

Ordering of Intensifying Prefixal Elements in Modern Greek Taboo Nouns

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Abstract

This paper investigates the hitherto unexplored phenomenon of the ordering of multiple intensifying prefixal elements combined with Modern Greek taboo nouns. While intensification has been extensively studied cross-linguistically and, in Modern Greek, primarily in relation to adjectives and verbs, little attention has been paid to intensifying prefixes and prefixoids in taboo vocabulary. Drawing on online data and analyzing them using a morpheme-by-morpheme approach, this study adopts a bottom-up perspective, starting from the morphological and semantic properties of intensifying prefixal elements. We propose a classification of these elements based on their features and identify the attested patterns of their combinations. Our findings show that the maximum number of intensifying prefixes and prefixoids that can co-occur with a base noun is three, although the most frequent pattern involves the cumulation of two distinct intensifiers. In line with previous research on affix ordering, we argue that the number of attested combinations is significantly smaller than the number of possible ones. With respect to prefix and prefixoid ordering, the analysis reveals that polysemy plays a significant role, as less or non-polysemous elements tend to occur farther from the base. Semantic prominence and the degree of intensity expressed by the elements also contribute to their ordering, with superlative intensifiers tending to occupy more external positions. Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of affix ordering, intensification, and evaluative morphology in Modern Greek, highlighting the morphological richness of taboo vocabulary as a fertile ground for theoretical investigation.

Keywords: *prefix/prefixoid cumulation, prefix/prefixoid ordering, intensification, evaluative morphology, taboo vocabulary, Modern Greek nouns.*

1 Introduction

This study examines the hitherto unexplored topic of the ordering of intensifying prefixal elements combined with Modern Greek taboo nouns.¹ Intensification can be defined as an increase in quantity or quality (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 416). Cross-linguistically, intensification has attracted considerable attention in the relevant literature (cf., among others, Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015; Rainer 2015; Napoli & Ravetto 2017; Hendrikx 2019), while in Modern Greek it has been studied primarily with respect to adjectives and verbs, and several strategies for the expression of intensification have been identified (cf. Efthymiou 2003, 2015, 2017; Gavriilidou 2014, 2016).

In this paper, we focus on intensified taboo nouns in Modern Greek. Taboo vocabulary in Modern Greek is rich, and numerous neologisms are attested (Xydopoulos 2008; Christopoulou 2016). As observed in several languages (cf., among others, Mattiello 2008,

¹ This article contains authentic examples of taboo language. These examples are reproduced exclusively for the purposes of the present analysis and may be disturbing to some readers. Ethical approval was not required for this study because it is based exclusively on linguistic data and did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data.

2022; Christopoulou 2016; Morris 2022; Sánchez Fajardo 2022), taboo vocabulary provides fertile ground for morphological analysis. A notable characteristic of Modern Greek taboo vocabulary is the extensive use of various morphological means for intensifying the meaning of the base, such as *αρχι-μαλάκας* [arxi-malákas] INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’ (prefixation) and *πουταν-άρα* [putan-ára] whore-INT ‘extreme whore’ (suffixation) (cf. Xydopoulos & Christopoulou 2011; Kamilaki et al. 2016; Kallergi et al. 2023). However, the cumulation of intensifying affixes in taboo vocabulary, as in *αρχι-καρα-μαλάκας* [arxi-kara-malákas] INT-INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’, remains unexplored.

Prefixal elements used to intensify Modern Greek taboo nouns have not been extensively discussed in the literature (Christopoulou 2016; Xydopoulos & Christopoulou 2011). Adopting a bottom-up approach, we examine the morphological and semantic properties of intensifying prefixal elements and propose a classification based on these features. Analyzing these features is crucial to investigating the ordering of prefixes and prefixoids, which is the focus of the present paper. Based on a Table of combinations, we identify attested patterns of intensifying prefixal elements. Our data are drawn exclusively from online sources and analyzed using the morpheme-by-morpheme method (cf. also Sissamperi 2025). Building on previous research, we aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the attested combinations of intensifying prefixal elements.

In general, the stack-up of affixes is a widely debated issue in morphological theory (cf., among others, Fabb 1988; Zirkel 2010; Manova & Winternitz 2011; Manova 2023). A range of grammatical and extra-grammatical factors have been proposed in the literature to account for the principles governing the organization of multiple affixal elements (cf., among others, Plag & Baayen 2009; Aronoff & Manova 2010; Manova 2015, 2023). The cumulation of intensifying elements has been investigated in several European languages (cf., among others, Lehrer 1995 for English; Martín García 1998 for Spanish; Cacchiani 2011 for English and Italian; Izert 2012 for French; Merlini Barbaresi 2012 for Italian; Kamber & Huyghe 2023 for French), and it has been shown that these languages employ different formal strategies for the intensification of bases, for example, affixation, compounding, or reduplication (cf., among others, Grandi 2017; Napoli & Ravetto 2017).

In Modern Greek, affix combinations have been studied to a limited extent (cf. Melissaropoulou & Ralli 2010; Melissaropoulou 2015), with individual evaluative affixes and affixoids receiving the greatest attention. Our data show that the maximum number of intensifying prefixes and prefixoids that can be attached to a base noun is three, as in *αρχι-καρα-μεγαλο-μαλάκας* [arxi-kara-meyalo-malákas] INT-INT-INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’, with the most frequent pattern involving the combination of two different intensifiers. We present the attested patterns of intensification in Modern Greek taboo nouns and analyze the types of prefixes and prefixoids that combine in these patterns. In accordance with Zirkel (2010), we argue that the number of attested patterns is far smaller than the number of possible ones.

