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Interpreting particles in dead and living languages

A construction grammar approach to the semantics of Dutch *ergens* and Ancient Greek *pou*

Words may have multiple interpretations. For instance, the word *table* can refer to a piece of furniture or to a page listing the chapters of a book as in *table of contents*. Generally, native speakers do not perceive this as a problem, because the context provides enough clues as to what is meant. For non-native speakers and students of dead languages, however, the existence of multiple interpretations sometimes does raise problems. This suggests that the context is not the only clue native speakers use to interpret words.

In this dissertation, it is studied what types of context Dutch speakers need to interpret the poly-interpretable word *ergens* 'somewhere/anywhere', *modal particle*. The results of this investigation were used to find out more about the Ancient Greek form *pou* 'somewhere, anywhere', *modal particle*.

This thesis shows that the study of contextual cues that allow native speakers to interpret their language provides insights that may be used in the study of dead languages. The modal interpretations of *ergens* and *pou* turned out to be quite different, but the context of both words clearly showed recurring (albeit different) patterns. Knowledge of the common interpretation of words in specific contexts seems crucial for their interpretation, suggesting that it is not words themselves that carry meaning, but words-in-context.

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