

The emergence of the Greek definite article

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This paper examines the distribution, semantics and grammatical status of the definite article in Modern Greek. It argues that the definite article in Modern Greek is an article of the Second Stage (following the typology of Greenberg 1978), which has started to acquire features of a Third Stage article.

If we compare it with definite articles in other European languages (e.g. in Italian, in English) we can easily discern differences in their distribution.

Definite articles in Modern Greek present an extended obligatoriness, which is not observed in other European languages, e.g. the definite article in Modern Greek is obligatory before proper names, when they are used in subject position:

- (1) *O Jannis troi* ‘John eats’
Art. N V

While in Italian: *Gianni mangia* ‘John eats’, in English: *John eats*, in French: *Jean mange*.

Since Greenberg (1978) introduced the typology of the Three Stages for definite articles and of the “cycle of the definite article”, several studies have shown that the evolution of deictic elements in definite articles is a well-attested case of grammaticalization (e.g. Selig 1992, Himmelmann 1997, Laury 1997, Epstein 1993, Diessel 1999, Lehmann 2004).

The purpose of the present investigation is to discuss the evolution of the Greek definite article and to describe its synchronic status in relation to its diachronic “journey”. The investigation examines corpora of texts from every period of the Greek language (Classical Greek, Hellenistic Greek, Medieval Greek, Modern Greek). The questions raised are:

- What were the contextual pressures that gave rise to the grammaticalization of deictic elements into articles, already in Homeric language? Was the anamnestic use (anamnestischer Gebrauch) a decisive factor in this development, as Himmelmann (1997) suggests?
- Is the definite article in the language of the “New Testament” – where we find the roots of the Modern Greek language – a typical article of Greenberg’s Second Stage?
- Is the Modern Greek article more grammaticalized than the English, French and Italian definite articles, or does it, like them, belong to Greenberg’s Stage I, as Lyons (1999) proposes?

More general theoretical issues are also discussed such as:

- Are articles “useless ballast” and “old rubbish” as Gardiner (1932) described them (cited in Chesterman 1991, 4), or are they “another ineffable category in the grammar”, as Halliday (1988) suggests (cited in Chesterman 1991, 205)?
- Can an examination of Greek data confirm Chesterman’s (1991) formulation that “if grammar is indeed ‘frozen pragmatics’, it appears to freeze in different languages at different temperatures. And one area where this is most evident is precisely the expression of definiteness”?

The investigation draws on the theory of grammaticalization and more specifically on the theory of “Emergent Grammar” (Hopper 1987, 1988).

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