

# The Social Dynamics of Beggar Argots in Current Athens

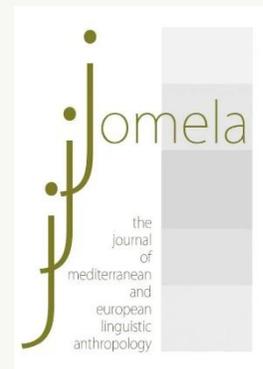
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## Abstract

Coded languages have a multi-functional dynamic presence in daily life. These languages are employed to encode language, with motives such as to obscure meaning from police, while also contributing to the formation of a 'unique' social structure which is frequently predicated on the positioning of these languages. That is, these languages inspire specific social structures and sub-cultures, as distinguished from other communities and larger society. This emergence of these languages and their distinct communities is evident in the case in Greek beggars. Until the 1990s, and during the intense periods of poverty in Greece, Greek beggars developed and employed vocabulary specific to these communities, an encoded discourse which shares significant similarities with the underworld at large. Indeed, the issue of Athenian beggars is a complex one if we consider the high population of these beggars in Athens.

This paper focuses on the argots of beggars in current Athens, Greece. Despite the existence of work on the argots of various social groups, no study has yet emerged to describe the argots of beggars in Greece, and more specifically in Athens. The research for this study draws on fieldwork conducted at the center of Athens, and thus builds on long term ethnographic participant observation of these communities who reside in these communities represented as the research field). The data is supplemented by narrations describing the lives of the informants.

This study particularly focuses on two levels: At the first level, we attempt to expose and examine vocabulary that has longevity and that survived in these begging communities until the present time. As such, the study is particularly interested in the survival of words emanating in their current form from 19<sup>th</sup> century beggar communities in Athens. At the second level, we examine the argots of migrant beggars in Greece. To examine which code words are employed by these foreign beggars (migrants and refugees) in Athens today.

In this study, the level of analysis of beggars' argots will be dual: At first, we focus on the main structures of the argots, i.e., we examine the language levels from which categories of beggar speech communities emerge, and in which language environments they are appropriated. Secondly, the social dynamics and meanings for daily survival will be investigated. The paper thus focuses on these two levels, in order to landscape the daily use of the argots by beggars residing in Athens.

**Keywords:** *Mendicancy, Beggar communities, Marginality, Argot, Coded language*

## Introduction

Argots used in a speech community or language group can provide abundant information on both the heritage and the current cultural landscapes of such a community, and on the larger networks in which the community is embedded. Work on speech communities emerged throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by Dell Hymes and others, describing the dynamic features that typify argots. Current global flows have encouraged speech communities to become increasingly complex and fluid, thus producing micro scapes within larger urban spaces and within national languages.

This paper documents and discusses the argots of beggars in urban Athens, Greece. Work on this theme has until now been limited, but and has been conducted mainly by linguistic anthropologists, among other scholars. In the present article we focus on two main themes; first, the forms that beggar argots currently take, and second, the current social significance of these argots. Here, rather than focusing merely on linguistic domains, we combine ethnographic, anthropological, and linguistic perspectives, in order to present a wholistic perspective on the social dynamics of argots, in areas within which these marginalised populations reside. Similar studies on Greek argots have been conducted (Triantafyllidis 1953; Papazahariou 1995; Petropoulos 2010; Kamilaki, Katsouda and Brakhionidou 2015), on which we hope to build in this piece.

Here, too, we describe the argots in question and examine the need for such linguistic codes in beggar communities and elsewhere. Our aim is then to observe and analyze the importance of negotiating the use of these argots so as to facilitate communication between immigrants within

these communities with those outside. The study employs an anthropological approach, to bring out the linguistic and social structures of these argots.

