High negation and speech act mitigation in Greek

Previous research (Romero & Han 2004) has suggested that Greek negative polar questions displaying Negation-Verb-Subject-Object word order (1) feature a 'high' negative marker *dhen* 'not' and are interpreted like English pre-posed negation polar questions (see the English translation in (1)), i.e., they unambiguously convey positive speaker bias:

(1) Dhen   efere   o   Tasos turta?
    NEG   brought   the   Tasos cake
    'Didn't Tasos bring cake?' (I believe he did.)

Importantly, solid empirical evidence in support of this claim turns out extremely difficult to come by, due to Greek being a pro-drop language (Holton et al. 2012) that displays both VSO and SVO unmarked word order (Roussou & Tsimpli 2006; Oikonomou & Alexiadou 2022). The present study focuses on two stronger but underexplored candidates for hosting 'high' negation in Greek, exemplified by (2) and (3) below, with small caps graphically representing focus realization.

(2) MIA   TURTA dhen efere   o   Tasos?
    a   cake NEG   brought   the   Tasos
    'Wasn't it a cake that Tasos brought?'

(3) Dhen   mas   ftiaxnis   mia   turta?
    NEG   us   you.make   a   cake
    'Why don't you bake us a cake?'

On a first level, the study motivates the claim that *dhen* is not interpreted as propositional negation in either of these two utterance types. On a second level, it shows that both utterance types realize mitigated speech acts (Sbisà 2001; Krifka 2024) and associates the mitigating effect with the presence of the 'high' *dhen*.

Starting from example (2), it shows the same behavior as English 'high' negation questions (Romero & Han 2004; Krifka 2017, a.o.) once one applies all the relevant tests found in the literature (Ladd 1981; Sailor 2013; Goodhue 2022). Concretely, despite the presence of *dhen*, (2) fails to license Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) or Negative Concord Items (NCIs), it cannot be part of an alternative question, and it displays the same response pattern as the corresponding positive polar question. Moreover, modification of (2) by *again*-adverbials or *as*-parentheticals can only target the positive sentence radical. Last but not least, uttering (2) is most felicitous in those contexts where the speaker has a strong epistemic preference for the positive propositional alternative, that is the proposition corresponding to *Tasos brought a cake*.

But if the speaker uttering (1) believes that the positive propositional alternative is true, why don't they simply assert it?

(4) O Tasos efere   mia   turta.
    theTasos brought   a   cake
    'Tasos brought a cake.'

Uttering (2) or (4) serves the same broad goal: to positively settle the issue regarding Tasos having brought a cake. The difference between the two alternatives is that the speaker producing (2) gives up the power to achieve this goal to the addressee. In this sense, (2) represents a weakened, mitigated speech act (Sbisà 2001). If we adopt a commitment-based semantics for speech acts (Cohen & Krifka 2014; Krifka 2024), (2) can be analyzed as an act via which the speaker gives the addressee the freedom to *not*

commit to the proposition corresponding to *Tasos brought a cake* (see Krifka 2017). Notice that, under such an analysis, the negative marker *dhen* is considered to take scope over an assertion speech act operator (see Krifka 2017 on negative questions as denegated assertions). The analysis thus derives the conversational impact of the utterance in (2), the presence of the negative marker *dhen*, as well as the non-propositional, 'high' interpretation of the latter.

Moving now on to example (3), this satisfies all the diagnostics that Francez (2024) introduces for suggestive questions, which also involve non-propositional negation. Specifically, the sentence in (3) makes reference to a controllable eventuality (i.e., the baking of a cake), it is compatible with *please*-type or *come on!*-type expressions, and it admits *OK*-responses. Furthermore, in spite of the presence of *dhen*, example (3) cannot license NCIs and is felicitous in contexts where the speaker has a clear preference that the addressee makes true the proposition expressed by the positive sentence radical, that is that he actually bakes a cake.

But if the speaker clearly wants the addressee to bake a cake, why don't they simply give the corresponding order?

(5) Ftiakse   mas   mia   turta!
    make.IMP us   a   cake
    'Bake a cake for us!'

The goal of a speaker uttering (3) or (5) is that the cake-baking on the part of the addressee becomes true. The fundamental difference between these two options is that, by choosing (3), the speaker gives up the authority to demand that the addressee bake a cake. In this sense, (3) corresponds to a mitigated speech act (Sbisà 2001). Staying in the commitment-based semantics framework (Cohen & Krifka 2014; Krifka 2024) adopted for the previous case, uttering (3) can be considered as a speech act via which the speaker allows the addressee to *not* commit to making the positive propositional alternative true (see also Bella & Moser 2018). Under this view, *dhen* in suggestive questions such as (3) is considered to scope over a promise speech act operator. Such an analysis readily derives the conversational impact of uttering (3), the presence of the negative marker *dhen* and its non-propositional, 'high' negation reading.

Summing up, this study successfully identifies Greek focus-fronted biased questions (2) and suggestive questions (3) as 'high' negation hosts. It further uniformly relates Greek 'high' negation to the speech act domain of the clause, thus deriving the properties of both the 'high' negative marker itself and the types of utterances in which the latter appears. On a broader level, the two types of utterances discussed provide evidence for the presence and availability of speech act operators in syntax.

Selected references

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