Formal theories and the analysis of ancient languages: definite articles in Ancient Greek

**Topic and goals.** This paper focuses on a synchronic description of some properties displayed by the so-called *definite* article in two (groups of) Ancient Greek varieties (*Classical* and *Koine* Greek and *Homeric* Greek), and suggests a preliminary diachronic analysis of the mechanisms and the minimal changes which gave rise to the current structure of the article-system in Greek.

**The research.** This paper is part of an on-going broader research on the syntactic properties of nominal structures in Greek, whose main aim is to show that the exploration of such properties in the ancient stages of the language, as well as of their diachronic development, can be effectively supported by the tools provided by formal theories of syntax. The research grounds on two main foci. 1. Description of syntactic patterns in ‘ancient’ varieties. The implementation of the theoretical tools provided by formal syntax shows that the behavior of nominal structures in Ancient Greek falls within well-established crosslinguistic patterns, and obeys the same constraints acting on ‘modern’ languages (Manolessou 2000, Guardiano 2003, 2006, 2011a/b, 2013). 2. Analysis of diachronic change. Minimal comparisons suggest that the main changes in the DP-structure visible across the history of Greek stem from a series of successive micro-changes formally representable as ‘parameter resettings’, which can be traced back precisely through a systematic synchronic analysis of sequential varieties.

**Theoretical background.** I follow the formal approach to nominal structures developed within the so-called DP-hypothesis (since Abney 1987). The synchronic analysis of the structure of the DP in Ancient Greek is based on Manolessou’s (2000) and Guardiano’s (2003) pioneering attempts, and inspired by the methodological premises suggested by the Parametric Comparison Method (Guardiano/Longobardi 2005, Longobardi/Guardiano 2009) and Longobardi’s (2003) Modularized Global Parametrization. The diachronic approach grounds on the theories of diachronic change exploited within the generative framework (see Roberts&Roussou 2003, Roberts 2007 for a summary).

**Articles and the structure of D.** Variation across languages in the properties of the so-called *articles* depends on three features universally encoded in D (the category that heads argument nominal structures), i.e. definiteness, countability and reference/person (Crisma 1997, Longobardi 1994, 2005). In particular, variation depends on whether D needs to be lexically filled or not in order for the nominal expression to be read as definite/indefinite, count/mass, object/kind-referential. When definiteness is grammaticalized, the typical filler for D is the definite article. When countability is grammaticalized, the count reading of the nominal expression must be licensed either by overt number (i.e. plural) morphology or via an overt item in D, usually (misleadingly) labeled indefinite article. When reference/person is strong, D is filled either through raising the noun itself, or through the insertion of an expletive article (usually homophonous with the definite one).

This paper will focus on the encoding of the aforementioned categories in Ancient Greek; a comparison with Modern Greek will be also sketched, along with a proposal that accounts for the diachronic changes traceable across the history of the language in this domain.

**Analysis.** The analysis proposed in this paper focuses on the inspection of two separate main diachronic stages. 1. Classical Attic (and New Testament): ὁ, η, τὸ behaves as an actual definite article (and as an expletive), precisely like in Modern Greek. Indeed, it is systematically (and thus presumably obligatorily) visible on nominal structures with definite reading (definite bare nouns are not accepted in argument position: Guardiano 2003) and on kind-referring (Longobardi 1994) expressions (Guardiano 2006, 2011a); it sometimes occurs with proper names (i.e. object-referential expressions). Thus, definiteness is fully grammaticalized, and person/reference is strong. The alternation between free and articulated proper names is no more available in Modern Greek: this difference is likely to depend on the properties of null D, that becomes progressively more constrained from ancient stages to more recent ones. Indeed, Classical Attic and New Testament allow empty Ds in a broader set of contexts than Modern Greek: singular count nouns can be bare (thus countability is not grammaticalized, hence the absence of an indefinite article, Crisma 1997, Guardiano 2003); demonstratives can occur both with a def-
inite article and bare (Guardiano 2011a), proper names alternate between articulated and bare (Guardiano 2003). Such differences are likely to depend on one single parametric distinction, and of the interaction of such a parameter with other DP-properties (in particular N-movement). The resetting of the “null D” parameter (probably occurred through a chain of micro-changes, as New Testament and Byzantine Greek data seem to suggest; Manolessou 2000), as well as minor changes in the constraints operating on N-movement, produced the differences observable in diachrony. 2. Homeric Greek. Apparently no articles. The item that will become a definite article (ὁ, ἡ, τό) is described in the literature as a neutral (i.e. non deictic) demonstrative (Chantraine 1945, Meillet 1965, Lombardi Vallauri 2002 a.o.), that covers various functions and is ‘optionally’ used as a definite marker. In fact, such an item seems to already display D-like properties: a) contrary to the other demonstrative items, it always occur in the leftmost area of nominal structures (and thus seems to be compatible with a D-like position); b) it does not co-occur with items which are likely to be in D (such as personal pronouns); c) some of its occurrences in (definite) nominal-like structures in argument position are predictable (Guardiano 2013). These preliminary observations suggest that ὁ, ἡ, τό is in fact already compatible to a D-position, and that a visible D is already needed in Homer, at least in a limited set of contexts, to fulfill syntactic requirements (even though neither definiteness nor count are yet grammaticalized). Further analyses are required in order to better define such contexts, associate them to more precise syntactic requirements, and observe the interaction between purely syntactic constraints and restrictions depending on stylistic, metric, formulaic choices (which, in particular in these texts, play a particularly significant role, that cannot be ignored).

The core empirical evidence comes from a systematic scan of all the argument nominal structures occurring the following texts: Iliad and Odyssey (Guardiano 2013); Plato’s Apology of Socrates, Cratylus and Symposium (Guardiano 2003); Demosthenes’ Philippics 1-3 (Bernasconi 2010), the four Gospels (Guardiano 2003, 2013). Additional evidence comes from the scientific literature (e.g. Manolessou 2000, Bakker 2009, a.o.). The data from Modern Greek come from the scientific literature and from on-purpose interviews with native speakers.

**Conclusions.** 1) The syntactic properties of the DP in Ancient Greek can be in fact described through the methods and tools made available by formal theories and the parametric approach. 2) Each single stage of the language can be described synchronically and represented as a string of (discrete) parameter values. 3) Minimal comparison of parameter strings related to successive synchronous stages shows that diachronic variation follows from (single) parameter changes (i.e. differences in the setting of individual parameter values).

Potential advantages of the parametric approach (with respect to more traditional perspectives): 1) parameter values are discrete: each stage selects one and only value; thus, there is no space for free variation: internal variation (if any) must follow from determinable syntactic constraints; 2) cross-linguistic comparison shows that Ancient Greek is not ‘special’ or ‘exceptional’: the same parameters settings observable at each of its stages are visible in many other contemporary languages.

This leads us to the conclusion that, once their peculiarities as closed corpora languages are appropriately taken into consideration, the syntactic structure of ancient languages can be explored, and better understood, through the same tools adopted for ‘living’ ones.

Finally, the evidence coming from the rigorous implementation of the parametric method to ancient languages reveals itself as pivotal in order to address long-debated (and recently revived) issues about the role played by syntax in the historical classification of Indo-European languages (Ringe, Warnow, Taylor 2002, Longobardi et al. 2013 a.o.) as well as in the reconstruction of PIE (Ringe and Eska 2013, a.o.).
References