The M-word: a Greek collocation between solidarity and insult
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The Greek collocation re malaka can correspond to English “asshole” (insulting use) or “dude” (solidary use), depending on the age, gender and relationship between interlocutors. Similar interactional ambiguities found cross-linguistically (e.g., AmE nigger/nigga) can be explained historically as instances of amelioration; however, rather unusually, the insulting sense continues to exist synchronically parallel with the solidary sense. This project investigates the extent to which the two competing readings are attached to such expressions directly, and/or follow from their context of use. Specifically, do such expressions encode only their insulting meaning, with the solidary reading derived as a particularized conversational implicature (PCI) via a principle such as Banter (Leech 1983)? Do they encode both meanings, albeit to different degrees, with the insulting sense being generalized across the community at large, and the solidary sense being enabled in a range of stereotypical (yet non local) minimal contexts as a mcGCI of the expression (Terkourafi 2009)? Or, are they semantically underspecified and their interactional import determined by the (linguistic and extra-linguistic) contexts in which they occur each time?

In this paper, we present the results of a pilot study that investigated participants’ metalinguistic judgments about the use of re malaka inspired by Kiesling’s (2004) analysis of dude in AmE. Participants (N=750) were divided in three age cohorts (18-29, 30-39, 40-65). Results showed that overall the solidary use prevails across all age cohorts. Close to 95% of participants agreed that the solidary reading is the prevailing one and identified best friends and brothers as the most likely recipients. Consensus about the insulting use was markedly lower, with approximately 30% of participants agreeing that the insulting reading is more likely to arise with strangers. In the self-report part of the survey, participants of all ages reported that they do not use the collocation in an insulting manner often, but when it comes to the solidary use, the youngest cohort use it more frequently than others and more frequently than the insulting one. Based on these results, we propose that the Banter principle (Leech 1983) that may well have motivated the solidary reading during the early stages of this change is no longer in operation and no inference (in the form of a PCI) is needed to disambiguate the collocation. Rather, the solidary reading proceeds as a “conventionalization of invited inferences” (Traugott 1999) and disambiguation is achieved automatically assuming the appropriate minimal context (Terkourafi 2005, 2009). Lastly, the results may be construed as indicating that impoliteness is not necessarily parasitic on politeness, as strategies that create face support can be independently based on ‘impolite’ forms that can be conventionalized to the extent that they encode a face-constituting potential.

References: