

Greek Preverbs in Diachrony

An Ongoing Study



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1 Introduction

Preverbs are generally defined as uninflected morphemes occurring before a verbal stem and affecting its semantic features.

E.g. CG *ana-* 'up' + *baínō* 'go' = *anabainō* 'go up'

In Indo-European languages, preverbs (and prepositions) developed from **independent spatial adverbs** (Kurylowicz 1964).

Through **univerbation with verbal stems**, they gradually lost their syntactic autonomy and became:

- Bound morphemes retaining their original **spatial function**
- Bound morphemes with **abstract or grammatical functions**
- Lexicalized verb–preverb units with idiomatic, **non-compositional meanings**

Preverbs have been extensively studied in **Ancient Greek** (cf. Papanastassiou 2003, 2011; Romagno 2004; Revuelta Puigdollers 2007, 2014, 2019, 2020, 2025; Viti 2008a,b; Imbert 2010; Zanchi 2017, 2019; Marchesi & Zanchi 2025) and in **Modern Greek** (cf. Ralli 2002a,b, 2004; Mendez Dosuna 1997; Efthymiou 2001, 2002a,b, 2017; Giannoula 2023).

A systematic study of the diachronic development preverbs in **Medieval Greek** is still lacking!

2 Aim of the Study

The present study aims to provide a corpus-based investigation of the **semantic and morphosyntactic evolution of Greek preverbs**, focusing on Medieval Greek as a key stage in their diachronic development

3 Corpus and data

The first stage of the analysis is based on a corpus of vernacular Late Medieval texts (XI–XV c. AD) covering different genres.

LMG corpus (from TLG): **200.000 tokens**

Pvb	amfi-	ana-	anti-	apo-	dia-	eis-	ek-	en-	epi-
N	4	674	53	2037	438	204	1044	766	830
Pvb	kata-	meta-	para-	peri-	pro-	pros-	sun-	hyper-	hypo-
N	1040	123	657	260	126	330	776	29	674

Table 1: Preverb frequency in the LMG corpus

Total
occurrences:
10.088

4 Annotation

a. Preverb meaning (Marchesi & Zanchi 2025; Inglese 2025):

- **Spatial:** (es. *ana-* 'up' + *baínō* 'go' = 'go up').
- **Metaphorical:** (es. *hypo-* 'under' + *thōrēssomai* 'arm oneself' = 'arm oneself in secret').
- **Actional** (es. *kata-* 'down' + *esthiō* 'eat' = 'eat up').
- **Pleonastic:** (es. *hypo-* 'under' + *chéō* 'pour' = 'pour').
- **Lexicalized:** (es. *dia-* 'through' + *fērō* 'bear' = 'differ').

b. Semantic class of the verbal base

c. Telicity of the verbal base and of the preverbed verb (cf. Viti 2008a,b; Romagno 2004, 2008)

d. Grammatical features (tense-aspect, mood, and voice)

e. Argument structure of the preverbed verb (cf. Viti 2008a,b; Romagno 2004, 2008)

f. Animacy of the arguments

g. Phonetic erosion and position of the augment (cf. Méndez Dosuna 1997)

5 The case of *anti-*

Original spatial meaning: **'opposite to / in front of'**.

Starting from Ancient Greek, *anti-* developed more abstract meanings, both as a preverb and as a preposition (Revuelta 2025; Luraghi 2003: 165–167).

Meanings <i>anti-</i>	N	Example	Reference
Spatial	1	<i>anti-fōnéō</i> 'to shout from the opposite side'	Dig G 6.221
Metaphoric	49	See table 3	
Pleonastic	2	<i>anti-máchomai</i> 'fight against'	Dig. E 705
Lexicalized	1	<i>anti-boléo</i> 'entrust' (<i>boléo</i> 'throw')	Dig. G 4.1032
Totale	53		

Table 2: Distribution of meanings of *anti-* in LMG

▪ **A focus on the metaphorical functions of *anti-***

Meaning	N.	Frame	Verbal base	Example	Reference
Opposition	10	A opposes B	Caused position	<i>antistēmī</i> 'stand against'	Chron. Mor. 3354
Counteractive	23	A acts towards B in response to a previous action by B towards A	Communication Damage/care	<i>antilégo</i> 'answer' <i>antikakéo</i> 'harm in return'	Dig. G 4.735 Belth. 55
Exchange	7	A gives B an entity C in return for an equivalent entity D previously given by B to A	Transfer of possession	<i>antididōmi</i> 'repay'	Dig. G 6.305
Reflection	6	A reflects a perceptible physical phenomenon	Sound/light emission	<i>antilámpō</i> 'shine back'	Dig. G 6.26
Equivalence	3	A is in the same state as B	Psychological state	<i>antipáschō</i> 'suffer likewise'	Lib. 464

Table 3: Distribution of metaphorical meanings of *anti-* in LMG

▪ **Some preliminary quantitative data**

Semantic class	N occurrences
Caused motion	1
Caused position	10
Psychological state	5
Communication	23
Hostile interaction	3
Transfer of possession	4
Sound/light emission	7
Tot.	53

Table 4: Distribution of semantic classes of verbal bases

Aspectual stem	N occurrences
Present stem	21
Aorist stem	32
Tot.	53

Table 5: Distribution of aspectual stems



No evident preference for either aspectual stem

	Atelic anti-V	Telic anti-V	Tot
Atelic base	16	0	16
Telic base	13	24	37
Tot.	29	24	53

Table 6: Distribution of telicity in verbal bases and anti-V



The shift from telicity to atelicity is restricted to caused position verbs and it appears to be triggered by the use of the middle voice rather than by the presence of *anti-*.



Next steps

Full examples and references

- Further develop the analytical framework and apply it systematically to all preverbs extracted from the LMG corpus.
- Extend the analysis to Early Medieval Greek papyri and literary texts to provide a diachronic account of the phenomenon.

