

When Zeroes Count for Nothing: The (Mythical) Origins of Nasal Deletion in Greek

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Complete assimilation and deletion of nasals before voiced stops (πέντε [pédde] or [péde]) are widely attested in modern Greek dialects. Recent sociolinguistic surveys indicate that the pronunciation [péde] has gained increasing acceptance in Athens itself in recent years, and is now fairly general in the speech of people under 50 in all social classes. It is generally believed that this phenomenon can be traced back to Ancient Greek. Preconsonantal nasals are sporadically omitted in inscriptions, especially in painted vases, in curse tablets and in magical papyri: e.g. νύφαι for νύμφαι, πέτε for πέντε, etc. Allegedly, this attests to the weakness of preconsonantal nasals in vulgar speech, but, on closer inspection, the would-be ancestor of present-day nasal loss dissolves into nothing.

Keywords: Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, nasal weakening, slips of the pen

*Illusion never changed
Into something real*

Natalie Imbruglia, «Torn», *Left of the Middle*

1. Introduction

There can be little doubt that Modern Greek dialects may provide important clues for the reconstruction of Ancient Greek since phonetic changes tend to recur in different varieties and at different periods along the history of Greek:

- σθ > στ in ancient NW dialects (Méndez Dosuna 1985) and in modern Greek: Elean λυσάστῶ (= Att. λυσάσθω) and AGk ἠκούσθην > MGk ἀκούστηκα
- ‘Raising’ of prevocalic /e/ in ancient and modern dialects (Méndez Dosuna 1993a, 2002): Boeot. εννια (= Att. ἐννέα) and AGk ἐννέα > MGK ἐννιά [ɛnɹá]
- Consonant gemination induced by a yod in ancient Thessalian and in the modern dialect spoken in the Terra d’Otranto (Méndez Dosuna 1993b): Thess. πολλιος (= Att. πόλεως), προξεννια (= Att. προξενία), ιδδια (= Att. ιδία) and Terra d’Otranto [ίλιο] (< ἥλιος), [veláɹɲa] (< βαλάνια), [rúddja] (< ροίδια)

- /o/ > /e/ in word-final syllables after dentals and palatals in ancient Histiaeotis (Thessaly) and in modern Tsakonian (Méndez Dosuna, in press): Hist. Thess. δικαστερραις (= Att. δικαστηρίους), χρόνεν (Att. χρόνον), ἔτεες (= Att. ἔτος), and Tsak. [curé] (< τυρός), [miné] (< μηνός), [ithé] (< ιστός).

Quite a different problem is the real or, more often than not, imagined persistence of ancient dialectal features in modern dialects (see, for instance, Hodot 2000). In this paper I will analyse an instance of this second type: the occasional omission of nasals before stops in ancient inscriptions. According to prevalent opinion, this omission reflects a phonetic process that anticipates the loss of nasals before voiced stops attested in modern dialects, but, as I will try to show, this conclusion may be hasty.

2. Misspellings

Admittedly, misspellings in written records provide first-hand evidence for sound changes in languages spoken in the past. At the risk of oversimplifying, the standard protocol in the interpretation of orthographic evidence of this kind consists of the following steps:

- (a) A deviation from the orthographical norm is detected. In order to be significant, misspellings must recur several times in the documents. When the data are scanty, which is often the case in Ancient Greek, their significance is difficult to judge.
- (b) The context(s) where misspellings occur are identified. In some cases the change in question may be—or appear to be—context-free.
- (c) A phonetic process is posited which may be capable of accounting for the deviation. This process must be phonetically plausible and, preferably, have parallels in living languages.
- (d) The change posited must be consistent with evidence found at later periods.

If the hypothesis fails to comply with any of these requirements, the odds are that we are dealing with a mere ‘slip of the pen’ irrelevant to phonological analysis.

