Value in the margins: clitic placement in Cypriot Greek

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Tagliamonte (2006:84), correctly advises that one should not investigate patterns of variation that are near-categorical. Despite the overall soundness of this advice, I will show that sometimes, one can uncover crucial information in the margins of variation. The data come from Cypriot Greek clitic placement, which varies between the preverbal and post-verbal position. Since the majority of this variation can be explained by the generalization that clitics are post-verbal in clause initial position, and preverbal after a complementizer, many researchers (Terzi 1999, Condoravdi & Kiparsky 2001, Revithiadou 2006) have ignored the marginal exceptions to this generalization, claiming that they are most likely due to performance errors or dialect mixing.

Contrary to this opinion, I will show that the pattern of exceptions is both diachronically and synchronically stable. To do this, I will present results from previous research in the Medieval Greek period (N = 6230), and in sociolinguistic interviews (N = 2015), as well as the results of a recent magnitude estimation test (cf. Johnson 2008, N = 611), in order to present as complete a picture of the variation as possible. This method of evidence triangulation helps overcome the disadvantages that beset each individual dataset.

The results show conclusively that the pattern of exceptions is real and should not be dismissed as an accident of performance. The small subset of lexemes and phrasal constructions, which behave exceptionally in modern Cypriot Greek both in terms of production (sociolinguistic interviews) and assessment (magnitude estimation test), is, by and large, the same as it was in Medieval Greek. Furthermore, these exceptions do not align with the pattern of Standard Modern Greek and so cannot be dismissed as the product of dialect of mixing. Instead, the investigation of these marginal patterns provides concrete evidence that the clitic placement variation in both stages of Cypriot Greek is a valid representation of speakers' competence.