With respect to the ordering of prefixes and prefixoids in such combinations, we observe that semantic factors appear to be the most influential in determining the order of elements. More specifically, we argue that polysemy may be a relevant factor, since less or non-polysemous elements tend to be placed farther from the base. In addition, semantic prominence contributes to the ordering of elements, as elements closer to the base seem to indicate a higher degree of intensity than those farther from the base. Furthermore, prefixal elements that denote a superlative degree of intensity tend to occur in more external positions within combinations. Finally, we suggest that, in some cases, the order of the elements follows

the pattern of existing formations, while frequency also appears to influence their distribution, with more frequent elements tending to be positioned farther from the base.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the expression of intensification as part of the evaluative morphology of Modern Greek taboo vocabulary. Section 3 outlines the methodology for collecting intensifying prefixes and prefixoids, as well as the data. Section 4 presents the analysis of intensifying prefixes and prefixoids, along with the data. More specifically, Section 4.1 examines the origin and the morphological and semantic features of the prefixes and prefixoids, while Section 4.2 analyzes the attested patterns of combinations with respect to both the number and the types of prefixes and prefixoids that are combined. Section 4.3 addresses the factors that influence the ordering of intensifying prefixes and prefixoids in our data. Finally, Section 5 concludes with a discussion of the results and outlines directions for future research.

2 The expression of intensification in taboo vocabulary through affixation

Intensification can be examined as a semantic function of evaluative morphology and belongs to qualitative evaluation based on the semantic primitives Good/Bad, in the sense that evaluation is grounded in the speakers' emotions and their personal/subjective criteria regarding a person, thing, or situation (Grandi 2017). Thus, intensification expresses the quality above the standard or the default value, in contrast to other semantic functions like attenuation, mitigation, reduction, or approximation,² that denote the quality under the standard or the default value (Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015: 9–12).³ According to Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 416), intensification constitutes an increase in quantity or quality ('very/extremely X'), while Rainer (2015: 1346) defines intensification as a linguistic term that comprises not only a high degree, but all degrees of intensity. In the present study, intensification is examined as a semantic function that denotes only a high degree with an upward direction for the expression of qualitative evaluation.

Taboo vocabulary constitutes a class of emotionally arousing references to body products, body parts, sexual acts, ethnic or racial insults, and profanity (Jay et al. 2008: 83–84), and expresses the speaker's emotional state and communicates that information to listeners (Jay & Janschewitz 2008: 268). Taboo vocabulary is usually sanctioned (or restricted) on both institutional and individual levels under the assumption that some harm will occur if a taboo word is used (Jay 2009: 153–154), and includes words that range from the mildly offensive (e.g., *fart* in English, or *ψολή* [psolí] 'dick' in Modern Greek) to the very offensive (e.g., *cunt* in English or *πουτάνα* [putána] 'whore' in Modern Greek) (cf. Janschewitz 2008; Xydopoulos & Christopoulou 2021).⁴ In contrast, general (neutral or non-taboo) vocabulary refers to socially unmarked words that are generally acceptable across communicative contexts and are not subject to the social restrictions typically associated with taboo words. Unlike taboo vocabulary, such words do not conventionally carry strong affective or offensive connotations (cf. Allan & Burridge 2006; Jay et al. 2008).

Cross-linguistically, intensification of taboo nouns through affixation is realized via: (a) prefixes, e.g., *hiper-pendejo* INT-wanker 'extreme wanker' (in Spanish), (b) suffixes, e.g.,

² Cf. Masini et al. (2023) for the semantic function of approximation.

³ Cf. Bauer (1997: 537–538) for the notion of evaluative morphology and its core areas, namely diminutivization and augmentativization.

⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of English slang (including taboo vocabulary), see Mattiello (2008).

stronz-one wanker-INT ‘extreme wanker’ (in Italian), (c) suffixoids, e.g., *dumb-ass* ‘idiot’ (from Mattiello 2026: 52 for impolite suffixoids in English slang), or even (d) infixes, e.g., *de-fuckin-fence* (in English slang) < defence (from Mattiello 2008: 123).⁵ In Modern Greek, taboo nouns exhibit intensification through various morphological strategies to express the positive or negative meaning of the base (cf., among others, Xydopoulos & Christopoulou 2011; Christopoulou 2016; Kallergi et al. 2023; Katsouda 2024). These strategies include but are not limited to the following: (a) prefixes, e.g., *υπερ-καριόλα* [iper-karióla] INT-bitch ‘extreme bitch’, (b) prefixoids,⁶ e.g., *χοντρο(ο)-μαλάκας* [xodro-malákas] INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’, (c) suffixes, e.g., *τσουλ-άρα* [tsul-ára] slut-INT ‘extreme slut’ and (d) prefixes or prefixoids in combination with suffixes, e.g., *καρα-πουστ-αράς* [kara-pust-arás] INT-faggot-INT ‘extreme faggot’ (cf. also Sissamperi 2025).

3 Research methodology: analysis of intensifying prefixes/prefixoids and data collection

At the first stage of our research, we listed all the prefixes/prefixoids that can be used for intensification in Modern Greek. These elements were collected from descriptive grammars/descriptions of Modern Greek, such as Eleftheriades (1993), Mackridge (1985), Clairis & Babiniotis (2011), online dictionaries of Modern Greek, such as the *Dictionary of Standard Modern Greek*⁷ and the *Practical Dictionary of Modern Greek*,⁸ and printed ones, such as Babiniotis (2016) and Iordanidou & Pantazara (2023), and secondary sources such as studies on affixoids (Giannouloupoulou 2003), intensification (Efthymiou 2003, 2015, 2017; Gavriilidou 2014, 2016), augmentation (Minas 1978), pejoration (Kallergi et al. 2023), and taboo vocabulary (Kamilaki et al. 2016; Christopoulou 2016). We also collected examples with intensifying prefixes/prefixoids attached to Modern Greek taboo nouns from *Sketch Engine* (elTenTen19) (Kilgarriff et al. 2014), *slang.gr* (the online dictionary for Greek Slang),⁹ social media platforms, and web searches.¹⁰

Based on these sources, we compiled a final list of 26 intensifying elements attached to nouns. These elements vary in number of occurrences and morphological status. Based on the compiled list of intensifying prefixes/prefixoids, we collected formations that display these elements to extract combinations of intensifying prefixes/prefixoids. The dataset used in the present study was compiled between February and August 2024. All combinations of intensifying elements were collected exclusively from online sources, as the formations in question are typically absent from printed lexicographic and academic materials. Specifically, data were drawn from social networking platforms (mostly ‘X’ formerly Twitter), websites (mostly with sexual content), online newspapers (such as tabloids), and the online dictionary for Greek Slang ‘slang.gr’.¹¹ These sources include low-formality speech and provide a space

⁵ It is noteworthy that infixation is not a very common morphological process cross-linguistically (Štekauer et al. 2012).