## Describing Beggar Argots in Greece

Specific and situated vocabulary is a notable feature of marginalized cultures, in particular when the vocabulary forms part of an argot (e.g., *kaliarda*<sup>1</sup>, i.e. Greek gay slang, the language of prisoners, the language of beggars). These lexical clusters are employed either for communication within the speech community in question or to provoke a reaction from other communities. Since before the 1920s, anthropologists and sociologists have been interested in the communication employed these groups who live on the fringes of society (Anderson 1923; Gilmore 1940; Liebow 1967). For instance, Anderson (1923), who investigated the culture of hobos in the United States, pointed out the importance of argot vocabulary for the smooth and seamless functioning of this marginalized group's system as a whole (Malinowski 1945: 12-14). Studies on beggars in Europe (Marie and Meunier 1908; Kouzas 2017), Asia (Kumarappa 2009) and China (Schak 1988; Lu 1999; Henry 2009) have also emphasised the importance of argots used in these communities. Their work focuses, first, on the inner need of these marginalized groups to express themselves through an often-incomprehensible idiolect, impenetrable to outsiders, and, secondly, as Fleisher (1995: 12) notes, on the ways in which these argots empower the group as a whole. Most of these studies focus not so much on the linguistic character of argots per se, as they do on the symbolic character and the symbolic power of argot lexicons and expressions. These symbols become an accumulation of events, objects, environments, timelines and so forth of individuals within beggar communities, and thus become polysemous. Geertz (1973) in his work on symbolic anthropology and language, described the significance of an accumulation of polysemous symbolisms, as condensed systems of information, including those employed in oral communication, which in his view were deeply representative of the lifeworlds of individuals and their communities.

In Greece, only a few, albeit significant, studies on the language of marginalized groups have emerged. These include the work of Triantafyllidis (1953), while folklorists, such as Aikaterinidis (1972), have produced pioneering work on Greek related argots. Petropoulos, who focused on speech communities of the marginalised and, in particular, on the lexica of homosexuals, has significantly contributed to the understanding of the anthropology of language on the margins. More recently, interdisciplinary work on communities, e.g., Kamilaki, Katsouda and Brakhionidou (2015), has examined taboo words in modern Greek from the standpoint of linguistics and anthropology. Some of the lexicon of the marginalized groups examined in these

studies is also to be found in the argot employed by beggars, since the argots of many marginal groups tend to resemble each other.

To conclude this brief introduction, we mention that in Greece, no official information on beggars exists, either with regard to their numbers or to their countries of origin. This is influenced by a lack of official records and in part to the fact that statistics regarding beggars have not yet been produced. Here, the individuals concerned also belong to various other groups, such as the homeless, the destitute, migrants and refugees, and beggar communities do not have fixed and measurable characteristics, such as homelessness. Indeed, work on beggars had been largely neglected by researchers until recently, at which time the Greek scholar Kouzas (2017) embarked on work on beggar communities.

## A History of Beggar Communities in Greece

The argot of beggars in Greece is not a recent phenomenon, and is not a product of the Greek financial crisis. The financial crisis in Greece began in 2009 and grew in enormous proportions in 2010 – 2011, whereupon the country resorted to borrowing from the IMF (International Monetary Fund) and then from the Emergency Support Instrument. The crisis peaked in 2015, when the government held a referendum over whether Greece should remain in the Eurozone, thus resulting in thousands losing their jobs and in a corresponding increase in social marginalization.

In Greece, in both urban and provincial areas, many beggars emerged during the second half of the 19th century. The number and the denigrated state of these people, who were frequently homeless and living on the streets, significantly influenced 19th century Greek prose writers, whose most well-known work is Karkavitsas' *The Beggar* (1982).

Two strands of mendicancy developed, that of urban areas and that of rural areas. Regarding urban areas, many beggars existed in Athens and in the Piraeus between the early-19th century and the mid-20th century. Mendicancy in urban areas tended to be stable, given that beggars lived and were active mainly in the cities. By contrast, beggars in the countryside were more mobile, given that they were continuously moving from village to village.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, beggars were mainly unemployed Greek nationals or Greeks who had arrived from regions recently added to the Greek state. Many of these individuals were young children who had lost their parents or had been abandoned and were forced to move to Athens or the Peiraeus. Survival required that these communities live in a highly organized fashion. Korasidou (2004) provides an extensive picture of the lives of beggars during the 20th century, describing how such beggar communities lived, their residences, their difficulties, and the way they approached their profession of begging. She deals with a whole range of matters,

such as training of children for mendicancy, the hiring of crippled children as props for begging, the tricks employed (e.g., fabricating blindness, disability or generally wretchedness), other fabrications and explicit motifs employed to attract attention and money, acting and begging techniques, and performances and begging styles. She also looks at parallel activities, such as selling herbs, fortune-telling, petty theft, and fraud. In all of this, beggar argots played an essential role, to distinguish their communities from others, and to develop covert codes of communication, which in turn further marginalized the groups.