Since the data at our disposal are relatively scanty and philologists are eager to find new evidence of sound changes, they tend to overinterpret their data and indulge themselves with bizarre explanations. Wachter (2001) provides us with an illustrative instance of overinterpretation. On a Corinthian pinax (COP 36, 6th c.), the painter wrote ΑΔΕΘΕΚΕ with a *delta* for expected ΑΝΕΘΕΚΕ (sc. ἀνέθηκε). According to Wachter, “the painter may have had a bad cold”. He imagines him speaking aloud when writing, and transcribing his own pronunciation. His alternative explanation (“some kind of dissimilation of the nasal component of the sound”) fares no better.

3. Preconsonantal nasals in Ancient Greek

We are now in the position to address our issue: What was the status of nasals before stops in the ancient dialects, and more specifically in Attic? Is the dropping of nasals in Ancient Greek the prologue to the dropping of preconsonantal nasals in Modern Greek?

Here follows a brief summary of the evolution of syllable-final nasals in Greek:

As is known, NR clusters were eliminated through epenthesis (**anrós* > ἀνδρός) or through assimilation in internal sandhi (**sunrēw* > συρρέω)

Except for a few dialects (Thessalian, Arcadian, Argive, Cretan), -Ns- clusters had been also eliminated: πάνσανς > πάσας, **sunshmainō* > συσσημαίνω, **salpínzō* > σαλπίζω, **súnzygos* > σύζυγος (ζ = [zd]). Later on, -ns- clusters were reintroduced through the combined effect of analogy (e.g., θέρμανσις after θερμαίνω) and borrowing from other languages, especially Latin (Lat. *Censorinus* > Gk. Κηνσορεῖνος). It is quite likely that the nasal was imperfectly articulated with a reduced oral occlusion.

The spirantisation of aspirates created new inputs for nasal loss: *númphi*, *pentherós*, *suxharíkiá* > *núphi*, *petherós*, *suxharíkiá*. NΘ sequences were reintroduced through borrowings from the written language (e.g. *sumphérei*, *ánthrwpos*, *suxharhthéria*) and from other languages (Fr. *confort* > κομφόρ, It. *conserva* > κονσέρβα). Needless to say, except in hyperarticulated formal speech, in Modern Greek the nasal is weakly articulated with a concomitant light nasalisation of the preceding vowel.

Conversely, the spirantisation of voiced stops was inhibited by a preceding nasal. ND clusters merged with NT clusters, which underwent voicing: *gambrós*, *déndron*, *feγγáριον* > *gambrós*, *dénτρο*, *feγγári* and *ámpeλιον*, *pénτε*, *áγκων* > *ámpeλιον*, *pénτε*, *áγκώνας*.

The main source for NΔ fricative sequences in Modern Greek is spelling pronunciation in loans from the written language: **su[nj]urízō* (with [j] after *γυρίζω*), **sú[nj]ambrós* (with [γ] after *γαμβρός*) > *súgambrós* [síyambros], *sugirízō* [sijirízo]. As in the case of NΘ clusters, nasals in NΔ clusters are fully articulated only in formal speech: *gambrós*, *déndro*, *suggrafeás*; cf. also It. *bomba* > βόμβα, Fr. *ingénu* > ενζενί. Nasal deletion operates in external sandhi in closely related sequences of words: *to dáskalo*, *to thálamō* vs. *ton toμέá*. Of course, levelled variants like *ton dáskalo*, *ton thálamō* with an -v written and even pronounced are far from infrequent.

4. Where nasals before stops weak in Ancient Greek?

According to the norm, in Standard Modern Greek the spelling *vt* may have three different pronunciations (the same holds for *μπ* and *γκ*):

- (a) [nd] in word-internal position in inherited words (πέντε), and in loanwords with [nd] in the donor language: βενδέτα (< It. *vendetta*).
- (b) [d] in word-initial position in inherited words as a consequence of vowel aphaeresis: ντύνομαι (< ένδύομαι); in loanwords with [d] in the donor language both word-initially and in word-internal position: νταντά (< T. *dada*), βενδέτα (< It. *vedetta*).
- (c) [nt] is prescribed for recent non-assimilated loanwords with [nt] in the donor language: αντένα (< It. *antenna*).

