

Exploring Discourse Conditions on Word Order Phenomena in Greek

Dionysis Goutsos

Abstract

Studies of Greek word order have largely ignored explanations that refer to discourse. This paper illustrates an example of a textual approach to word order phenomena that relates the placement of adjuncts to local and global text-strategic motivations. Data are drawn from five different translations into Greek of an English text. Relevant suggestions are made with regard to the further exploration of word order issues within a discourse perspective.

Discourse explanations in the study of word order phenomena

The topic of word order and, more generally, the order of constituents or linguistic items in natural languages has always entertained an enormous popularity among linguists and has been investigated under theoretical frameworks as diverse as the Prague School, on the one hand, and Fillmore's case theory, on the other. This constant preoccupation can be understood if we consider that word order is a manifestation of linearity, one of the distinctive features of language as a semiotic system. Both speech and written language are deployed in time, in a sequence of forms in which one follows another. Since language production and understanding depend on linearity, various languages have developed systematic means of manipulating word order to make necessary distinctions and encode meaning.

However, no single theory has provided all the necessary principles to describe the diversity of patterns found in even just one language. Word order has been linked to a complex array of parameters (adapted from Siewerska 1988:262):

- a) grouping relations
- b) grammatical relations
- c) thematic relations
- d) semantic roles
- e) syntactic features (e.g., categorial status, tense, aspect, modality, mood, finiteness, etc.)

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- f) semantic features (e.g., animacy, humanness, definiteness, referentiality, etc.)
- g) pragmatic factors (e.g. perceptions of salience or dominance, familiarity, iconicity, relative identifiability, etc.)

In the last category we can include discourse or textual factors such as thematic continuity, topicality, and episodic structure, which have been shown to affect word order in the construction of narratives in several languages (*inter alia* Thompson and Longacre 1985; Givón 1987). Textual considerations may also be influential on a higher level e.g. with regard to the relative position of main and subordinate clauses in discourse (Thompson 1985; Givón 1990). In addition, word order seems to be sensitive to the context of situation but, as Siewerska notes (1988:264), "so far too little work has been done, within linguistics, on the effect of text types and registers on order."

In Greek only some of the above parameters have been described to any extent while others have not been examined at all until recently. The most common view in the literature is summarized by Mackridge (1985:234): word order in Greek does not serve a syntactic function but is used "to indicate which part of the clause contains the new information which is being conveyed (the focus)." Most grammar books follow this view, usually by substituting a vague notion of "emphasis" for what Mackridge attributes to "focus." The employment of emphasis to explain "deviant" patterns, however, does not challenge the basic claim that "the constituent order in the verb phrase is independent of its function" (Mirambel 1978:248).

In contrast to other traditional grammarians, Tzartanos makes some perceptive remarks pointing to a functional explanation. In a way reminiscent of functionalists, he states:

even where there appears to be a certain freedom in the ordering of words or phrases, there is on each occasion a specific reason for which this or that word or phrase takes this or that position in the unfolding of discourse. (1946:270, my translation)

He even goes on to suggest a pattern for Greek, akin to Daneš's thematic progression:

Again, in a series of sentences in a paragraph, each item of every sentence is placed towards the beginning, when related to the preceding, and towards the end, when related to the following. (1946: 273)

Finally, he is aware of register variation (Mackridge 1985:238 also has some interesting comments on register):

In narrations the verb *ʔitan* in its existential sense is usually fronted:

ʔitan paramo'ni xristu'jenon ke o pa'pas [...]

In general, the verb is also fronted when preceded by a subordinate clause:

'Ondas epli'siase o 'δrakos, e'fonaksan ta pe'δja [. . .]

or by an adverb of time or any modification of the verb in general:

'tote 'ipe o vasi'ljās

ka'la pe'rasame 'simera e'δo [. . .]

(1946:274 note)

In more recent syntactic approaches, it has been the grammatical relations and syntactic features that have attracted the attention of analysts. The theoretical framework adopted has focused the discussion on a search for the "basic" word order of Greek (see, for example, the debate between Horrocks 1982 and Philippaki-Warbuton 1985). Variation from the basic word order has been considered to be of an undefined "stylistic" nature. This view privileges form at the expense of functional explanations, with the further consequence of neglecting what are considered "peripheral" or "minor" sentence constituents such as adverbials or conjunctions (as well as elements with a broader scope such as discourse markers).

