Discussion Notes

Response to the Review of *The Acquisition of Greek Case, Number, and Gender: A Usage-Based Approach* by María Mastropavlou

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We are grateful to the editors of the *Journal of Greek Linguistics* for offering us the opportunity of clearing up some misunderstandings of our views in the above review of our paper concerning in particular the theoretical approach chosen, some methodological arguments as well as issues in Greek noun classification, gender assignment, and the overall goals of the paper.

Usage-Based Theory may be characterized as an approach which lets “the data constrain the theory, as good science would dictate” (Karmiloff & Karmiloff-Smith 2001: 142). This is why this induction-driven approach seems more suitable to us than certain deductive approaches, in particular generative ones. Although usage-based and construction-based approaches do not force the researcher to make assumptions “about the nature of the child's linguistic representations other than those to which the data directly point” (Karmiloff & Karmiloff-Smith 2001: 142), it is not the case that such approaches do not recognise “notions such as morphological structure and morphological decomposition or analysis of word forms during language
acquisition” as claimed by the reviewer (Mastropavlou 2009: 227). Although it is correct that according to Bybee “the stems and affixes … are never extracted from the word in which they occur” (2001: 24), S&C stress that in this approach “affixes are taken to emerge from associations between inflected forms” (2008: 4). In contrast to symbolic rules, which are source-oriented and assume complex forms to be constructed by adding affixes to stems, “a product-oriented schema generalizes over forms of a specific category, but does not specify how to derive that category from some other” (Bybee 2001: 126). Bybee (2001: 127-128) presents convincing evidence for the fact that even “fairly agglutinative affixation” such as that of the regular English Past suffixes /t/, /d/, or /ɪd/ “may be conceptualized as a product-oriented schema” rather than a source- or input-oriented generative rule. Thus, the concept of schemas does not deny morphological structure but accounts for it without however decomposing complex forms into their elements, a procedure leading to a number of well-known problems in inflecting-fusional languages such as Latin or Greek.¹

It is not surprising that the reviewer, who adopts a different theoretical perspective from the one taken by S&C, should be disappointed about the fact that their work does not result in what formalist linguists take to be at the core of linguistic competence, namely across-the-board symbolic rules and their acquisition in well-determined stages (Mastropavlou 2009: 230). In similar vein, the reviewer criticizes S&C for presenting too much detail rather than a more general picture of the children’s development. However, a usage-based approach to language acquisition allows one to come to grips with the gradual emergence of patterns and schemas based at first on very few grammatical forms whose number slowly increases in the course of development. As S&C demonstrate, there is no such thing as a general development of Case or even the Nominative; rather, the nominative-accusative distinction is at first limited to (some) masculine nouns while the number distinction is in the beginning more or less restricted to neuter nouns (see S&C 2008: 21-22, figs. 3a and 3b).

As far as the methodology of our study is concerned, we fully agree with the reviewer that no general conclusions on the acquisition of Greek can be drawn from the data of only five children. The small number of subjects is a general drawback of longitudinal studies on language acquisition, since such studies are usually limited to, for practical reasons, one or at most five children. Still,

¹ See Matthews (1991) on ancient Latin and Greek grammarians, who also deal with words as wholes.