

Polydefinites in Modern Greek: When restrictive interpretation fails

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Abstract

In what follows, I discuss a number of cases of polydefinites that unexpectedly give rise to a non-restrictive interpretation in Modern Greek. It is shown that in most of the cases identified as problematic in the literature, a clear line of explanation can be pursued.

1. *The case of eksipnos*

One of the well-known examples that have been used in the literature as an exception to the restrictive interpretation of polydefinites involves the adjective *eksipnos* 'smart'. The relevant example is shown below:

- 1) O eksipnos o aderfos mu pige telika
the smart the brother my went finally
'My wise-ass brother went in the end'

There are two problems with the above. The first one is the apparent non-restrictive interpretation. The second problem is that the semantics of the polydefinite are not compositional, i.e. the meaning we get is not of 'my smart brother', but rather 'my brother the wise-ass' or 'my brother that pretends to be smart but he is not'. Thus, in this case, we do not only have to explain the non-restrictive interpretation but presumably the semantic deviance as well.

In trying to see what is happening in this case, the first thing we observe is the fact that this kind of polydefinites have some properties that are not in general shared by other polydefinites. Perhaps, the most interesting one concerns word order, in the sense that in cases like (42) the polydefinite can be actually split by the intervention of other material between the *det + N* and the *det + A* construction:

- 2) O aderfos mu pige telika o eksipnos
the brother my went finally the smart
'My wise-ass brother went in the end'

Contrast this, with the ungrammaticality of other polydefinites:

- 3) *I gates pinusan telika i mikres
the cats were.hungry finally the small
'Intended: The small cats were hungry'

Note that this is a general fact of close appositions as the following ungrammatical example shows:

- 4) *O Papadopulos ekane megali zimia sti xora o diktatoras
the Papadopoulos did big harm to-the country the dictator
'Intended: Papadopoulos, the dictator did great harm to the country'

This is in fact reminiscent of the behaviour of epithets (Higginbotham 1985, Lasnik and Stowell 1991 among others), which show a strange behaviour reminiscent of R-expressions, being subject to principle C. The relevant examples from Greek exemplify this behaviour:

- 5) *O ilithios_i nomizi oti i Maria agapai ton Gian_i
the idiot thinks that the Mary loves the John
'Intended: The idiot thinks that Mary loves John'
- 6) I aderfi tu Giorgu_i lei oti telika tin patise o ilithios_i
the sister the George says that in-the-end her stepped the idiot
'George's sister says that the idiot fell for it in the end'

In (45), the epithet *c*-commands its antecedent but this nor its opposite (the antecedent *c*-commanding the epithet) happens in (46). The first is ungrammatical, the second it is not. Now, back to our case, we can easily see that cases like *o eksipnos aderfos mu* can have a similar behaviour with *o eksipnos* functioning as an epithet (thus an R-expression) and *o aderfos mu* as a regular R-expression:

- 7) *O eksipnos_i nomizi oti i Maria agapai ton Gian_i
the idiot thinks that the Mary loves the John
'Intended: The idiot thinks that Mary loves John'
- 8) I aderfi tu Giorgu_i lei oti telika tin patise o ekspinos_i
the sister the George says that finally her stepped the smart
'George's sister says that the wise-ass fell for it in the end'

Thus, in these cases the construction is not really a polydefinite and consequently a close apposition but rather consist of an epithet and its antecedent. In this respect, the expected behaviour of polydefinites should not apply in these cases, according to fact. Of course, such examples remain to be explained but this can be done once a theory for epithets is provided. Other adjectives can exhibit this behavior as well:

- 9) O kamenos o barman mas servire sketi vodka
the burnt the barman us served straight vodka
'The crazy barman served us straight vodka'

Again, in this case no restrictive interpretation arises and the interpretation of the adjective exhibits a deviation with respect to its standard meaning. Furthermore, the ordering facts are similar to these found with the case of *eksipnos*:

- 10) O barman mas servire sketi vodka o kamenos
the barman us served straight vodka the burnt
'The crazy barman served us straight vodka'

Other similar cases can be found with other adjectives like *anekdiigitos*, *terastios* 'indescribable' and 'huge' respectively. The exact range of the adjectives that can participate in this construction (as epithets) is not going to be studied here, but it is clear from the examples above that these cases are not instances of polydefinites, since they do not involve adjectives but rather epithets.