As an exception, Philippaki-Warbuton (1985) stresses the importance of pragmatic factors by suggesting that initial unstressed subjects in SVO structures must be interpreted as topics which have been placed there by movement. However, her use of topic conflates the propositional (topic = what is talked about) and the informational (topic = given, assumed information, not new) meaning of the term. She also cannot avoid resorting to a distinction between pragmatically and emotionally (sic) affected and non-affected sentences—which brings us back to the vague notion of "emphasis." Her data mainly consist of constructed examples with little or no context.

A systematic examination of the role of semantic features is found in the work of Laskaratou (1984; 1989), which is a corpus-based statistical analysis of word order patterns. She found that "the clause positions occupied by NP constituents are not arbitrary but rather determined by (and to some extent predictable from) certain tendencies" such as definiteness, anaphoricity, categorial complexity, and size. The data confirm, for example, the preference of Modern Greek for end-focus (which Mackridge empirically observes in 1985:243). Laskaratou appeals to "the needs of communication" for what escapes the explanations given in her study. Moreover, her statistical approach is designed to examine what is probable or likely, not what can actually be found in a specific context.

Considerations of the textual context are taken into account by Valioli, who links "right dislocations" to particular communicative functions such as the foregrounding or highlighting of the new information contained in the predication (1990:146). She further argues that

"antitopics are basically presentational constructions which are used for . . . the presentation of a familiar discourse topic . . . through which the speaker succeeds in foregrounding new information by presenting it as its natural development or exemplification" (1990:159).

Likewise, Sasse (1987) mentions Greek VS constructions as typical thetic statements. According to his theoretical discussion of the thetic vs. categoric distinction, thetic utterances are found at those points of the discourse when compact information is required; categoric ones occur when information is built up in successive bits. Thus a particular word order pattern of Greek (VS) is related to the method of text development and—at least indirectly—to discourse principles such as the foreground-background distinction.

Finally, King (1990) must be also mentioned for the explicit reference to questions of register in his discussion of *as for* constructions in Greek and English. In his view, problems of word order are linked to the employment of rhetorical patterns and the active engagement of the writer in highlighting information or enhancing the clarity of relationships.

In short, it seems that Tzartanos's intuitive insights have not been followed by a systematic treatment of textual parameters in Greek word order. Apart from isolated examples of individual analyses, little work on Greek has explicitly addressed the issue of word order in a discourse perspective.

The placement of adjuncts in Greek

This lack of work in discourse conditions on word order phenomena is especially problematic when considering constituents with a less clearly 'fixed' position in the sentence, such as adjuncts (modal elements and adverbials). Joseph and Philippaki-Warbuton give a list of sentences with various "positional possibilities for adverbials" and remark that their basic meaning is the same, differing "only in emphasis and focus" (1987:40). Similarly, according to Mackridge (1985), the position of adverbials in Greek shows a large measure of flexibility: adverbs or adverbial phrases may be placed in various positions in the clause. In his words, "it is difficult to generalize on this matter; but a characteristic position of an adverb of time, as also that of a sentential adverb is at the beginning of a clause" (1985:239).

In the rest of this paper, I discuss the placement of adjuncts by bringing evidence from an experiment with parallel texts in English and Greek. According to a methodological approach common to Contrastive Analysis (Hartmann 1981), parallel texts—i.e., alternative versions of a text in different languages—may provide a suitable empirical basis

for comparing these languages. The data for this study belong to a specific type of parallel texts which comprises a source-language text and translations of it by different authors. The source-language text comes from the first pages of an introductory volume of a Political Studies handbook entitled *Masters of Political Thought* (used in Hoey 1991:78, 246). The texts for comparison are five translations into Greek, the target-language. The translators were native speakers of Greek and had a near-native proficiency in English, but none of them had any experience in professional translation. (A detailed discussion of the texts can be found in Goutsos 1992.)

The underlying assumption in using these texts was that inexperienced translators, even if they were fluent speakers of both languages, would take sentence equivalence as a default and avoid deviations from the original construction whenever that was allowed in structural terms. The translating task was designed on the basis of this premise. Thus the translators were not given specific instructions in advance about the task or the purpose of the study. Furthermore, time restrictions were conducive to adopting a word-for-word approach to the translation of the quite long original text (40 sentences, 1240 words in total).

