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The instantaneous aorist: the syntax of the agora and the syntax of Parnassus

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0. It has always been recognised that Greek poetic language needs a special sort of linguistic investigation, since it is a register in which features alien to the matrix language of the poet are not only possible but to a certain extent necessary. There are, of course, limits to what is acceptable deviation in poetic language, and this is surely connected to the issue of what the sources of deviant (poetic) forms are in a particular literary culture. In general we can suggest that poetic language borrows *a*) archaic forms of the language preserved in a literary tradition, and *b*) dialect forms similarly preserved. In some cases the notion of «dialect» forms may be stretched to include a foreign language (as in the Latin use of the Greek accusative of respect). The idea that the poet can manipulate the language in any way he sees fit is tempting to young readers of classical poetry, but is also implicit in some explanations of the instantaneous aorist. When we are faced with a feature of poetic syntax in ancient Greek that we find puzzling, there are two possibilities: the feature may be part of the poetic register (a «poetic licence»), or it may belong to the spoken language. We note in passing that the concept of a poetic syntax that calls for special explanation is predicated on the assumption that the normative syntax of a language is derived from the (written) prose standard.

A corpus language is typically short on information about that register of language which we might call interactive: the norms of everyday conversational grammar in Attic, for example. A prose corpus is typically rich in declarative sentences, but relatively poor in non-declarative sentences such as Jakobson's «non-referential» utterances (expressive, phatic, etc.), or the performatives of Austin. However, as corpus linguists we do have a valuable and unusual resource in Greek drama, which has the potential to provide information about such interactive communication. Nevertheless, it is a complicated process to sort out the elements in dramatic language, which is characterised by a fine mixture of poetic, archaic, dialect and colloquial features (categories which intersect in quite perplexing ways).

1. In the first volume of his *Syntax of Classical Greek* (1900), Basil Gildersleeve called comedy «the bridge that spans the syntax of the agora and the syntax of Parnassus». By this he meant that we should not expect that the syntactic norms which are derived from Greek prose literature should apply without modification to drama, and in particular comic drama. Linguistic variation in drama can be explained by reference to social register, or the language of what Gildersleeve (1900: 147) calls the «ungrammatical herd» (though there has rarely been investigation into what it might mean to call a native speaker «ungrammatical»). Jebb (1891: 108) comes close to a definition of dubious literary syntax with a comment on an unexpected nominative in Sophocles' *Antigone* 566-7:

566 (Is.) τί γὰρ μόνη μοι τῆσδ' ἄτερ βιώσιμον;
567 (Kr.) ἀλλ' ἤδε μέντοι μὴ λέγ'· οὐ γὰρ ἔστ' ἔτι.

«What life could I endure without her presence? – Nay, speak not of her 'presence'; she lives no more» (Jebb 1891).

He says «the colloquial language would have allowed it» (it is also a construction that could hardly work outside of its dialogue context). This points to a useful working definition of the term «ungrammatical»: use of an inappropriate register, or of features of an inappropriate register. It also fits with modern sociolinguistic theory, which seeks to build a wider notion of grammaticality than the formalist model followed by most pedagogic grammars; one in which appropriate use of a range of linguistic repertoires is part of the native speaker's linguistic competence.

Comedy, however, is a genre in which the mixing of linguistic repertoires is built in at both a metalinguistic and a linguistic level. It has long been mined as a repository of *pure* Attic, though purity is not a widely-cited concept in contemporary linguistic theory. Generally this means (a) not poetic, (b) not Ionic; to what extent it means (c) not the language of the «ungrammatical herd» is unclear. Rutherford (1881) argues that Aristophanes would not have spared his contemporaries (from lampoon) if they had spoken bad Attic: but he does not tell us how we would recognize bad Attic in Aristophanes if it were present. His argument seems to be that since the Athenian people were few in number and unified in genius, it follows that «an Athenian comic poet had no occasion to deviate from literary Attic in giving a faithful representation of his countrymen» (p. 33). He contrasts this with Shakespeare's practice: «No citizen of Athens is ever represented as abusing his mother tongue in the way that Dogberry or Dame Quickly [*Much Ado about Nothing*] abuses the King's English. Even the slaves of Athenian households have excellent Attic put into their mouths» (p. 32). But Dogberry does not speak ungrammatical English: his language is marked by malaprops, absurdity, and paratactic structure. In fact both malapropism and parataxis are features of the language of Strepsiades in the *Clouds*, and for absurdity in (for example) the language of slaves one could point to the first scene of *Knights* 1–146 (Nicias and Demosthenes).