However, except for a minority of language-conscious speakers, this distribution is purely theoretical. The pronunciation [nt] is rare. In initial position [d] is almost regular, but in word-internal position speakers have [nd] or [d] irrespective of etymology.

In some 'radical' dialects nasal loss has been generalised to ND clusters (Newton 1972) so that πέντε is pronounced [pédde] (Simi, Kalimnos) or [péde] (Crete, Mani, Aegina, Megara, Kephallonia, Ithaki, Zakynthos, Thrace, E Macedonia, Thasos, Samothraki, Lesbos, Skiros, Samos, N Euboea).

In standard Modern Greek the pronunciation [péde] used to be stigmatised as a sign of slovenly speech, but recent sociolinguistic surveys indicate that nasal loss in word-internal position is now quite general in the speech of people under 50 of all social classes (Mikros 1995, Arvaniti & Joseph 2000).

This stage had already been reached in ancient Pamphylian, where preconsonantal nasals are systematically omitted in inscriptions: e.g. πέδε (= πέντε) cf. also the gloss ἀδρί· άνδρί. Παμφύλιοι attested by Hesychius (5th c. A.D.).

Brixhe (1986) suggests that the non-writing of *v* in Pamphylian may indicate a pronunciation with a weakened nasal and a nasalised vowel: π□δε [pẽⁿde]. This explanation has been repeatedly suggested for the omission of nasals in other dialects. But this is quite counter-intuitive. As far as I know, adult speakers of present-day languages having phonological (or nearly phonological) nasal vowels like French or southern varieties of American English do not indicate vowel nasalisation by not writing nasal consonants. How could an orthographic zero represent something? Interestingly, Paradis and Prunet (2000) claim that nasal vowels must be conceived of as biphonemic, i.e. they behave virtually like VN sequences. Consequently, Pamph. π□δε must be taken at face value with the omission of *v* reflecting a phonetic zero. An orthographical zero must correspond to a phonetic zero.

Preconsonantal nasals are usually ignored in Cyprian syllabic inscriptions as well: *ta-e-pi-o-ta pa-ta* τὰ ἐπιό(ν)τα πά(ν)τα, *nu-pa-i* Νύ(μ)φαι. It is however open to dispute whether the non-expression of nasals reflects a real phonetic process of articulatory weakening with nasalisation being ignored in spelling or

the practice is merely a spelling convention comparable to the omission of syllable-final /m, n, l, r, s/ in Linear B: Μyc. *e-ko* ἔγχος, *pa-te* πάντες.

Nasals before stops are sporadically omitted in other dialects: Ὀλυπιόν[ι]κος for Ὀλυμπιόνικος, θανότι for θανόντι, Ἀταλάτε for Ἀταλάντη, Παφίλου for Παμφίλου, πέτε for πέντε, κατοικούτων for κατοικούντων, etc. The omission of nasals is extremely rare in engraved official documents, but more frequent in painted vase inscriptions, in curse tablets and in the oracular *lamellae* of Dodona which were written on lead sheets, and in magical and documentary papyri. There is universal consensus that the data at issue reflect a process of preconsonantal nasal weakening, presumably a feature of vulgar speech (Kretschmer 1894: 164-165; Buck 1955: 63; Lejeune 1972: 146-147; Teodorsson 1974: 240; Gignac 1976: 119; Threatte 1980: 485, 589; Brixhe 1987: 36; Wachter 1991: 103, 2001; Horrocks 1997: 113).

The sporadic omission of nasals in the inscriptions of Pompei (before A.D. 79) has been also considered to provide evidence for nasal weakness in Vulgar Latin: Pompei *nuc* for *nunc*, *pricipis* for *principis*, *quodam* for *quondam*, *Nuphe* for *Nymphe*, etc. A similar explanation has been put forward for the misspellings attested in Latin inscriptions on Visigothic slate tablets found in Spain (6th-8th c. A.D.): *seper* for *semper*, *uc* for *hunc*, *cique* for *quinque*. Strangely enough, this hypothetical sound change has left no trace whatsoever in modern Spanish, where nasal before stops are fully pronounced in most dialectal varieties.

