

Looking out for number one: Greek word order

Eirik Welo, IFIKK, University of Oslo

In Ancient Greek, restrictions on surface word order are typically of a pragmatic nature: different word order patterns express the different status of discourse referents. While in many languages, information structure is grammaticalized in the sense that pragmatic roles are associated with specific phrase structural positions, e.g. the specifier of IP or CP, I will argue that in Ancient Greek, the two pragmatic roles *focus* and *topic* compete for the first position in the sentence. As a result, we find sentences where the focus precedes the topic as well as sentences where the topic precedes the focus.¹

- (1) *diabrôtika* *men* *gar* *estin* *amphô* *tôn*
 corrosive-NOM.PL PART PART be-PRS.ACT.3SG both-NOM.PL the-GEN.PL
sômatôn
 body-GEN.PL
 ‘For they are both corrosive of the bodies. . .’ (297,1H = 18b:175K)
- (2) *to* *akraton* *epi* *tês* *amiktou* *legetai*
 the-NOM.SG neat-NOM.SG at the-GEN.SG unmixed-GEN.SG say-PRS.MED.3SG
poiotêtos
 quality-GEN.SG
 ‘It is the unmixed quality that the word “neat” is used of.’ (318,2H = 18b:212K)

For example (1), I assume the simplified i-structure representation in (3):

- (3)
$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{TOPIC} \\ \text{FOCUS} \\ \text{BACKGROUND} \end{array} \left[\begin{array}{l} \{ \text{amphô} \} \\ \{ \text{diabrôtika} \} \\ \{ \text{tôn-sômatôn, estin} \} \end{array} \right] \right]$$

The subject *amphô* ‘both’ functions as the topic while the predicative adjective *diabrôtika* ‘corrosive’ is the focus of the sentence. The genitive argument of the adjective and the copula are both backgrounded.

In a similar manner, example (2) has the i-structure in (4):

- (4)
$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \text{TOPIC} \\ \text{FOCUS} \\ \text{BACKGROUND} \end{array} \left[\begin{array}{l} \{ \text{to-akraton} \} \\ \{ \text{epi-tês-amiktou} \} \\ \{ \text{poiotêtos, legetai} \} \end{array} \right] \right]$$

¹The examples are taken from the Greek medical writer Galen (129–ca. 200 CE).

The i-structure reflects the fact that the subject functions as topic and that the adjectival modifier *amiktou* ‘unmixed’ is the focus while its nominal head *poiôtêtos* ‘quality’ is backgrounded.

Being a dependent-marking, free word order case language, Greek may be analyzed following Nordlinger (1998). As far as c-structure is concerned, it is possible that Greek has a grammaticalized topic position in complement clauses with an overt complementizer. In main declarative clauses, however, I will assume no functional projections. Rather, surface linearization results from pragmatically motivated general constraints on word order within S.

The choice between focus-first and topic-first sentences is sensitive to discourse context. The focus-first configuration seems to be particularly frequent in sentences containing the explanatory particle *gar* ‘for’.

Building on the work by Andréasson (2007) and others, I view information structure (i-structure) as a separate level within the projection architecture. The mapping from i-structure to c-structure takes as its input sets of words associated with different pragmatic roles and matches them with the possible syntactic configurations, choosing the one(s) which respect some simple general constraints on linearization. Since the mapping operates on sets of *words*, the linearization of pragmatic domains need not be continuous: the words associated with an informational focus domain may intersperse with words from the topic domain. Modeling pragmatic domains as sets of words also allows for a simple explanation of word order patterns where a topic splits the words of an informational focus domain: the constraint requiring the focus to appear early in the sentence is satisfied as long as at least one word bearing the focus function appears early.

In deciding on the correct interpretation of a given sentence, the hearer makes use of morphological clues such as whether a referent is realized as a pronoun or a noun, whether a noun phrase is definite or indefinite, etc. Default associations between morphology may be overridden by contrastive focus and referential distance within the discourse may influence the realization of a given pragmatic role within the sentence.

From a discourse point of view, I assume that the distribution of old and new information is guided by two conflicting principles:

- anchor your message to known referents;
- get new information across first.

These discourse principles are reflected in the competition between early position of words carrying either the topic or the focus function. Formally, this competition/variation may be explained in terms of stochastic optimality theory. The constraints on the realization of focus and topic domains are close to each other on the hierarchy of constraints and dominate other pragmatic constraints. Thus, focus-first and topic-first sentences may both emerge as the optimal candidate, and surface linearizations where both topic and focus precede words bearing any other pragmatic function such as background are optimal.

By connecting recent developments in optimality theoretic pragmatics with a flexible mapping from i-structure to c-structure, this approach allows us to account for a greater range of variation in surface linearization within a pragmatically constrained free word order language.

References

- Andréasson, M. (2007). The architecture of i-structure. In M. Butt and T. H. King (Eds.), *Proceedings of the LFG07 Conference*.
- Nordlinger, R. (1998). *Constructive case. Evidence from Australian languages*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.