

Lígo: Towards grammaticalized verbal diminutivization

The Modern Greek adjective/adverb *lígo*, typically rendered as ‘(a) little’, has a number of well-known idiomatic uses beyond the relatively straightforward (1) and (2), where it functions as an adjective and adverb, respectively:

(1) *évala lígo γάλα ston kafé su* (but cf. *évala líyi/líyo záxari ston kafé su*).

‘I put a little sugar in your coffee.’

(2) *se íða polí lígo*.

‘I saw very little of you.’

Such uses, exemplified in (3), have been identified as instances of hedging linked to politeness issues arising from requests (cf. Sifianou 1992). In these, *lígo* serves an unambiguous hedging or diminutivizing function on the verb of request in an attempt to minimize the imposition towards the addressee. In this sense, *lígo* in (3) is grammaticalized. However, in other instances, exemplified in (4) and (5), it is ambiguous between a grammaticalized hedge and an adverbial:

(3) *mu pjánis lígo to stilo? / Mu pjanis to stilo lígo?* ‘Can you grab this/the pen for me?’

(4) *aníyis lígo tin porta? / aníyis tin pórtá lígo?*

‘Can you get the door? / Can you open the door just slightly.’

(5) *éla lígo na se ðo! / éla na se ðo lígo!*

Literally: Come over so I can see you → ‘Come over to see me!’

Thus, (4) may be a request to open the door a little or a polite request to open the door (irrespective of degree of openness). Along the same lines, (5) may be a request for a brief period of one’s time or a polite request for a visit of indeterminate length. On the other hand, *lígo* is also used with verbs that have nothing to do with requests and in constructions that function mostly as statements, as in (6) through (9) below:

(6) *ðulévo lígo*. ‘I am working.’

(7) *tróo lígo*. ‘I am eating.’

(8) *ðjavázo lígo*. ‘I am reading/studying.’

(9) *mazévo lígo to spíti. / mazévo to spíti lígo*. ‘I am cleaning the house.’

In (6)-(9) word stress plays a crucial role in disambiguation and, therefore, in interpretation. When main stress is on *lígo*, it functions as an adverb and the interpretation is that one works, eats, or reads a little as opposed to a lot. On the other hand, when main stress is on the verb, it is interpreted as a hedge, indeed as a verbal diminutivizer comparable to the increasingly used prefix *psilo*—literally ‘thin’ in the sense of ‘a little’ or ‘lightly’—as in *psiloðulévo* ‘-work’, *psilotróo* ‘-eat’, *psilodyavázo* ‘-read’, *psilomalakízome* ‘being a jerk’, etc. I would like to argue that the former is an “objective” and the latter a “subjective” interpretation linked with an ongoing process of grammaticalization through subjectivization of *lígo* (cf. Traugott & Dasher 2002, Traugott 2003, Athanasiadou et al. 2006). This claim receives serious support given the high degree of productivity of *lígo* in this diminutivizing function and may, arguably, be traced to its use with verbs of request.

This line of thought points to the way cognitive sociolinguistics may develop on the basis of lectal variation (cf. Geeraerts 2003a, 2003b, 2005). Such a development necessarily means looking at variation with an eye for (objective?) “structural” information as it occurs in a (subjective?) instance of use which hinges critically on linguistic practice; i.e., on the situation of use often referred to as a “speech event”. This way of looking at things forms the very core of cognitive linguistic theorizing. However, the original promise for pragmatic grounding in cognitive linguistics—and, therefore, the examination of the interplay of cognition and social factors in linguistic practice¹ even if it means encapsulating or/and completely accounting for the latter as part and parcel of the former—remains partly a promissory note.

¹ Cf. Langacker (1988) on cognitive linguistics as a quintessential “usage-based model” which is the very point of departure of cognitive linguistics from the structural tradition (which, in this case, includes, of course, all known versions of Chomskyan linguistics; cf. Antonopoulou 1997).

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