In a similar vein, Thumb (1898) cites spellings like ἀπέλι for ἀμπέλι, νετιώνω for νεντιώνω (AGk ἐναντιοῦμαι) in texts from Amorgos written in Modern Greek [8d]. According to Thumb, the spellings π and τ are intended to represent [b], [d] (< [mb], [nd]) [8d].

I. Manolessou (p.c.) informs me that this is also the standard explanation for the omission of nasals in medieval manuscripts.

5. The spelling of nasals before non-dental stops

According to some scholars, the articulatory weakness of preconsonantal nasals in Ancient Greek is confirmed by another argument. Allegedly, the use of ⟨ΝΠ, ΝΦ, ΝΒ⟩ for ⟨ΜΠ, ΜΦ, ΜΒ⟩ and ⟨ΝΚ, ΝΧ, ΝΓ⟩ for ⟨ΓΚ, ΓΧ, ΓΓ⟩ is indicative of the difficulty speakers experienced in identifying the point of articulation of weakened nasals: e.g. ἐλάνβανον vs. ἐλάμβανον, πονπή vs. πομπή, Ἄνφικτύων vs. Ἄμφικτύων, ἐνγραφὴ vs. ἐγγραφὴ, ἔνκλημα vs. ἔγκλημα, τυγχάνει vs. τυγγάνει.

In point of fact, such spellings have nothing to do with the hypothetical weakness of nasals. The spellings ἐλάμβανον and ἐλάνβανον correspond to two different pronunciations. The spelling ἐλάμβανον reflects the subphonemic output of nasal assimilation in normal speech: [elámбанon]. Conversely, the spelling ἐλάνβανον corresponds to a slower, more deliberate speech style with

artificial pauses at syllable breaks where the assimilation rule could be ignored: [e. lám. ba. non]. This is similar to dictation style except for the fact that dictation favours hyperarticulation based on spelling: [e. lám. ba. non]. Crucially, /n/ was the only nasal permitted before a pause in Ancient Greek. cf. *sem > ěv.

For similar reasons in Spanish we find misspellings like *onbre* (standard *hombre* 'man'). Cf. also Lat. *quem* > Sp. *quien* 'who', *Adam* > *Adán*, and the modern loanword *album* usually pronounced ['albun] (cf. substandard pl. *álbunes* for prescriptive *álbumes*).

6. Appearances may prove deceptive

At first glance the case of preconsonantal nasals is open-and-shut. We have a recurrent misspelling in what seems to be a well-defined phonetic context. Of course, nasal deletion via nasalisation is a natural process attested in many languages. Finally, this natural process can boast a would-be descendant in Modern Greek: πέντε [péde].

Still, in my opinion, such an interpretation is almost certainly to be rejected. To begin with, postnasal voicing and preconsonantal weakening of nasals normally apply in feeding order: πέντε [pénte] > [pénde] > [pé(d)de]. An early weakening of nasals should have yielded an outcome *[péte] since there is no documentary evidence for voicing after nasals in the classical period.

Preconsonantal weakening and spirantization of voiced stops apply in counter-feeding order: δένδρον [déndron] > [déndron] > [déd(d)dro]. The early weakening of nasals should have yielded an outcome *[dédro].¹ According to the standard point of view (Allen 1987: 32), β, δ, γ, were still voiced stops in classical times.²

Scholars try to circumvent these difficulties by admitting implicitly that nasal weakening was just a persistent tendency that failed to catch on immediately.

On the other hand, the phenomenon is surprisingly uncommon in the texts. The fact that omitted nasals are rare in official documents and relatively frequent in more informal text is not directly relevant either to phonology or to sociolinguistics. The execution of official texts carved on stone is a time-consuming task requiring considerable preparation and care. Conversely, painting with a brush or scribbling on a soft metal like lead and writing on a papyrus produce a faster script. This results in a higher frequency of purely mechanical errors: 'slips of the pen'. Consequently, the evidence must not be interpreted in terms of a sociolinguistic variation, but in terms of a socio(ortho)graphic variation.

