A Construction Grammar approach to polysemous Greek particles

The Ancient Greek language is famous for its abundance of particles. Yet, the description of particles - both in Greek and in other languages - continues to be a challenge. The main reason for this is that particles are often poly-functional. The Dutch particle *wel*, for instance, may be used both as a downtoner and as a strong positive marker as in respectively (1) and (2).

(1) *Wel leuk hoor, maar nu ook weer niet vreselijk bijzonder.*
WEL nice PTCL, but now also again not terribly special
'ok, but not very special' (http://boeklog.info/auteur/lans-jos-van-der/).

(2) *Werken moet wel leuk zijn*
Work(V) needs WEL fun be
'work does need to be fun' (http://www.tractorfan.nl/topic/3126/1/)

As we can see from the examples above, one particle may have different functions. This has led to frequent reference to the context in the description of particles. Both in monosemy and polysemy approaches to particles, context and pragmatics play an important role. However, it is not always clear what context leads to what interpretation and why this is the case. Especially in a dead language like Ancient Greek this leads to different interpretations of the same passage as in (2), where κου (=που) is translated in three different ways. (a) nothing, b) somewhere, c) had chanced/anywhere?)

Herodotus.4.9.6

(3) ᾽Ιδόντα δὲ καὶ θωμάσαντα ἐπειρέσθαι μιν εἴ κου εἶδεν ἵππους πλανωμένας.

a) When he saw her he was astonished, and asked her if she had seen his mares straying; (Vert. Godley)
b) And after he had seen and marvelled, he asked her whether somewhere she saw mares wandering. (Vert. Shlomo Felberbaum)
c) He looked at her wonderingly; but nevertheless inquired, whether she had chanced to see his strayed mares anywhere. (Vert. George Rawlinson)

Although it is not impossible that a sentence was also ambiguous for the Ancient Greeks themselves, we may assume that this was not generally the case. Therefore it is interesting to find out whether there are any regularities in the context that point in the direction of one of the possible interpretations. This may also help us to choose between various contradicting descriptions of scholars of, for instance, the particle που.

A theory that might help us to disambiguate particles is Construction Grammar (a.o. Fillmore, Kay & O'Connor, 1988; Goldberg, 1995). This theory has as its basic assumption that form-meaning parings may consist of more than one word and may not always be compositional. A construction may for instance, consist of completely fixed expressions, such as *kick the bucket* 'to die', but it can also be rather abstract such as *VERB something to someone*, expressing a transfer of some sort. Constructions are connected in a semantic network, allowing the language user to see

connections between formally or functionally comparable constructions. From this theory and comparable findings from grammaticalization research we would expect that different interpretations or a particle are connected to different environments (i.e. constructions). We will test this hypothesis for a highly polysemous Ancient Greek particle and see whether this theory can shed some light on the use of context in disambiguating and describing this polysemous particle.

References

Goldberg, A.E. (1995) *Constructions : a construction grammar approach to argument structure*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fillmore, C., P. Kay and C. O'Connor (1988) Regularity and Idiomaticity in Grammatical Constructions: The Case of *let alone*. *Language* 64: 501-38.