The focus in and on book epigrams:

A pragmatic investigation of object clitic pronouns and the topic-focus pair in Byzantine book epigrams

Today I want to talk to you about the object clitic pronouns and the topic-focus pair in Byzantine book epigrams. What I am about to present now is a case study in my doctoral thesis, which I am in the process of finishing at the moment. My research in general focuses on the metre, particles, and word order of book epigrams. It is therefore no exaggeration, I think, to say that the Database of Byzantine Book Epigrams has been fundamental for my research, as everything I have done hinges on the texts in the database. For that reason, I first want to talk a little bit about DBBE and me.

DBBE and me

For my research, I have needed to tag several characteristics in the texts of the Database. I could not very well do this directly into the large database, and so a smaller subdatabase was constructed for me. This subdatabase parasitizes, as you will, on the larger DBBE, and is therefore updated as the DBBE is updated, giving me the most up-to-date texts to work with.

From my end, it looks like this, with on the left side the epigram, where I can select words or verses, and on the right side several characteristics that I can tag. After the tagging has happened, I can then search my subdatabase with queries, which can involve information from the main database as well as from my own subdatabase. However, the tag that I want to focus on today is the one on the bottom that is denominated 'clitics'. This 'clitics' is short for Object clitic pronouns, or OCPs, and as you can see, I have added three possibilities for where the OCP occurs within the verse, but I will talk more about that in a moment. First, let's take a look at what OCPs are.

OCPs

A clitic is a small word with no phonological stress of its own. Therefore it has to lean on another word, hence the term 'clitic' from the Greek κλίνω. The word it leans on is called the phonological host. The object clitic pronoun is a specific subset of clitics, that fulfill the role of direct or indirect object in the grammatical sentence. We are talking about words like μοι, με, σου, etc. As such, the syntactic host of the object clitic pronoun is the verb. However, the syntactic host does not need to be the same word as the phonological host, and in fact, it often is not.

As an illustration, let's consider the following two examples. In example (1), the phonological host of μοι is γοῦν, as it is the preceding word. The syntactic host, however, is the verb εὔξασθε. This is in contrast to example (2), where both the phonological and the syntactic host are the verb εὔχεσθε. However, there is a historical trend for the phonological and the syntactic host to converge more and more over time, as we will see.

Historical evolution

In Homer, OCPs occur in the second position of the clause, thus following Wackernagel's law without significant deviating. In the classical period, we find that the OCP is following the verb from time to time, so it is postponed in the sentence. This postverbal position wins in popularity during Late Antique times. Janse (2008) mentioned that this is to be expected, as it is only natural that the phonological and syntactic host become one and the same. OCPs are drawn back into their original P2 position when preceded by one of three word classes. The first one are function words. These are non-lexical words that open a subordinating or relative clause. The second on is preferential words. These are words that often stand at the front of a clause, due to emphatic reasons. These are words like interrogatives, negations, demonstratives and strong personal pronouns. The third class is focalized constituents, so words that carry the focus of the sentence.

Topic and Focus

How can we define focus? Very briefly, we can contrast focus with topic, and say that while a topic is something that is "agreed on by the speakers", focus is information that is "emphasized". In the very simple sentence: 'He is such a nice person!', we can therefore say that 'he' is topic, as the speakers will know who this refers to, so the topic is agreed upon, they understand each other. 'a nice person' is focus, because it is what is said *about* the topic, it is new information and it therefore carries the emphasis of the sentence. This is very simplified, as there is a lot more literature about several nuances and subclasses, but I will not go into more detail now.

Historical evolution (2)

So this is the situation in Late Antique times: the OCP occurs quite often in postverbal position, and when it is not, it is usually because it is attracted into its original P2 position by one of these three word groups. That brings us to medieval times.

In medieval times, these Late Antique tendencies remain, but are solidified. In fact, Mackridge (1993) has called them 'laws' now. That means that, by definition, OCPs occur in postverbal position, except when one of these three word group precedes. This is called the 'focus hypothesis', which states that the distribution of OCPs is not only regulated by syntactic rules, but also by pragmatic rules. The syntactic rules are then the rules about function words or preferential words attracting the OCP into P2 position. The pragmatic rule, however, is the focalized constituent that we mentioned. This is not a syntactic rule, because there is not objective way of determining what has focus and what doesn't, therefore it is more of a pragmatic one, as it relates to the practical use of the language in context.

If we then look at the Modern Greek situation, we see that the OCP is always part of the verb phrase, meaning that the OCP is always adjacent to the verb. This can be post- or preverbal. A gerund or imperative cause the OCP to be postverbal as in 3.a, while a finite verb causes the OCP to be preverbal, as 3.b. This means that the OCP has become proclitic in certain situations, meaning that it leans onto the following word. This is completely new, as in the previous historical periods, the OCP has always been enclitic, so leaning onto the previous word. In Modern Greek, then, we see that the phonological and syntactic host have effectively become one and the same.

Research questions

The question now is, where do our texts stand in this evolutionary scheme? There is still some debate about the accuracy of the focus hypothesis by Mackridge, so it is worthwhile examining our numbers from closerby. Can we identify the syntactic as well as the pragmatic rule for preverbal OCP? And do our texts verge on the Modern Greek side with OCP to verb adjacency? Do OCPs ever lean forward on the verb, as in Modern Greek, or not?