Mendicancy on the fringes of Greek society, mainly in villages and the countryside, was current from the 1850s until World War II and disappeared in the 1950s. These mendicant communities fluctuated in size, and consisted largely of itinerant beggars, who moved from village to village and from city to city. At the time, there were three main categories of beggars: a) itinerant mendicants b) itinerant peddlars; c) itinerant craftsmen and construction workers. All three groups disappeared by the 1950s, when a large part of the Greek national population migrated to the towns and cities of Greece.

A significant portion of the first category, itinerant mendicants, who were clearly mendicants, migrated from places in undeveloped mountainous regions, such as Aghios Petros in Kynouria in Arkadia, Kloukina in the Peloponnese, the regions of Aegialia and Kalavryta, from Stemnitsa in Gortynia, Volissos on Chios island, and Kravara, near Nafpaktos. Mendicancy in these rural areas largely resulted from unfavorable socio-economic conditions, including low levels of agricultural production, underdeveloped stock farming, poor weather conditions and other circumstances that impacted negatively on the lives of these communities. The inhabitants of these areas thus turned to begging to ensure that they maintained their livelihood, either for goods, such as food or olive oil, or for money. Such mendicancy frequently began as a part-time occupation, but became the sole occupation, since it often constituted an only means of survival. Beggars, frequently known in Greek as diakoniarei (διακονιάρηοι), travelled to all the regions of Greece and even abroad, beyond Thessaloniki and Komotini. Some even went as far as Vlachia in Romania and indeed several individuals managed to make a considerable fortune, building houses for themselves and their families upon their return.

## Argots in Traditional Beggar Communities

Communities of wandering beggars throughout Greece displayed a notable level of organization. They comprised teachers who transmitted the techniques of begging to small children, as well as containing argots impenetrable to outsiders, known as mpouliarika (μπουλιάρικα). The term mpouliarika stems from the Byzantine mpouliaris (μπουλιάρης), used at the time to signify 'beggar' (Triantafyllidis 1953: 663-665). The argot displayed lexical and phonological characteristics common to those of argots of groups constantly traveling throughout Greece and

employed in poorly paid occupations; construction workers and seasonally migrant craftsmen. Such communities of itinerant beggars also spawned apprentices, that is, young children, usually orphans, who were taken in, in order to assist and to provoke pity in outsiders, so as to generate charity. Many of these children were often beaten and tortured by their masters, to remain in the community and so serve the interests of community elders. Many such children were unable to find a livelihood elsewhere nor to enter domestic life. They were thus condemned to mendicancy for life, a practice which ensured that mendicancy would continue down across generations.

The techniques employed by mendicants to provoke pity partly assist in the construction of the traditional image of the itinerant beggar. Such beggars would pretend to be crippled, sick or blind, would fabricate wounds on their bodies and would pretend to be dying from poverty or starvation, despite enjoying an affluent life, owing to their effective begging skills.

Beggar communities from Kravara, Rekouni and Kloukina shared communication networks and linguistic forms. Communication between these groups was frequent, occurring at least once a month, which was expected given that these people frequently travelled together for months on end or even for years through various parts of the Peloponnese and central Greece, as they begged for money or material goods. As Aikaterinides notes (1972: 106-107), such coexistence and lengthy and frequent contact between groups affects the argots of both beggars and itinerant builders, to the extent that both communities occasionally developed almost identical characteristics. Similarities thus arise between the lexicons of builders, for example, from Epirus or Arcadia, and the those of itinerant beggars.

## Theoretical Framework and Methodic Approach

Beggars are particularly difficult to access, as they are wary of outsiders, which is hardly surprising, since they live in conditions of marginality and illegality. This suggests that we needed to focus on more than one locality, in order to garner adequate material, an approach that necessarily led to a multi-sited ethnography. The research extended on previous work in the municipality of Peristeri, in Athens, and on communities of priests in the area who offer food to beggars at soup kitchens. The sites included the centre of Athens and the municipality of Peristeri. The project spanned two years, from 2012 to 2014. Initially, non-participant and participant observation of interaction on the streets and at other central spots in each of these two localities for extended periods was necessary, in order to determine how and why the beggars used argots (Williams 1995: 25-39). The tenure in the field furnished us with an introductory ethnography, and allowed the research group to begin to formulate questions regarding the communities and the field as a whole. As the project was not limited to one part of the city, and was a multi-site ethnography (Marcus 1995: 95-117), which does not focus solely on a single spatially defined area, we also directed our focus towards the informants' journeys

and activities across the city at large. By following the communities as they went about their daily activities, we were able to track how the use of argot fluctuated throughout the day. Altogether, we conducted interviews with 108 individuals. These informants were Greeks, and migrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and eastern Europe.

