Book Review


This book is a partly updated version of the author’s 2000 University of Oxford Ph.D. dissertation, *Aspects of the history of Greek prepositions* (a title which inexplicably is not in the references of the present book). The author aims at providing a survey of diachronic developments in the usage of Greek prepositions (and adpositions, more generally), with an overview of the 3,000 years that separate the Homeric poems from contemporary standard Greek. Such a task is perhaps too ambitious for the limited size of a monograph, especially if one considers that the author also intends to give an overview of theories of adpositions (and necessarily of cases), from European structuralism to the present, with some highlights of earlier endeavors.

The book is divided into two parts, I “Background to Greek prepositions”, and II “The history of Greek prepositions”. In part I, the author lays the foundations for the analysis in part II. He does so by surveying theories of the last century concerning the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of prepositions, as well as the viability of a localistic theory of their meaning. Such a survey could well provide the matter for a whole book; summarized in three chapters, it leaves one wondering about its usefulness: clearly the author thinks that prepositions are meaningful, and assumes a localistic theory of their meaning. These are nowadays widely shared views, as evidenced by current research on polysemy and grammaticalization; in this framework, more data regarding the evolution of prepositional meaning from space to more abstract domains are certainly welcome, but that these data are needed in order to refute Brøndal’s 1940 non-localistic theory of prepositions looks somewhat anachronistic. The reason for the author to shape his argument in this way lies in the stratified structure of the first part of the book, which, in its earlier version, mostly featured discussion of structuralist and formalist (Chomskian) theories regarding the meaning of adpositions and cases.

In the decade that separates the new from the earlier version, Bortone has partly restructured the first part of his monograph, mostly taking up issues that reflect current debate in cognitive linguistics, a theory that he had not discussed in depth in the earlier version. Chapter 1 “On the function of prepositions” aims to demonstrate that prepositions and cases have essentially the same function, while in chapter 2 “On the meaning of prepositions” Bortone strives to confute theories
that view cases and adpositions as meaningless, and to demonstrate the cognitive
primacy of local over more abstract meanings. To make his argument, here as in
the other chapters, Bortone makes extensive reference to cross-linguistic evidence,
a fact that is at odds with the almost complete absence of reference to typological
works. For example, when discussing semantic connections between comitative
and other semantic roles (p. 43-45), Bortone mentions possible contacts with the
locative on the one hand and the instrumental on the other, proving unaware of
the wealth of literature on comitatives which appeared in recent years, including
various works by Thomas Stolz and his associates (cf. Stolz et al. 2006 with the
numerous references cited there). At this point in the book, Bortone does not even
mention Lakoff and Johnson’s “Companion Metaphor”, even though it could pro-
vide evidence for his assumption of a “instrumental-comitative continuum” (p. 45),
and in spite of the fact that this metaphor is mentioned elsewhere (p. 113 fn. 14).
Similarly, Heine (1997), Baron et al. (2001), and Stassen (2009) are among miss-
ing references in the discussion on possession (pp. 62-71) and the recent compre-
hensive Oxford Handbook of Case (Malchukov and Spencer 2008) is ignored.

Examples like these could be multiplied, and it would be easy to indicate all the
instances in which the author tries to demonstrate strategies that have been the
topic of extensive discussion in the typological literature. Yet cognitively oriented
literature does not fare much better in Bortone’s consideration. Discussing the
meaning of cases and adpositions, he fails to mention the radial category model of
structured polysemy, used for example in the description of the meaning of the
on pp. 73 and 78 regarding her remarks on the pros and cons of a cognitive
approach, discussed by Janda in the first few pages of her book, but with no refer-
cence to her model of case polysemy. In addition, Tyler and Evans’ (2003) study of
English prepositions with its concept of protoscene is in the bibliography, but
never referred to in the text. All these and other references could have provided
Bortone with solid arguments and widely employed models for case and preposi-
tion polysemy. Chapter 3, “The origin of prepositions”, contains cross-linguistic
evidence for the origin of adpositions from body parts nouns, nouns that indicate
spatial regions, as well as verbs, which could usefully be framed with more exten-
sive reference to ongoing research in the field.

The updating of the book apparently concerned part II only very marginally, as
shown by complete overlap of the table of contents with the old version. It con-
tains four chapters: “Prepositions and cases in Ancient Greek” (ch. 4), “Prepositions
and cases in Hellenistic Greek” (ch. 5), “Prepositions and cases in Medieval Greek
(ch. 6), “Prepositions and cases in Modern Greek” (ch. 7). Surprisingly, all litera-
ture regarding Greek preposition, as well as Greek cases and preverbs, published
from 2000 onward has been left out of consideration. The only exception is Hewson
and Bubenik (2006), a book whose focus, however, is on the increase in the use of
adpositions in all IE languages and not only in Greek (remarkably, Bortone does
not refer to the chapter on Greek adpositions in this book, but only to the book’s