⁶ Cf. Section 4.1 for the formal distinction between prefixes and prefixoids.

⁷ https://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/index.html

⁸ <https://christikolexiko.academyofathens.gr/index.php>

⁹ <https://www.slang.gr/>

¹⁰ The search for intensifying prefixes/prefixoids on Sketch Engine, social media and web searches was performed based on some frequent bases such as *πουτάνα* [putána] ‘whore’.

¹¹ We also checked corpora such as *Sketch Engine* (elTenTen19), but we did not get any good results suitable for the purpose of our research.

where language users can express themselves freely, including the use of taboo words. The total number of intensifying formations is 65.¹²

To collect different patterns, we applied the morpheme-by-morpheme method, starting with individual elements to identify attested patterns (cf. Manova & Winternitz 2011: 121).¹³ The possible patterns were placed in a table of combinations with 676 cells (26 × 26).¹⁴ Through searches of the sources, we attempted to populate this table of combinations by searching for each cell, e.g., *αρχι-αρχι-* [arxi-arxi-], *αρχι-βλαχ(ο)-* [arxi-vlaxo-], and so on. To find the patterns, we considered all possible spelling variations, namely, solid (*αρχιαρχι* [arxiarxi]), hyphenated (*αρχι-αρχι-* [arxi-arxi-]), and open spelling (*αρχι αρχι* [arxi arxi]).

After the collection of attested patterns of prefix/prefixoid combinations, and given that our study focuses on Modern Greek taboo nouns, the data were further filtered based on several criteria, among others, to exclude:

- a. Formations with noun bases that belong to the general vocabulary, e.g., *σουπερ-υπερ-παίκτρια* [super-iper-péktria] INT-INT-female player ‘extremely good female player’.¹⁵
- b. Formations that do not have a nominal base, either from the general or the taboo vocabulary, e.g., *καρα-κατα-πατώνω* [kara-kata-patóno] INT-INT-fail ‘to fail completely’ (verbal base).
- c. Stack-ups of elements that seem to have literal (lexical) meaning rather than a grammatical function, e.g., *χοντρο-βλαχο-μαλάκας* [xodr-o-vlax-o-malákas] ‘fat-CM-hick-CM-wanker’ ‘fat hick wanker’.¹⁶

4 Prefix/prefixoid and data analysis

4.1 Intensifying prefixes and prefixoids

The list of intensifying elements that can be attached to taboo nouns comprises elements of different origins:¹⁷ (a) elements that have been used for several centuries in the system of Greek, such as the Classical Greek *υπερ-* [iper-] ‘hyper’, (β) newly coined elements, such as *χοντρ(ο)-* [xodro-] (< *χοντρός* [xodrós] ‘fat’), (c) borrowed elements, such as *καρα-* [kara-] (< *kara* ‘black’ from Turkish) or *σουπερ-* [super-] (< English *super-*). Intensifying prefixes/prefixoids are grammaticalized elements that come from various parts of speech, such as nouns, e.g., *σκατ(ο)-* [skato-] (< *σκατό* [skató] noun ‘shit’), adjectives, i.e., *παλι(ο)-* [paló-] (< *παλιός* [palós] adjective ‘old’), prepositions/adverbs, e.g., *υπερ-* [iper-] (< *υπέρ* [ipér] preposition ‘for’/adverb ‘above’), or cardinal numerals, e.g., *τρι(σ)-* [tri(s)-] (< *τρία* [tría] ‘three’).

¹² For the full list of the data, with slight modifications, cf. Sissamperi (2025).

¹³ To the best of our knowledge, there is no extensive research on the combinations of prefixes/prefixoids in Modern Greek.

¹⁴ The relevant table is placed in the Appendix. This table includes only combinations of two elements (different or identical). The combinations of three identical or different elements are the following: *arxi-arxi-arxi-*, *kara-kara-kara-*, *iper-iper-iper-*, *arxi-kara-kata-*, *arxi-kara-meyalo-*, *kara-arxi-paló-*, *arxi-iper-super-*, *arxi-arxi-tri-*, *arxi-arxi-kara-* (see also the analysis in 4.2).

¹⁵ In the examples, hyphens are used to mark morphological boundaries, and spelling has been normalized, given the considerable orthographic variation across the original data sources.

¹⁶ The analysis of the status of these elements will be further analyzed in section 4.1.

¹⁷ Several of these elements are also used for intensification in general vocabulary, but a thorough analysis is yet to be conducted.

