MICHAŁ BZINKOWSKI
Jagiellonian University
Kraków, Poland
michal.bzinkowski@uj.edu.pl

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SEMANTIC CATEGORIZATION OF COMPOUNDS IN SELECTED POST-BYZANTINE LAMENTS ON THE FALL OF CONSTANTINOPLE. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Abstract. – This article examines compound words sourced from a selection of anonymous post-Byzantine works written in vernacular Greek and categorized as laments on the fall of Constantinople. It establishes a classification based on the semantic profiles of these compounds, with a particular focus on emotionally charged terms. While this taxonomy represents a preliminary step toward mapping the rich lexicon and phraseology of these laments, it demonstrates that the poetic Greek of the post-1453 period exhibits numerous features poorly documented in learned Byzantine Greek. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the vitality of the Greek language under Ottoman rule and underscores the lexical creativity of its anonymous authors.

Key words. – Fall of Constantinople, Laments on the Fall of Constantinople, Vernacular post-Byzantine Greek, Greek Compound Words.

Although relatively understudied, vernacular Greek laments on the fall of Constantinople from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries have been the subject of several significant investigations.[1] These studies have primarily examined various ideological dimensions of the texts, focusing closely on their expression of grief, patterns of collective trauma, and the relationships between these vernacular works and monodies written in classicizing Greek. To date, however, little attention has been paid to their linguistic features, particularly regarding their lexical and phraseological originality.[2]

[1] Among the more significant studies of the last twenty years, the following are worth mentioning: Papayianni 2010; Goldwyn 2014; Karanika 2016; Kefala 2020. I have also written a number of articles on various aspects of these literary works: Bzinkowski 2025a; Bzinkowski 2025b; Bzinkowski 2026.

[2] Browning, in his analysis of the period 1100–1453 in the development of the Greek language, emphasises that compound words, which had been very rare in earlier periods, began to be formed intensively and creatively during this time. See Browning 1983, 67.

This brief article addresses a relatively overlooked linguistic aspect of these poetic works: compound words. The primary objective is to classify these compounds based predominantly on their semantic properties. By focusing on meaning, this study aims to delineate possible systemic patterns that emerge independently of any specific lament.

A comparative analysis of the surviving laments[3] reveals that while some texts are replete with compound words, others employ them only sporadically or omit them entirely. Consequently, this study focuses on three poetic works characterized by a high frequency of such compounds: *Alosis Konstantinopoleos* (Ἅλωσις Κωνσταντινουπόλεως) (*AK*), *Anakalima tis Konstantinopolis* (Ἀνακάλημα τῆς Κωνσταντινόπολης) (*AtK*), *Thrinos tis Konstantinoupoleos* (Θρῆνος τῆς Κωνσταντινουπόλεως) (*ThtK*). These abbreviations will be used hereafter.[4]

Dating from the fifteenth century (*AtK; ThtK*) to the sixteenth century (*AK*), these poetic works span a considerable chronological timeframe. They also exhibit significant disparities in length: *AK* comprises a total of 1,054 lines, *ThtK* 128 lines, whereas *AtK* consists of 118.

Because post-Byzantine laments are predominantly anonymous[5] and their precise geographical origins remain obscure – often being preserved in only a single manuscript[6] – it is difficult to determine with certainty when and where they were composed. Consequently, establishing whether specific vocabulary was somehow drawn from the rich literary tradition of the Cretan Renaissance or developed independently poses a significant scholarly challenge.[7]

These texts also exhibit considerable thematic diversity regarding their engagement with the fall of Constantinople itself. Although the Ottoman conquest of the City—and its consequent loss by the Greeks (*Romaioi*) – remains the dominant motif, these works vary significantly in tone, with several departing from purely elegiac or solemn registers. Some, for instance, emphasise the perceived culpability of the Greeks themselves, while others attribute the catastrophe to Western inertia; meanwhile,

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[3] Still, the most comprehensive list of monodies and laments on the fall of Constantinople is provided by Lambros 1908.

[4] In this article, I use the following editions of the laments mentioned: Alosis 1956; Anakalima 2012; Thrinos 2003.

[5] One exception is *Alosis Konstantinoupoleos*, which is now attributed to Emmanuel Limenitis, a 15th-century author of, amongst other works, the poem *The Plague of Rhodes* (*To thanatikon tis Rodou*).

[6] For example, *Anakalima tis Konstantinopolis* survives in only one codex (Codex Parisinus Graecus no. 2873, ff. 187r–191r) and was first published by Émile Legrand in 1875.