The analysis that follows concentrates on cases in which the translated texts differ from the original and from each other.¹ According to the assumption above, any instances of deviations—i.e., structures which could have been translated “as they are in the original” but *were not*—have a special significance and are in need of an explanation. The aim is not to evaluate different translations but to understand the motivations of different solutions to the same translational problems posed by the source text.

Text strategies in the fronting of adjuncts

Not surprisingly, since English and Greek are not notably dissimilar in structural terms, the assumption of equivalence held true in the majority of translated clauses. However, the comparison of the parallel texts indicated a number of cases in which the linearization of textual elements differs from the original.

One of the most common alterations in the Greek translations involved fronting of adjuncts which were non-initial in the original. This could undoubtedly reflect a certain tendency in Greek to place adverbials at the beginning, their “characteristic position.” At the same time, this movement seems to stem from text-strategic considerations; in other words, it should be seen as the product of choices that the text-producer (in this case, the translator) makes to attain specific communicative goals (cf. Enkvist 1987).

First, the fronting of adjuncts is an effective means of handling the staging relations of the clause elements, i.e., the discourse presentation of constituents that indicates the speaker's perspective (Grimes 1975). For instance, in the translation of E.12: *I will indeed stake my credit on the assertion that . . .*, where the modality of the clause is further emphasized by indeed, two options are followed by the translators: they make the emphasis explicit either by shifting the verb into the present tense and by using explicit lexis (G2.12: *pi'stevo a'kraðanta 'oti* [= I believe firmly that . . .], G3.16: *kano tin aksiopi'stia mu na eksart'jete a'po* [= I make my credibility rely on], G5.15: *stiçima'tizo tin ipoli'psi mu me* [= I stake my reputation on]) or by fronting the modal element (G1.16: *stin praymati kotita iposti'rizo 'oti* [= in fact I claim that . . .], G4.12: *'praymati tha diakinði'nefso tin aksiopi'stia* [= indeed I will stake the credibility of. . .]).

A similar case concerns the translation of E.6: *[Very often after a long passage has been quoted] a single point only has been selected . . .* The Greek dictionary equivalent for both *single* and *only* is (in this context) the form: *'mono*. Translators following a narrow view of equivalence would thus have the choice of using the same form twice or once only. All translations follow the second solution. The resulting de-emphasization is compensated for in G4.6 by fronting only: *'mono 'ena si'mio . . .* [= only one point . . .].

There are a few more cases which involve what Halliday (1985) calls interpersonal elements, that is, elements whose main role relates to the attitude of the speaker (or writer) and the hearer (or reader) toward the message expressed. In E.24: *But this is certainly not the advantage . . .* two translations front the modal; G1.27 has: *a'la 'siçyura* and G3.29 has: *aptin 'ali* [= on the other hand] *asfa'los*. Here Halliday's remark (1985:58) with regard to modal and conjunctive adjuncts is relevant; he observes that these elements tend to come at the beginning because it is natural for the speakers to make their own angle of judgment the "point of departure" or theme for the clause.

Fronting, however, is also found with textual elements, i.e., elements whose meaning is related to the context (either as the preceding and following text or as context of situation). That is the case, e.g., in G1.6 where: E.4: *I have tried rather . . .* is given as: *Ka'ta 'vasi pro'spaθisa*, by which the cohesion of the sentence to the rest of the text becomes more explicit. In G5.5: *peri'sotero 'ine* translates: E.3: *It is rather*, and in G1.42: *'siçyura tha peri'orize* renders E.9: *he would certainly confine*. The same happens in G3.10, in which the temporal adjunct precedes the additive conjunction: *po'les fo'res e'pisis*, for E.6: *and sometimes*.

Interestingly enough, the management of staging relations seems to provide the motivation in the few cases of moving adjuncts toward the

end of the clause. For instance, G3.14 has: *kapjos 'omos pu . . .* for: E:10: *but a man who . . .* and G1.35 translates: E.32: *Of course it is true that . . .* as: *'ine a'liθia, fisi'ka, 'oti . . .* In the latter example the placement of the adjunct in second position results in the fronting of an element with a role similar to that of modals, the verbal group *'ine a'liθia*, which carries the attitudinal stance of the speaker.

