

Patterns of case syncretism in the Tsakonian dialect: A morphosyntactic analysis

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το άρθρο μελετά τον συγκρητισμό των πτώσεων στην τσακωνική διάλεκτο, μια διάλεκτο που ομιλείται σε μια μικρή περιοχή της νοτιοανατολικής Πελοποννήσου. Παρουσιάζεται μια μορφοσυντακτική ανάλυση του φαινομένου μέσα από το πρίσμα της *Κατανεμημένης Μορφολογίας* (Distributed Morphology, Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994). Ειδικότερα, ο συγκρητισμός στην Κατανεμημένη Μορφολογία μπορεί να προκύψει μέσω δύο μηχανισμών: (α) με υπο-χαρακτηρισμό (underspecification) των στοιχείων λεξιλογίου και (β) με κανόνες ελάττωσης (impoverishment rules).

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ: case syncretism, Distributed Morphology, impoverishment rules, Tsakonian dialect, underspecification

1. Introduction

In the literature, the term *syncretism* is used to refer to cases in which the same morphological realization is assigned to two distinct morphosyntactic categories within the same categorical dimension (Meiser 1992, Calabrese 2008, Harley 2008, Marinis 2024; see also Antonopoulou 2020). For instance, in Latin American Spanish, there is no distinction between the second- and third-person plural verb forms: the same exponent realizes both forms in the present tense, as illustrated in (1):

- (1) Latin American Spanish verb *hablar* ‘speak’
Person / Number
1 sg. habl-o
2 sg. habla-s
3 sg. habla-Ø
1 pl. habla-mos
2 pl. habla-**n**
3 pl. habla-**n**

Case syncretism arises when a single exponent realizes multiple case forms within a paradigm (see also Baerman 2008). The causes of case syncretism vary. In many instances, phonology may play an important role, as sound change may lead to syncretism when two originally distinct surface forms become homophonous. Another possible factor is the semantic or syntactic similarity between categories (Luraghi 2003, Baerman 2008); in such cases, the category used more frequently in comparison with the other takes over, and the less frequent category merges into it. Interestingly enough, syncretism does not, in general, entail the loss of a grammatical category. Although its morphological realization is identical to that of another category, the function of the original category is not necessarily lost (Luraghi 2003).

In this paper, I aim at analysing case syncretism within the framework of *Distributed Morphology*, a syntax-all-the-way-down and realizational model. In particular, I focus on the Tsakonian dialect and examine patterns of case syncretism attested in the dialect. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a brief overview of the dialect. Section 3 outlines the main assumptions of the theoretical framework adopted for the analysis. Section 4 presents the analysis of case syncretism in the Tsakonian dialect and Section 5 concludes the discussion.

2. The Tsakonian dialect

The Tsakonian dialect (see among others, Deffner 1875, 1880, 1881, Anagnostopoulos 1926, Pernot & Kostakis 1933, Pernot 1934, Kostakis 1951, 1999, Liosis 2007, 2016) is spoken in a small area known as Tsakonia in the southeastern Peloponnese. This area extends along the western coast of the Argolic Gulf, from the village of Agios Andreas to the town of Leonidio, and northwards as far as the villages of Kastanitsa and Sitaina. In the past, the region of Tsakonia was larger, as it extended further south, specifically along the eastern coast of Laconia towards Cape Maleas and the surrounding area.

The Tsakonian dialect differs substantially from other Modern Greek dialects; its isolation due to natural and geographical factors has likely contributed to this divergence. The dialect comprises three sub-dialectal groups: (a) *northern Tsakonian*, spoken in the villages of Kastanitsa and Sitaina, which shows significant influence from Standard Modern Greek, (b) *southern Tsakonian*, spoken in the remaining Tsakonian villages and (c) *Propontis Tsakonian*, which has been influenced by Turkish (Kontosopoulos 1994).

3. Theoretical assumptions

Distributed Morphology (henceforth DM; Halle & Marantz 1993, 1994) is a non-lexicalist, syntax-all-the-way-down model, according to which all complex linguistic objects –both phrases and words– are derived by means of a single syntactic combinatoric mechanism. According to this theoretical model, linguistic elements do not carry from the beginning combinations of phonological and semantic representations, but are associated with these representations through systematic rules of exponence and interpretation. In this respect, DM is closer to realizational approaches.

