

Natural language use and bilingual interference: verbal complementation patterns in postclassical Greek

Several Greek verbs allow for more than one complementation pattern. For instance, λέγω combines with an accusative or a dative and an infinitive. However, a syntactic shift often goes hand in hand with a semantic shift. Thus, λέγω in the first configuration means ‘to tell (something)’, but in the second configuration ‘to tell / order (somebody to do something)’ (cf. Bentein 2017). From a modern perspective, the range of syntactic patterns and semantic notions is sufficiently accessible only for high-frequency verbs. Therefore, the verbs ἀξιόω, γράφω and θαυμάζω will serve as case studies.

I will consider instances of these verbs in a corpus of all personal letters on papyrus that belong to bilingual (Greek-Coptic) archives dating from the fourth to mid-seventh centuries. The writers of these letters lived in a bilingual setting. They were exposed to two languages that profoundly differed in both the syntax of verbal complementation patterns and the associated semantics. In Greek, the choice of a complementation pattern and its associated semantics is highly context-dependent. Conversely, most Coptic verbs allow for only one complementation pattern.

We will classify complementation patterns as ‘collocation’, ‘idiom’ or ‘formula’ depending on their semantic and syntactic transparency and contextual flexibility (cf. Hollos 2010, Wray 2009). Our evidence shows that mistakes concern all three kinds of complementation patterns. At first glance, one may attribute mistakes to our writers’ bilinguality as a result of which natural language use was not internalised.

However, not each kind of complementation pattern is affected to the same extent. Also, the context-dependence of the complementation patterns indicates that apart from writers’ basic knowledge of Greek their educational background was relevant (cf. Evans 2012). Speaking a language fluently does not automatically imply familiarity with the standard of letter writing.

[word count: 300]

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sources: high-frequency verbs

method: corpus-based

concepts: collocation, idiom, formula

variation: context-related

contact: bilinguality interfering with natural language use

results: mistakes regarding collocations, idioms and formulae are related to a writer's
linguistic background AND their stage of education