The morphological status of the elements that we examine is not always clear, as they move along a cline ranging from stems to derivational affixes.¹⁸ We group our elements into two major categories: prefixes and prefixoids; the latter is considered an intermediate category between stems and prefixes.¹⁹ Specifically, when elements have the status of prefixes, the resulting formation is a derived word; for example, the element *υπερ-* [iper-] ‘hyper’ can be considered a prefix, e.g., *υπερ-πούστης* [iper-pústis] INT-faggot ‘extreme faggot’. The resulting formations with prefixoids display features such as the compound marker *-ο-*, which is typical of Modern Greek compounds (cf. Ralli 2008, 2022, and several other works), as can be seen in the formations *χοντρο-μαλάκας* [xodro-malákas] INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’ (prefixoid *χοντρ(ο)-* [xodro-]), *θεο-γκόμενα* [theo-gómena] INT-bombshell ‘extremely attractive woman’ (prefixoid *θε(ο)-* [theo-]), and *μεγαλο-λαμόγιο* [megalo-lamóγιο] INT-crook ‘extremely dishonest person’ (prefixoid *μεγαλ(ο)-* [megalo-]).

Based on this feature, one would expect to treat these formations as cases of compounding, with *-ο-* analyzed similarly to prototypical compounds in Modern Greek (cf. Ralli 2008, 2022). However, as Ralli (2022: 267) also argues, these formations are not considered compounds and *-ο-* in this type of construction functions as a linking element rather than a compound marker. Based on that, we propose to formally represent the element *-ο-* within parentheses when it participates in formations with intensifying prefixoids, while keeping it as a separate morpheme when it is part of a compound. It should also be mentioned that the same element may have a completely different morphological analysis depending on its semantic analysis (cf., among others, Christopoulou 2016). For example, the element *χοντρ(ο)-* [xodro-] in the formation *χοντρ-ό-πουτσα* [xodr-ó-putsa] fat-CM-penis ‘fat penis’, is considered as the first constituent of the compound and *-ο-* is a compound marker. In the case of *χοντρο-μαλάκας* [xodro-malákas] INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’, the element *χοντρ(ο)-* [xodro-] does not keep its literal meaning but is used as an intensifying element. In this case, we propose the use of parentheses: *χοντρ(ο)-μαλάκας* [xodr(o)-malákas] INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’.

At the semantic level, two categories of intensifying elements can be distinguished: prototypical and pejorative intensifiers, which are defined below.²⁰

- a. *Prototypical intensifiers* denote consistently intensification of the meaning of the base, namely have intensification as their prototypical function (cf. Efthymiou 2003),²¹ either for positive evaluation, e.g., *υπερ-μουνί* [iper-muní] INT-pussy ‘extremely sexually attractive woman’ (intensifier *υπερ-* [iper-]), or negative evaluation, e.g., *καρα-παπάρας* [kara-papáras] INT-blusterer ‘extreme blusterer’ (intensifier *καρα-* [kara-]).²²

¹⁸ Christopoulou (2016: 198–207; 273–275) also discusses these cases and argues that the status of these elements may vary.

¹⁹ Due to space limitations, we cannot provide a fully-fledged analysis of this category in Modern Greek. Briefly, we consider an element to be prefixoid when: (a) it exists alongside a formally identical, and usually free, “parent” morph from which it originates; (b) its meaning is more generalized and abstract than the formally identical “parent” morph; (c) it is in competition with or in complementary distribution with affixes (cf., among others Stevens 2005; Dimela 2010; Efthymiou 2015; Amiot & Dugas 2020; Ralli 2020; Van Goethem 2020).

²⁰ Although both elements combine with bases from the general vocabulary, the present study is concerned only with their combination with bases from taboo vocabulary for the expression of intensification.

²¹ Prototypical intensifiers are usually polysemous and have meanings other than intensification. We will not go into details as this issue falls outside the scope of the present study.

²² Prototypical intensifiers in general vocabulary can be categorized into maximizers (totality modifiers) that denote the meaning ‘total/complete X’ and boosters (scalar modifiers) denoting the meaning ‘very/extreme X’ (cf.

- b. *Pejorative intensifiers* denote intensification when combined with taboo words (cf. Christopoulou 2016; Katsouda 2024), e.g., *βρωμ(ο)-πουτάνα* [vromo-putána] PEJ.INT-whore ‘extreme/bloody whore’. This is because pejorative elements with negative and offensive meanings combine with inherently abusive and negative bases, thereby developing into pejorative intensifiers (cf. Kallergi et al. 2023).²³ In contrast, these elements, when combined with bases from the general vocabulary, function as pejorative elements, that is, elements that are prototypically used for negative and offensive evaluation, i.e., pejoration (cf. Sánchez Fajardo 2022). Pejorative elements convey the speaker’s disapproval, rejection, and indignation towards the referent, e.g., *βρωμ(ο)-βιβλίο* [vromo-vivlio] PEJ-book ‘damn book’.

4.2 Patterns of combinations of intensifying prefixes/prefixoids

The analysis of patterns of combinations of intensifying elements encompasses several aspects of the phenomenon, including the maximum number of elements that appear in patterns, the patterns attested, the number of attested patterns relative to the possible ones, and the principles that govern the order of these elements.

To begin with, the analysis of the table of combinations shows that 14 (out of 26) different prefixes/prefixoids appear in the attested combinations, all of them with the meaning ‘very/extreme X’. These elements can be grouped as follows:

a. Prototypical intensifiers

αρχι- [arxi-], e.g., *αρχι-παπάρας* [arxi-papáras] INT-blusterer ‘extreme blusterer’
υπερ- [iper-], e.g., *υπερ-αλήτης* [iper-alítis] INT-bastard ‘extreme bastard’
σουπερ- [super-], e.g., *σουπερ-καύλα* [super-kávla] INT-sexy woman ‘very sexy woman’
καρα- [kara-], e.g., *καρα-λαμόγιο* [kara-lamóγιο] INT-crook ‘extreme crook’
κατα- [kata-], e.g., *κατα-καριόλα* [kata-karióla] INT-bitch ‘extreme bitch’
θε(ο)- [theo-], e.g., *θε(ο)-γκόμενος* [theo-gómenos] INT-squeeze ‘extreme squeeze’
μεγαλ(ο)- [meyalo-], e.g., *μεγαλ(ο)-ρουφιάνος* [meyalo-rufiános] INT-rat ‘extreme rat’
τρι(σ)- [tri(s)-], e.g., *τρί-βλακας* [trí-vlakas] INT-idiot ‘extreme idiot’
χοντρ(ο)- [xodro-], e.g., *χοντρ(ο)-μαλακία* [xodro-malakía] INT-crap ‘extreme crap’²⁴

b. Pejorative intensifiers

βλαχ(ο)- [vlaxo-], e.g., *βλαχ(ο)-πουτάνα* [vlaxo-putána] PEJ.INT-whore ‘extreme whore’

Quirk et al. 1985; Gavriilidou 2014, 2016; Rainer 2015: 1346–1348 for an extended analysis primarily based on adjectives). In this study, however, this distinction is not relevant, as all elements convey the intensifying meaning ‘very/extreme X’.

