PRAGMATIC EFFECTS OF THE REPETITION
OF THE POSSESSIVE μου IN GREEK

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I. Introduction

This study\(^1\) attempts to prove with specific examples from Greek that elliptical utterances are not synonymous with their corresponding unreduced structures. More specifically, this study deals with the repetition of some determiners and in particular with possessives in coordinate structures and the pragmatic effects that this repetition creates on the reader.

Fromkin and Rodman (1983: 175), writing about ellipsis, a phenomenon which seems to be universal, claim that this deletion of identical material "may be a result of a general tendency for languages to be more efficient by not repeating information already known or easily deducible". Hence, elliptical sentences are always shorter than their corresponding full-fledged ones. Ellipsis has, therefore, been described in the literature as a word-saving\(^2\) and/or effort-saving\(^3\) device that allows writers/speakers to be more efficient by not repeating redundant information. On the other hand, it has been proved\(^4\) that not all elliptical sentences can be generated
from full sentences by the application of ‘deletion rules’ as Trasformational Grammarians maintain.

Speakers, as Labov (Studium Generale, 23.77) quoted in Bolinger (1977) has remarked, “do not readily accept the fact that two different expressions actually ‘mean the same’”. It seems that the natural condition of a language is to preserve one form for one meaning and one meaning for one form (Bolinger ibid.: x).5

II. Obligatory ellipsis

It seems that, in certain cases, the maxim ‘reduce as much as possible’, becomes obligatory since, as Liles (1975) points out, elliptical expressions seem to be much more functional and less irritating than their corresponding expanded versions.6

Greenbaum, quoted in Sanders (1977), also indicates that “there are many contexts in which it is the non-elliptical member of a paraphrase set which would be found anomalous or difficult rather than the elliptical one”. Notice in this respect that Brown and Levinson (1978: 116) consider ellipsis a positive politeness strategy “since the comprehensibility of the utterance depends on mutually shared knowledge”. By using ellipsis, as they claim, the speaker “acknowledges the fact that there is shared knowledge and thus indicates that there is common ground and closeness between the participants”.

Failure to reduce some linguistic elements that are either needless or redundant to repeat may be associated with “a pedantic or else mocking effect” (Levin 1979: 1).7 Similarly, as Bolinger (ibid.: 6), rightly, contends, the ‘polite and wistful’ reply to the invitation why don’t you go shopping with me? is I’d like to and not the full answer—on the first intonation—I’d like to go shopping with you which sounds ‘a bit brusque’ and “one is more strongly
impelled to finish with *but I can’t*. As he concludes:

the effect of repeating the full sentence in a case like this is one
either of *mocking* [emphasis mine] the original speaker or
pretending that he is too dense that it is necessary to repeat all
words to make him understand.

Thus, repeating elements which, otherwise, would have been
omitted results in utterances that are marked because they do not
follow the norm. As Bolinger (ibid.) has remarked, when an
optional rule, which is used quite widely, fails to apply, pragmatic
associations grow up around those structures. It is the purpose of
this paper to attempt to shed some light on these pragmatic
associations that grow up when the application of the deletion rule of possessives in coordinate structures fails.

### III. Coordinate Structures

Sanders (1977) defines elliptical coordinate structures as
synonymous with corresponding unreduced coordinate structures.
Generally speaking, however, it has been proved (Greenbaum and
Meyer, 1982; hereafter G&M) that when speakers are asked to
choose between an unreduced structure and the corresponding
elliptical one, in certain cases, they opt for the reduced sentence.
Thus, as G&M point out, in coordinate structures, subjects prefer
D-ellipsis (ellipsis at the beginning of the second clause) over the
corresponding full coordination. Thus, subjects from the following
two structures opted for the second truncated sentence:

Susan is working during the day and Susan/she is studying at
night

Susan is working during the day and studying at night.

Similarly, their informants “tended to prefer more ellipsis to less
ellipsis”. From the following two sentences their subjects preferred
the second sentence which exhibits fuller ellipsis:

My sister is washing the dishes and is drying them

My sister is washing the dishes and drying them.
Hence, what seems to be the case is that when people communicate and decide to include deliberately certain linguistic elements which otherwise would or, perhaps, should be left out, they do it in order to create certain stylistic effects or pragmatic associations since the norm seems to be to omit the unnecessary information (least effort principle (Zipf 1949)).

