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Conclusion, theoretical implications and further research

15.1 Conclusion and theoretical implications

In this dissertation, a study of *ergens* and $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$ showed that it is very likely that speakers interpret poly-interpretable forms by means of a detailed knowledge of the contextual patterns with which certain interpretations of a form are associated. In an experimental setup, it was found that, generally, a two word window on both sides of *ergens* was enough for speakers to interpret *ergens* in the same way as they did when 9-15 words of context on both sides were provided. This implies that meaning may be connected not so much to one word, but to the word in a specific context, which is known to the language users.

However, in a minority of the cases, the larger context (i.e. more than a few words around *ergens*) played an important role in its interpretation. This suggests that although contextual and constructional information is an important factor in interpretation, it not the only factor. Expectations on the basis of the larger context may sometimes also have a strong influence on interpretation.

The patterns in both the direct linguistic context and the situational contexts of *ergens* and $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$ allowed us to draw quite a clear picture of what the functions of these forms may be. By means of a careful study of the patterns in the linguistic and situational contexts in which *ergens* was used, I was able to describe *ergens*, apart from its non-modal uses, as a mental space builder which expresses that there is more than one subjective viewpoint. These viewpoints may be implicit, as in the interpretation *in someone's feelings or thoughts*, or explicit, as in the case of many instances of the *from some point of view*- interpretation.

As was shown by the study of $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$, the relation between the linguistic and con-

textual patterns of a poly-interpretable form and its interpretation may be used to find out more about the use of forms in dead languages that are hard to interpret. By using both translations in three different languages as well as the linguistic and situational contextual characteristics of $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$, it was possible to describe modal $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$ as a marker that manages the expectations of the addressee by expressing that the speaker is aware that the content of the $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$ -clause is accessible information for the addressee.

This description of modal $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$ was used to connect and explain many observations that have been made in the literature on $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$.

On the basis of the surveys on *ergens*, it was suggested that in case of ambiguity speakers tend to prefer a more subjective, modal or metaphorical interpretation over the original concrete interpretation. However, if there is no context at all they seem to prefer the most concrete interpretation, which, in the case of *ergens* also happened to be the most frequent interpretation. The question as to whether people choose the most concrete interpretation when deprived of all context or the most frequent interpretation remains open.

This brings us to questions for further research.

15.2 Further research

With respect to the theoretical points made in this dissertation, it is a child of its time. This is clear from the fact that during the five years I worked on it, many of the theoretical ideas which are put forward here were independently put on the agenda by other scholars (e.g. Bergs and Diewald, 2009a; Bybee, 2010; Taylor, 2012). What this dissertation has to offer is, therefore, for the largest part the testing of the theories against linguistic data, thereby stumbling upon the inevitable complexities of actual human language use both in dead and living languages. This means that although in many respects the results of this dissertation confirm the theoretical expectations, it also shows that there are still many problems to be solved. I will indicate a few directions in which further research may expand the work that was done here.

In the discussion of the use of triggers for interpretation, we distinguished between higher order triggers and lower order triggers. This distinction was purely descriptive. However, this raises the question of what makes one trigger more important than another and how people know that.

One of the most difficult problems is how to account for those cases which seem to comply only partly with the most commonly found regularities. Both in the cases of *ergens* and of $\pi\upsilon\upsilon$ we found examples which seemed to be connected to some larger group, but also deviated from it in the sense that they did not comply with the normal characteristics of that group. It may be that this is just a symptom of language change in progress, but if language users know which patterns are found in their language as well as seemed to be the case in the *ergens* surveys, one would not expect this to be 20-30% of the instances in a corpus. One solution is that I just overlooked some patterns, possibly also as a result of a restricted corpus. However, the question remains how, in the end, people combine all the types of information they have into an utterance

and why they (on purpose or by accident) sometimes deviate from the most common way to express things. More psycholinguistic research may shed more light on this issue.

A last point is the question as to which extent the methods used in this dissertation will work for other forms and other word types, both in Dutch, Ancient Greek and in other languages. One of the questions that was already mentioned in the introduction is whether the type of linguistic and situational information used may differ between more content related words and function words. If the type of word studied matters, it may be useful when studying a dead language to study a comparable form in a living language also. This way it may become clear what kind of contextual characteristics do or do not play a role.