2. *Topic-shift signalling*

Other cases of polydefinites with where no-restrictive interpretation arises include cases like the one shown below. Note that these only make sense within the context of the previous discourse which is shown as well:

- 11) Context: O Giorgos ixē trīs mikrēs gates tis opies agapuse ke den apoxorizotan pote.
Parola afta, mia mera i mikrēs i gates to skasan
however one day the small the cats it ran
'George had three small cats that he loved and never parted with them. However, one day the small cats ran away.'
- 12) Context: O Giorgos ixē agorasi mia xrisi pena prin pola xronia ke me aftin sinithize na grafi gia pola xronia.
Mia mera, i xrisi i pena xathike os dia magias
one day the golden the pen disappeared like by magic
'Many years ago, George had bought a golden pen and used to write with it for many years. One day, the golden pen suddenly disappeared.'

We can make sense of the above examples, by assuming that polydefinites can be also used in order to signal a topic-shift. The above examples are clear examples of topic-shift, the adverbial *mia mera* 'one day' being prototypical example of expressions that are used in order to signal topic-shift in the literature on narrative discourse structure (see for example Costermans and Bestgen 1991; Zwaan 1996). Monadics are also valid in these environments. It is not clear to me whether there is any interpretational difference in these cases between monadics and

polydefinites. What the above examples show, is that polydefinites participating in topic-shift constructions can be interpreted non-restrictively.

3. *Low accessibility of the referent*

A further case, where a restrictive interpretation does not seem to arise with polydefinites, concerns examples like the following:

13) Ta megala ta ktiria pu su elega ine afta edo
the big the buildings that you told are these here
'The big buildings I was telling you about are these.'

14) To mikro to laptop pu agorasa ekane tin dulia
the small the laptop that bought did the work
'The small laptop I bought did the job.'

15) Ti omorfa pu ine ta mikra su ta pedakia!
What beautiful that are the small you the children
'How beautiful are your small children!'

In all the above cases, the polydefinite is most preferably interpreted as non-restrictive. Thus, in (53) there is no salient set of buildings that includes other buildings besides big ones, and in (54) there is no necessary assumption that the addressee has other children which are not young. Again, the question is how to make sense of this kind of data. Taking a closer look at all of the above examples, one notices that the DPs involved in the polydefinite are in fact long DPs, in the sense that they involve extra modifiers and not the adjective alone. In (53) and (54) a relative clause is involved, while in (55) a genitive clitic. Notice that the equivalent sentences without the use of the extra modifiers are not good on a non-restrictive interpretation:

16) ?Ta megala ta ktiria ine afta edo

17) ?To mikro to laptop ekane tin dulia

18) ?Ti omorfa pu ine ta mikra ta pedakia!

A way to understand this behaviour is via Ariel's accessibility theory (Ariel 1988, 1991 among others). According to accessibility theory, referring expressions form a scale according to the level of accessibility of their referent. Ariel further identifies three relevant factors for accessibility: a) informativity, b) rigidity and c) phonological size. Informativity pertains to the amount of lexical information about the referent is provided. Rigidity concerns the extent to which the expression can eliminate any alternative competitors for reference. Lastly, phonological size plainly refers to the phonological size of the expression as well as whether this bears a stress or not. The examples in (53)-(55) are more informative, rigid and phonological bigger versions of (56)-(58). In this respect, one can argue that use of polydefinites can be found non-restrictively in cases of very low referent accessibility. What is the limit in this case, and why regular DPs, which in a sense are already long DPs, do not have this ability to give rise to

non-restrictive polydefinites but further need other modifiers in order to get a non-restrictive interpretation, is something that cannot be precisely understood at least at the moment. Of course, the extreme informativity and rigidity in the case of (56)-(58) can be provided by the context. In case this happens, then cases like these can also be well-formed on a non-restrictive interpretation. Here is an example of how (56) can receive such an interpretation:

19) Context: There is a long discussion on a number of big buildings in a given city x. Then the two interlocutors reach these big buildings. One of the interlocutors then utters (56)

To recap, it seems that polydefinites can receive a non-restrictive interpretation if their referents are very low in terms of accessibility. In syntactic terms, this translates into long DPs having more chances to be compatible with non-restrictive interpretations of polydefinites. It is of course not very clear how a counting measure of accessibility can be given in this case, i.e. providing a definite measure above which non-restrictive interpretation arises, but however some clear cases of long DPs can be taken to be more prone to a non-restrictive interpretation than shorter DPs, given identical contextual information is at play in both cases.