We then conducted interviews with the communities. The interviews generally comprised semi-guided questionnaires, affording subjects ample opportunity to speak freely and at length. We then informed participants that we were interested in argots in particular, and that the aim of our activity was to prime these communities, who we asked to then provide us with language information. Over a period of six months, we conducted eight group interviews with beggar communities, by recording all audio data on digital devices.

Our 108 subjects were aged between 19 and 88. 78 were male and 30 were female. We interviewed several beggars, who were of an elderly Greek background. These interviewees discussed argot vocabulary either still in use or now outmoded. Drawing, then, on documented data, we first investigate both literal and metaphoric use of beggars' words and expressions. We then analyze the social dynamics informing these argots, after which, we examine the existence of traditional argot language, and the ways in which these argots have shifted in form and function over the years. We also look at these changes from a contemporary perspective, in relation to changes in mendicant populations in Athens today. That is, we look at such phenomena in areas of large populations of migrant and refugee mendicant communities.

In this study, we draw conclusions from our ethnographic material. We have begun to analyse the documented data, rather than merely quoting the views of the informants, and we interpret this material through a framework presented by Geertz's as speech functions (Geertz 1973). We have attempted to tie the analysis into theoretical work by other scholars who have investigated mendicants in other localities globally (Fleisher 1995). Concurrently, we have avoided an excessively theoretical interpretation, which may obfuscate our ethnographic material and may lead to rickety theoretical structures, rather than to present authentic information.

## Results and Discussion

### *Current Basic Argot Forms*

#### Vocabulary

The argot lexicon of mendicant communities is largely figurative yet not polysemous, and thus, argot words each have a single meaning. Two subcategories of these argots emerged from our data: a) words employed in general daily interactions which are used metaphorically only by beggars, and b) words that are not employed in daily interactions and which are used mainly by

beggars or others living in the fringes of society. The use of these argots assigns to these argots a unique metaphorical and, certainly, symbolic meaning. The language data set is small, owing to the availability of the argots. The argots are used mainly by elderly beggars who learned these from previous generations. We present the argots not to suggest that these are widely used, but to evidence that a number of encoded words are in use by marginalized groups. Indeed, these words possess history, owing to their long tenure. We have no documented sources of their use, and we thus provide this firsthand documentation. The documented examples below constitute argot languages common to these communities.

Lexical Item	English	Description	Documented speech
Άγαλμα, το	Statue	A beggar in one pose for a long time	
Αράπη, ο	Nigger	A priest	<i>Παιδιά, σύρμα, βγήκε ο αράπη, να πάμε να μας δώσει λεφτά.</i> Hey, boys! have a look, the priest has come out. Let's go and get money.
Βαποράκι, το	Pusher	Courier who carries mainly drugs, rather than the dealers	
Γατάκι, το	Small cat	A new beggar, not yet familiar with begging practices nor how to act cunningly	
Γατοκέφαλο, το	Cat head	A large coin [of high value]	
Κρεμμύδι, το	Onion	An expensive gold watch	
Κάβουρας, ο	Crab	A mean individual, never offering charity	
Μουζικάντζης, ο	Busker	A beggar who plays a musical instrument to attract passers-by	
Παντόφλα, η	Slipper	A leather wallet, usually full of money	
Πετσί, το	Skin	A leather wallet	
Χήνα, η	Hina, goose	A one-thousand drachma note, now no longer in circulation or, in general, a banknote of high denomination	

**Table 2:** Noun forms

Lexical Item	English translation	Description
Τσιχλιάζομαι (tsihliazome)	A state of idleness and boredom, chewing gum and doing nothing.	Derives from the noun 'τσίχλα' (tsihla, 'chewing gum' in Greek). Mostly used on occasions when there are few passers-by, resulting in low profits.

**Table 1:** Verb forms

Lexical Item	English translation	Description	Documented speech
Αδιάβροχος, ο	A Waterproof jacket	A very cruel insensitive person	
Βελονάκιος, ο	A Junkie	A drug addict	
Μπατάλας, ο (Mpatalas [m]) Α Μπατάλω, η (Mpatalo [f])		A very fat, disabled beggar; used mainly for obese beggars with mobility problems	<i>Έκατσε ο μπατάλας και έπιασε πάγκο για τρεις ανθρώπους</i>  This mpatalas sat on the bench and took up the space of three people.

