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Teenage slang in Modern Greek

Anna Iordanidou - Ioannis Androutsopoulos¹
 University of Patras - University of Heidelberg

ABSTRACT

Ce travail est consacré à l'étude de la langue des jeunes en Grèce, basée sur un corpus de mots et expressions qu'on trouve dans des conversations entre jeunes, dans des magazines etc. Notre but principal est d'examiner la façon dont le vocabulaire des jeunes en Grèce est formé et enrichi, par changement sémantique, création de nouveaux mots à partir de suffixes utilisés en grec standard, création de composés, d'expressions idiomatiques etc. ou par modification (par troncation, reduplication etc.) de signifiants existant en grec standard.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Sociolinguistics, age differences in the use of language are seen in terms of (1) *age-specific differences*, which reflect the type of language considered to be appropriate for the different stages of life and (2) *generation-specific differences*, which reflect language change. In practice, these two parameters are not clearly separated.

As far as age-specific differences are concerned, a number of large-scale sociolinguistic surveys have analysed the covariation of some linguistic variables with age, using the Labovian methodology of quantitative analysis. The results from these surveys have given rise to the assumption that "the less prestigious forms of the variables are used more frequently by younger speakers, although middle-aged speakers use the prestige forms more frequently". Examples for phonetic-phonological variables are given in Trudgill (1974), Labov (1966) etc.

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On the morpho-syntactic level as well, adolescent speakers in a very large number of urban communities use a significantly higher proportion of socially stigmatized variants than other speakers : examples (of such variants) include the multiple negation (*she didn't do nothing*) in the black community of Detroit, see Wolfram/Fasold (1974), the pleonastic clitics in Spanish, see Silva-Corvalan (1981); and, probably, for Modern Greek nonstandard superlative degree formations such as *το καλύτερο, αργότερα*, which have recently been popular among young people.

A characteristic feature of verbal behaviour during adolescence is the use of a particular vocabulary, which the parents cannot understand, or, if they do, do not use themselves, that is they have a passive competence of it. This vocabulary is referred to as «teenage slang» in English, «langue des jeunes» in French, «lingua dei giovani» in Italian, «Jugendsprache» in German. The teenage slang in Modern Greek is the subject of our research. As far as we know, it has not previously been described.

We believe that teenage slang has to be described as a **style**, in the sense of a cluster of co-occurring linguistic features which are habitually used by many young people in daily in-group situations of verbal interaction and are generally identified as young people's talk. At the present state of research, however, our attention primarily focusses on vocabulary items as such and less on their use in discourse contexts.

2. FIRST ANALYSIS

Our analysis is based on a **corpus** of about 2.000 words and expressions (as vocabulary items), mainly used in spoken discourse and youth magazines. Our sources include some tape recorded conversations and interviews and some informal letters. The corpus covers a period of 5 years (1990-1995) and the data have been collected from students of the University of Patras. For data storing and managing we are currently using the computer program THEMA, elaborated in the Computer Laboratory of the Education Dpt of Patras University. Words and expressions are being stored along with data source, meaning and origin (for loan words or items known from other argots) and examples of real use.

We suggest a teenage slang analysis on the following levels :

- (1) on a structural level, we deal with word formation types and regular occurring patterns for the creation of new expressions. We also examine some syntactic constructions and the process of morpho-lexical modification and creation of synonyms. Further, we will point out some deviations from the standard variety of MG,
- (2) concerning the semantic and communicative functions, we examine the «fertile» semantic fields and some major discourse functions of teenage slang items,
- (3) as a third point of interest comes the aspect of borrowing from English.

3. SEMANTICS

It should be noted that a considerable part of teenage slang vocabulary consists of *semantic neologisms*, i.e. words of the standard language used with different meaning, as is the case in all vocabularies of restricted social extent. Some regular patterns of semantic shift in teenage slang include:

- the massive use of words with the semantic feature [-animate] or [-human] as mainly pejorative appellatives, denoting physical appearance, social and local origins, behaviour and character; for instance: τυρί (=cheese=wimp), or ψάρι (=fish=shy and naive person)
- the metaphorical use of Greek and English proper names, also with derogatory meaning : Τζόνης (=stupid man), Κάθριν (=stupid woman)
- the use of words with the feature [-animate] to denote states like intoxication : κόκαλο (=bone=stoned)
- and the use of verbs for body functions to denote mental states and attitudes, such as κλάνω κπ.=fart at sb.=ignore, abandon), μασάω (=chew=naively believe sth.).