²³ We focus on the intensifying function of these elements; for the pejorative function, cf. Kallergi et al. (2023).

²⁴ In this study, prefixoid *χοντρ(ο)-* [xodro-] is classified as a prototypical intensifier. To the best of our knowledge, it has so far been examined only in slang/taboo vocabulary of Modern Greek (cf. Christopoulou 2016), where, in line with the present data, it solely denotes intensification of the negative meaning of the base. Future research should investigate whether *χοντρ(ο)-* [xodro-] functions only as an intensifier or also conveys a pejorative meaning in combinations with bases from general vocabulary, as has been argued for prefixoids such as *σκατ(ο)-* [skato-] (cf. Kallergi et al. 2023). This question is further motivated by the negative evaluative meaning of its lexemic ancestor *χοντρος* [xodrós] ‘fat’.

βρωμ(ο)-/βρομ(ο)- [vromo-], e.g., *βρωμ(ό)-βλαχος* [vromó-vlaxos] PEJ.INT-hick ‘extreme hick’

κοπρ(ο)- [kopro-], e.g., *κοπρ(ο)-μαλάκας* [kopro-malákas] PEJ.INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’

παλι(ο)- [paʎo-], e.g., *παλι(ο)-σκρόφα* [paʎo-skrófa] PEJ.INT-bitch ‘extreme bitch’

σκατ(ο)- [skato-], e.g., *σκατ(ο)-φασίστας* [skato-fasístas] PEJ.INT-fascist ‘extreme fascist’²⁵

Regarding the relation between the attested and possible patterns, we should note that our data contain only 35 prefix combinations, which is a low number compared to the 676 possible combinations. This finding corroborates the results of previous studies on affix combinations, which argue that although there are numerous possible affix patterns, only a few are attested (cf., among others, Fabb 1988; Manova & Aronoff 2010; Zirkel 2010; Manova & Winternitz 2011).

The next issue that we would like to discuss is the patterns of combinations of intensifying elements with taboo nouns. In our dataset, we find the following patterns of combinations of intensifying prefixal elements:

- a. Combination of two different intensifying elements, e.g., *κατα-κατα-καριόλα* [kara-kata-karióla] INT-INT-slut ‘extreme slut’ (23 combinations in 46 formations).
- b. Combination of three different intensifying elements, e.g., *κατα-αρχι-παλιο-μαλάκας* [kara-arxi-paʎo-malákas] INT-INT-PEJ.INT-wanker ‘extreme/fucking wanker’ (4 combinations in 4 formations).
- c. Repetition of the same intensifying element twice,²⁶ e.g., *αρχι-αρχι-παπάρας* [arxi-arxi-papáras] INT-INT-blusterer ‘extreme blusterer’ (3 combinations in 10 formations).
- d. Repetition of the same intensifying element three times, e.g., *υπερ-υπερ-υπερ-καριόλης* [iper-iper-iper-kariólis] INT-INT-INT-motherfucker ‘extreme motherfucker’ (3 combinations in 3 formations).
- e. Repetition of the same intensifying element twice combined with a different one, e.g., *αρχι-αρχι-τρί-μπαζο* [arxi-arxi-trí-bazo] INT-INT-INT-skag ‘extreme skag’ (2 combinations in 2 formations).

In our dataset, the most frequent pattern is the combination of two different prefixal elements since it appears in 23 combinations in 46 formations (see a.), while the maximum number of intensifying elements that can be attached to a base is three (see b. and d.).²⁷ In contrast to the combination of two different elements, the other four patterns (see b.–e.) include only a small number of formations.

Moreover, intensifying prefixal elements differ in the number of attestations across the patterns. Specifically, elements such as *αρχι-* [arxi-] occur in 15 combinations, while others, such as *βρωμ(ο)-* [vromo-] and *κατα-* [kata-], are attested in 6 and 2 combinations, respectively. Similarly, among combinations of intensifying elements, the combination *αρχι-κατα-* [arxi-

²⁵ We do not mention the etymological origin of the elements and their meanings, since our study focuses on the grammatical function of the elements. We leave this issue open for further research.

²⁶ With the term *repetition*, we refer to the re-appearance of the same intensifying prefixal element (cf. Štekauer et al. 2012).

²⁷ In the general vocabulary of Italian, the cumulation of more than three intensifying prefixes is attested, namely, up to six different ones, e.g., *che super arci extra iper mega ultra incazzature* ‘what a huge/fucking mess’ (Merlini Barbaresi 2012).

kara-] is attested in 7 formations, whereas *καρα-καρα-* [kara-kara-] is attested in 3 formations. Most of the patterns (n = 26), e.g., *υπερ-αρχι-* [iper-arxi-], appear only once. Additionally, in some patterns, permutation²⁸ of the two elements is possible, e.g., *αρχι-καρα-* [arxi-kara-] and *καρα-αρχι-* [kara-arxi-], while in others it is not attested (but not necessarily ungrammatical), e.g., *καρα-κατα-* [kara-kata-]²⁹ but *?κατα-καρα-* [kata-kara-].