**Table 3:** Adjectival forms

### Expressions

We encountered expressions that differ from spoken Modern Greek in their application and frequency of use. These expressions seem to be employed only within mendicant communities and reference the lives of beggars, and the difficulties these beggars face. Two themes emerged from these expressions:

A) the gift-giving procedure involving the offering of certain items or money to the beggar, i.e. charity. This category describes an offering that will guarantee the beggar's survival, essential for the survival of both beggar and members of the beggar's family. For example:

1	<i>Του 'κανε ένα ψηστήρι του περαστικού και του 'δωσε μια ολόκληρη χήνα</i>
	He grilled the passer-by and was given an entire hinai
	He managed to convince the passer-by to give him a big amount of money
2	<i>Την πετσώσαμε και σήμερα</i>
	We skinned it today
	We earned enough money today

**Table 4:** Expressions 1

B) expressions indicating the ephemeral and marginal habitat within which mendicant communities reside. Mendicancy continued to constitute a criminal offence at the time of our fieldwork in Greece and in many other countries. For example:

1	<i>Παιδιά, θα μας χώσουν στη Μπουζού</i>
	Boys, they're going to shove us in Mprouzou
	They will send us to prison
2	<i>Τουμπεκιάζομαι τους μπάτσους</i>
	I toumpekiazome the cops
	I suspect that the police are somewhere nearby

**Table 5:** Expressions 2

Such examples are employed in the figurative sense exclusively by beggars or, less frequently, by other marginalised groups, such as the homeless, drug addicts, or prisoners. Our research aligns with other work (Petropoulos 2010; Papazahariou 1995), in that only Greek beggars, immigrant beggars and aged mendicants of both types use these phrases, while the phrases seem to be ignored by other groups. Such vocabulary contains, in encoded form, specific meanings and is now rarely taught by elder mendicants to younger generations and is thus gradually becoming extinct. This vocabulary today forms a small part of language used by mendicant communities. Despite the prevailing ideology that such argots are neither transmitted nor altered over time, much of this language does spread owing to the social, cultural, and linguistic environments of these communities.

From the interviews and the material documented, three fundamental themes arise: a) The use of such coded words and phrases has declined over time, to which our informants agreed; b) the argots have been inherited from previous generations of beggars. These past generations employed these argots to avoid being understood by non-mendicants outside of this marginalized group; c) mendicants continue to employ such coded language among themselves, at times when they wish to conceal the communication from non-mendicants, such as in church courtyards, in public streets, and when discussing illegal acts. In the second part of the study, we present a social and cultural analysis of these coded words and compare the use of argots in these communities to the past.

### *Continuities and Non-continuities from Past to Present*

We now draw on our discussions with informants, and hence on their views on these codified sociolects. Our aim here is to reveal ideologies of past and present, and to begin to landscape the shifts in these argots over the past century and a half. The informants suggest that these argots emanate directly from the 'underworld,' a term frequently employed to label these marginalized groups. The informants use these phrases either in full or in part. For example,

Most of the words I told you are still used regularly when something is going on, so that we have

some idea, the Greeks, for instance, if the police is coming... Nowadays, there are many who don't get these phrases. These are things of the street... these words are the language of the streets. People like me who have lived in the street know them, but the younger ones know less than what I've told you.

(Kostas, 78 years old)

The use of a specific linguistic code is connected to the need for secret communication (Lu 2005: 37-39). In the past, when communities lived in ways unacceptable to normative society, thus needing to avoid prosecution, encoded communication to maintain secrecy, thus protecting members of those communities from the general public and from the police (Spradley 1970: 144-145; Wallace 1965: 12-16). Argot-based codes of communication are until today mediated by conditions under which the marginalized live, as these codes aid covert communication (Wallace 1965: 146). As our informants indicated, speakers strategically place argot vocabulary in their communication in order to transfer confidential information, such as the whereabouts of optimum locations, which passers-by are generous with money, who is unpleasant, and who should not be approached.

Argot vocabulary is also used to issue warnings, at times when greater vigilance is required. For example, the argots are employed when police are on patrol or conducting checks, or at times when residents or shopkeepers behave in hostile fashion towards the mendicants.

