

On the Grammar of the Greek Particle *Re*

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Abstract

This paper is a preliminary investigation of the grammar of the Greek particle *Re*. Principally, we concentrate here on establishing its distributional, syntactic, and interpretive properties. We also outline a basic analysis in terms of focus marking.

1 Introduction

Discourse particles or markers are a heterogeneous class of elements. As Blakemore (2004) points out, research has yet to yield a comprehensive and unified list of discourse markers/particles in any language, and there is no agreement in the literature on whether the various elements that have been studied under the term discourse marker (or any of the many other similar terms) constitute a unified phenomenon. Where Blakemore (2004) does find agreement is that the meaning of these elements is to be described at the level of discourse and that their meaning should be understood in terms of “what they mark rather than what they describe”. In a similar vein but from a different perspective, Zeevat (2004) proposes that discourse particles should be understood in terms of *context marking* in terms of a relation between the content of the utterance in which they occur and the context or certain parameters of the context and the common ground. The pragmatic nature of these particles as Stalnaker (1973) observed lies in the fact that although they can affect the felicity of a sentence they cannot affect its truth.

In this paper we study the particle *Re* in Greek. This particle has never up to now been the focus of attention in formal/theoretical linguists of any shape or persuasion. Perhaps one of the reasons for this neglect is that this particle is ever present in familiar, spoken discourse¹ and has a distribution apparently so free that it seems there is little to be said about it. However, as we show in this paper this is simply a misconception. *Re* is usually considered a particle of address used only in familiar registers. It is a particle of address in the sense that a speaker can utter something like (1)

(1) Re...

and in this manner request the attention of the addressee. However, the term *particle of address* does not even begin to do justice to the complex reality that an account of the use

¹*Re* is indeed strictly limited to spoken discourse. It is just not a feature of the written language apart from quotations.

of this particle needs to cover and ultimately it is probably an incorrect characterisation as we will see. It will do however in order to give a general idea of its of a subclass of its uses before we try to explain its properties in more detail.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2 we show what the distribution of this particle is. Section 3 details various effects that this particle has on the interpretation of various types of utterance and how it interacts with other elements such as *wh* elements and focus. In section 4 we outline an analysis of the observed patterns. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2 The Distribution of *Re*

Generally speaking, concerning its position in the sentence, *Re* can appear sentence-initially, sentence-finally and at the junctures of the major constituents. It cannot appear in the following contexts (i.e. breaking constituents such as a DP, an AdjP, or an AdvP).

- (2) a. Det ___ N
- b. Deg ___ Adv
- c. Deg ___ Adj
- d. Clausal/infl particles___ Verb
- e. Neg ___ V
- f. Adv ___ V
- g. Aux ___ V
- h. Relative Pronoun ___
- i. Specificational Constructions

The above contexts are exemplified below:

- (3) To (***re**) vivlio
the book
“The Book”
- (4) Poli (***re**) siga
Very slowly
“Very slowly”
- (5) Poli (***re**) xazos
Very stupid
“Very stupid”
- (6) a. O Giannis thelei na (***re**) figi
The G. wants subj-marker leave
“Giannis wants to leave”
- b. Tha (***re**) figo
Fut. leave
“I will leave”
- (7) *Den re thelo
Neg want
“I don’t want”

- (8) *Mi re figis
Neg go
“Dont’ go”
- (9) a. *Diavaze re syxna efimerida
Read often newspapers
“Read Newspapers often”
b. ?Perpata re grigora
Walk fast
“Walk fast”
- (10) *To exw re dei
It I-have seen
“I have seen it”
- (11) *O anthropos pou re irthe
The man that came
“The man who came”
- (12) Ida to Vasiliu, re ton kathigiti
saw-I the V. the professor
“I saw Mr Vassiliu, the professor”
- (13) *Ida ton kathigiti, re to Vasiliu
Saw-I the professor, the V.
“I saw the professor, Mr Vassiliu”

The data above require some further clarification in order to appreciate their significance. Crucially, most of these contexts do not allow insertion of any material, not just *Re*. So for instance, nothing can come between the auxiliary and the non-finite verb and only clitics can occur between negation and the verb. These observations are important since they show that *Re* is not inserted at some post-syntactic level, say PF. Rather, *Re* is inserted during the syntactic computation at positions where adjunction is generally possible. Under this view, however, the fact that *Re* is banned from appearing between an adverb and a verb is problematic since it should be possible to adjoin it before the adverb which would then be adjoined to the vP on which *Re* has already be adjoined. The restriction against its appearance between a determiner and a noun is similarly problematic since an adjective can intervene between the determiner and the noun, cf:²

- (14) To mikro kokino vivlio
The little red book
“The little red book”

One last thing that we should also point out concerning the distribution of *Re* in the DP is that although it cannot be inserted between the determiner and the noun, it can be inserted between certain quantifiers and their complement. A case in point is (15):

- (15) Ola re ta pedia
All the children
“All the children”

²It goes without saying that we are glossing over important issues concerning the precise syntax of adjectives and their order in the DP. The observations in the text are meant at a descriptive level.