DM involves an architecture that employs three distinct lists, which contribute to the building of a word. For this reason, morphology is called distributed. These lists are as follows:

(a) Syntactic Terminals (List A): This is the inventory of morphemes that syntax manipulates in order to build complex syntactic structures. It includes both *functional elements* and *roots*. Functional elements bear exclusively grammatical information, i.e. they consist of specific morphosyntactic features (e.g. [$\pm$ plural], [$\pm$ past], [$\pm$ definite] etc.). Roots include items such as $\sqrt{\text{CAT}}$, $\sqrt{\text{DOG}}$, $\sqrt{\text{PLAY}}$; these items are indices that refer to abstract semantic content and function as instructions for interpreting and spelling out roots in a given morphosyntactic context (see also Acquaviva 2009, Harley 2014, Panagiotidis 2014). They do not inherently possess a grammatical category; they rather acquire it by merging with a relevant *categorizer* (n(ominalizer), v(erbalizer) etc.) in the syntax (Embick 1997, Marantz 1997; see also the *Categorization Assumption*, Embick & Marantz 2008).

(b) Vocabulary (List B): This list contains objects known as *Vocabulary Items* (VI). These objects provide phonological content for both functional elements and roots after the syntactic derivation is completed through a process called *Vocabulary Insertion*. For example, the root $\sqrt{\text{CAT}}$ in English is phonologically realized with the VI /kæt/, as illustrated in (2):

$$(2) \sqrt{\text{CAT}} \leftrightarrow /kæt/$$

Moreover, the regular plural in English nouns, such as *cat-s*, is realized by the VI /-z/, as follows (Embick 2015):

$$(3) [+pl] \leftrightarrow /-z/$$

Vocabulary Insertion is regulated by the Subset principle:

(4) *Subset Principle* (Halle 1997: 128)

“The phonological exponent of a Vocabulary Item is inserted into a position if the item matches all or a subset of the features specified in the terminal morpheme. Insertion does not take place if the Vocabulary Item contains features not present in the morpheme. Where several Vocabulary Items meet the conditions for insertion, the item matching the greatest number of features specified in the terminal morpheme must be chosen.”

The VIs inserted during Vocabulary Insertion may be underspecified, in the sense that they may match only a subset of the features of a terminal node. However, even in cases of underspecification, the most specified VI in comparison to its less specified competitors will be inserted.

(c) Encyclopedia (List C): This list contains special semantic information that is associated either with roots or with complex linguistic objects and is added post-syntactically. A special case involves idiomatic expressions, which are also included in this list. For example, the phrase “it rains cats and dogs” has the special meaning “it rains heavily!”.

In DM, syncretism occurs when a single VI is inserted for more than one functional morpheme in a terminal node, namely when distinct morphosyntactic features are realized phonologically in the same way (Harley 2008, Embick 2015). In particular, within this framework, syncretism arises through two main mechanisms: (a) underspecification or (b) impoverishment rules.

Starting with underspecification, in this process a VI is underspecified with respect to the morphosyntactic features of terminal nodes, which are always fully specified. This means that a single VI may be associated with different sets of features (see also Harley 2008, Embick 2015), as illustrated in the example below with subject and object exponents in Hupa:

(5) Subject and Object Exponents in Hupa (Embick 2015)

<i>Person/Number</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Object</i>
1 sg.	W-	Wi-
2 sg.	n-	ni-
1 pl.	di-	noh-
2 pl.	oh-	noh-

As shown in (5), first- and second-person plural subjects have distinct morphological realizations, i.e. *di-* for first person plural and *oh-* for second person plural. On the other hand, there is no distinction between first- and second-person plural objects (in bold): both are realized as *noh-*. As mentioned above, terminal nodes are always fully specified; in this case, they are specified as follows:

- (5) (a) [+1, -2, +pl, +subj]
- (b) [-1, +2, +pl, +subj]
- (c) [+1, -2, +pl, +obj]
- (d) [-1, +2, +pl, +obj]

However, the VIs inserted in these terminal nodes refer to the following features:

- (6) (a) [+1, -2, +pl, +subj] ↔ di-
 (b) [-1, +2 +pl, +subj] ↔ oh-
 (c) [+pl, +obj] ↔ noh-

Thus, we infer that the VI in (6c) is underspecified, as it does not refer to person features; for this reason, it applies to both first- and second-person plural objects.