We had been told [by the members of our circle] to watch out for policemen and notify one another, not by using common words, such as "Careful, police!", but by using either Pakistani words or words, such as "red" in English (indicating danger), because, in the group I was a member of, not everyone spoke Pakistani and so the code words were in English.

(Amin from Pakistan)

In general, however, the encoded languages employed by many marginalized groups in order to remain incomprehensible to outsiders, exhibit strong symbolism (c.f. Geertz 1973). The symbolic character of a linguistic code reveals motives during speech acts, and predisposes the user of such a code to take such action (Duranti 2015). The symbolic character of a linguistic code is directly linked to the experiences of a speaker, and is drawn on by the speaker at times when the speaker wishes to conceal communication from outgroups (Fabrega 1971: 277-287). Seen in this way, the argots reinforce the coherence of speech communities, which in this case is the mendicant community in Athens. As the 72-year-old Eleni explains:

I'm begging here with my friend, Katerina. And we have been doing this for many years. And we've never hurt anyone. We know some coded words so that we're not understood all the time. You know, passers-by look at us suspiciously! We don't want them to understand what we are talking about. We don't talk gibberish to confuse others. We talk to each other and we understand each other, so that we can defend our interests and lives, as many people can't see how difficult our lives are.

Eleni links the argots of beggars to the code of values of the group in general, and to the notion of belonging, through repeated use of the first-person plural pronoun in collective action. This notion of belonging is thus tied to the concept of 'our people,' in combination with the experiences, values and ideologies of the group. Fleisher (1995: 147-148) discusses gangs of thieves in Washington and Seattle to exemplify conduct by groups that do not adhere to normative behaviour and indeed infringe on social norms, while still maintaining a conception of collective belonging. Fleisher's work reveals that individuals share a symbolically homogeneous attitude to life, with respective values, hierarchical structures, common identities, and a particular space as a common reference. He confirms the view that deliberate participation in what one might call 'common belonging' emerges both in socially organised groups and in marginalised groups, such as those of thieves or beggars. Furthermore, the use of a coded vocabulary aids the social reproduction of marginal cultures that stand in opposition to the dominant culture.

### *Defining Mendicant Culture*

We now attempt to define mendicant culture, or at least to define its basic elements, so far as they emerge from our work in urban Athens. The totality of rules and values of mendicant culture most certainly contrasts with the values and rules of society in general. This is not to say that the values of mendicant culture oppose those of mainstream society. Rather, these values signify a different perspective on, and different estimation of, the world resulting from the very different conditions of mendicant life. During our interviews with both Greeks and immigrants to Greece, a code of values emerged, which contributes to the achievement of the goals of these communities.

Prevalent in such a code, the complexity of which correlates positively with that of the organization of the group, are the concepts of trust and mutual assistance within in a closed circle (Lee and Farell 2003). Trust emerges through a complex set of mutual values and explanations. Thus, trust is established regarding the correct division of money or goods earned from mendicancy, a trust that ensures that one mendicant will not betray another or turn others in to the police, and trust regarding the maintaining of secrecy. Argots symbolically and performatively reinforce this code of values and ensure that it is handed down from one generation to the next. The comments by Dimitris, an eighty-one year old man who mentions certain mendicant argot words, summarizes their significance:

These words are not really used anymore! For us, they were important. They were words we had been taught by older chaps, my grandfather, and my great grandfather. And they were something that only we knew. And it was something very important which has not been added to for many years, maybe 40 or even 50, and only very few people still know it.

Lastly, the argots of beggars, both past and present, constitute an expression of defiance towards socially dominant ideologies (Liebow 1967; Hagan and McCarthy 1998). Our informants discussed that, in communities where such code is continuously employed, speakers operate in a sphere outside that of the dominant culture. The beggar communities relate the dominant culture to urban middle and lower middle classes, to which they certainly do not think that they belong. The language of these marginal communities expresses their views, emotions, ideas and attitudes. As such, their linguistic code becomes a common and simple yet safe means of expressing their resistance to those they perceive as the ruling group, whether the individuals concerned have institutional roles, such as policemen, municipal clerks, priests and members of church councils, or other roles, such as members of the local community, including residents or shopkeepers.