IV. Possessives

Let us now consider some coordinate structures where the possessive is omitted as the maxim dictates and see some of the pragmatic associations that its insertion ignites. The following example is from Milapides (1990: 4.5):

He took his wife and child with him.

Presumably, this perfectly acceptable sentence in English is not synonymous with its corresponding non-elliptical one:

He took his wife and his child with him.

This sentence, provided that his wife happens also to be the mother of the child seems to be odd since the insertion of the second possessive is not only redundant but it is this very insertion that renders the unreduced sentence odd. This sentence seems to be perfectly all right if his wife and the mother of the child are two different persons, i.e., he has a child, perhaps from a previous marriage.

From the example cited above, it becomes, I hope, quite obvious that the two sentences are semantically different and, therefore, the deletion of the second possessive in this case seems to be compulsory because its insertion can cause ambiguity.

In Greek coordinate structures when two nouns are coordinated, the possessive is usually placed after the second noun and it is supposed
to cover the first noun as well. Thus, the sentence

'Εχείς την αγάπη και τη συμπάθεια μου
have-you12 the love and the sympathy my13
* ‘You have love and my sympathy’

is said to derive from the corresponding

'Εχείς την αγάπη μου και τη συμπάθεια μου
have-you the love my and the sympathy my
‘You have my love and my sympathy’.

Notice that the English equivalent of the first Greek sentence, you have love and my sympathy, is unacceptable and has been starred for this reason.

It should be mentioned that, unlike English where the possessive is a determiner, in Greek, the possessive is an enclitic placed after the noun, and in this way articles and possessives are not mutually exclusive as is the case with English:14

* You have the my love and sympathy

* You have the my love and the my sympathy.

Another major difference is that in English the supposed ‘deletion rule’ deletes the second occurrence of the possessive my—considering it redundant—leaving only the first occurrence of the possessive, right before the first noun phrase (NP).

Thus, the equivalent sentences are:

You have my love and sympathy

deriving from

You have my love and my sympathy.

Any attempt to apply the English deletion rule to Greek results in the unacceptable Greek sentence

* 'Εχείς την αγάπη μου και τη συμπάθεια
have-you the love my and the sympathy
‘You have my love and sympathy’

the English translation of which, however, is perfectly all right.
Notice in this respect that all my informants found unacceptable the following sentences which retain the possessive in the first conjunct only:

* Εξεις τη σκέψη μου και την αγάπη have-you the thought my and the love
  ‘You have my thought and love’

* Σου στέλνω τις ευχές μου και την αγάπη you send-I the wishes my and the love
  ‘I send you my wishes and love’.

Quite parenthetically note that the first one is questionable in English only because English people would rather say you are in my thoughts instead of you have my thought whereas the second is an acceptable output as it should be.

A possible explanation for the unacceptability of the Greek sentences is that the possessive μου cannot also be mentally transferred to cover the second abstract noun as well and, for this reason, the second NP seems to be in need of another possessive.

It is striking, however, that another sentence with the same structure but concrete nouns in both conjuncts was found to be not only perfectly acceptable but ambiguous as well:

Σου στέλνω τα βιβλία μου και τα άρθρα you send-I the books my and the papers
  ‘I am sending you my books and papers’.

All of my informants had the feeling that the possessive μου does not necessarily apply to the noun άρθρα ‘papers/articles’ as well. The noun άρθρα might refer to papers or articles written by either the same author, i.e., myself—rare reading—or could refer to papers that you have asked for and those papers might contain papers written by other authors—most likely reading—including, perhaps, myself. In other words, the possessive seems to cover only the first NP and not the second.

Oddly enough, the unacceptability of the examples with the abstract nouns cited above can be improved by the use of the possessive σου
(2nd person, singular). Thus, the majority of my informants found the following utterances acceptable:

Σ' ευχαριστώ για την καλούσηνη σου και την αγάπην
you thank-I for the kindness your and the love
'I thank you for your kindness and love'

Σ' ευχαριστώ για τη φιλοξενία σου και τα δώρα
you thank-I for the hospitality your and the presents
'I thank you for your hospitality and presents'.