On the other hand, impoverishment rules delete specific features in a feature bundle of a morpheme prior to Vocabulary Insertion. Thus, the VI that refers to these features can no longer be inserted and a less specified VI is selected instead. For example, in the verbal conjugation of Latin American Spanish, there is neutralization of second- and third-person plural forms. Analyses within DM capture this phenomenon by claiming that the feature [± 2] is deleted in the context of [+pl]:

(7) Latin American Spanish verb *hablar* ‘speak’ (Embick 2015)

Person/Number	Present
1 sg.	hablo
2 sg.	hablas
3 sg.	habla
1 pl.	hablamos
2 pl.	hablan
3 pl.	hablan
Impoverishment Rule: [± 2] → $\emptyset$ / [+pl]	

4. An analysis of case syncretism in the Tsakonian dialect

4.1 The data

One of the main characteristics of the Tsakonian dialect is case syncretism. In particular, according to Pernot and Kostakis (1933) and Kostakis (1951), in most nouns a single form in each number suffices to realize all cases and only a few nouns display a second form, either in the singular or the plural. Pernot (1934) assumes that case syncretism arose due to foreign influence. Instead, Kostakis (1951) argues that case syncretism is due to the simplification of inflection, a phenomenon also observed cross-linguistically, for instance in Griko and in Standard Modern Greek (8). Moreover, according to Liosis (2007), case syncretism is very common in Indo-European languages, especially in Balkan languages.

(8) Standard Modern Greek

- a. i anðres → nominative plural
 b. tus anðres → accusative plural

The Tsakonian dialect has three cases: nominative, genitive, and accusative.¹ Moreover, following Markopoulos’ (2025) analysis of theme elements and nominalizers in Modern Greek², I assume that there are four inflectional classes in the dialect:

- (a) nouns with a theme element -i-/a-, e.g., *yiton-a*³ ‘neighbor’, *eli-a* ‘olive tree’,
 (b) nouns with a theme element -o-/e-, e.g., *mok-o* ‘ox’, *abel-e* ‘vineyard’, *alit-e* ‘flour’,
 (c) nouns with a nominalizer -eð-/ið-, e.g., *kaf-e* ~ *kaf-eð* ‘coffee’, *laspi-* ~ *lasp-ið* ‘mud’,

¹ Tsakonian also has a vocative case. However, it is identical to the nominative and does not have a distinct syntactic function (see also Deffner 1880). Therefore, I will not include it in my analysis here.

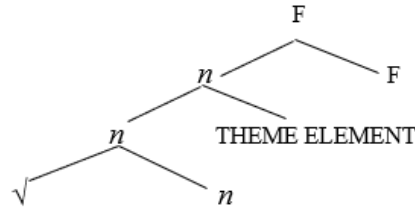
² See also Revithiadou & Spyropoulos (2016).

³ In Tsakonian, the final -s is deleted.

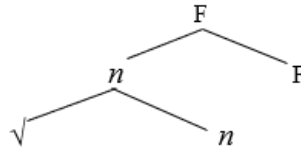
(d) nouns with a nominalizer *-at-*, e.g., *krama*⁴ - ~ *kram-at-* ‘vine’.

In particular, according to Markopoulos (2025), theme elements and nominalizers are distinct from one another, each carrying different properties. As a result, they attach at different levels of the syntactic structure. Theme elements realize a dissociated node (see, among others, Harley & Noyer 1999, Embick & Noyer 2007, Embick 2015), which is inserted post-syntactically and added to the node of the nominalizer (9a).⁵ On the other hand, nominalizers are functional heads, which assign roots the grammatical category of noun (see also section 3). Therefore, a root merges with a nominalizer (9b).

(9) a.

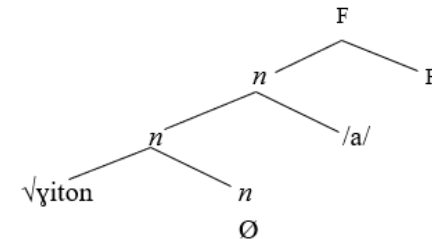


b.

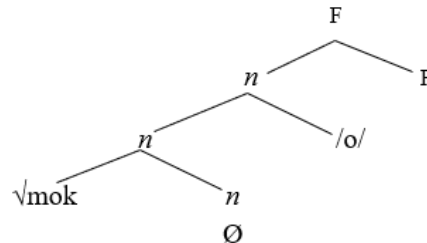


Thus, given their distinct properties and their different levels of attachment in the syntactic structure, I propose that they define separate inflectional classes. In other words, one may assume that theme elements and nominalizers provide information about the inflectional class to which a noun belongs. In what follows, I present the syntactic derivation of nouns in each inflectional class, as well as a table illustrating the exponents that realize the cases in each inflectional class.