With respect to the semantic type of prefixal elements that are combined, three different patterns were attested in 23 combinations of two different elements:

- a. Combination of only prototypical intensifying elements, e.g., *υπερ-καρα-μαλάκας* [iper-kara-malákas] INT-INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’ (11 combinations).
- b. Combination of only pejorative intensifying elements, e.g., *παλιο-σκατο-ρουφιάνα* [paľo-skato-rufiána] PEJ.INT-PEJ.INT-rat ‘extreme/fucking rat’ (6 combinations).
- c. Combination of both prototypical and pejorative intensifying elements, e.g., *αρχι-σκατο-γύφτισσα* [arxi-skato-γίftisa] INT-PEJ.INT-pikey ‘extreme/fucking pikey’ (6 combinations).

4.3 Prefix/prefixoid ordering

In this section, we will examine the order of prefixes/prefixoids in our data. The order of affixes is regulated by grammatical or extra-grammatical factors (cf. Manova & Aronoff 2010: 111–112). Grammatical factors refer to phonological, morphological, syntactic, or semantic constraints that govern the combination of affixes. In contrast, extra-grammatical factors include statistical, psycholinguistic, and cognitive constraints (cf. Manova & Aronoff 2010: 111–112). However, prefixes show an asymmetry compared to suffixes with respect to the constraints in their combination. Prefixes exhibit fewer selectional restrictions and greater combinability flexibility, and their ordering is generally considered to be less constrained than that of the suffixes (cf. Zirkel 2010: 251, 253; Manova 2023). Cross-linguistically, except for the research on the combination of different or same intensifying prefixes (cf. Lehrer 1995 for English; Cacchiani 2011 for English and Italian), the order of intensifying prefixes in general vocabulary has also been a matter of discussion in several studies (cf. Martín García 1998 for Spanish; Izert 2012 for French; Merlini Barbaresi 2012 for Italian; Kamber & Huyghe 2023 for French). In Modern Greek, only a few studies have examined the order of evaluative affixes (cf., among others, Melissaropoulou & Ralli 2010; Melissaropoulou 2015; Efthymiou et al. 2026, for the combination of diminutive suffixes).

In our data, we examined the possible grammatical factors that may regulate the order of intensifying prefixes and prefixoids in combinations. Starting with the phonological factors, we observed that in our data, the order of elements is not constrained by hiatus (i.e., two adjacent vowels), e.g., in the structure *αρχι-υπερ-γκόμενος* [arxi-iper-gómenos] INT-INT-squeeze ‘extreme squeeze’ we notice two identical adjacent vowels [i] (written as *ι* and *υ*), connected with a hyphen in the written form (cf. Zirkel 2010: 251–252; Izert 2012: 439).³⁰ The prosodic structure (i.e., number of syllables and stress)³¹ of the intensifying elements does not affect the order of the elements. Twelve out of the fourteen constituents are dissyllabic, one is monosyllabic, and one is trisyllabic. The trisyllabic prefixoid *μεγαλ(ο)-* [meyalo-] appears only

²⁸ Cf. Merlini Barbaresi (2012) for the permutability of affixes.

²⁹ The combination *καρα-κατα-* [kara-kata-] is mentioned on *slang.gr* as a separate lemma, namely, *καρακατα-* [karakata-].

³⁰ Hyphenation is used for pragmatic purposes or emphasis (Papanastasiou 2008: 470; Cacchiani 2011: 775).

³¹ Cf. Rice (2000) and Manova & Winternitz (2011) for an analysis of prosodic factors.

once in our data, and the monosyllabic prefix *τρι(σ)-* [tri(s)-] is placed both externally and internally.

A crucial factor to consider when examining the order of intensifying elements is the *polysemy* of the constituents involved (cf., among others, Amiot 2004; Efthymiou et al. 2015; Gavriilidou 2016).³² As an indicative example of a non-polysemous intensifying element, we mention the prefix *καρα-* [kara-], which is exclusively used with an intensifying meaning in Modern Greek (i.e., ‘very/extreme of what the base [X] denotes’). In contrast, as an indicative example of a more polysemous prefix, we note *κατα-* [kata-], which has five meanings in the *Practical Dictionary of Modern Greek* and four in the *Dictionary of Standard Modern Greek*. The non-polysemous prefix *καρα-* [kara-] when combined with the polysemous prefix *κατα-* [kata-] is placed externally, e.g. *καρα-κατα-πουτάνα* [kara-kata-putána] INT-INT-whore ‘extreme whore’. Thus, the polysemy of the elements that appear in combinations seems to be a decisive factor regulating the order of prefixes.

Moreover, in our data neither *semantic scope* nor the *relevance principle* can account for the ordering of intensifying prefixes in Modern Greek taboo nouns. Specifically, semantic scope presupposes that one affix modifies the semantic contribution of another, yielding a hierarchical scopal relation (Rice 2000). In our data, however, all elements contribute the same semantic function, that is, intensification, and directly modify the base more than each other. Consequently, the data does not provide evidence that one element can have semantic scope over another. Likewise, the relevance scope principle (Bybee 1985), according to which the affix most semantically relevant to the base is expected to occur closest to it, does not seem applicable here, since all intensifying elements are equally relevant to the base and express the same semantic function. Rather than exhibiting hierarchical semantic relations, the elements display cumulative intensification.

