

Tongues of Greek Australia: An Anglicised Hellenic language



The photograph of the composite sign accompanying this text was taken by my own insufficiency while driving around the streets of Melbourne.

It represents, better than any words ever could, the complex multicultural and linguistic reality of our city. The first half of the sign is in Italian. The second half purports to be in Greek and at first glance one is struck at how anomalous it is, with a capital V used instead of N in the word Νεκρώσιμη, presumably because lower case n in the Greek alphabet resembles a v, thus «v», though here the lowercase is used as an Uppercase letter. Yet the incongruities do not end there. In Greek, «νεκρώσιμη ακολουθία,» refers to the funeral mass or service chanted by the priest within the Orthodox church. However, this is not an advertisement for Orthodox funeral masses. Instead it is an advertisement for a Greek funeral director. In English, “Greek funeral services” of which the Italian as well as Greek appears to be a literal translation, can thus mean either a funeral director or a Greek funeral mass. One takes their pot luck when entering those words into Google translate or any like application. In Greek however, the term for funeral directors is γραφείο τελετών or γραφείο κηδειών, and thus this sign would make no sense to a Greek from Greece.

It makes perfect sense in Australia however. It illustrates the reality of Greek language maintenance and acquisition in this country. Presumably, the commissioner of the sign would have asked his parents or elderly relatives how to say “Greek Funeral Service” in the Greek language. Those parents or relatives would have arrived in Australia from their villages at a time when people buried their own dead and did not have recourse to the services of funeral directors. They thus would not have been able to provide the Greek equivalent, just as the early Greek migrants, adopted words such as φρίζα, αικουντίσιο, and καρπέτο for fridge, air conditioner and wall-to-wall carpeting, as these were items that they encountered in this country, with no prior experience of them or the vocabulary associated with them, in Greece. This sign, then, embodies a quintessential Greek-Australian experience: that of trying to render into a form of Greek, however incorrect by Helladic standards, concepts and terms encountered in the Anglosphere.

Thousands of second generation Greek-Australians who flexed their intellectual muscles in ways most ingenious in order to render the term “Curriculum Day,” into adequate enough Greek for their parents to understand why they don’t have to go to school will know exactly the experience referred to herein. Viewed from this context, Ελληνική Νεκρώσιμη Ακολουθία, is an inspired translation and what is more, it is an effective one, because although it defies Helladic convention, it is readily understood by Greek-Australian Greek speakers.

It signifies a singular dialect, under construction.

Undeniably, our sojourn in this land has changed the way we speak Greek. Yet arguably, the way we incorporate English terms into Greek grammar, Hellenising them along the way, represents a more authentic way of dealing with foreign loan words, than the modern Greek practice, which is to introduce English terms into Greek text, without even transcribing them, or where this is done, without recourse to Greek grammatical rules at all. How one can claim that «σοβατζής» (a Turkish loanword), is any more Greek than our own Greek-Australian «πλασταδόρος», (as depicted in the advertisement displayed herein) while also claiming that «μπούλινγκ» (which is the way the concept of bullying is rendered these days in Greece), is any more Greek than our own homegrown «πειράξιγ» is beyond the ken of most Hellenolinguists. As for the «ντιζάιν» of the «Λόντρι», in the accompanying advertisement, let us give thanks that the «ντιζάινας» was savvy enough to change the y in Laundry to a ι when transcribing the term in Greek-Australian, for as we all know, the word takes the neuter case, is preceded by the article το , and thus must, like all other neuter nouns, end with an ι. In Greek-Australian, consistent grammar is paramount.

Or is it? Over time, our grammatical conventions change. Because the English language cannot distinguish between masculine and feminine cases, feminine surnames are masculinised (except for mine that is; my father arrived in Australia with my grandmother and the powers that be, unable to understand why his surname was Kalimnios while his mother's surname was Kalimniou, duly changed his to Kalimniou, causing his feminised descendants vast amounts of confusion and not a bit of grammatical gender dysphoria). This masculinization is in turn carried into the Greek language and our community newspapers (especially the death notices) and sundry gravestones around Melbourne are full of references to such people as Ελένη Παπαδόπουλος, (instead of the correct Παπαδοπούλου). This grammatical aberration is employed by the Greeks of Greece to emphasise the foreignness of Greeks abroad. Thus Nia Vardalos is never referred to in modern Greek as Βαρδάλου but as Βαρδάλος, even though this is ungrammatical. The incorrect case has become a cultural grammatical convention, one that is often internalised, as in the case of actress, academic and theatre critic Helen Tsefala who informally signs her correspondence under the name and style of Χέλεν.

In time, even the way we render the Greek language is prone to change, often as a result of entrenched error. The names of our departed relatives on their tombstones are often permanently marred by mistakes made by masons unfamiliar with the Greek language. At my local cemetery the most common mistake involves

the substitution of Greek letters with English ones, thus ΠΑΣΗΑΛΗΣ, ΧΑΡΑΛΑΜΠΟΣ, and ELENH. Greco-Australian alphabetical pastiches are not restricted to the dead, however. In the sign above the entrance to the church of St Andreas in Sunshine, the Greek P is rendered with an English R, to curious effect. Yet this too is representative of a common enough phenomenon among many first generation migrants: being semi-literate in Greek, and having spent the majority of their lives in Australia, it is quite natural for English letters to slowly penetrate their forms of written communication. My grandmother never learned to write in Greek. Her only form of education was the two years of Romanian school she attended in Epirus. For the rest of her life, she wrote Greek in Latin letters. A similar process has taken place among many Greek Australians and the documentary evidence they leave behind are a treasure trove for linguistic who trace the unique development and evolution of the Greek language as it is spoken and written in Australia.

Examining the way second and third generation Greeks write in Greek using the English alphabet is also a valuable pursuit because by employing a different alphabet, they are free of spelling conventions that mask the different ways that Greek is actually pronounced. Countless times I have, in social media, seen words such as πρέπει or πόρτα rendered as brepei and borta, κήπος as gibo, παπούτσια variously as bappoutsha or papoucha, and even τικάνεις as di gangs, reflecting regional pronunciations that have either been lost or cannot be recorded adequately using the Greek alphabet. A proper study of these emerging and most probably ephemeral forms of communication has not been undertaken and that is a pity, for as Greek, in all its forms is inexorably replaced by English, the diverse and ingenious ways in which we in these antipodean climes have striven to express ourselves, often stretching linguistic convention beyond the limits of the permissible and exhausting the prescriptions of grammar, will be lost forever.

Before we, labouring under a cultural cringe of inauthenticity, deplore our misspellings as symptomatic of a gradually dehellenised people, let us consider that spelling mistakes appear in inscriptions of some of our most exalting buildings, such as the mosaics of Agia Sophia and before that, in Hellenistic floor mosaics. If anything, writing Greek “incorrectly” is proof of the Hellenic condition, a tie that inexorably binds us to the traditions of our ancestors, equally confounded by the complex rudiments of Greek grammar. Let us then rejoice in our profound linguistic complexity and celebrate, those who, like the owners of the transport company Fortigo sit astride the linguistic fence of two language traditions, hybridising both, and boldly taking our tongue, where no tongue has gone before.

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