[7] See, for example, the discussion on the Cretan or Cypriot origins of AtK in Kriaras 2012, 10-14.

certain texts adopt a lighter, satirical tone to mock the prophecies associated with the restoration of the spiritual capital of Orthodoxy.[8]

Inevitably, a comprehensive treatment of these historical and ideological issues lies beyond the scope of this article. This analysis of compound words intentionally bypasses these broader contexts, as well as the immediate textual settings of individual lexical items. Furthermore, the morphological structures of these compounds and the questions of their etymological origins remain outside the purview of this study, constituting instead a subject for separate investigation. Consequently, the following sections present a systematic semantic typology of the compound words found within the aforementioned post-Byzantine laments.[9]

I. *Pathopoieia*: Expressions of Lamentation, Sorrow, and Fatalism

This category encompasses terms that articulate psychological trauma, profound grief, and despair. These lexical items frequently denote concepts of fate, destiny, or inevitability, thereby emphasizing the fatalistic dimension of the historical situation. This group of compound words is most distinctively exemplified in the laments on the fall of Constantinople as a specific genre. Evidently, the authors aim to evoke intense emotional responses in the reader while vividly portraying the tragedy experienced by the city's inhabitants and, by extension, the entire Greek population.

– καρδιοαναστενάγματα (*AK*, v. 17) – Heart-sighs / deep visceral groans.
– ψυχοπονέσετε (*AK*, v. 34) / καρδιοπονέσουν (*AtK*, v. 39) – To suffer profoundly / to empathize from the depths of the soul or heart.
– πολύθλιβος (*AK*, v. 78) / πολύθλιβη (*AK*, v. 588) – Greatly afflicted / heavily burdened with sorrow.
– βαρόμοιρε (*AK*, v. 52) – Ill-fated / bearing a heavy destiny.
– κακομοιρασμένος / κακομοιρασμένο (*AtK*, vv. 20, 35) – Ill-starred / wretchedly fated.[10]
– πικροκαημένον (*ThtK*, v. 68) – Bitterly consumed / wasted by poignant grief.

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[8] See Bzinkowski 2025a.

[9] The English translations of the compound words listed in this article are partly based on the lexicographical definitions provided in two dictionaries that are fundamental to the study of this period: Kriaras (1969–) and Trapp (2001–2017). The former constitutes the definitive lexicographical reference for texts of this era, essential for verifying distinct vernacular and hybrid forms, including those containing foreign or loan elements. The latter is an indispensable resource for the analysis of Byzantine Greek, particularly useful for tracing the semantic evolution of compound words pertaining to theological, administrative, and metaphysical domains.

[10] Kriaras gives such synonyms as κακόμοιρος, άτυχος. See Kriaras 2012, 22-23.

– ἀπαραμύθητος (*AtK*, v. 2) – Inconsolable / disconsolate.
– πανάτυχον (*AK*, v. 185) – Utterly unfortunate / ill-fated.

II. War, Ruin, Cosmic Cataclysm

This category comprises compound terms that depict military devastation, artillery damage, and mass slaughter. It also encompasses severe meteorological phenomena and cosmic portents that frame the collapse of the City as an eschatological event. Many of these compounds exhibit semantic ambiguity, posing significant translational challenges; in certain instances, they constitute *hapax legomena.* Collectively, these lexical items vividly portray the conquest of Constantinople as a localized apocalypse, punctuated by violent and unprecedented natural upheavals.

– ἀστραποκαημένην / ἀστραποκαημένη / ἀστραποκαημένες (*AK*, vv. 48, 194, 211) / ἀστραποκαμένην (*AtK*, v. 11) – Lightning-struck / scorched by celestial fire.[11]
– ἀστραποχάλαζην (*AtK*, v. 10) – A tempest of lightning and hail / a lightning-and-hail storm.
– ἀνεμοζάλην (*AtK*, v. 10) – Wind-driven vertigo / a blinding gale.
– θεοκαρβουνόκαυτης (*AK*, v. 196) – Divinely incinerated to charcoal / reduced to ashes by divine wrath.[12]
– μαυρογελασμένης (*AK*, v. 195) – Darkly/mournfully mocked.[13]
– πουμπαρδοχαλασμένης (*AK*, v. 196) – Bombard-shattered / ruined by heavy artillery fire.
– αἱματοκυλισμένος (*AK*, v. 422) – Blood-drenched / wallowing in gore.[14]
– καστροτρυπητάδες (*ThtK*, v. 99) – Castle-breachers / fort-piercers.

III. Theological and Metaphysical Dimensions

These theological and metaphysical compound words refer to divine creation, God's absolute omnipotence, or conflicts concerning heresy. Such terms echo the pervasive belief that Constantinople, though historically renowned for its divine favour, had forfeited God's protection and consequently fallen into the hands of the infidels. This providentialist notion was widespread and had functioned as a well-established literary topos since the seventh century.[15]

– θεόκτιστον (*AK*, v. 234) – Divinely founded / built by God.

[11] Kefala points out that in Saunier's well-known collection of Greek folk songs, this word is used to refer to those who have met a violent death. See Kefala 2020, 45.

