related to the development of genitive gaps in a few paradigms of the nominal morphology. The two most prominent cases of defectivity involve a large number of parasyllabic barytone feminine nouns (e.g. μπάλα/ gen.sg μπάλας/ gen.pl *μπάλων-*μπαλών "ball") and ι-neuter diminutives and derivatives (e.g. παιδάκι/ gen.sg *παιδακιού/ gen.pl *παιδακιών "little child").

This phenomenon, which exhibits great dialectal variation, reflects the structural complexity of these genitive forms, as they require shift of the position of stress. In the case of feminine nouns, it is quite likely that speakers hesitated to apply an archaic (and no longer phonologically justified) pattern to nouns of medieval or modern origin, which in turn could not acquire analogical genitive plurals without stress shift, since this would be a pattern mostly associated with masculine nouns,8 cf. μπάλος/ gen.pl μπάλων (a type of Aegean folk dance).

Turning to ι-neuter diminutives (e.g. -άκι) and derivatives (e.g. -λίκι), it seems that the shift of stress from the stem to the inflectional suffix after the phonological effect of synizesis in LMedG was considered problematic by speakers of most dialects. Evidence for this comes from dialects that did not develop synizesis and maintain such genitives, e.g. Kymi κοσσυφ-άγι/ gen.sg κοσσυφ-αγι-ου/ gen.pl κοσσυφ-αγι-ων vs. Common Modern Greek (CMG) κοτσυφ-άκι/ gen.sg *κοτσυφ-ακι-ού/ gen.pl *κοτσυφ-ακι-ών “little blackbird” (<κοτσύφι "blackbird").

3.3 Complete Loss of the Genitive Plural in Northern Greek (Chapter 7)

The complete loss of the genitive plural in the majority of Northern Greek varieties is clearly the most extreme of the phenomena under examination, as it sometimes involves a great degree of genitive singular loss owing to the possessive use of the preposition από “from”. Given the fact that there is great dialectal variation in the degree of loss of the genitive in either number, it can

8 With the exception of feminine nouns ending in -άδα, -ίδα, -ούδα that mostly stem from the ancient third declension.
be proposed that the phenomenon was most likely caused by various factors, the most decisive of which seems to have been indirect object marking. More clearly, dialects with accusative indirect objects exhibit a much greater degree of genitive loss, due to the restricted distributional potential of the case, as opposed to Northern Greek varieties with genitive object marking (cf. Lesbos, Central Greece and Epirus).

Other factors seem to have had more restricted impact. Northern vocalism quite possibly affected masculine and neuter genitive singular forms due to their phonological weakening caused by the deletion of unstressed /i, u/, cf. ου λύκους [ο λύκος]/ gen.sg τ' λύκ [<του λύκου] “the wolf”. Furthermore, language contact with Aromanian and western varieties of Makedonski, where the ablative prepositions di and od are used respectively to mark possession, might be related to the highly advanced use of the preposition από as a possessive marker in Thessalian and Macedonian varieties (cf. Mertyris [forthcoming]).

3.4 Language Contact and the Periphery of the Greek-Speaking World

This chapter focuses on three regions, where Greek would often be an enclave or a linguistic minority due to the presence of dominant communities, e.g. Italian and local Romance in Southern Italy, Crimean Tatar (before 1778) and Russian in Mariupol of south-eastern Ukraine and Turkish in Central Asia Minor (Cappadocia, Phárasa and Silli).

Apart from the effect of language shift on morphological attrition, these languages exhibit structures that seem to have been the result of language contact. For instance, Italiot Greek exhibits the use of the genitive plural of definite articles as a possessive marker followed by an undeclined possessor (cf. Id) or the use of the ablative preposition ‘atse “from” in domains similar to those of the Italian di “of/ from”.

In Central Asia Minor (and some Pontic varieties), juxtapositional constructions of indefinite possessors in Turkish seem to have led to similar uses, even though in Cappadocia, Phárasa and Silli the phenomenon can also be found in definite possessive structures.

The dialect of Mariupol presents the most difficult case of genitive loss to explore, due to the lack of a sufficient corpus of narratives. However, a few matters seem to be clear, such as the complete loss of distinct genitive plural forms (apart from relics), the development of possessive adjectives similarly to Russian, cf. μανίτκα δάκρις “motherly tears” (instead of *μάνας [gen] δάκρις) and the frequent use of undeclined possessors (possibly related to the indefinite ‘izafet’ construction and the undeclined possessors used with personal pronouns in Crimean Tatar).
4 Conclusions

As is shown from the proposed analysis, there seems to be significant interplay between the five markedness criteria with regards to the nature and the origins of the loss of the genitive in Greek. Taking the period right after the loss of the dative in EMedG as a starting point when the genitive still had its full inflectional potential, it can be argued that the highly reduced distributional potential and frequency of the genitive due to the loss of almost all of its non-possessive (ablative and partitive) functions formed an imbalance with the high degree of the structural complexity of the case due to its multiple stress patterns.

This crucial disturbance of the equilibrium of form and function of the genitive initiated the loss of the inflectional potential of the case. What is more, the development of accusative-genitive syncretism in the personal pronouns and genitive gaps created new cycles of deflexion,9 namely the extension of the syncretism to the nominal inflection in certain dialects and the loss of the genitive plural in all paradigms of Northern Greek. Apart from the reduction of frequency, the loss of inflectional potential also resulted in further loss of distributional potential, as can be seen by the increased use of the preposition σε "in/ to" (and occasionally the use of masculine accusative plurals) in many Southern dialects for the marking of indirect objects.

The diachronic order of inflectional loss of the genitive in Greek:

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9 The term is used to refer to the mere loss of inflectional material (Norde 2001: 242).
**Table 2**  
The diachronic order of inflectional loss of the genitive in Greek

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Century</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th c.</td>
<td>accusative-genitive syncretism in the innovative 1PL and 2PL forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th c.</td>
<td>accusative-genitive syncretism in the 3PL clitics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13th c.</td>
<td>accusative-genitive plural syncretism in the masculine nouns in Cypriot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th c. (appr.)</td>
<td>after the establishment of synizesis, ι-neuter diminutives become defective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14th c.–16th c. (appr.)</td>
<td>development of paradigmatic gaps for many barytone ( \alpha-/\eta )-feminines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th–19th c. (appr.)</td>
<td>loss of the genitive plural in most Northern Greek varieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17th–20th c. (appr.)</td>
<td>deflexion in peripheral dialects due to language contact and language shift</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While this thesis attempts to describe and interpret a particular phenomenon in the broader case system of Greek, there are a few matters that further research could undertake, such as a more detailed exploration of the loss of the dative in the highly unknown vernacular of EMedG and the future directions that the case system of contemporary CMG and its diatopic variants will take.

**References**


