

In the shadow of optimization: exploring change in compounding in a 3000 year old language

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Compounding is found in almost all languages. Its categories, structural patterns, and productivity vary from one language to another but do not depend on the family or the typology of language it belongs to (see, among others, Bauer 2009). Compounding is subject to modification through time and questions arise on issues such as the factors activating its alteration as well as the type and adaptation of changes in the system of languages where they occur.

In an attempt to investigate these issues, I propose to examine the compounding process in Greek, a language with an attested history of 3000 years, where numerous compounds are found in all periods, ranging from the prehistoric Mycenaean to Modern Times and innovative patterns have been emerged, parallel to old ones (see, among others, Tserepis 1902, Debrunner 1917, Browning 1969, Meissner & Tribulato 2002, Ralli 2013). Compounding is one of the main sources for enriching the Greek vocabulary across centuries, but the form and evolution of compound structures has not received the degree of attention compared with other well-attested languages (see, for instance, Rainer 2021 for the evolution of compounds from Latin to Romance).

On the basis of data drawn from Mycenaean, Classical Greek, Hellenistic, Medieval and Modern Greek, both standard and dialectal, I show that, in the diachrony of this language, an already rich compound formation has been expanded and improved with the elimination of discrepancies, in compliance with the system's principles and constraints. I propose that innovations are triggered by a deeper tendency for optimizing the grammar of compounding and that optimization is assisted and/or facilitated by some language-specific properties, such as a preference for stem-based morphology and right headedness. In this spirit, I demonstrate that, before changes occur, there are indications concerning the categories and/or structures which are prone to evolution, such as: a) the multiple forms of stems or stem formatives; b) the empty slots of structural patterns, the

filling of which is not against the rules governing Greek; c) the existence of some old patterns opposing the general tendencies of the language. I also interpret cases revealing an apparent impoverishment of Greek compounding as triggered by an endogenous tendency to eliminate allomorphy, systematize and optimize the system. Finally, I argue that the presence of certain seemingly ‘weird’ structures is justified by a number of old and rare pre-existing patterns, which had been inert for some time but are reintroduced in a particular period due to the exogenous factor of contact with another language; nevertheless, they remain restricted in the linguistic varieties affected by contact and within the limits of the specific period.

Selected references

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