Verb adjacency

Let's start with the verb adjacency.

It is important to note that the book epigrams in the Database are written in what Martin Hinterberger (2014) has called "Literary Koine". This is a standardized, more or less highbrow language, which was very different from the vernacular language at the time. This is by definition a classicizing language, so we would expect the OCPs to follow a more or less classicizing scheme as well, with regular P2 positioning and low verb adjacency.

In total I have tagged 613 OCPs in my corpus. Of these there are 202 preverbal and 399 postverbal. We see here a distribution that suggests a Late Antique/Medieval situation, with the postverbal position being the unmarked one, and therefore the majority.

Of the 399 postverbal OCPs 315 are adjacent to the verb, as in example (2) which we already cited. This is by far the majority, and in contrast to what we would have expected, resembles a Modern Greek situation, with the OCP being part of the verb phrase. This points to a strong tendency to unify the phonological and syntactic host.

However, it is clear that not *all* of the examples are adjacent, indicating that we are in fact *not* dealing with a Modern Greek situation just yet. When we look at examples where the postverbal OCP is *not* adjacent to the verb, we see that these OCPs are positioned in the second position of the clause again. So they are in fact in a classical position. In these cases, the positioning of the OCP in P2 is preferred over an adjacency to the verb and the phonological host is not the same word as the syntactic host. We can see this in example (4) here. The scribe asks 'protect me' 'ρυσαι με' 'with your prayers', but the OCP is postponed, not only till later in the verse, but to the next verse entirely. The OCP then ends up in the second position of the next verse.

If we then look at the preverbal OCPs instead, we find that of the 202 cases, 123 are adjacent. This is still the majority, but it is not quite such an overwhelming majority as with the postverbal OCPs. No less than 93 occurrences have the OCP removed from the verb, as in the examples you see here. These often occur in P2 position again, so the classical position. In example (6) for instance, this means the second position after the metrical caesura.

The fact that preverbal OCPs are more likely to be separated from the verb than postverbal OCPs probably has to do with the closer position of preverbal OCPs to the P2 position. Indeed, preverbal OCPs are by definition closer to the head of the phrase than postverbal OCPs.

Preverbal OCPs

Let's now take a closer look at the preverbal OCPs. These are the most interesting, as they are in a marked position.

We would expect many of the preverbal OCPs to be attracted into the second position of the clause, because that is the classical situation, and as we have seen, our texts were written in an archaizing, for the most part classicizing language. However, that is not what we find in my corpus. The majority of preverbal OCPs is not in second position, as is illustrated in the final verse in this example.

However, the OCP is adjacent to the verb instead. What we can conclude from this, is that the adjacency has prevalence of the second positioning, and so we are seeing a preference for a Modern Greek situation rather than a Classical situation.

The Focus Hypothesis

Let's now have a look at the focus hypothesis. Does it hold in our corpus? Let's go over some examples.

In example (8), we see that σοι is attracted into a preverbal position, and even enters the previous verse, because of the function word ὅς that opens the relative clause. It is therefore an example of part one of the focus hypothesis: when preceded by a function word, the OCP is attracted into preverbal position.

In example (5), which we already cited earlier, we see the preferential word μή precedes the OCP, therefore attracting it into preverbal position.

This only leaves us with the focus rule, so the rule that a focalized constituent attracts the OCP into preverbal position.

Let's first look at example (6) that we already mentioned. Here we see that the attribute of σοι is Χριστε, carries a lot of focus, and most likely was the reason for attraction in preverbal position. In example (9) we see something similar happening with δωρόθεος.

Another very interesting example we see in number (10), where we have in fact a parallel sentence-structure, but a different word order. In the second verse we see μάρκος με τέρπει, while the third verse has μάρκος φρούρει με. There are no function words or preferential words to explain this, so the only possible explanation left is the focus rule. We could therefore assume that μάρκος in verse two carries the focus of the sentence, as it is still a relatively new subject. By verse three, however, μάρκος has become "agreed upon", "topic" and therefore fails to attract the OCP into preverbal position. There is not really any other possible explanation, since the placement of the OCP has no effect on the metre, whatsoever.

These snippets of information are very interesting, though, because they do give us a tiny glimpse into the scribe's mind. We see that the scribe considered the mention of Mark's name in the second verse still relatively new and striking or conspicuous, but this had faded by the third verse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that – despite being written in an archaizing language – the OCPs are strikingly often found in adjacency to the verb, so we in fact see a heralding of the Modern Greek situation. However, we are still far from the Modern Greek situation, as especially preverbal OCPs are still often separated from their verb. Byzantine Greek is therefore a perfect illustration of the evolution of the convergence of the phonological and syntactic host in progress.

Apart from that, we see that the focus hypothesis does hold true in our corpus. We indeed find the three word categories which attract the OCP into preverbal position. Focus may indeed be the missing piece to complete the puzzle that is the "seemingly random variation" in OCP placement, as it explains many of the otherwise inexplicable varieties in word order.