4. WORD FORMATION

A large number of new slang words are formed by means of a relatively small inventory of productive **word formation types**. From a sociolinguistic point of view, these formation types can be divided into three groups:

(1) In general, teenage slang uses several word formation types known from colloquial varieties of MG, such as the derivational suffixes *-άκας*, *-άς*, *-άτος*, *-ιάρης*, *-λίκι*, *-δικο*, *-μένος*.

(2) On the other hand, we find some genuinely nonstandard formation types, occurring in teenage slang and in other argots of MG (see, for example, Papadopoulou 1988). These include the derivational suffixes *-όνι*, *-όβιος*, *-άνος* (the latter combined with English base lexemes); the morpheme *-ς*, acting as a derivational suffix for the metaphorical recategorization of the base lexeme, e.g. *έπιπλο* (=piece of furniture) > *έπιπλος* (=one who likes Greek folk music); finally the modification techniques mentioned below, such as truncation and syllable reordering.

(3) In some cases, an innovative use of known formation types emerges. It can involve the redistribution of a derivational suffix to base lexemes of a new word class, as it seems to be the case with *-ιά*, combined with adjectival and participial bases (e.g. *άνετος* > *ανετιά*, *ψαγμένος* > *ψαγμενιά*); or a shift in semantic function, as with the diminutive suffix *-άκι* acting as a derivational suffix (e.g. *πρέζα*=heroin, smack > *πρεζάκι*=junkie, smack-head). Several suffixes can be combined with unusual bases, such as greeting formulas (*καληνύχτα*=good night > *καληνυχτάκας*=good night guy=escort but not lover of a girl) or onomatopoeic words (*μπλι μπλι* =bleeping sound > *μπλιμπλικία*=electronic music). In any case, all productive formation types of teenage slang also combine with English base lexemes, supporting thus the morphological integration of loan words into the MG lexicon (see Anastasiadi-Simeonidi 1986:206).

Suffixes in teenage slang are mainly linked with the formation of nouns to describe people's social characteristics, hobbies or occupations, in particular the suffixes *-άς*, *-άκας*, *-άτος*, *-άκι*, *-όνι*, *-ιάρης*, *-όβιος*. From these, *-άς* mainly constitutes the ending of English loans, such as *κομπιουτεράς*, *ουφάς*, *χαρλεάς*, *-άτος* produces a lot of lexical items used as nouns and/or adjectives, such as *μουράτος*, *στρουγκάτος*, *βογκάτος* (< Vogue).

Abstract nouns are usually formed by the *-ιά* and *-λίκι* suffixes. *-ιά* combines with Greek and English adjectives (e.g. *άνετος* > *ανετιά*, *trendy* > *τρεντουριά*), with participles (e.g. *προχωρημένος* >

προχωρημενιά) and metaphorical nouns (e.g. *γάτα* > *γατιά*). *-λίκι* combines, inter alia, with English nouns (e.g. *gay* > *γκεϊλίκι*, *γκουρού* > *γκουρουλίκι*). We can also mention the use of the suffix *-δικο* to form nouns for places for entertainment: *γαβγάδικο*, *ποτάδικο*, *νταμπαντουμπάδικο*.

New adjectives are formed by adding *-άτος*, *-ικός* (*ταρίφας*=cab driver > *ταρίφικός*=cab-driver-like), and *-μενος* (*freak out* > *φρικάρω* > *φρικαρισμένος*).

For the formation of new verbs from Greek and English nouns, a variety of derivational suffixes is used: *-άρω*, *-εύω* (*πυρό*=old man > *πυρεύω*=become old, jazz > *τζαζεύω*=to be jazzed up), *-ώνω* (*τσιπούκι*=blow-job > *τσιπουκώνω*=give a blow-job), *-ιάζω* (*ρούκλα*=lazyness > *ρουκλιάζω*=to be lazy) and *-ίζω* (*πούτσος*=cock > *την πουτσίζω*=to be in trouble).