[12] A reference to 'Black Tuesday'. As Constantinople fell on a Tuesday, this day is considered unlucky.

[13] Also a reference to 'Black Tuesday'.

[14] Epithet of Ares – the personification of war.

[15] Papayianni 2010, 31.

– παντεπόπτης (*AK*, v. 326) – All-seeing / the All-beholding Omniscient Pantocrator.
– παντάνακτος (*AK*, v. 537) – All-sovereign / Monarch over all creation.
– παντεργάτου (*AK*, v. 537) – All-working / the Omnificent Creator.
– ψυχοπαραδότης (*ThtK*, v. 104) – Soul-deliverer / the *psychopompos* or agent of death.[16]

IV. Magnification, Encomia, and Material Splendor

This category comprises epithets utilized to contrast the current ruin of Constantinople with its past glory,[17] architectural opulence, and geopolitical prestige.

– πολυχρυσωμένην (*AK*, v. 181) – Heavily gilded / rich with gold.
– χρυσομαρμαρωμένες (*ThtK*, v. 41) – Adorned with gold and marble.
– τετραπεντάτρουλλα (*ThtK*, v. 40) – Possessing four or five domes.
– ἀσημοχρύσαφον (*AK*, v. 314) – Silver-and-gold / precious metalwork.
– λιθομαργαριτάρια (*AK*, v. 305) – Precious stones and pearls.
– μυριοχαριτωμένη (*AK*, v. 296) – Myriad-graced / infinitely graceful.
– πανύμνητε (*AK*, v. 145) / πανεύμνοστε (*AK*, v. 515) / πανένδοξε (*AK*, v. 516) – All-praised / superlatively lauded / all-glorious.
– παμφούμιστος (*AK*, v. 513)/ πολυφουμισμένη (AK, v. 333) / πολυφημισμένην (ThtK, v. 11) – All-renowned / highly celebrated.
– ἀκριβαναθρεμμένες (*AtK*, v. 72) – Sumptuously reared / delicately nurtured.[18]

V. Socio-Political Realities, Alterity, and Demoralization

This category comprises terms indicating imperial domain, collective kinship identity, the ethnic depreciation of the conquerors, and the physical degradation or displacement of the victims.[19]

– κοσμοκρατορία (*AK*, v. 75) – World-empire / global hegemony.
– ὁμόφωνοι, ὁμόψυχοι, ὁμόφυλοι (*AK*, v. 962) – Of one voice (unanimous), of one soul (like-minded), of one kin (conspecific).
– Τουρκοκακογέροι (*ThtK*, v. 46) – Wicked Turkish elders.
– τολμηρόκαρδιον (*AK*, v. 879) – Bold-hearted / audacious.
– ψευδοελπίδες (*AK*, v. 245) – Pseudo-hopes / delusive expectations.

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[16] Pertusi points out that this word, like the passage in which it appears, is unclear. In his view, this may be a reference to the so-called Orban's Basilica bombard. See Pertusi 2003, 487.

[17] Bzinkowski 2025b.

[18] Allusion to the noble women.

[19] See especially Bzinkowski 2025b, 372-375.

– ἐξετραχηλισμένα (*AK*, v. 202) / ξετραχηλισμένους (*AK*, v. 734) – Degraded / unbridled / cast down headlong (literally, with necks bared/ exposed in panic).[20]
– ἐξανασκεπασμένες (*AK*, v. 209) – Violently stripped bare / uncovered and defenceless.
– ἐσφιχτοκλείδωνεν (*AK*, v. 617) – Rigidly locked / bolted tightly.

Conclusions

The systematic semantic classification of compound words proposed in this article elucidates the profound richness of the Greek poetic lexicon in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople. Rather than serving as mere decorative elements, the analyzed compounds function as precise expressive mechanisms deployed to articulate collective trauma, deep-seated grief, intense ideological conflicts, and immediate historical realities.

Highly emotionally charged expressions predominate across the corpus, reinforcing the thesis that the primary objective of these anonymous authors was to heighten the dramatic resonance of the events surrounding the Ottoman conquest. Consequently, the fall of the City is framed not merely as a localized human tragedy, but as a cosmic, apocalyptic catastrophe. The sharp contrast established between the images of Constantinople's pristine historical glory on the one hand, and the subjugation of its inhabitants and the physical desolation of its ruins on the other, structurally mirrors a profound sense of rupture within the post-Byzantine collective consciousness.

Furthermore, these compound words – sometimes embedded with dense theological and highly specialized overtones – coexist with demotic innovations that appear to be the original creations of the poets themselves. The juxtaposition and taxonomy of these terms demonstrate that early modern vernacular Greek was not only remarkably elastic but also structurally and literarily sophisticated, capable of operating at the highest levels of poetic sublimity.

[20] According to Kechagioglou it means just ‘naked’ (ξεγυμνωμένα). See Kechagioglou 2012, 108.

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