Notice that in the second sentence the noun δώρα 'presents' might contain presents from other people as well.

What is of primary importance, however, is that the sentences with the possessive retained only in the second conjunct are both acceptable and preferred over the corresponding ones that contained the possessive in the first conjunct only. Thus, the unacceptable examples mentioned above

* Έχεις τη σκέψη μου και την αγάπη
have-you the thought my and the love
? ‘You have my thought and love’

* Σου οστέλνω τις ευχές μου και την αγάπη
you send-I the wishes my and the love
‘I send you my wishes and love’.

become acceptable when μου is inserted in the second conjunct instead of the first (both are either questionable or unacceptable respectively in English):

* Έχεις τη σκέψη και την αγάπη μου
have-you the thought and the love my
? ‘You have thought and my love’

* Σου οστέλνω τις ευχές και την αγάπη μου
you send-I the wishes and the love my
* ‘I send you wishes and my love’.

Notice, however, that the ambiguity of the sentence

* Σου οστέλνω τα βιβλία μου και τα όρθα
you send-I the books my and the papers
‘I am sending you my books and papers’

is only transferred—instead of being removed—when the
possessive is placed in its natural position, i.e., the second conjunct:

Σου στέλνω τα βιβλία και τα άρθρα μου
you send-I the books and the papers my
* 'I am sending you books and my papers'18.

Τα βιβλία ‘the books’ are not necessarily books written by me or belonging to me; they might as well be books that you simply have asked for. In support of the argument that the natural position of the possessive, in Greek, is in the second conjunct note that the sentences

Σ' ευχαριστώ για την καλοσύνη και τη συμπάθειά σου
you thank-I for the kindness and the sympathy your
? 'I thank you for the kindness and your love'

Σ' ευχαριστώ για τη φιλοξενία και τα δώρα σου
you thank-I for the hospitality and the presents yours
? 'I thank you for the hospitality and your presents'

were preferred over the corresponding ones with the possessive in the first conjunct.

My informants, however, agreed that the following two sentences are not semantically identical as they should be if the omission of the possessive were only optional:

'Εχεις την αγάπη και τη συμπάθειά μου
have-you the love and the sympathy my
* 'You have love and my sympathy'

'Εχεις την αγάπη μου και τη συμπάθειά μου
have-you the love my and the sympathy my
'You have my love and my sympathy'.

It is worthy of note that my informants reconfirmed my feeling that what seems to be unnecessary information—I refer to the insertion of the possessive μου in both conjuncts of the second sentence—is actually very crucial since it is responsible for the fact that all my subjects preferred the second sentence when they were asked to choose the one that they would use to extend their condolences to a bereaved person/friend.

What makes this non-elliptical sentence be preferred in a situation like this? Is it, perhaps, that repetition creates a childlike effect—
innocence—on the hearer/reader that is appropriate in this case? This is possible since, repetition has been associated with children’s speech\(^9\) and as, has been pointed out, “failure to reduce an utterance which normally should be reduced can relegate the speaker/writer of such a construction to the status of children, ...”. (Milapides 1990: 185f).

As is known, elliptical constructions involve a greater strain on processing abilities and memory and, generally speaking, they are harder to decode than their non-elliptical counterparts (Sanders 1977).\(^2\) This claim, however, cannot be applied to this case since this particular example is only a short sentence and what is missing does not require extra computation abilities in order to reconstruct it, thus, its omission should not really put any strain on the already emotionally suffering friend. On the other hand, as is known, retaining superfluous items is quite unusual in adult speech\(^2\). Repeating the possessive \(\mu o u\) certainly diverts from the norm and there must be a reason for this failure of the deletion rule to apply. It is by no means accidental. The effects of this failure seem to be too significant to be ignored.

It is worth pointing out that this difference in the two sentences in question occurred to me when, in my need to show my sympathy to a friend who had lost a beloved relative, I noticed that in the wording of the telegram, I had decided to send, it was the unreduced version of the utterance that expressed better or more adequately my feelings at that particular moment—although it contained an extra word for which I would, perhaps, have to pay more money! Therefore, it seemed as if this insertion helped me overcome the impersonal character of a telegram since expressing sorrow telegraphically strips it of all the feelings of genuine regret.