(10) a. 1st inflectional class

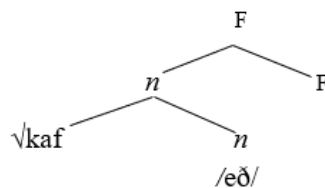
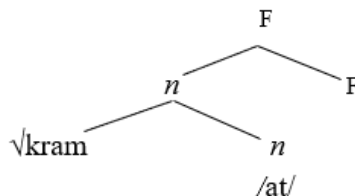


b. 2nd inflectional class



⁴ In Tsakonian /l/ → [r] / C__

⁵ F stands for functional categories, such as Number.

c. 3rd inflectional classd. 4th inflectional class(11)⁶

	1 st class		2 nd class			3 rd class		4 th class
	masc.	fem.	masc.	fem.	neut.	masc.	fem.	neut.
Singular								
Nom.	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø
Gen.	-Ø	-Ø	-u	-Ø	(-u)/-Ø	-Ø/(-u)	-Ø	-u
Acc.	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø	-Ø
Plural								
Nom.	-i	-e	-i	-e	-a	-e	-e	-a
Gen.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Acc.	-i	-e	-i	-e	-a	-e	-e	-a

4.2 Towards an analysis

4.2.1 Patterns of case syncretism in the Tsakonian dialect

In general, three patterns of case syncretism are attested in the Tsakonian dialect:

a) syncretism between the nominative and accusative singular; this type of syncretism is found in masculine and neuter nouns of the 2nd inflectional class, in masculine nouns of the third inflectional class and in nouns of the 4th inflectional class,

b) syncretism between the nominative, accusative, and genitive singular; this pattern of syncretism is attested in the 1st inflectional class, in feminine and neuter nouns of the 2nd inflectional class and in masculine and feminine nouns of the 3rd inflectional class,

c) syncretism between the nominative and accusative plural is attested across all inflectional classes.

Starting with the first pattern of case syncretism, both the nominative and accusative case are realized by the default exponent -Ø, whereas the genitive case is realized by a distinct exponent, namely /-u/, as illustrated in table (11). In contrast, in the second pattern of case syncretism, the genitive case is identical to the nominative and accusative case and is also realized by the default exponent -Ø.

⁶ As illustrated in the table, the theme exponents -i, -a and -e are absent in plural forms. Similarly, the final consonant of the nominalizer exponents -eð, -ið and -at is deleted in singular forms. I assume that this is due to phonological reasons. However, a detailed account of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of the present paper and will therefore not be further discussed.

In the third pattern, which occurs in the plural,⁷ one may observe that, although the nominative and accusative case are identical across all inflectional classes, they are realized by different exponents. These exponents appear to be closely related to the gender of the noun: if the noun is masculine, both the nominative and accusative plural are realized by the exponent /-i/; if it is feminine, by the exponent /-e/; and if it is neuter, by the exponent /-a/. However, this distinction does not apply to the 3rd inflectional class, in which the exponent for both the nominative and accusative case is /-e/ for masculine and feminine nouns alike. Thus, this also constitutes an instance of syncretism, since the same exponent realizes nominative and accusative case for both genders.

Finally, another interesting point is that masculine nouns of the 2nd inflectional class exhibit a kind of allomorphy with respect to the exponents that realize the nominative and accusative plural (see also Liosis 2016). In particular, in Tsakonian this type of allomorphy depends on the animacy of the noun: animate masculine nouns take the exponent /-i/, whereas inanimate masculine nouns take the exponent /-u/:

- (12) a. mots-i ‘oxen’
b. sak-u ‘sack’

In fact, in the case of inanimate nouns, the nominative plural is realized by the exponent of the accusative case, whereas in the case of animate nouns, both the nominative and accusative plural are realized by the exponent of the nominative case. This phenomenon is common and is also attested in other Modern Greek dialects, such as Pontic Greek (see Spyropoulos 2016)⁸:

(13)

Plural		
	animate	inanimate
Nom.	ðéskal- i	xor- ús
Gen.	ðeskal- íon	xor- íon
Acc.	ðéskal- us	xor- ús

