Information structure in Modern Greek

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(in collaboration with project D2 „Typology of Information Structure")

1. Object language

Modern Greek is spoken by a population of 11 million speakers in Greece and Cyprus, as well as by smaller communities in further 35 countries. Standard Modern Greek is based on the southern varieties of Greek (spoken in Peloponnese and on the islands of the Ionian sea). The most important currently spoken dialects are Cypriot Greek (in Cyprus), Pontic Greek (originally on the Black Sea coast of Turkey and Georgia), and Grico (in Southern Italy).
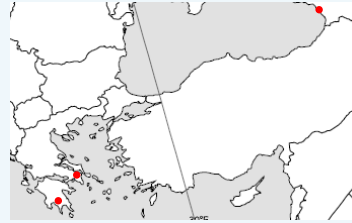

Figure 1. Data collection locations

Our data for Standard Modern Greek has been elicited in Athens. The subjects that participated in the production experiments of QUIS were young speakers of Athenian Greek (age range: 25–35).

Moreover, we have created an additional data collection with data from Pontic Greek (as spoken in Georgia) and Peloponnesian Greek (as spoken in Mesinia), in order to observe dialectal differences in the encoding of information structure.

2. Information Structure

The following features of Modern Greek are of special interest for the typology of information structure and have been intensively studied in recent investigations:

• WORD ORDER: All possible constituent orders are used in order to encode information structural functions (see Lascaratou 1989, Alexiadou 1999). The statistically dominant order in corpora and the preferred order in "all new" contexts is SVO, but it is a matter of debate in the literature if this is the canonical order (see Horrocks 1994 among others) or if it is derived from VSO through S-topicalization (see Philippaki-Warburton 1985 among others). The preferred position for focused constituents is adjacent to the verb (see Tsimpli 1995).

• CLITIC DOUBLING: Clitic doubling refers to the use of a pronominal copy of the object, that – in Standard Modern Greek – immediately precedes the verb (in non-imperative mood). The use of object clitics is determined by information structure: (a) when a definite object precedes the verb, then absence of the clitic is only possible when the object is in focus. (b) when a definite object follows the verb, then the use of the object clitic is optional (see Anagnostopoulou 1994).

• PROSODY: Greek is an intonational language. Reflexes of information structure are found in the use of pitch accents and boundary tones (Baltazani & Yun 1999, Botinis 1998), as well as in phrasing (Revithiadou 2004), etc.

3. Empirical observations

3.1 Discourse functions of clitic doubling

Clitic doubling is probably the most intensively studied issue in Modern Greek syntax, but the accounts with respect to its discourse function are not uncontroversial. Some authors treat doubled objects as topics (see, e.g., Drachman 1983), while others claim that doubled objects relate to the givenness/discourse prominence of the referent (see Anagnostopoulou 1999). The experiment BRIDGE of QUIS shows that doubling postverbal objects is possible when the referent is anaphorically available. Inferrable referents, though encoded through definite NPs (see (1)), are not accompanied by a pronominal copy, hence supporting the second viewpoint on Greek clitic doubling.
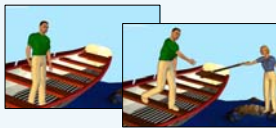

Figure 2. Condition "bridged referent" (experiment BRIDGE)

(1) íne énas ádras ce stékete páno se mja várka
    is INDEF man and stands above at INDEF boat
    emfanízete mja jinèka ce Dini to kupí ston ádra
    appears INDEF woman and gives DEF paddle to-the man

Second, the experiment CHANGES of QUIS has shown that when the verb is the new information, Modern Greek speakers use clitic doubled postverbal objects. This fact empirically supports the view that clitic doubling of postverbal objects signals R-dislocation, which in this experimental condition is a result of V-focus.

Figure 3. Condition "action=new" (experiment CHANGE)

(2) énas ádras travái to trapézi
    INDEF man pulls DEF table
    tóra to spróxni to trapézi
    now CLIT.3.SG pushes DEF table

3.2 Word order in Greek dialects

It has been noted that contemporary Modern Greek shifts towards a language type with rigid SVO word order, allowing for alternative word orders only to express topicalization or focus on a constituent. The reasons for this change have been claimed to be structural (shift towards a non-scrambling language) or socio-linguistic (impact of norms).

In order to empirically examine these claims, we have collected data from three varieties of Greek: (a) Athenian Greek which is expected to show the greatest impact of school norms, (b) Messinian Greek which belongs to the same dialectal variety, but it does not have a strong impact from the Athenian norm, and (c) Pontic Greek, which preserves some archaic properties of Greek: V-final order and scrambling.

In our empirical study we have elicited spontaneous descriptions using the pictures of the experiment CHANGES:

Figure 4. Condition "action=new" (experiment CHANGES)

Our results show that Athenian and Messinian speakers behave alike, in having a general preference for SVO orders independently of discourse condition. The orders used by Pontic speakers, on the other side, are clearly determined by the given/new partition of the sentence:
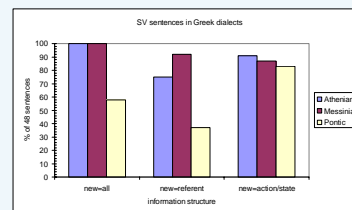

Figure 5. Experiment CHANGES: Results from three Greek dialects

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