It can also be found in the DP in the so-called determiner spreading construction:

- (16) To kalo re to vivlio
 The good the book
 “The good book”

Let’s now turn to the different clause types where *Re* can be found.

2.1 *Re* and Clause types

Re can appear in interrogatives, exclamatives, and imperatives but not in simple declaratives where by simple declaratives we meanthetic sentences (‘the cat is on the mat’ etc...) as shown here:

- (17) Edw ine re ?
 here is it
 “Is it here?”
- (18) Ti vlakas ise re !
 What an idiot you are
- (19) Vaps’ to re
 “paint it”
- (20) # I gata ine sto xalaki re
 The cat is on the mat

Finally, we observe that *Re* cannot appear in embedded clauses

- (21) I Maria rwtise (*re) ti (*re) efere o Haris
 The Maria asked what brought the Haris
 “Maria asked what did haris bring.”

It should be pointed out that these sentences are ungrammatical in the sense that *re* is part of the embedded clause proper and that there is proper embedding here rather than a direct discourse complement. The same is valid for the following :

- (22) I Maria ipe (*re) oti (*re) tha figi o Haris
 The M said that FUT. leave the H.
 “Mary said that Haris will leave.”

With this broad description of the distributional properties of *Re* in mind, let us turn to its interpretive effects.

3 Interpretive effects

In this section we will try to show the effects that *Re* has on the interpretation. The first observation that we will make concerns the interaction of *Re* with *wh* items in questions. As it actually it turns out that different positions of *Re* produce different readings. The cases that are of particular interest to us here are those where *Re* either precedes or follows the *wh* word. The readings in question can be elucidated by the following examples. The context here is a conversation between two people who have organised a party and have asked guests

to bring some contribution to food/drink. The following sentences are potential questions that one of the two party-organisers asks the other the following day:

- (23) Ti **re** efere o Kostas
 What brought the Kostas
 “What did Kostas bring”
- (24) **Re** ti efere o Kostas
 What brought the Kostas
 “What did Kostas bring”
- (25) Ti efere **re** o Kostas
 What brought the Kostas
 “What did Kostas bring”
- (26) Ti efere o Kostas **re**
 What brought the Kostas
 “What did Kostas bring”

And the corresponding readings are as follows:

- (27) a. Sentence (23) can be a simple request for information. However, there is a presupposition that K. did bring something.
 b. Sentence (24) is an expression of surprise at the nature of the thing that K. brought.
 c. Sentence (25) is an appropriate question when there is no presupposition that K. brought something.
 d. Sentence (26) is ambiguous between readings (27-a) and (27-b)

Clearly, *Re* has some kind of effect on the information structure of the sentence, very broadly speaking, in each of the above examples, different things seem to be focused or backgrounded. This, however, cannot be the whole story, the pragmatic effects of surprise etc. . . must somehow be accounted for. Let’s now move on to other types of questions.

3.1 Non-Wh questions

In non-wh questions *Re* also seems to have an effect on the interpretation. The following illustrates the effect in question:

CONTEXT A person has been kidnapped and is being tortured in order to extract relevant information. The following questions are asked by one of the pair of torturers after a day of sustained torture.

- (28) Re, tha ton skotwsoume simera ?
 will-we him kill today ?
- (29) Tha ton skotwsoume simera Re ?
 Will-we him kill today

Sentence (28) can be paraphrased as follows:

- (30) Get on with it, let’s kill him because we have other things to do.

Sentence (29) on the other hand means something like this:

(31) Is it the killing that we will do today?

or

(32) We may have gone a little too far, I did not know we were supposed to kill him today.

In these cases, of course, the serious question that arises is what is the exact relationship between (29) and its intended meaning in (31) and (32). If we assume that (31), (32) are implicatures of (29), and not of (28) then an account of *Re* as an element associated with or operating upon the implicatures is called for.

3.2 Imperatives and Focus

In imperatives, *Re* seems again to have an effect on the general focus structure of the sentence, consider the following examples:

(33) Re Fer' to
bring it
“Bring it”

(34) Fer' to Re
Bring it
“Bring it”

In these cases, sentence (33) is felicitous only when this is a repeated request whereas (34) is a new request. In other words, one can understand the effect of the particle in (34) as focusing of the verb.

