

oi na+V in Cypriot Greek:

A speech-act construction at the interface of semantics, pragmatics and intonation

This paper deals with the expression *oi na+V* in Cypriot Greek, which functions to express ‘requests not to X’ as in (1):

- (1) *Αλλά να μιλάς Κυπριακά, όι να βάλεις τα επίσημά σου.*
But SUBJ speak-2sg. Cypriot, NEG SUBJ wear-2sg. the formal your
‘But you should speak Cypriot, don’t put on your formal [clothes]’ (=don’t speak formally).’

The compositional semantics of this expression is one where the negative operator *oi* takes scope over the ensuing subjunctive, yielding an interpretation truth-conditionally equivalent to the negated subjunctive ‘*na min*’. That is, on a traditional account, *oi na+V* may be interpreted as an instance of neg-raising (Horn 1978).

In this paper, I will try to substantiate the view that *oi na+V* constitutes a construction motivated by considerations of positive face in contemporary Cypriot society. This view is supported by spoken corpus and internet data, which jointly reveal both structural and distributional constraints on the use of *oi na+V*. On the structural side, the intonational pattern with which *oi na+V* is realized is particularly interesting. This may be glossed as L+H* L- ... L% with pitch accents between L- and L% being strongly compressed. Having identified this pattern on the basis of the spoken corpus data, its contribution to native speakers’ interpretations of utterances containing *oi na+V* was further probed by means of a perception experiment. The results of this experiment revealed that, rather than the sharp rise-fall pattern at the start of the phrase, it is the quasi-deletion of pitch accents following L- that is primarily responsible for the neg-raised interpretations.

Considering that similar pitch accent deletions frequently affect material treated as given in the discourse, this finding suggests the following account of the meaning of *oi na+V* when contrasted with the negated subjunctive *na min+V*: in addition to the prohibition expressed by *na min+V*, *oi na+V* introduces into the common ground the affirmative of the proposition expressed in the negated clause (represented by *na+V*) treating it as given (something that the addressee may be tempted or likely to do, or is already doing, as in one instance in the data), and subsequently proceeds to warn the addressee against V-ing.

This account is supported by recent psycholinguistic evidence that information within the scope of negation is not automatically suppressed but may well remain salient and be exploited in subsequent processing (e.g., Giora 2006). In addition, it is supported by the situational distribution of occurrences of *oi na+V* in the corpus data, where it occurs in informal settings, and between participants who are familiar with each other.

The situational distribution of *oi na+V* suggests its function as a positive politeness device in Cypriot Greek: by uttering what sounds like a friendly warning, the speaker is taking the hearer’s perspective on things and proceeds to advise him/her accordingly. The proposed analysis thus extends previous analyses attributing neg-raising to negative face considerations (Prince 1976; Horn 1978), highlighting how culturally and situationally prevailing face considerations, be they positive or negative, can motivate constructional structure in language.

References

- Giora, R. (2006) Anything negatives can do affirmatives can do just as well, except for some metaphors. *Journal of Pragmatics* 38(7): 981-1014.
- Horn, L. (1978) Remarks on neg-raising. *Syntax and semantics*, vol. 9: pragmatics, ed. by P. Cole, 129-220. NY: Academic Press.
- Prince, E. (1976) The syntax and semantics of neg-raising, with evidence from French. *Language* 52(2): 404-426.