Nevertheless, the analysis of some individual combinations appears to be compatible with the *semantic prominence* analysis proposed by Merlini Barbaresi (2012), according to which the most internal prefix, although less perspicuous, exhibits clear semantic prominence over the external one. Besides that, Merlini Barbaresi (2012) also claims that in Italian, the modification obtained by the prefix that is closer to the base of an intensified word is stronger than the effect of intensification produced by the prefix that is further, e.g., *é un hotel ultra, super lussuoso* ‘extremely luxurious hotel’. Kamber & Huyghe (2023) similarly observe a tendency for the intensifying prefixes in French to be placed in order (inwards), starting from the one indicating the lowest degree of intensification to the highest, e.g., *méga giga über fan* ‘extreme fan’,³³ after examining the prefixes *mega-*, *giga-* and *hypra-*.³⁴

If we apply this hypothesis to our data, we can make similar claims. Let us take examine the formation *παλιο-σκατο-μαλάκας* [paʎo-skato-malákas] PEJ.INT-PEJ.INT-wanker ‘extreme/fucking wanker’. In this example, both prefixoids *παλι(o)-* [paʎo-] and *σκατ(o)-* [skato-] are pejorative intensifiers and denote a high degree of intensification; however, they exhibit a difference in terms of origin and semantic load, in that the prefixoid *παλι(o)-* [paʎo-] has as its lexemic ancestor the word *παλιός* [palós] ‘old’, which is not a taboo word, while the prefixoid *σκατ(o)-* [skato-] has as its lexemic ancestor the word *σκατό* [skató] ‘shit’, which is a

³² For the notion of *polysemy*, we rely on the information that we get from lexicographic sources and the available grammatical descriptions.

³³ Cross-linguistically, the desire to express higher degrees of intensification leads to the continual emergence of new prefixes (cf. Kamber & Huyghe 2023).

³⁴ For a similar study about the measurement of the degree of intensification of Italian prefixes and especially of the prefix *uber-*, cf. Micheli & Verdelli (2025).

taboo word (i.e., *σκατό* [skató] ‘shit’). We assume that the prefixoid *σκατ(ο)-* [skato-] stands closer to the base, as it originates in a taboo word and is therefore more intense.³⁵ Taking a step further, following Merlini Barbaresi (2012), we can assume that in repetition of the same *prototypical* intensifying prefixes, e.g., *αρχι-αρχι-μαλάκας* [arxi-arxi-malákas] INT-INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’, the prefix that is closer to the base is semantically stronger, and the external prefix only obtains an intensifying effect.³⁶

Martín García (1998: 110–111) has also argued that in Spanish, when superlative (e.g., *archi-* and *ultra-*) and augmentative prefixes (e.g., *hiper-* and *super-*) are combined, superlative prefixes are always placed before augmentative prefixes, e.g., *archi-super-conocido* ‘extremely famous’, but the reversed order (**super-archi-conocido*) is not possible. This can be explained by the fact that superlative prefixes denote the absolute degree of intensity, while augmentative prefixes only emphasize characteristics without reaching the maximum degree of superlatives. Although the same argument does not seem to apply across the board in Modern Greek, we can argue that the prefix *αρχι-* [arxi-] is usually placed in the outermost position when several prefixes or prefixoids co-occur, e.g., *αρχι-καρα-παπάρας* [arxi-kara-papáras] INT-INT-blusterer ‘total/extreme blusterer’. This ordering can be attributed to the fact that *αρχι-* [arxi-] denotes the superlative degree of the (negative) property expressed by the base (cf. Efthymiou 2015; Gavriilidou 2016), in contrast to other prefixes, such as *καρα-* [kara-], which indicate a high (but not maximal) degree of intensity.

Moreover, we would like to discuss the order of some prefixes in relation to patterns of existing formations. To give a concrete example, when the prefixoids *παλιο-* [paʎo-] and *βρωμ(ο)-* [vromo-] co-occur for expressing intensification in taboo nouns, they usually appear with a fixed order (i.e., *παλιο-βρωμ(ο)-* [paʎo-vromo-]), as in *παλιο-βρωμό-μουννο* [paʎo-vromó-muno] PEJ.INT-PEJ.INT-cunt ‘extremely despicable person’. This could be linked to the formation *παλιο-βρώμα* [paʎo-vróma] ‘extremely despicable woman’, which is quite frequent in taboo vocabulary. In this formation, we notice the combination of the prefixoid *παλι(ο)-* [paʎo-] with the noun *βρώμα* [vróma] ‘filth; slut’ which is the lexemic ancestor of the prefixoid *βρωμ(ο)-* [vromo-]. The same holds for the morphological structure *παλιο-σκατο-λεχρίτης* [paʎo-skato-lexrítis] PEJ.INT-PEJ.INT-bastard ‘extreme/fucking bastard’, which follows the pattern of the existing formation *παλι(ο)-σκατό* [paʎo-skató] ‘fucking little bastard’.³⁷

Let us now turn to the productivity of the constituents involved.³⁸ Zirkel (2010: 244) refers to the proposal by Hay & Baayen (2002), which holds that increased *productivity*³⁹ serves as an indicator of parsability, with more productive prefixes tending to be more parsable. Based on her data, Zirkel (2010: 260) concludes that “attested prefix combinations have a pattern in which productivity increases from the innermost to the outermost element”. Following Mattiello (2008: 93), we hold the view that measuring the productivity of slang affixes is difficult, as they are ephemeral, and that it is methodologically more accurate to examine token frequency rather than type productivity. In our data, two prefixes seem to be quite frequent,

³⁵ See Christopoulou et al. (2026) for a discussion of this issue.

³⁶ This claim could be verified through an experimental study focusing on morphological processing. We would like to thank the editors of the special issue for this note.

³⁷ This view could be likened to Baker’s (1985) *Mirror Principle* (as cited in Manova & Aronoff 2010: 118), according to which “morphological derivations must directly reflect syntactic derivations (and vice versa).” According to Manova and Aronoff (2010: 118), this claim is related to the generally held view that morphological derivations are grammaticalized syntax.

³⁸ For the factor of productivity in suffix ordering, cf. Manova & Winternitz (2011).