In short, although language-specific preferences seem to influence the word order configurations in the translated texts (fronted adverbials are an unmarked option for Greek in contrast to English), the placement of adjuncts is influenced by text-strategic motivations. The factors discussed so far include the relative prominence of elements within the sentence and the textual context in which the sentences occur. Thus, fronted adjuncts provide an interpretative framework for the rest of the sentence by grounding the main predication in the speaker's attitude. This function is attributed in Halliday's (1985) framework to "thematic" elements, which provide a point of departure for the message that follows. It is also consistent with the observations of Firbas's (1992) model of Functional Sentence Perspective about the role of adverbials, according to which fronted adverbials serve as settings, carrying the lowest degree of communicative dynamism. In this sense, the fronting of adjuncts in the translated texts would be a case of aligning the linear arrangement of sentence constituents with their interpretative arrangement (starting from those which make the least contribution to the forwarding of communication).²

However, global motivations also play a crucial role in the placement of adjuncts. The role of the larger textual context can be seen in a number of constructions (traditionally related, at least in English, to the interplay of word order, prominence, and information distribution—constructions such as impersonal projections (Halliday's term, 1985:246), e.g., E.8: *it is part of the plan of the book to concentrate attention on . . .* Whereas G4.8 and G5.11 simply transfer the structure of the original, the other translators opt for a non-equivalent structure. So G2.8 puts emphasis on *attention* by placing ("raising") it before the infinitive:

G2.8: *apote'li 'meros . . . i proso'xi na epikentro'θi*
is part . . . the attention to be concentrated

The "projected" structure is abandoned altogether in a more natural version, namely G3.18, in which the main parts are related with an identifying structure:

vasi'kos 'stoxos . . . 'itan i sin'kentrosi tis proso'xis
basic plan . . . was the concentration of attention

Most interestingly, in G1.12 the construction which substitutes for the original has a fronted adverbial. Thus the first part of E.8 becomes less prominent and the second part is turned into a finite clause as the main focus of attention:

- G1.12: *‘simfona me ti ‘silipsi . . . ‘δinete ‘emfasi*
 according to the plan . . . is-given emphasis

Here the placement of the adjunct at the beginning of the clause is not only motivated by considerations of the interpretative arrangement of the sentence itself but also by the text-strategic role of the sentence in the surrounding text. The fronted adjunct indicates a textual shift to a new topic. Clearly, it is not a coincidence that E.8 occurs within a paragraph-initial sentence.

A similar structure is the *wh*-cleft, which appears at the beginning of the original text (E.1). Here the translator has to find an analogous structure for the cleft and, at the same time, to make explicit the subject of the infinitive. G5.1 and G4.1 preserve the cleft structure but assign different subjects to the infinitive:

- E.1: *What is attempted in the foll. volume*
 G5.1/4.1: *A‘fto pu epixi‘rite ston ep. ‘tomo*

- is to present . . . a series*
 G5.1: *‘ine na parusi‘asi3SG mja si‘raOBJ*
 G4.1: *‘ine na parusia‘sti3SG.PASS mja si‘raSUBJ*

On the other hand, in G2.1 and G3.1 the adverbial (*in the following volume*) is moved to the front and the predicated theme (*to present*) follows as a subject of the “impersonal” finite verb:

- G2.1: *ston ‘tomo epixi‘rite na parusia‘sti mja si‘ra*
 in the volume is-attempted to presentPASS a seriesSUBJ
 G3.1: *i parú’siasi mjas si’ras*
 the presentationSUBJ of a series

The fronted adjunct provides a local context for the interpretation of what follows and the VS word structure emphasizes the presentational character of the sentence.³ At the same time, the translated, syntactically non-equivalent construction would be required to achieve an equivalent function of topic-introduction to that achieved by the *wh*-cleft in the English text. We can assume, therefore, that the fronting of adverbials is motivated precisely by this need, i.e., to introduce a new topic segment in the text as a whole. The role of the adverbial becomes more apparent if we compare this translation to the one in G1.1:

- G1.1: *O 'tomos pu akoluθi epixi'ri*
 the volume that follows attempts
na parusi'asi ston ana'ynosti mja si'ra
 to present3SG.OBJ to the reader a seriesOBJ

The choice of a simple SVO active sentence differs from the translation with a fronted adverbial in terms of prominence: here, the first element of the original (*what is attempted*) is de-thematized completely. However, there is a more important difference in the degree to which the transition into a new topic is smoothly achieved. The adverbial functions as a framing introduction not only to the rest of the clause but also to the rest of the new topic and to the text as a whole.