In composition we find neologisms on the model stem+stem, such as *γκομενοφύλακας*, and on the model V+stem, such as *πρηξαρχίδης*, *μπορόλας*. Further, hybrid formation with an English first or second constituent such as *φραγκοκίλερ* and *τρασερογάμης*; some lexical phrases also occur: *παιδί - κουμπί* (stupid guy), *γκόμενα-Μόρνος* (cold woman), *πουλί-πεταλούδα* (womanizer).

A last characteristic formation type of teenage slang, which always occurs in combination with semantic shift, is the conversion of nouns, used as predicative adjectives or as pronominal modifiers in adjectival position: *ο τύπος είναι αστέρι* (=the guy is star=excellent), *αστέρι γκόμενα* (=beautiful girl).

5. SYNTAX

On the **syntactic-syntagmatic level**, a large number of idiomatic expressions, denoting physical or mental states or ways of acting, are formed as Verb-Noun-Collocations: *παθαίνω φρίκη*, *χτυπάω μπιέλα*, *τραβάω λούκι*, *βαράω ενέσεις*, *σκάω μύτη*.

New verbal constructions can also be obtained by the addition of dummy pronominal elements together with a change of meaning of the verbs involved: *τα παίζω* (=I am exhausted), *μου τη βιδώνει* (=it irritates me). These constructions may also bear complementary items, such as adverbs (*την έχω δει στραβά / άσχημα / περίεργα*), or prepositional

phrases (τα παίρνω στο κρανίο). A third group of patterns for idiomatic constructions denoting evaluation or deontic modality involve the verbs *είμαι* and *έχω* and predicative prepositional phrases: *είναι για πολλές σφαλιάρες, την έχω στο περίμενε, είμαι στο πολύ κυριλέ*.

Teenage slang does not really have syntactic patterns of its own. It nevertheless exhibits some uncommon and innovating constructions, which, on discourse level, mainly serve evaluating and intensifying factors. Such constructions already referred to in recent research are the intensifying definite article (Apostolou-Panara 1994) and the absence of preposition+article after verbs of motion (Valioui/Psaltou-Joycey 1995). In the latter case, the determiner of temporal nouns can be deleted as well, as in the following corpus excerpt: *Καλά, θα κουφαθείς, αλλά Πάσχα πάω Μύκονο*.

Some more typical syntactic features of teenage slang should be noted. First, a wide range of items can be used as evaluative predicatives in copulative constructions: nouns without a determiner (as mentioned above), onomatopoeic words, interjections, greeting formulas: *το άτομο είναι τσίου/γεια σου/όπα/και πολύ όπου*. Second, the use of nouns as indeclinable adjectives: *ψώνιο φάση, μπόμπα ταινία*. And third, the extensive use of emphatic propositional markers in the beginning and/or at the end of utterances: *μιλάμε / σου μιλάω / (και) καλά, ε/άσε/ρε μαλάκα / γάμησέ τα*.

6. MODIFICATION AND SYNONYMS

It has often been suggested (see, for example, François-Geiger 1973) that the formation of a parallel slang vocabulary relies heavily on transformations of the *signifié* and on the creation of synonyms. As this is also the case in MG teenage slang, we want to briefly discuss some relevant processes.

In teenage slang, lexical items can be formally **modified** in one of the following principal ways:

- a) By *truncation* (ματσωμένος > ματσό, πρέζα > ζα).
- b) By *truncation and reduplication* (φούντα > φουφού, ρουφιάνος > ρουφ ρουφ).
- c) By the kind of syllable reordering known as *back slang* (τρελός > λόστρε, αμάξι > ξιάμα).

d) By *changing gender, or accentuation and suffix* (τασάκι > τάσακος, αδερφή > αδέρφω).

e) By means of suffixes such as *-ίδια* (μπουνιές > μπουνίδια), *-άνος* (μπάρμαν > μπαρμάνος), *-ιά* (τσιγάρο > τσιγαριά), by certain pseudostems (μουγγαμάρα > μουγγαφόν) and by means of puns (dealer > ντιλέρι > καντηλέρης).

It should be taken into consideration that *back slang* or, in French, *verlan*, is a cryptic and playful coding process known to many argots of the world, and also a very popular feature of the French teenage slang since the 80ies.

The truncation of initial syllables is peculiar to MG compared to other European languages, where the truncation of last syllables is the common process (φαρμακείο > κείο, μπάτσοι > τσοι, τσιγάρο > γάρο, ταβόρ > ταβοράκια > βοράκια, τριπ > τριπάκι > πάκι).