³⁹ Following Van Goethem (2020), we use the term *productivity* to refer we refer to the ability of a prefix to create new words.

namely *αρχι-* [arxi-] and *καρα-* [kara-] (cf. also Xydopoulos & Christopoulou 2011 on the same observations), which, when combined with other prefixes or prefixoids, are usually placed externally,⁴⁰ e.g., *αρχι-θεό-χαζος* [arxi-θεό-xazos] INT-INT-idiot ‘extreme idiot’, *καρα-παλιο-μαλάκας* [kara-pa-lo-malákas] INT-PEJ.INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’.

In addition, there are a few formations in which the order of the terms does not seem to be governed by any principle and appears more like a free choice by the speaker (cf. Izert 2012: 443). In these cases, the order could be related to the emotional charge that the user of language has at the time of expressing the taboo words, e.g., *σκατο-βρωμο-μαλακία* [skato-vromo-malakía] PEJ.INT-PEJ.INT-crap ‘extreme/fucking crap’, *βρωμο-παλιο-κάθαρμα* [vromo-pa-lo-kátharma] PEJ.INT-PEJ.INT-bastard ‘extreme/fucking bastard’. However, we leave this question open for future research.

When three different intensifying prefixes stack up, the same observations seem to remain valid, as the sequence does not exhibit any deviation. For example, in the word *αρχι-καρα-κατα-ρεμάλι* [arxi-kara-kata-remáli] INT-INT-INT-deadbeat ‘extreme deadbeat’ as well as in two more words *αρχι-* [arxi-] is more external. In this example, we notice the order of prefixes we discussed above, namely *αρχι-καρα-* [arxi-kara-] and *καρα-κατα-* [kara-kata-]. Prefix *αρχι-* [arxi-] is placed in the middle in only one formation with three prefixes/prefixoids, e.g., *καρα-αρχι-παλιο-μαλάκας* [kara-arxi-pa-lo-malákas] INT-INT-PEJ.INT-wanker ‘extreme wanker’.⁴¹

5 Conclusions

In this paper, we examined the combination of prefixes and prefixoids that intensify the positive or negative meaning of the base in Modern Greek taboo nouns. First, we argued that individual intensifying affixes and affixoids are widely used in the taboo vocabulary of Modern Greek, and we analyzed intensifying prefixes and prefixoids with respect to their formal (morphological status and relation to their lexemic ancestor) and semantic features. Intensifying elements comprise derivational prefixes and constituents with an ambivalent status; the latter can be considered prefixoids when used with their intensifying meaning but stems when used with their literal/lexical meaning. Consequently, the structure of the formation changes according to the status of the element involved. Additionally, some elements may denote intensification in all contexts (prototypical intensifiers), while others indicate intensification only when combined with taboo bases (pejorative intensifiers).

As regards the patterns of combinations of intensifying prefixes and prefixoids, our data have shown that five different patterns were attested. It is noteworthy that the number of attested combinations was very low compared to the possible ones. In these patterns, the maximum number of intensifying elements attached to a single base is three, and the most frequent combination involves two different intensifying elements. Moreover, we demonstrated that not all intensifying elements are used in combination, and the elements attested exhibit variation in frequency. Combinations of elements also showed variation in frequency in attested formations. Our data also revealed three distinct patterns of combination regarding the semantic type of prefixes and prefixoids: (a) the combination of *prototypical*

⁴⁰ In the combination of prefixes *αρχι-* [arxi-] and *καρα-* [kara-], *αρχι-* [arxi-] is placed externally in 6 combinations and internally in 2 combinations.

⁴¹ The order of prefixes in combinations may affect the degree of offensiveness of the formations (cf. Christopoulou et al. 2026).

intensifying prefixes/prefixoids; (b) the combination of pejorative intensifying prefixes/prefixoids; and (c) the combination of *prototypical* prefixes/prefixoids mixed with pejorative intensifying prefixes/prefixoids.

Concerning the order of intensifying prefixes and prefixoids, we examined all possible factors that may be involved. Our data have shown that semantic factors play a key role in determining the ordering of prefixes and prefixoids within combinations. Specifically, the polysemy of prefixes and prefixoids seems to play a role in their ordering, as less or non-polysemous elements tend to be placed farther from the base. Moreover, semantic prominence is also relevant to the order of elements, as the prefix or prefixoid closer to the base indicates a higher degree of intensity compared to the external one. Additionally, prefixes and prefixoids that denote a superlative degree tend to occur in more external positions within combinations. In some cases, the order of prefixes and prefixoids seems to follow the pattern of existing formations. Frequency also seems to affect the ordering of elements, with more frequent elements tending to be positioned farther from the base. Finally, the order of prefixes and prefixoids across a few combinations appears unrestricted.

To conclude, this paper sheds light on the intricate question of prefix combination in Modern Greek. The next steps of our research involve cross-linguistic comparison with other European languages, which will offer insights into affix ordering in morphological constructions.

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Abbreviations

INT intensifier
PEJ pejorative
CM compound marker

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Appendix 1: Table of combinations (possible and attested)

0 stands for possible but not attested combinations

1 stands for attested combinations (regardless of the number of occurrences)

	arxi-	γam(o)-	γift(o)-	iper-	kara-	kata-	kol(o)-	kopr(o)-	kurað(o)-	meγal(o)-	paλ(o)-	peda-	psol(o)-	psor(o)-	pust(o)-	puts(o)-	skat(o)-	skil(o)-	super-	tetra-	θε(o)-	tri(s)-	vlaX(o)-	vrom(o)-	xiλ(o)-	xodr(o)-
arxi-	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
γam(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
γift(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
iper-	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
kara-	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
kata-	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
kol(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
kopr(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
kurað(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
meγal(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
paλ(o)-	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
peda-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
psol(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
psor(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
pust(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
puts(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
skat(o)-	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
skil(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
super-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
tetra-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
θε(o)-	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
tri(s)-	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
vlaX(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
vrom(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
xiλ(o)-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
xodr(o)-	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0