

Studies in Ancient Greek Denominative Verbs

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Denominative verbs built on nouns or adjectives, are found throughout the World's languages but their properties are currently poorly understood. In English 'shelf' and 'carpet' form denominatives 'to shelve' and 'to carpet', but when we 'carpet the stairs', we put carpet on stairs and when we 'shelve a book', we put a book on a shelf. Recent studies (Kiparsky 1997, Baeskow 2006) have tried to establish the extent to which extralinguistic conceptual knowledge is necessary to assign meaning to such verbs.

The Indo-European **-ye/o-* suffix was used extensively to form denominative verbs in the daughter languages. How far was their meaning determined by the suffix and what role did extralinguistic knowledge play? Meillet (1937:219) took the view that '**-ye/o-* n'a aucune valeur sémantique propre: il sert simplement à la dérivation'. This paper suggests that a more articulated analysis is achievable. Since secure word-equations for denominative verbs are practically non-existent, we must approach the question through an analysis of the daughter languages.

Several recent studies have dealt with the question of the meaning and function of the **-ye/o-* suffix, particularly as it appears in Vedic (e.g. Tucker 1988 on *-ya-* denominatives specifically, see also Kulikov 1998 and Schrijver 1999 on other uses of the *-ya-* suffix). However, little has been written recently on the **-ye/o-* suffix in Ancient Greek.

This study is limited to Ancient Greek denominative **-ye/o-* verbs formed from consonant final stems attested in literary texts in or before the Fourth Century BCE. There is a systematic contrast between verbs like [*ap^hraínō*] 'I am foolish', built from the adjective [*áp^hrōn*] 'foolish' and verbs like [*pīaínō*] 'I make something fat', built from the adjective [*pīōn*] 'fat'.

A study of the collocations in which the base adjectives occur from Homer

to the Fourth Century shows that this difference in verb meaning is determined by the lexical properties of the nominal base. The intransitive verbs of the $[ap^h raínō]$ type are built from adjectives which occur only with animate nouns (e.g. $[ándras \dots áp^h ronas]$) and have an inherent EXPERIENCER or AGENT semantic role: $[stōmúlos]$ ‘chattering’ (with an implied AGENT argument) forms a verb $[stōmúllō]$ ‘I chatter’. The denominative verb simply spells out the internal argument of the base adjective as the verbal subject.

On the other hand, transitive verbs of the $[pīaínō]$ type are built from adjectives which collocate with inanimate *or* animate nouns (e.g. $[píōnes agroí]$, $[ánt^hrōpos \dots píōn]$) and have an inherent THEME semantic role: $[daídalos]$ ‘cunningly wrought’ forms a verb $[daidállō]$ ‘I embellish’. This type is clearly factitive/causative. Analogous patterns can be adduced for denominatives built from substantives.

I suggest that the subject of an active $*-ye/o-$ verb required an AGENT or EXPERIENCER semantic role. Where such an argument was available in the argument structure of the base noun or adjective, this became the role of the subject. Where there was no such role, as in the $[pīaínō]/[daidállō]$ type, a default AGENT role was added and the factitive/causative semantics and transitive syntax of the derived verb followed automatically. Thus some semantic content needs to be attributed to the $*-ye/o-$ suffix, and no extra-linguistic knowledge needs to be invoked to account for the contrast $[ap^h raínō]/[pīaínō]$.

This analysis predicts that denominative $*-ye/o-$ verbs should never be *impersonal* or *unaccusative* – this prediction holds amongst all the data analysed. An unexpected corroboration comes from the primary $*-ye/o-$ verbs inherited from Indo-European. All active Greek examples in LIV² have a subject which conforms to the above constraint, suggesting – in a preliminary fashion – that this limitation on $*-ye/o-$ denominatives may have been a constraint on early primary formations also.

References

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