

Roots and argument structure alternations in Greek from an Indo-European perspective

The concept of a category-less “root” has been at the center of much recent theoretical work in morphology. For instance, in models such as Distributed Morphology (see, among others, Embick & Marantz 2008) or the approach of Borer (see, for instance, Borer 2013), the lexicon consists of atomic, non-decomposable roots that are further categorized (for instance, as verbal or nominal and transitive or intransitive) by functional elements or the syntactic context.

In this study, we examine the role of roots (from an Indo-European perspective) in the causative-anticausative alternations of Greek. The causative verbs refer to a causal relationship between two events: they express the meaning ‘cause to V_0 ’, whereas V_0 denotes the anticausative (non-causative) member of the alternation (Kühne 1882, Hildebrand 1889, Kulikov 2013). We will support the view that roots do not restrict meaning in these cases. This means that roots can be analyzed as phonological packets with indices to semantic interpretations in different contexts (Borer 2014). Accordingly, any root can appear in a causative-anticausative alternation. For instance, this holds for Homeric Greek, where any root can participate in a causative-anticausative pair. For a causative-anticausative pair to emerge, there is only a need for additional material in the form of: (i) an alternation between active (for causatives) and middle (for anticausatives) suffixes, such as $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\text{-}\omega$ ‘I cause to hope, I give hope’ and $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\text{-}\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ ‘I hope’ (Author 2009); (ii) an alternation of the root vowel $-o-$ (for causatives) and $-e-$ (for anticausatives) as in $\phi\omicron\beta\text{-}$ ‘terrify’ and $\phi\epsilon\beta\text{-}$ ‘panic, flee in terror’. These forms follow the suffix of the common Indo-European present causative ($*\text{-eye/o-}$ suffix and o -grade in the root); or (c) a reduplicated form, as with (anticausative) $\lambda\alpha\nu\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\omega$ ‘I escape the notice of’ and (causative) $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\text{-}\lambda\alpha\text{-}\theta\omicron\nu$ ‘I make to forget’ (cf. the Vedic causative aorists with i -reduplication; Kulikov 2008, 2013).

Following Borer (2014), we argue that if there is no contextual categorization of a root (no categorizer), both (causative and anticausative) derivations can be possible. This is the case of labile verbs in Classical and (mainly) post-Classical Greek, where the active suffix—and the contrast between active and middle suffixes—does not result in a causative interpretation. Moreover, in Classical and post-Classical Greek, the alternation of the root vowel or the reduplication described above are not productive anymore. Accordingly, the post-Classical $\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\text{-}\omega$ has a causative reading if it appears with an animate direct object in the accusative case ($\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\text{-}\omega$ ‘I cause to hope’) but has an anticausative reading if it appears without an object ($\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\text{-}\omega$ ‘I hope’).

References

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