What’s the generalization? Challenges from Cypriot clitic placement

Cypriot Greek is one of the dialects of Greek that figure prominently in the research on object clitic placement, an issue that continues to be of interest to scholars (Terzi 1999, Condoravdi and Kiparsky 2001, Pappas 2004, Revithiadou 2006). Its prominent role is due to the fact that it is the most robustly used dialect among the few extant ones that follow the pattern of mixed clitic placement of Medieval Greek in which object clitic pronouns may appear either before or after the verb as seen in examples (1) and (2).

The explanations for this pattern fall into two categories: purely syntactic ones in which the position of the pronoun is determined by verb movement (Agouraki 1997, Terzi 1999) and syntactic-prosodic accounts (Condoravdi and Kiparsky 2001, Revithiadou 2006) in which the final position of the pronoun is determined by some kind of prosodic filter. However, there is no clear agreement among researchers as to what the facts of clitic placement in Cypriot actually are; this lack of consensus is not surprising since the linguistic situation in Cyprus is quite complex and most speakers use a large repertoire of lects which range from the most basilectal or ‘village’ Cypriot to Standard Modern Greek (Terkourafi 2005).

In this paper we will present the results of a variationist analysis of object pronoun placement in Modern Cypriot Greek based on a database of vernacular Cypriot Greek that has been constructed from 48 sociolinguistic interviews with participants from the central and southeastern parts of Cyprus. The analysis of the data shows that the pattern of pronoun placement is much more complex than previously thought, and in our presentation we will focus on two important aspects of this complexity:

Contrary to existing claims in the literature, it will be shown that focused elements are not necessarily associated with preverbal pronoun placement; overt subject pronouns, which are used for emphasis, appear with postverbal as well as preverbal pronouns (example 3).

A small set of function words (four complementizers and one negative marker) is predominantly associated with postverbal pronoun placement (examples 1, 4). This pattern has not been reported before in the literature and in fact none of the previous accounts of clitic placement in Cypriot Greek can account for it. Data from older speakers show that this is not a case of incipient change as this pattern has existed for at least 40 years and appears to be stable.

Based on this evidence, I will argue that there is a limit to what generalizations can achieve as regards this specific pattern. As has been the case with other studies (e.g. Jackendoff 2008), the pattern seen in Cypriot object clitic placement suggests that there exists a continuum of productivity that ranges from lexical idiosyncrasies to grammar-wide rules.
Examples

(1) oti leyan tin
    that say–3pl.past she–acc.sg
    “[he said] that they called her …”

(2) pos tin epirame
    that she–acc.sg take–1pl.past
    “[he said] that we took her …”

(3a) emis lalume to
    we say–1pl.pres. it–acc.sg
    “we call it …”

(3b) eyo ton iða
    I he–acc.sg see–1sg.past
    “I saw him …”

(4) endyε troi , tus lefta
    NEG eat–3sg.pres he–acc.pl money
    “she does not waste their money”

References


