Linguistic constraints on causal content:
The case of Modern Greek markers☆

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Abstract

The current paper sets out to explore finely grained distinctions in causal meaning. In this sense, it focuses on the two prototypical, monolexemic exponents of causal subordination in Modern Greek (MG), i.e. *yiati* and *epeiδi*, in a diversity of contextual applications. Interestingly, the translation counterpart of both markers in the corresponding contexts in English is *because*. However, despite initial readings, it transpires that the two Modern Greek connectives display distinct distributional regularities. Exposing the finer distinctions in causal interpretation requires a theoretical model of meaning analysis that warrants sharp observations of meaning in context. To this effect, the relevance-theoretic machinery is implemented. It is shown that a rigorous and realistic account of the two causal markers can be secured by exploiting the full range of distinctions in meaning drawn in this framework: conceptual/procedural, explicit/implicit and truth-conditional/non-truth-conditional. In this connection, then, the current study also outlines the types of encoded constraint contributing to the determination of the divide between semantic and pragmatic content.
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1. Introduction

In a bid to establish the interface between semantic and pragmatic aspects of utterance interpretation, pragmatic research appears to have tipped the scales in favour of a thorough examination of contrast markers like *but*, largely overlooking the contribution that causal content may also make in this direction. Blakemore's (2002:83) comment on the industry that *but* has created among semanticists is no coincidence. To counter-balance this disequilibrium, the current work draws attention to a number of interesting facts about causal meaning. More specifically, we will concentrate on prototypical,[1] monolexemic exponents of causal subordination, e.g. *because*.

To pick up the thread from the original investigation of these connectives within a pragmatic framework explicating meaning divergences from their logical counterparts, we need to pay our dues to Grice's (1989) theory of implicature. Grice focused mainly on co-ordinate conjunction ('and', 'but', 'therefore', etc.) disregarding subordination. In fact, causal expression seems to be a glaring omission in Grice's observations of propositional vs. non-propositional meaning, with the exception of *therefore*, which, however, differs from subordinating markers, in that its application is external to the clause that follows it, i.e. it does not introduce a non-finite clause. On account of this omission, the Gricean perspective

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inevitably misses the varieties of causal subordination in context (Sweetser, 1990). What is more, the varieties of a single marker, say *because*, in English, may be variously encoded in another language. In this paper, we can note the widely acknowledged cross-linguistic variation of causal meaning expressed by connective markers (as compared to the English language), but whether this linguistic variation is based on cross-cultural variation or whether there is an interdependence between the two levels of language and culture in this respect is a matter of investigation yet to be undertaken. What is clearly the case, however, is that for a description of causal meaning to count as reliable, it is essential that it captures the range of distinctions in meaning in any given language or across languages.

Turning now to our more specific topic, Modern Greek affords more than one typically applied, though not necessarily intersubstitutable subordinating markers of cause: *ɣiati* and *epeiδi*.[2] Interestingly enough, both markers are standardly translated as *because* in English. There is, thus, the temptation of an account merging the two cases into a single category of causal meaning. Nevertheless, a thorough inspection presents evidence lending support to a differentiating treatment. In fact, this type of variation in causal encoding is not unique to the MG language. Similar variations that also call for a differentiating treatment apply in French, German and Dutch. Consider, for instance, the French case of *car* vs. *parce que*, the German *weil* and *denn* and the Dutch *omdat*, *daar*, *doordad*, discussed in Maat and Sanders (2000), Pit (2003), Degand and Fagard (2012), Sanders and Stukker (2012), Zufferey (2012), to mention but a portion of the work done in this direction (though from a perspective that we will not be taking in the current paper, that of relational coherence and subjectivity).

This paper singles out and examines the divergent functions that the MG connectives serve in discourse, in light of the differentiated contributions that they make to either the semantic or the pragmatic aspect of communication. To this end, a theoretical apparatus is required that can observe sharp distinctions in causal meaning. We will, thus, deploy the relevance-theoretic (Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2012) model of meaning analysis and evaluate the claims of reliability that it makes in this regard. To be more precise, we will take on board the range of distinctions in meaning commonly drawn within the relevance-theoretic tradition in determining the semantics/pragmatics of discourse markers: conceptual vs. procedural, explicit vs. implicit and truth-conditional vs. non-truth conditional (Blakemore, 2002; Carston, 2002).

In short, our undertaking involves pursuing the following set of aims: (a) a relevance-based refined account of the finer specifications of MG causal markers *ɣiati* and *epeiδi*, (b) addressing the contribution of these finer specifications of cause to a reappraisal of what constitutes conceptual/procedural import in the relevance-theoretic framework (therefore, also, a reappraisal of the divide between semantic/pragmatic aspects of utterance interpretation), and c) illustrating the extent to which relevance theory can measure up to the requirements of a thorough description of causal interpretation in a range of contexts.

At the outset, our enterprise familiarizes the reader with the two Modern Greek subordinators under investigation (section 2.1) and lays the foundation for a relevance-theoretic account (section 2.2). In the course of this discussion, we set out the criterion for a differentiated causal analysis in terms of a conceptual and procedural treatment of the two connectives of Modern Greek. Our description in either conceptual or procedural terms takes the distinction between truth-conditional and non-truth-conditional meaning as a working point of reference. In this respect, the section that follows (section 3.1) sets out to determine truth-conditional in association with conceptual content within causal expression. In this line of investigation, we also distinguish the type of context that is non-truth-conditional and, thus, resists a conceptual characterization (sections 3.2 and 3.3); hence, the requirement for an alternative procedural treatment. Given the variegated import of causal encoding, the additional relevance-theoretic distinction between explicit and implicit communication comes onto the descriptive stage. Thus, procedural operations are defined in terms of explicit content, which in turn, is subcategorized based on both levels of explicitness: higher-order and base-order explicatures. On this stipulation of cross-cutting meaning distinctions, we ultimately investigate the extent to which the distinction between conceptual and procedural encoding may coincide with that between truth-conditional and non-truth conditional causal meaning. Finally, we consider the implications (in the relevance-theoretic literature on *because*) of proposing a differentiating analysis of causal content in either conceptual or procedural terms (section 3.4).

Let us begin with our promised introduction to the distributional regularities of MG *ɣiati* and *epeiδi*.

2. Introduction to Modern Greek *ɣiati* and *epeiδi*

At first sight, the two most widely applied exponents of MG causal subordination, i.e. *ɣiati* and *epeiδi* appear synonymous and, therefore, interchangeable in context. However, upon closer inspection they prove to display distinct

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[2] We will be using the orthographic rather than the phonetic transliteration of the two MG markers, in line with Kitis's paradigm in her 1994 and her 2006 papers, which constitute the first attempt to offer a distinction in MG causal meaning against the backdrop of grammaticalization and subjective/objective meaning.