Clause-initial verbs in Ancient Greek and the Question Under Discussion model

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Ancient Greek is a discourse-configurational language, in which word order is largely determined by pragmatic and information-structural factors. Despite recent advances in our understanding of the specific pragmatic determinants of Greek word order (Dik 1995, Matić 2003), many issues remain unclear. This paper focuses on one such issue, the discourse-pragmatic conditions that license the clause-initial placement of verbs.

I argue that the proper unit of analysis is not initial verbs in themselves, but 'verbal intonation units' or VIUs: intonational units which contain an initial verb as well as, optionally, additional material. (The existence of such intonational units can be demonstrated by evidence from clitic placement.) The criteria licensing the inclusion of such additional material (e.g. NPs) in VIUs are discourse-pragmatic: namely, such material must be broadly topical, i.e. either part of the common ground or of an introduced topic. In (1), where the right boundary of the VIU is marked with |, the pronoun *autou* appears inside it because it is part of the common ground:

(1)   ērksanto   de   autou | Athēnaioi   kai   Peloponnēsioi
        begin-AOR-3PL PART it-GEN Athenians-NOM.PL   and   Peloponnesians-NOM.PL
        ['The Peloponnesian war was the most protracted and disastrous war in Greek
        history.'] 'The Athenians and the Peloponnesians started it.'

Using the Question Under Discussion (QUD) framework introduced by Roberts (1996), which sees the structure of discourse as consisting of an ordered set of questions which participants attempt to answer, I show that a principal function of VIUs in Ancient Greek prose texts is to articulate the QUD structure. VIUs serve to introduce new QUDs, or, less frequently, to restate a current QUD when it is in a position to be answered. Thus in (1), the new QUD is 'Who started the war?' Specific types of QUD transitions performed by VIUs can be identified: general-to-specific transition, explanation, frame completion, assertion justification, and conclusion.

Works cited
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