3.3 Scope

The final aspect of the meaning of *Re* that we will consider here is its unexpected effect on the scope of indefinites. In short, *Re*, when attached to an indefinite (35) gives it wide scope. Interestingly, this is not the case when *Re* is attached to a universally quantified NP. Compare the three sentences below:

(35) Erotiftike kathe agori [re mia gineka]
fell-in-love-with every boy one woman
“Every Boy fell in love with a/one woman” $\exists > \forall$

(36) Erotiftike re kathe agori mia gineka $\exists > \forall$
 $\forall > \exists$

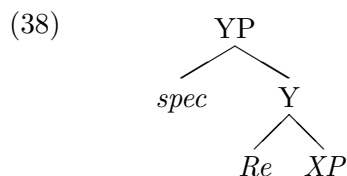
(37) Erotiftike [re mia gineka] kathe agori
fell-in-love a/one woman every boy
“A woman fell in love with every boy” $\exists > \forall$

Although these judgements are subtle they seem to be correct. These cases raise different types of questions. So far, we have presented *Re* as a discourse particle which, following Blakemore (2004), ought to have its meaning described at the *discourse* level. On the other hand we also took on board Stalnaker’s observation that these particles cannot affect the truth conditions of a sentence. And yet, if the above data are correct this is precisely what *Re* seems to be doing. What should we conclude then? There are various options open to

us at this stage. Either we try to establish some kind of truth conditional import of *Re*, or we devise a pragmatic mechanism to account for the specificity of the indefinite. Neither possibility seems totally unreasonable though the first one is clearly a bigger challenge.

4 Analysis: an outline

The properties above are only a representative selection of the uses of *Re*. Based on these however, we can begin to evaluate a number of analytical options and at least start formulating a number of questions. To begin with, there is a host of questions regarding the morphosyntax of *Re* that need to be settled such as the following: is *Re* a lexical item part of the initial numeration? is *Re* itself heading its own projection and if yes what kind of projection is it? For the first question, much of the answer depends on one’s assumptions regarding the organisation of the grammar. It seems to us that *Re*’s multiple functions and interpretations can best be captured if we assume that it is a late-inserted element in a variety of syntactic positions. From its interpretations which we have so far characterised as affecting the focus structure of the sentence it would seem reasonable to suggest that *Re* is inserted into head positions which are associated with focus and other so-called *peripheral effects*. Following an important body of recent literature we assume that the domains relevant to the cyclic computation are Chomsky’s (2001) *phases* and that these domains are dominated by a series of functional heads such as : Point of View, Force, Mood, Finiteness, Focus, Topic, Scope Heads: Share, Dist, Ref, and so on which serve among other things to connect the propositional content of the phase to the wider discourse content (taking care of topic-focus articulation etc for instance). Note here that the projections that make up this functional layer don’t necessarily have to be identical across phasal categories. In other words, what makes vP a phase is not the same set of properties that make CP a phase and if DP is also a phase then there is even less reason to believe that it becomes phasal through the same processes/representations. If the above is correct we would then have a structure like the following:



Where XP is almost any maximal projection. The Y head, however, is not “any” head, and most importantly it is not *Re*⁰ either. We propose that Y should be identified with one of the peripheral heads mentioned above. This type of analysis allows us to capture at least a subset of the interpretive effects of *Re* especially when it functions as a mood reinforcing particle or as a focus particle. Furthermore, this approach allows us to maintain the idea that *Re* is an element syntactically active and at least part of its properties can and should be captured at the syntax-semantics interface. But this is clearly not the whole story. As we have shown above several aspects of the meaning of *Re* are pragmatic and perhaps the best place to formulate an account of them is the implicature level or Zeevat’s context marking, although we would have to accept that *Re* turns out not to have a unique value as a context marker. To say the least, it is obviously a major challenge to come up with a unified description and theoretical account. It is also clear, however, as we mentioned earlier that in most of the examples that we have mentioned above, *Re* seems to have primarily an effect on the focus structure of the sentence. Thus we would like to propose that, at least for the core cases, *Re*

is directly linked to focus and its effect is to pick the relevant alternative, out of the set of alternatives. Although this simple enough proposal turns out to cover substantial empirical ground, it leaves various aspects of the grammar of this particle unexplained. For instance, how are we to understand the scopal facts under this account? In fact, under the syntactic assumptions outlined earlier the scopal facts may find a suitable explanation after all if *Re* fills one of the scopal heads and confers a wide scope reading to the element moving (covertly) into its specifier. On the other hand, a focus-based analysis can also, rather straightforwardly, be generalised to cover effects on presupposition. It then seems possible to provide an account for the effects that *Re* seems to have on interpretation. Space constraints prevent us from going into further detail here though.

5 Concluding Remarks

What we have tried to do here is primarily to establish the range of effects that the particle *Re* has on the meaning of sentences where it occurs. We began by considering it on a par with so-called *discourse markers* but we found that this term was far too narrow to cover the various types of effects seen with *Re*. Of crucial importance here was the way scope is affected. We also discussed the question of levels of representation where the meaning effects given can be captured. At least, due again to the scope facts, we established that some of these should be considered LF effects. Importantly though we note that certain of the effects discussed above seem to pertain to a putative interface between syntax and pragmatics. If we follow recent work on embedded implicatures (e.g Chierchia (2004)) such an interface should be postulated. What remains unclear though is that such an interface is indeed an interface between syntax and pragmatics rather than an interface between syntax and an enriched semantics (which includes implicature calculation). If we were to speculate on that question, we believe that the facts presented here support the general architecture that Chierchia proposes. Although much further research is needed capturing the effects of *Re* at such an interface between syntax and enriched semantics seems rather promising.

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