

On the locative meaning of the verb ‘to be’ in early Greek philosophers

This paper investigates on the syntactic and semantic continuity between the lexical and the copulative uses of the verb εἶμι in ancient Greek. Kahn (2003 [1973]) challenged the traditional linguistic view according to which the lexical meaning of the verb is more ancient than the copulative use. In particular, he was against the hypothesis of a primitive locative meaning of the original Indo-European root, since there would be no diachronic development that explains the diversity of usage from an originally basic word with a concrete or spatial meaning. Moreover, since in the Homeric poems the locative-existential uses of εἶμι are by far less frequent than the more common use as nominal copula, it would be the copula that represented the main function of εἶμι. This function would be primarily syntactic, as a mark of ‘sentencehood’ that is used to distinguish between a simple NP and a sentence (Kahn 2003 [1973]: 189). Thus, the locative-existential meaning would be a secondary development, given that the copula can assert the existence of its subject, and then the same verb would be used to assert existence independently from the copula construction. However, if the problem is tackled from a typological linguistic perspective, at both synchronic and diachronic levels, it turns out that many languages of the world typically exhibit the ‘demonstrative-to-copula’ path of evolution (Diessel 1999; Lionnet 2012), a grammaticalization process that originates from the so-called ‘topic mechanism’ (Li & Thompson 1977). After having considered a similar diachronic evolution for the Indo-European root **h₁es-* ‘to be here/this’, by hypothesizing a common deictic predicative source for both its verbal and nominal uses (cf. Stassen 1997; Dixon 2003; Killian 2022; cf. Shields 1978; 1997), I will analyse the distribution, the meaning and the contexts of use of εἶμι in a sample of early Greek philosophical texts (Diels & Kranz 1951), in order to determine whether there is a semantic continuity between the deictic locative meaning and the foundation of Being.

References

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