In Greece, a telegram is frequently used as a formal written way of expressing, for instance, your sympathy to a friend. According to Young (1980), the absence of elliptical forms in a dialogue implies formality and distance between the speaker and his/her addressee. As Liles (1975) also contends, “writing is necessarily more formal
than speech because it lacks most verbal signals. Hence, there is less deletion in writing and formal speaking than in casual styles”. Was formality, then, that dictated the use of the long sentence? I suspect not. At least this was not the reason I decided to include the repetitive μου in my telegram. On the contrary, instead of keeping a distance from a friend—formality entails it, after all!—I wanted to share some of the grief; I wanted my friend to know that I was close both literally and figuratively.

On the other hand, the purpose of the user of telegraphic ellipsis is the economy of the language “through the omission of items of little information value” (Quirk et al. 1985: 900). For this reason, determiners, pronouns, operators and other closed-class words tend to be left out in telegraphic ellipsis. This significantly strengthens the claim that the choice to include the determiner in the telegram was definitely deliberate because it seemed to serve a purpose. One could claim that the insertion was decided, among other reasons, because the characteristic of telegraphic ellipsis is that there is no one underlying form and that is because of its contextless isolation. As Gunter (1963: 141) points out, “two or more informants will often disagree wildly about the proper expansion of a telegraphic ellipsis”. A telegram, in a case like this, should be able to transfer the sender’s most elaborate feelings of sympathy to the reader by use of the sparsest verbal representation. At the same time, the sender has to make sure, however, that this is not done at the expense of coherence.

As is known, writing, unlike speaking, lacks most nonverbal signals. What seems to be the case with the possessive μου is that it is repeated for a second time, despite the norm, because in this case it acts as a kind of aid to the impersonal nature of a telegram from which other paralinguistic elements such as the colour or the tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, the intonational contours etc. are absent.

There is no need to say that the repetition of the possessive makes the sentence more emphatic than the elliptical one. The sentence may
sound a bit naive and not very elegant as some of my informants remarked but still they would choose this over the reduced version.

V. Conclusion

Hoey (1983: 25), writing about repetition, maintains that:

repetition is not only a common method of connecting sentences but also a significant contributor to their interpretation, because where two sentences have material in common, it is what is changed that receives attention by the reader, [emphasis mine] while the repeated material acts as a framework for the interpretation of the new material.

It seems, however, that the repeated material can serve other purposes as well beside that of acting ‘as a framework for the interpretation of new material’. Sometimes it is this very repetition of what seems to be redundant that might attract the reader’s attention because the new material, for instance, in our case, is the effect that the repeated item creates when it violates the norm itself.

Furthermore, it seems that the claim ‘the better people know each other, the more casual they can be in speaking, and the more they can delete’ (Liles 1975) does not hold for a case like the one under investigation. The lack of all the other paralinguistic elements that are present when speaking but absent in a telegram seems to play a decisive role in the choice for less ellipsis and more repetition.

In sum, we have argued in the preceding section of this study that the insertion of the possessive which would normally be omitted because it is considered redundant creates certain pragmatic effects to the reader/hearer. Notice, in confirmation of this, that as Bolinger (ibid.,) points out ‘there is no difference in form without some difference in meaning’.

Writers, therefore, must always weigh the appropriateness of ellipsis not only to the setting but also to their readers “to decide what extent [of ellipsis] will contribute to rather than damage” the efficiency of their texts. (Beaugrande and Dressler 1983: 69).23
NOTES

1 I am indebted to E. Kitis and Th. Kakouriotis for a number of valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.


5 Cf. Bolinger’s (1977: 5) claim that “when a speaker replies to *would you like to have some tea?* with *Yes I would*, and is asked (by a third party, say) *would what?*, we can observe him supplying the missing elements: *like to have some tea, of course.* One can almost say that *Yes I would, Yes I would like to, Yes I would like to have some,* and *Yes I would like to have some tea* are identical. No native speaker of English would be shocked at the use of ‘same’ to describe them (with a ‘difference’, of course, that ‘does not count’). Yet there are functional differences. *Yes I would like to have some,* unlike *Yes I would,* is normal after a first refusal and then a change of mind, but not as a first response”.