4.2.2 The analysis

For the purposes of the present analysis, I adopt the *hypothesis of feature decomposition of case* (Calabrese 1996, 2008, Halle 1997, Halle & Vaux 1998, McFadden 2004; Alexiadou & Müller 2008). According to this hypothesis, cases consist of features and each case is characterized by a specific feature bundle. Thus, case exponents refer to the features of each terminal case node. I assume that the following features define the three cases of the Tsakonian nominal system, namely nominative, genitive and accusative: (a) the [$\pm$ oblique] feature: in particular, the [+oblique] feature is assigned to the oblique arguments of the verbs and to the noun complements and (b) the [$\pm$ inferior] feature: the [+inferior] feature is assigned to an argument, when a superior case competitor is present (see McFadden 2004). The feature bundles for each case node in the Tsakonian dialect are illustrated below:

⁷ Interestingly enough, the genitive case is totally absent in the nominal system of the Tsakonian dialect, a tendency that is also noticed in other Modern Greek dialects. However, there are relics of the genitive case in phrases such as *ðir ameron ðulia* ‘two days of work’, *pende ðraxumu prama* ‘something that costs five drachmas’ etc. (Pernot & Kostakis 1933).

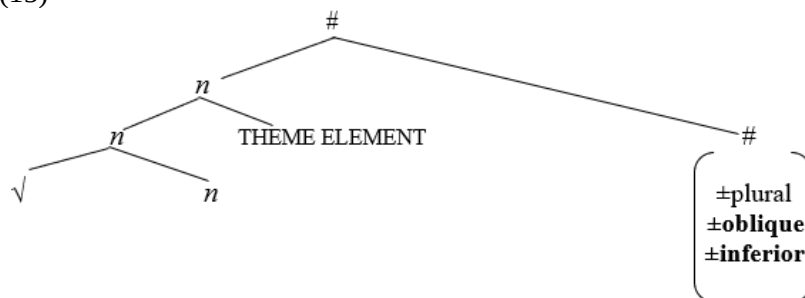
⁸ However, in this case the phenomenon is also attested in the 1st inflection class and both masculine and feminine nouns are involved.

(14)

	Nominative	Genitive	Accusative
Oblique	–	+	–
Inferior	–	+	+

Moreover, following Embick & Noyer (2007) and Embick (2015), case features are dissociated features in the sense that they are not present in the syntactic derivation but are added post-syntactically to Number (#P) (in bold in the tree below).

(15)



Thus, starting with the first pattern of case syncretism in the Tsakonian dialect, in which the nominative and accusative singular are identical and realized by the default exponent -Ø, I assume that the terminal case nodes are specified for the relevant features:

(16) (a) nominative singular: [–oblique, –inferior, –plural]

(b) accusative singular: [–oblique, +inferior, –plural]

On the other hand, the default exponent -Ø, which realizes the feature bundles in (16), is specified as follows:

(17) -Ø ↔ [–plural]

This means that the default exponent is underspecified with respect to the case features but fully specified for number. However, according to the Subset Principle, it is inserted into the terminal node position, as it matches a subset of the relevant features.

Regarding the second pattern of case syncretism in the Tsakonian dialect, in which syncretism occurs between the nominal, genitive, and accusative singular, I propose that it results from an impoverishment rule. The rationale behind this assumption is as follows. In general, the genitive singular is realized by the exponent /-u/ in masculine and neuter nouns of the 2nd inflectional class, in masculine nouns of the 3rd class and in neuter nouns of the 4th class. Given that the terminal node is specified for the features in (18), the exponent /-u/ is fully specified for these features, as it refers to all of them (19).

(18) genitive singular: [+oblique, +inferior, –plural]

(19) -u ↔ [+oblique, +inferior] / [–plural]

However, as shown in table (11), the default exponent -Ø may also realize this terminal node in nouns of the 1st inflectional class, in feminine and neuter nouns of the 2nd inflectional class, and in nouns of the 3rd inflectional class. This means that, in specific environments, features of the terminal node are deleted through an impoverishment rule. This rule applies prior to the insertion of the exponents. Therefore, the default exponent

is inserted instead of /-u/, as it better matches the features remaining in the feature bundle after the application of the impoverishment rule.