The creation of synonyms often takes place by the metaphorical use of new words belonging to the same lexical field as the word already in use. This enables the hearer to understand the meaning by association. Examples of this are *καρφί - πρόκας* (=betrayed), *κάνω καμάκι - κάνω πιρούνι* (=drag sb.), *βαράω μπιέλα - βαράω πιράκια* (=tuckered out), *αλοιφή - κρέμα* (=stoned). In compounds, synonyms can be created by retaining the compound structure and substituting the stem (σκυλάδικο - γαβγάδικο), or one or even both constituents (φραγκοφωνιάς - φραγκοκίλερ, τροχονόμος - τροχόμπατσος, παιδί κουμπί - κομβίο πυροδοτήσεως) or by analogical formation (λιμενικός - νερόμπατσος).

7. COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS

As far as the **communicative functions** of teenage slang are concerned, attention should be given to the functions of evaluation and emphasis (or intensification). Together, they group a large number of metaphorical and hyperbolic words and expressions. Moreover, they build the functional frame for the appearance of certain nonstandard syntactic features of teenage slang, as the ones mentioned above.

Teenage slang is essentially an in-group conversation style. Slang items are therefore used in order to fulfil some major discourse functions. Young people use specific greeting formulas, such as *τσα-γεια*. They also use a special addressing code, which includes, especially for the boys, the

use of vulgar and rude terms of address, connoting friendliness and solidarity. We should also note some specific reactive listener's signals, such as άντε, ρε μαλάκα! έλα, ρε πούστη! γουστάρω! και γαμώ! ζόρικα! όπα, ρε! τσου, ρε Λάκη! ούτε με σφαίρες! Finally, we should mention some specific formulaic expressions for certain discursive functions: among others, formulas for the opening and closing of narratives or thematic units (άκου φάση! άκου να πάθεις!); formulas in order to express surprise or distress (μην ξεράσω! μη γαμήσω!) and formulas in order to criticise the interlocutor or to refuse his proposals: χέσε μας, γάμησέ μας. As is clear, most of these formulas use taboo vocabulary.

8. LOANS

Young peoples' borrowings from English are the target of bitter criticism by the older generation of speakers. In general, teenage slang borrows English words and expressions related to youth culture; however, the amount of loan words varies according to the topic or semantic field. A rough estimate, based on our corpus data, shows approximately 80% anglicisms in fields such as TV, computer, electronics, music, fashion vocabulary, while in other fields, such as work, army or sexuality, the percentage of English loans is considerably lower. It should be noted that young people borrow words already socially and stylistically marked in the donating language (sucker, motherfucker, fuck off, freak out, flip out, etc). It must also be pointed out that very few English items remain morphologically non assimilated. This is the case with adjectives like *cool, free, groovy, original*. Nevertheless, these adjectives serve themselves as a basis for derivatives: οριζιναλιά, κουλαριστός. In fact, the creative use of English loans in MG teenage slang becomes obvious in the formation of deverbal nouns that do not exist in the donating language, like *get up* > γκιράπης, *rent rooms* > ρεντρούμης as well as in the playful use of expressions, such as *σινταουνίσου κατάχαμα*, where an English imperative verbal phrase *sit down* is morphologically assimilated and combined with a Greek place adverb of dialectical origin.

9. COMPARATIVE ASPECTS

A growing body of recent research reveals striking similarities of teenage slang in several European countries, of which only a brief

overview can be given here (see, among others, Walter 1984, *Langue Française* 1991, Zimmermann 1991 for French; Radtke 1990 for Italian; Henne 1986 and Androutsopoulos (in preparation) for German; Radtke 1992, 1993 and Zimmermann 1993 for comparative aspects).

A major point of convergence seems to be the concentration of neologisms in certain semantic fields and communicative functions (as discussed above). International similarities in structural innovation include word formation (for instance, new derivational suffixes and intensifying prefixes, along with the use of traditional nonstandard formation types) and syntax (change of verb syntax together with semantic shift of the verbs involved, especially in French the use of denominal zero-derivations as predicative adjectives). The role of teenage slang items in discourse, and especially in ritual interaction, is also apt to show international similarities, although further research is needed on this topic.

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