I have noticed that syllable-final nasals—in fact, syllable-final consonants—are frequently omitted in Spanish texts (e.g. in graffiti): QUITOS

for QUINTOS 'recruits', SORPRENENTES for SORPRENENTES 'surprising', FRACIA for FRANCIA 'France'. Most revealing is the text written on a cardboard box cover that I found in front of my garage. The text is an inventory of the stock of shirts for girls and gentlemen of two brands, in different sizes and colours. It must have been written by someone from a nearby shop where cheap rip-offs of expensive name-brand clothing are sold.

The writer has an imperfect command of standard orthography. (S)he combines lower-case *u* and *l* with capital letters and occasionally fails to separate words. (S)he dispenses with initial *h*- which is silent: OMBRE for *hombre*. Understandably, (s)he has great difficulty with the foreign names *Ralph Lauren* (RALAREN) and *Burberry's* (BUZBERRI, BUZBERI). But, for our purposes, the interesting thing is that in three out of four instances the letter N is omitted in the Spanish adjective BLANCO / BLANCA 'white masc. / fem.'

Similar mistakes are reported in studies on the acquisition of writing by Spanish-speaking children. At the age of 5-6 my son Nicolás used to drop syllable-final nasals in writing: *papá setóto* = *papá es tonto* 'daddy is silly', *la castañera vede* (= *vende*) *castañas* 'the chestnut seller (fem.) sells chestnuts'.

Miller (1994: 101) reports that English-speaking children go through a stage leaving out nasal consonants: *bup* for *bump*, *tet* for *tent*, *thik* for *think*. He is of the opinion that these spellings reflect tremendous phonetic accuracy since many speakers actually delete the nasal consonant. This is, however, doubtful since the resulting nasalisation of the vowel should have to be indicated in writing. As indicated above, an orthographic zero can hardly represent something.

Whatever it may be, the explanation is not valid for Castilian Spanish, where nasals before stops are stable and fully articulated. Consequently, their omission in writing cannot be the reflex of an inexistent articulatory weakening. It is obvious that the instances at issue are 'slips of the pen' with no bearing on phonology.

By the same token, it is quite clear that, contrary to Thumb's (1898) opinion, π and τ in contemporary Amorgos are mere errors rather than spellings consciously designed as a means of representing [b] and [d]. In fact, any reader would routinely read the spellings $\acute{\alpha}\pi\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\iota$ and $\nu\epsilon\tau\acute{\iota}\acute{\omega}\nu\omega$ as [apéli], [netjóno].³

Coming back to Ancient Greek, the writer of a curse tablet of the early 4th c. recently published drops almost consistently word-final -v: $\tau\acute{o}$ $\chi\lambda\alpha\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\alpha$ for $\tau\acute{o}\nu$ $\chi\alpha\lambda\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\alpha$ (l. 1), $\Sigma\omega\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ for $\Sigma\omega\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$ (l. 4), $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\alpha\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$ for $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\alpha\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha\nu$ (l. 5), $\acute{\Lambda}\gamma\eta\sigma\iota$ $\tau\acute{\eta}\nu$ $\text{Βοιωτ\acute{\iota}\alpha}$ for $\acute{\Lambda}\gamma\eta\sigma\iota\nu$ $\tau\acute{\eta}\nu$ $\text{Βοιωτ\acute{\iota}\alpha}\nu$ (l. 7). He has also some trouble with liquids: $\acute{\Lambda}\rho\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\alpha\iota\chi\omicron\mu\omicron\nu$ for $\acute{\Lambda}\rho\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\alpha\iota\chi\mu\omicron\nu$ (l. 1), $\chi\lambda\alpha\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\alpha$ for $\chi\alpha\lambda\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\alpha$ (l. 1), $\text{Πυρρ\acute{\iota}\alpha}\nu$ for $\text{Πυρρ\acute{\iota}\alpha}\nu$ (l. 1). The editors (Curbera & Jordan 1998) take this as evidence that the writer «slurred liquids and nasals in pronunciation».

