Modern Greek word order in the process of syntacticization: preliminary evidence from Late Byzantine and Early Modern Greek

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A recurring commonplace in descriptions of Greek word order is that all six logically possible permutations of the major clausal constituents [S V O] yield grammatical linearization patterns. This general observation seems to hold true for all historical stages of the language.

Nonetheless, there are major arguments that point towards word order reorganization in Greek (See Taylor 1994, Horrocks 1997, and Atchison (2001) among others). Triggered from the above, this study asserts that there is a move towards syntacticization in Modern Greek. Such a claim can be empirically verified if an unmarked word order can be clearly identified, which is used in a variety of pragmatic contexts. Concurrently, all the alternative orderings are reserved for specialized pragmatic functions.

Greek is specially well-suited for diachronic study, due to its long written history (8th c. BC onwards). It is this continuous attestation which has rendered possible the compilation of a broadly representative corpus of historical narrative texts. Data analysis is placed within Knud Lambrecht's information structure (IS) theoretical framework (1986, 1987, 1994, 2000), which had to be specially adapted for the diachronic study of Greek. Lambrecht's analysis generates a taxonomy of declarative IS types. Their interrelationships have also been laid out explicitly by means of a circular representation in conceptual space. The interaction of three interrelated parameters was investigated: functional structure, which describes the actual order of elements in the clause (i.e. S-V-O), syntactic structure, and information structure.

The research hypothesis has been fully substantiated by the preliminary data analysis. In Ancient Greek (AG), on the one hand, it is not possible to identify a single word order pattern as the unmarked one. SV(O) is restricted to shifted topic-comment clauses, a topic-comment subcategory. Besides, there is no direct mapping between syntactic constructions and pragmatic contexts. In Modern Greek (MG), on the other hand, SV(O) has been 'promoted' to the status of the unmarked word order type. This is typically linked to topic-comment clauses. It is also associated with other IS types, that is, it has a far wider distribution. Furthermore, there is a more direct correlation between syntactic configurations and pragmatic functions.

In view of these findings, it becomes imperative to shed further light on the mechanisms behind such a word order change; I thus decided to examine more closely the stages of historical development in Greek which are immediately prior to MG, namely Late Byzantine (LByz) and Early Modern Greek (EMG). Primarily, I set out to assess the compensation strategies for less flexible word order: first, the 'specialized' use of marked word order constructions like preposing, inversion and clitic doubling; second, the precedence of passivization over object-first constructions; and third, a greater freedom in the choice of subject. On a second plane, now with a scope over the entire Greek corpus, I opted to identify the cases which form the discourse basis for the later syntactic developments in Greek (like grammatical constructions with so-called hanging topics in AG as the "locus of emergence" for clitic doubling constructions).

Selected References

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