

LET'S CHANGE THE SUBJECT

Sometimes it seems that the Greek language was designed to catch out visitors. I guess if, like Crete, you have been occupied by foreign forces for most of the past 2,500 years, you can't be too careful. Having said that, having more than a dozen words for "the" is going to extremes.

We men also have the added complication that all male nouns – including proper nouns – have different endings depending on whether they are the subject or the object of a sentence. In short, if you are a man, staying in a town or village with a male name and you spent your English/German grammar lessons staring out of the window, you are better off feigning a mild disability than trying to introducing yourself to somebody in Greek. Not knowing your name is not a great confidence booster.

For example, my name in Greek is Mihalis...or is it Mihali? And before you say my name is Mike, say that to any Greek and they will replay, "Ah, Mihalis" (or is it Mihali?).

To introduce myself by saying: "Me lene" (literally "they call me") I would be Mihali because "they" is the subject and "I" am the object. But if I say: "Lego-me" ("I call myself") I'd become Mihalis. Easy isn't it?

This same rule also applies to towns and cities, which is why the street sign can say one thing and your bus driver something completely different. The village of Maheri in the Apokoronas is male plural which, when used as the subject of a sentence, such as "I want to go to Maheri", it becomes Maherous.

It keeps us foreigners on our toes, as one escaped British officer found out to his cost during German occupation in 1941.

George Psychonundakis writes in *The Cretan Runner* about the arrest of a Lieutenant Geoffry Barkham (who was known as Manoli) after being stopped on the road.

"Where do you come from," a German, who spoke Greek well, asked him.

"Apo tous Kampoi," the Englishman replied.

"But the Kampians," the German said, "don't say 'Apo tous Kampoi' they say 'Apo tous Kampous'."

"To the devil with all that," Manoli then said, flinging his cap on the ground. "I'm an English officer."

I must buy myself a cap.