(20) *Impoverishment rule*

genitive singular: [+oblique, +inferior, -plural] → genitive singular: [-plural]

where:

[+oblique, +inferior] → Ø / [-plural], {[I], [+feminine⁹, II, III], [+masculine, III]}

Turning to the plural, as mentioned in the previous section, only one pattern of case syncretism is attested, namely syncretism between the nominative and accusative plural. Additionally, as also discussed above, the nominative and accusative plural are realized by different exponents, despite their overlap due to syncretism. Thus, I assume that syncretism between the nominative and accusative plural results from the application of an impoverishment rule:

(21) (a) nominative plural: [-oblique, -inferior, +plural]

(b) accusative plural: [-oblique, +inferior, +plural]

Impoverishment rule

[-oblique, +plural]

where:

[±inferior] → Ø / [+plural]

The exponents /-i/ and /-a/ inserted into the terminal case nodes are specified for the following features:

(22) -i ↔ [-oblique] / [+plural], [+masculine], {I,II}

-a ↔ [-oblique] / [+plural], [-masculine, -feminine]

On the other hand, the exponent /-e/ is the default exponent due to its wider distribution in the plural across all inflectional classes. This exponent is specified as follows:

(23) -e ↔ [-oblique] / [+plural]

As mentioned above (see 4.2.1), there is also an instance of syncretism in nouns of the 3rd inflectional class. In this case, the same exponent, i.e. the default exponent /-e/, realizes the nominative and accusative case for both genders. This means that the feature [gender] is deleted in a specific environment, i.e. in the plural of nouns of the 3rd inflectional class, due to an impoverishment rule:

(24) *Impoverishment rule:*

[gender] → Ø / [+plural], [III]

Finally, another issue concerns the allomorphy that masculine nouns of the 2nd inflectional class exhibit in the plural, which depends on the animacy of the noun: animate masculine nouns take the exponent /-i/, whereas inanimate masculine nouns take the exponent /-u/. The exponent /-u/ historically derives from the suffix /-us/, which realized the accusative plural and was inherited in the Tsakonian dialect from its ancestor, the Laconian Doric dialect. I assume that case syncretism in inanimate masculine nouns of the 2nd inflectional class arises through underspecification. In (25) the feature bundles of

⁹ A comprehensive analysis of the nominal system of the Tsakonian dialect, and in particular the representation of gender and animacy features, is left for future research.

the nominative and accusative are illustrated; however, the exponent /-u/ in (26) is underspecified because it matches only a subset of the features of the terminal case nodes. However, it is specified for the feature [-animate]. On the other hand, the exponent /-i/ is underspecified for animacy, as its distribution across the inflectional classes of the Tsakonian dialect shows.¹⁰

(25) (a) nominative plural: [-oblique, -inferior, +plural]

(b) accusative plural: [-oblique, +inferior, +plural]

(26) -u ↔ [-oblique] / [+plural], [+masculine, -animate], {II}

5. Conclusions

In this paper, I have presented an analysis of case syncretism in the Tsakonian dialect within the theoretical framework of DM. As discussed in the previous sections, case syncretism has a central role in the nominal system of Tsakonian. In particular, I have shown that case syncretism in the dialect may arise through the two mechanisms proposed within DM: (a) underspecification, in which an underspecified exponent is inserted into a fully specified terminal node, and (b) impoverishment rules, in which specific features in a feature bundle are deleted prior to Vocabulary Insertion; thus, the VI that refers to those features can no longer be inserted and a less specified VI is selected, instead.

However, the phenomenon is gradually fading. First, the strong influence of Standard Modern Greek on the dialect plays an important role in the loss of case syncretism. Second, as noted by Liosis (2016), the speakers of the dialect nowadays tend to restore the distinction between the nominative and accusative plural, reintroducing the exponent /-u/ for the accusative plural.¹¹ In particular, this tendency is currently observed in masculine nouns of the 2nd inflectional class, as speakers no longer apply the allomorphy rule based on noun animacy (see 4.2.2). Thus, the (re-)introduction of distinct forms to differentiate the two cases gradually leads to the opposite end of the spectrum, namely de-syncretism.

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¹⁰ What is meant here is that in the 1st inflectional class of the dialect both animate and inanimate masculine nouns are realized by the exponent /-i/. This suggests that the exponent /-i/ is underspecified for animacy.

¹¹ In particular, the nominative case plural is realized by the exponent /-i/ (e.g., elaf-i ‘deers’) and the accusative case plural is realized by the exponent /-u/. (e.g. elaf-u)

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