It seems transitive…:
Two case studies questioning subjecthood in Ancient Greek

Liana Tronci (University for Foreigners of Siena)

This paper aims to investigate two phenomena of the verbal morphosyntax of Ancient Greek that seem to be unrelated but, as I will argue, turn out to be similar as both serve as evidence for the loss of subjecthood properties. The two phenomena under consideration are (1) detransitivizing strategies such as possessives, benefactives, etc. which, despite being biargumental structures, exhibit the same verbal morphology (middle inflection) as intransitive structures like passives and anticausatives; (2) syntactic structures with neuter subjects that do not exhibit the expected subject-verb agreement. These two types of structures have not been given special attention in previous studies. The former has been explored in studies dedicated to middle syntax and/or the middle semantic domain (Rijksbaron 2002, Allan 2003, Benedetti 2005, 2017, Tronci 2005, 2018), while the latter has been examined by scholars interested in reconstructing agreement patterns in Indo-European (see Fleischer, Rieken & Widmer 2015). However, there are no existing corpus-based accounts on these phenomena.

This paper seeks to fill the gap, by providing a corpus-based account of the two phenomena across three stages of Ancient Greek—Archaic, Classical and Koine Greek. The corpus comprises three texts: Homeric poems for Archaic Greek, a selection of works by Herodotus and Xenophon for Classical Greek, and the Gospels for Koine Greek. The goal of the corpus analysis is to identify the verbs involved in these constructions along with their subjects, and then analyse their syntactic combination in terms of lexical and semantic features. Specifically, I aim to examine whether there are classes of lexical items typically associated with these two types of constructions and explore their semantic features. For detransitivizing constructions, I expect results related to agency, volitionality, affectedness and individuation of the object, based on the parameters of low transitivity outlined by Hopper & Thompson (1980). Conversely, concerning agreement patterns, I expect results related to animacy and individuation of the subject. In broader terms, this research will contribute to the ongoing debate on subjecthood and subject properties (see Cotticelli & Dahl 2022) by introducing new data from Ancient Greek.

References

Allan, Rutger J. (2003), The middle voice in Ancient Greek. A study in polysemy, Amsterdam: Gieben.

Benedetti, Marina (2005), Dispersioni formali del medio indoeuropeo, in Lidia Costamagna & Stefania Giannini (eds.), *Acquisizione e mutamento di categorie linguistiche. Atti del Convegno della Società Italiana di Glottologia (Perugia, 23–25 ottobre 2003)*, Roma: Il Calamo, 95–119.

Cotticelli, Paola and Eystein Dahl (2022), Argument alternation and non-canonical argument marking in some archaic Indo-European languages, in Eystein Dahl (ed.), *Alignment and Alignment Change in the Indo-European Family*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 64–122.

Fleischer, Jürg, Elisabeth Rieken & Paul Widmer (2015), Introduction: the diachrony of agreement, in Jürg Fleischer, Elisabeth Rieken & Paul Widmer (eds.), *Agreement from a Diachronic Perspective*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1–26.

Hopper, Paul & Sandra Thompson (1980), Transitivity in Grammar and Discourse. *Language* 56/2, 251–299.

Rijksbaron, Albert (2002 [1984]), *The syntax and semantics of the verb in Classical Greek: An introduction*, 3rd edition, Amsterdam: Gieben.

Tronci, Liana (2005), *Gli aoristi con -(ϑ)η-: uno studio sulla morfosintassi verbale del greco antico*, Perugia: Guerra Edizioni.

Tronci, Liana (2018), Aorist voice patterns in the diachrony of Greek. The New Testament as a sample of Koine, *Journal of Greek Linguistics* 18/2, 241–280.