

Variation in the history of clitic placement in Greek: the role of lexical exceptions

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During the history of the language, clitics in Greek have changed from true clitics that occupied the second position in the clause (Classical Greek) to special clitics, which are always placed immediately before the finite verb in Standard Modern Greek (Halpern, 1995). This process unfolded through a complex pattern of variation and competition among different placement options that is evident both in the historical record, but also in the wide range of dialect patterns with respect to this phenomenon (Condoravdi & Kiparsky, 2001; Pappas, 2004; Revithiadou, 2006; Chatzikyriakidis, 2010). However, certain “unruly” aspects of the pattern, especially those that concern lexical exceptions are downplayed in the literature as the products of literary language tropes or dialect mixing (Terzi, 1999). A good example of such an exceptional pattern can be seen in (1) and (2) from Modern Cypriot where the two different forms of the complementizer are associated with different clitic placement orders: With /oti/, the pronoun /me/ is placed after the verb, while with /pos/ the pronoun /tis/ is placed before the verb.

(1) lali mu oti iðen me epses stin frutaria
say.3SG.PRES to.me that see.3SG.PST me yesterday at.the grocer's
'He says to me that he saw me yesterday at the grocer's'

(2) lali mu pos tis eferen mia tʃanta pelamos
say.3SG.PRES to.me that to.her bring.3SG.PST one bag crazy
'She says to me that he brought her an awesome bag'

Contrary to this opinion, I will show that the pattern of exceptions in Cypriot Greek is both diachronically stable and synchronically robust. To do this, I will bring together data from Hellenistic Greek (N = 462), the Medieval Greek period (N = 6230), and sociolinguistic interviews (N = 2015), and a magnitude estimation test (MET, cf. Johnson 2008, N = 611) from Modern Cypriot, in order to present as complete a picture of the variation as possible. This method of evidence triangulation helps overcome the disadvantages that beset each individual dataset.

The results show conclusively that the pattern of variation is real and should not be dismissed as an accident of performance or dialect mixing. Clitics in Cypriot Greek are post-verbal in clause initial position, and preverbal after a complementizer or other function word, but there are several lexical exceptions, which include a negative marker, a quotative, and causative conjunctions. If a content word precedes the verb-clitic complex, then placement is variable. The historical record shows that this pattern of variation can be traced back to the beginning of the Medieval Greek period, and the MET study shows that it is still robust in Cypriot Greek as well, providing further evidence that the pattern of variation in both stages of the language is a valid representation of speakers' competence. I will conclude with a discussion of the implications that these findings have about the nature of morphosyntactic change.

References

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