A similar interplay of strategies can be seen in E.18: *A view prevalent in earlier ages would have provided a simple answer to this question*. The role of the sentence in its surrounding (textual) context affects the word order in translation. While three translators copy the original construction, two translations have a fronted adverbial that results in highlighting what belongs to the rheme of the original (*a simple answer*):

- E.18: *A view . . . would have provided a simple answer*

- G1.22: *Simfona me mja 'apopsi, i'parxi mja a'pli a'pantisi*
 According to a view . . . , there-is a simple answer

- G3.13: *Vasi mjas 'apopsis . . . i a'pantisi . . . tha 'itan a'pli*
 according to a view . . . the answer . . . would be simple

This translation with fronted adverbials has both a local and a global motivation; the latter relates to the requirement for topic-shift and the signaling of a new segment of Solution following the segment of Problem in the previous text (E.17: *What, then, is the advantage which we may hope to derive from a study of the political writers of the past?*).

In sum, differences in linearization between the original and the translations seem to be motivated—apart from the need to highlight (or downgrade) individual items—by considerations of the larger context. The text-strategy of fronting adjuncts aims at indicating textual shifts (introduction of a new topic or shift to a new rhetorical segment). Initial adverbials thus play a significant role in signaling the organization of the text.

Concluding remarks

This paper has explored some ways in which word order phenomena in Modern Greek can be related to the discourse conditions that allow for their occurrence. The role of initial adjuncts has been linked

to local and global requirements—more specifically, to the management of staging or perspective relations within the sentence, the creation of a point of departure according to the interpretative arrangement, the signaling of textual shifts. This multifunctional role of initial adjuncts has also been observed in other languages (Virtanen 1992). The frequency of fronted adjuncts in Greek would seem to imply that this is a fairly conventional text-strategic convention which fulfills both local and global requirements of textualization. The significance of such conventions should be assessed within a broader theoretical framework of discourse-topic strategies (see Goutsos 1994).

Textual considerations undoubtedly arise from interactional needs. The fronting of adjuncts seems to be intuitively related to a politeness strategy by which the reader is gradually introduced to the main predication after the setting of the scene or the presentation of the speaker's attitude.⁴ For this reason, the discussion about the motivation of word order patterns is incomplete without investigating textual acceptance. Specific judgments of Greek speakers on preference of some patterns against others are necessary to determine the function of textual strategies.

Certainly, data from translated texts can provide only indirect evidence for discourse conditions on word order phenomena. The nature of these texts makes any generalization difficult, first, because it is not possible to exclude the possibility of "translationese" when texts are translated by people with no experience in professional translation, as in the data for this study, and, secondly, because it is difficult to assess the effect of lexical choices on word order patterns. Therefore, the claims made above with regard to the role of initial adjuncts must be tested upon a larger set of data from original texts. The analysis of large text corpora of Modern Greek with the techniques of Corpus Linguistics (an area which although still lagging behind in Greek has begun to show considerable development more recently) can provide invaluable insights (cf. Quirk 1984).

As a conclusion, I would like to suggest that textual or discourse parameters should not be "great unknowns" or "necessary evils" but should assume a central position in exploring issues of Greek word order. My analysis represents an initial approach to the explanatory potential of a textual perspective, according to which word order is a manifestation of text strategies or the outcome of a dynamic interaction among pragmatic principles, conventionalized rhetorical patterns, individual choices, and textual purposes.

NOTES

¹ The original is referred to as E, followed by the number of the sentence in question. For the Greek texts, G is followed by the number of the translated text (1–5) and the number of the specific sentence (separated by a period).

² The convergence of functional frameworks in the interpretation of textual phenomena is observed in Goutsos, n.d.

³ It must be noted that the opting for an adverbial at the beginning of the clause actually restricts the “free” choice of word order in what follows: the verb cannot but immediately follow.

⁴ In their study of linguistic politeness, Brown and Levinson stress the importance of organization and ordering of linguistic expressions for the achievement of politeness (1987:93) but do not provide a detailed discussion of relevant strategies.

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