6 Cf. Taylor and Cameron (1987: 150) who maintain that in order to understand an elliptical utterance it seems quite absurd to suppose that a complete sentence has first to be computed. “This absurdity is the same many school children feel when they are told that they must not answer the question *who was the king of England during the American revolution?* simply by saying *George the Third.* Instead they are told to reply *The king of England during the American revolution was George.*
the Third". This silly, unnatural way of answering a question is said to be essential in the process of learning since, as is generally accepted, 'repetition/practice makes perfect'.

7 As Jespersen (1948: 309) also contends, "not only is the writer's art rightly said to consist largely in knowing what to leave in the inkstand, but in the most everyday remarks we suppress a great many things which it would be pedantic to say expressly". For a more extensive analysis of the pragmatic associations of ellipsis see Milapides (1990, ch. 5).

8 Transformational-Generative Grammar terminology is not used in this paper because I support this particular theoretical model. The scope of ellipsis seems to be vast since many elliptical utterances can only be accounted for by recourse to the larger cognitive faculty and they seem to have distinct syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties. In other approaches ellipsis is not explained through deletions or transformations (Dik 1968, Shopen 1972, Levin 1979, Beaugrande 1980 etc.).

9 This term is based on Sander's general schema for elliptical coordinations (1977: 242f):
"ABC" is a preceding conjunct;
"DEF" is a following conjunct;
"A" and "D" are initial sequences;
"C" and "F" are final sequences;
"B" and "E" (where A, C, D, F are non-null) are medial sequences; and "&" is (possibly null) coordinating conjunction.

10 See Milapides (1990: 5.4 and 5.5) for a discussion on the exploitation of ellipsis in literature and the cinema.

11 For a more extensive discussion on this example and its equivalent in Greek see Milapides (1990: 4.5).
In Greek, as is known, the missing subject pronoun is in fact recoverable from the agreement marking on the verb.

In the literature, the possessive my has also been rendered as of me.

Notice another major difference pointed out by Mackridge (1987: 64) who writes that, in Greek, “the possessive μου ‘my’ is also used with the vocative to indicate affection or familiarity: Βασίλη μου ‘my [dear] Basil’, κυρίε Δημητράκο μου ‘my [dear] Mr Dimitrakis’. It should also be pointed out that, in Greek, “the possessive is often absent when parts of the body or personal belongings are referred to: στην πόρτα με το καπέλο στό χέρι ‘he stood at the door with [his] hat in [his] hand’ (Mackridge 1987: 222).

For the Greek data, I have relied more on the judgements of native speakers and less on my own intuitions as to whether the sentences are semantically identical or whether my informants detect any differences. I, then, tried to formulate my hypothesis based on their judgements. Hence, the different interpretations/readings I assign to certain utterances reflect the majority of my informants’ opinions.

Note that the same verb form is used in Greek to denote the present or present continuous/progressive aspect.

I have found divergent judgements on the acceptability of this example among various speakers. All of them, however, agreed that this example is better than the unacceptable ones

* Έχεις τη σκέψη μου και την αγάπη

and

* Σου στέλνω τις ευχές μου και την αγάπη.

Kakouriotis (personal communication) referring to the unacceptability of *Έχεις τη σκέψη μου και την αγάπη has
pointed out that the verb ἔχω 'have', being a verb of possession, requires precise specification.

Note that if the definite article the is inserted before the noun books the sentence I am sending you the books and my papers becomes a perfectly acceptable one meaning 'the books that the two of us know about'. The possessive my in the second conjunct does not seem to cover the first noun as well.

See Milapides (1990: 5.1 and 5.2).

As he claims, elliptical sentences are usually more difficult to understand than their unreduced versions because by omitting certain elements in an utterance “the difficulty of determining the intended grammatical and semantic relationships of constituents” increases and in this way hearers/readers are forced to use all their mental abilities if they want to fully understand the elliptical utterances.

Slobin (1985: 241) contends that children produce “too much information from an adult point of view”.

This term refers to the kind of language used in telegrams, newspaper headlines, signs, informal notes, diaries etc.

Liles (1975: 310) also claims that “although there is always a certain amount of redundancy in language, we remove part of it according to what we think the reader or listener knows”.
REFERENCES