However, the linguistic mechanisms do not continuously summon the same degree of intensity: Hostility is sometimes insinuated, and irony is frequently expressed indirectly, while on other occasions, mistrust is directly expressed. The values, emotions and experiences that arise from an adherence to the social code of a certain group embody the difference between the group and society at large, and indeed, these function as a means of resistance against the established order. This became clear in the comments of several informants, such as in the following:

Ah, these words were used by older beggars, but we shouldn't forget why they were used. It's because they lived on the society's margins, chased by the police and other people. And for these people, this "gibberish" language was a means of protecting themselves ...

(Panagiotis, 80 years old)

These argot words and expressions are used mostly by old, exclusively Greek beggars. However, a viable concern at present is the current situation in Greek urban areas, where beggar communities comprise mostly immigrants or refugees from other countries. Our ethnographic research indicates that even at this level, obvious and comprehensible adjustments occur in the vocabulary of argots.

Current immigrant mendicants have developed a uniquely encoded vocabulary (Reddy 2013), although labeling this vocabulary as an argot is debatable. The vocabulary differs to that of Greek beggars, including that Greek beggars employ a much greater larger vocabulary. Certain Pakistani immigrants informed us that the intermediate members of their circles used the word 'alarm' to warn the others, whenever the police were in the vicinity, and the word 'danger' whenever they were required leave their 'spot.' Sent by mobile phone, these are merely brief warnings from one mendicant to another and cannot be regarded as a fully developed argot.

Whenever the police approached, either close to the traffic lights on the National Road during some event, in a square or anywhere else, the intermediary used to call us directly. They usually

mentioned the words “alarm” and “danger”, which meant that we should immediately evacuate the area, as the police was approaching. (Amin, from Pakistan).

Most immigrant beggars do not employ coded vocabulary. Many of the immigrant informants did not suggest anything similar to Amin’s suggestions. While their habitual attempts to attract passers-by and their strategies with which they present themselves to the public may seem similar to the approaches employed by older, Greek beggars, immigrant beggar argots are incomparable to argots employed by Greek mendicants. Selim evidences this below:

No, I’m not used to hearing anything like that, nor have I heard anyone talking in coded words. We, people from Pakistan, either talk in English or in our language.

(Selim, from Pakistan)

Today, the term ‘argots’ has been replaced by coded language (Glasser and Bridgman 1999). Any of several factors may contribute to the shift in form of argots from past to present. Firstly, in the past, mendicancy was for many a permanent disposition. At present, however, this is usually a temporary solution to financial problems faced by migrants upon their arrival in Greece. Secondly, most beggars today are not of Greek heritage. In these communities, there is no concept of the social reproduction of mendicancy and hence consistent reproduction of argots in these communities becomes arduous.

Thirdly, mendicancy as a phenomenon has undergone a transformation in current Athens. Most beggars are today in transit, and thus passing through Greece, prior to moving on to other countries (Kouzas 2017; Wilson 1994). These beggars are therefore only temporarily mendicant, do not intend to live on charity indefinitely, and do not develop long-term strategies for survival as beggars. As such, these communities are not likely to create codes of communication.

## Conclusion and Future Research Directions

In this paper, we have presented facts pertaining to the presence of beggar argots in current Athens. The study employed an ethnographic, rather than a strictly linguistic approach. We have delineated the history of mendicant argot in Greece, a phenomenon that existed in 19<sup>th</sup> century Greece, and which migrated to urban centres from the Greek countryside. The survival of beggars has always needed encoded languages, as these languages allowed these communities to remain incomprehensible to those outside of the group, and reflexively strengthening in group cohesion, as a marginalized community.

Today, however, there is both a continuity and a lack of continuity in the use of argot in cities in Greece. Such an environment is to be expected, as the changing state of mendicancy follows the changing state of a larger world. Currently, few beggars use argots, and those who do are mainly elderly. Thus, this centuries-old transmission of argot language is now waning and giving

way to a new period in which immigrant mendicants use coded words, and not necessarily an argot with its own rules and its own code of values. Today, traditional mendicant argot is no longer an everyday means of communication, but rather, mainly functions merely to warn of danger.

A viable concern is therefore whether traditional argots are now disappearing. This may probably be the case, but there are caveats. Mendicant argot, although still in existence, has undergone a transformation. It is now only partially conspiratorial, and hence no longer strengthens the social agency of the group as it once did. It has retained some structural functions, which suggests that it may not disappear altogether. However, as a decreasing number of Greek mendicants now employ this argot, it is now dwindling and losing its status as an argot, with its attendant structures and social ramifications, to one of a set of encoded words employed simply to draw attention to danger.

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