4. *Some other cases*

Lastly, there are a number of instances where a non-restrictive interpretation arises with polydefinites and which seem a little bit harder to explain. One of these involves the case one shown below, where the name for the well-known landmark in Thessaloniki *lefkos pirkos* ‘white tower’ can appear in the form of a polydefinite. The following is a well-known football slogan from one of the football teams of the city that uses the aforementioned polydefinite is illustrative:

20) Paok, fere mas to kipelo ston pirkos ton lefko
Paok bring us the cup to-the tower the white
‘Paok, bring the cup to the white tower’

This behaviour has already been noted by a number of researchers (Manolessou 2000; Panagiotidis and Marinis 2011; Lekakou and Szendrői 2012 among others) as a case where a non-restrictive interpretation arises. It is true that proper names are compatible with polydefinites. Polydefinites are used with proper names in order to disambiguate when both the first and the last name are present:

21) I Maria i Papadopoulou ine fili mu
the Maria the Papadopoulou is friend my
‘Maria Papadopoulou is a friend of mine’

In the above example depending on context or stress, one of the two names functions as the subset of the other. For example, in the case where discussion is on different people having the

surname ‘Papadopoulou’, people named ‘Papadopoulou’ act as the superset, that is then restricted by the name ‘Maria’, i.e. a specific individual named both ‘Maria’ and ‘Papadopoulou’. In this case, the name ‘Maria’ plays the role that in polydefinite constructions is played by the adjective. Similarly in a different context where the discussion is about a number of females named ‘Maria’, the sentence in (61) has a different interpretation where people named ‘Maria’ acts as the superset, while people named ‘Papadopoulou’ as the subset. In both cases however, the behaviour is the expected restrictive behaviour associated with polydefinites. In the case of (60) nothing of this sort happens, as the interpretation is purely non-restrictive on the reading where the polydefinite refers to the specific landmark. The question is whether this type of polydefinites are productive or are just limited to the example in case. Similar cases of landmarks involving an A + N construction include *to prasino akrotiri* ‘cape verde’, *o efksinos pontos* ‘the black sea’, *o kitrinos potamos* ‘the yellow river’ among others. However, in these cases polydefinites are not that good:

22) ??Den exo pai ston efksino ton ponto
 not have gone to-the hospitable the sea
 ‘I’m going to the Black Sea’

23) ??O Giorgos katagete apo to prasino to akrotiri
 the George comes from the green the cape
 ‘George is from Cape Verde’

24) ??I Kinezi katevikan ston kitrino ton potamo gia na diamartirithun
 the Chinese came-down to-the yellow the river for SUBJ protest

Furthermore, in the above cases the adjectives can be also argued to form compounds with the nouns they modify, given that the semantics are not compositional.¹ For example, *to prasino akrotiri*, does not mean a cape that is green, *kitrinos potamos*, does not mean a river which is yellow etc. It seems in this respect, that this kind of polydefinites are not a productive part of the language, and in this sense, the proposal by Lekakou and Szendrői (2012) that such cases can be vestiges of an older restrictive usage, where *lefkos pirogos* had in effect a compositional meaning, distinguishing it from other towers via its colour does not seem implausible. Note that in order to get examples (62)-(64) to be grammatical, one must set the context in a way that allows a restrictive interpretation:

25) Ston efksino ton ponto den exo pai, ston aksino ne.
 to-the welcoming the sea not have gone to-the hostile yes
 ‘I have not been to the welcoming sea, but rather to the inhospitable one.’

¹ This has been already argued to be the case for a number of relational adjectives by Ralli and Stavrou (1998).

In the above example, the speaker uses the polydefinite that the black sea (lit: welcoming sea) is not really hospitable but rather inhospitable. The polydefinite is used to denote that the sea the speaker went is not the welcoming one from an imaginary set where two versions of the sea, one hospitable and one inhospitable exist, in effect a restrictive interpretation. It is plausible then to assume that cases of polydefinites like *o lefkos o pirgos* are not a productive part of the language, and polydefinites do not normally appear with this type of constructions.

5. *Unresolved cases*

A number of other cases where restrictive interpretation fails are shown below:

- 26) *Vgike ekso ston krio ton kero*
went out to-the cold the weather
'S/He went out into the cold weather'
- 27) *Kalos ta kala ta pedia*
welcome the good the children
'Welcome, good lads'

Both examples have been discussed in the literature as prominent cases where a non-restrictive interpretation arises with polydefinites (see Panagiotidis and Marinis 2011; Lekakou and Szendrői 2012). In the case of (66), Lekakou and Szendrői (2012) mention that the referent of the DP is somehow topical. However, the exact status of these constructions in terms of their pragmatics as well as their semantic difference to their monadic counterparts is yet to be understood. This paper is no exception to this, and unfortunately has nothing to offer on these constructions. Thus, we, like all the researchers before us, leave the exact pragmatic/semantic import of these cases as a subject of future research.

Bibliography

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