To my mind, these mistakes reveal nothing of the writer's pronunciation. In addition to the arguments stated above, we may note that a metathesis Ἄρισταιχμον > Ἄρισταιχομν would yield a cluster not allowed in word-final position: slips of the tongue —unlike slips of the pen— usually respect surface phonotactic constraints. Πρῦριάν for Πυρρίαν is another implausible sound change. Unlike heterogeneous clusters, which allow for metathesis, geminates tend to behave like a single phonological unit. Accordingly, they cannot split.

7. Conclusion

The omissions of letters and 'slips of the pen' in general are extremely interesting from the point of view of psycholinguistics as *prima facie* evidence for the neuromotor organisation of speech. Generally speaking, omission of letters in syllable codas is much more frequent than in syllable onsets (note the misspelling *azu* for *azul* 'blue' in the Spanish inventory of shirts). Onsets are cognitively more salient than codas. This cognitive saliency is consistent with the fact that they are more resistant to phonetic erosion than are codas. The omission of letters proves that the weakness of codas is not just articulatory. But the omission of a letter must not be automatically interpreted in terms of a phonetic change. Zeroes in spelling do not always reflect phonetic zeroes.

What is more, the omission of a letter cannot be interpreted as a conscious device for representing phonetic substance. In other words, the omission of nasals cannot be interpreted as a device for representing nasalisation.

By way of conclusion, contrary to prevalent opinion, the omission of preconsonantal nasals in ancient inscriptions does not attest to their weakening and loss in pronunciation.

8. Notes

1. Needless to say, the pronunciation [ðédro] does exist in Modern Greek, but only as a phonetic variant of [ðéndro] (δένδρο), a loan from the written language.

2. In point of fact, it is quite feasible that /b d g/ may have been pronounced as fricative [β δ γ] in intervocalic position at an early date. For instance, the /d/ of Greek loanwords has different spellings in word-initial and in word-internal (intervocalic) position (Bryce 1986): cf. *Ἰτεμυλίδα* = Att. Δημοκλείδη. In Greek these predictable allophonic variants were not indicated in spelling. Cf. Sp. *un dedo* [ún dédo] 'a finger', *¿a dónde?* [aðónde] 'where to?' with allophonic spirantization blocked by a preceding nasal.

3. Of course, this explanation can be valid for the omission of nasal in Cypriot manuscripts (see Marina Terkourafi's contribution, this volume) where /nt/ is adapted as /tt/ in loanwords: It. *panteloni* > Cypr. [pattelóni]. The same would hold for Karpathos where την κόρη is pronounced [tikkóri] (Newton 1972: 98).

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10. Περίληψη

Τα φαινόμενα της ολικής αφομοίωσης και της απαλοιφής των έρρινων πριν από ηχηρά κλειστά (PENTE [ˈpedde] ή [ˈpede]) απαντώνται ευρέως στις νεοελληνικές διαλέκτους. Πρόσφατες ψυχολογολογικές έρευνες έδειξαν ότι η πραγμάτωση [ˈpede] είναι αυξανόμενης αποδεκτότητας τα τελευταία χρόνια. Είναι καθολικά αποδεκτό ότι αυτό το φαινόμενο ανάγεται στα αρχαία ελληνικά. Τα προσυμφωνικά έρρινα παραλείπονται σποραδικά σε επιγραφές, ιδιαίτερα σε ζωγραφισμένα βάζα, σε αναθηματικές πλάκες και σε μαγικούς παπύρους: π.χ. NUFAl αντί NUMFAl, PETE αντί για PENT. Υποθέτει λοιπόν κανείς, ότι αυτή η απουσία αποτελεί μαρτυρία της αδυναμίας των προσυμφωνικών έρρινων στην καθομιλουμένη. Εντούτοις, μια προσεκτικότερη εξέταση των δεδομένων δείχνει ότι ο εν λόγω ισχυρισμός είναι λανθασμένος. Ο πιθανός πρόγονος της συγχρονικής απώλειας των έρρινων αποδεικνύεται μηδενικός.