The Athenians did not, of course, speak literary Attic: nevertheless, it seems certain that the language of comedy is a literary dialect which is designed to approximate rather closely to the Athenian *Umgangssprache*. The other variety of literary Greek that is (rightly) cited as an analogue to comedy in this respect is forensic prose, and Lysianic

prose in particular. It would be a mistake to assume that because comedy is written in verse it is automatically less close to standard spoken Attic than Lysias: live speech and spoken prose are quite dissimilar. Both Aristophanes and Lysias, for example, avoid the wild *anacolutha* that are characteristic of natural spoken language. Conversely, since drama has a dialogue format, it may be (as I shall argue below) that comedy captures certain features of interactive speech that are alien to forensic monologue.

2. It has long been recognised that there are syntactic features of comedy which seem to have been avoided by the orators:¹ in this case we could assume that they were useful at characterising imitation of natural dialogue, but were inappropriately informal in forensic or deliberative rhetoric. This would not be difficult to understand: although the defendant may be anxious to avoid alienating the jury by inappropriately polished or poetic language (since overt manipulation of language could be construed as inconsistent with a position of truth), at the same time the avoidance of certain informal linguistic features could be interpreted as a mark of respect for the court and/or the jury. An example is the use of ἄν with the imperfect or aorist in the expression of habitual past action, as at Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 510–12:²

... καὶ πολλάκις ἔνδον ἄν οὔσαι
ἤκούσαμεν ἄν τι κακῶς ὑμᾶς βουλευσαμένους μέγα πρᾶγμα
εἶτ' ... ἐπανηρόμεθ' ἄν ...

«... and often at home we'd hear how you'd made a bad decision on some great issue; and then ... we'd ask you ...» (Sommerstein 1990).

It seems likely that certain features of Greek will occur in a dialogue context which are missing from continuous written prose, and since most natural language occurs in interactive discourse we may be able to explain anomalous features of literary dialogue by reference to this. It makes sense, therefore, to separate comedy from the orators in order to examine features characteristic of interaction as opposed to extended declamation.

3. Some syntactic constructions are unlikely for pragmatic reasons to occur outside of dialogue. These include constructions that might unhelpfully be labelled «informal», «dramatic» or «expressive», but which in fact constitute the mechanisms of discourse. The explanation of syntactic features of Greek and Latin is a curious, and sometimes misleading part of the traditional pedagogical grammar. In a sense a grammar (or commentary) could be said to be fulfilling its role adequately if it describes a phenomenon fully, economically, and accurately. In this case one will understand the usage in question and will be able to predict future or hypothetical cases. But in a somewhat haphazard way an attempt is often made to explain the feature at a higher level than

¹ Dover (1968: 83–8): «... in the Lysianic period a certain distance between forensic language and colloquial language was maintained, no matter how simple and plain-spoken the persona of the litigant might be» (p. 83).

² It is avoided by the orators, perhaps because it was felt to be a feature of colloquial speech (Dover 1997: 65). That Socrates in *Pl. Ap.* 22b uses this construction is intriguing: he (or Plato) may be thumbing his nose at the court, or at forensic language in general.

mere description: an attempt to render it intelligible by appeal to related phenomena in the same language, or to an analogue in a different language, or to common sense, or to popular psychology. Explanations of the so-called «gnomic aorist» in Greek have often fallen into this category. Although this is a comparatively simple grammatical category, its outlandishness relative to English, French or German has provoked explanations of the sort offered by Gildersleeve (1900: 109):

The universal present may be represented by the aorist. The principle is that of the generic article. A model individual is made to represent a class.

The fact is that the aorist in Greek (ἀόριστος, «unbounded») is used to signify gnomic space just as the present tense is used in many European languages with an equal or greater lack of «logic» (habitual or repeated action need not be taking place at the moment the speaker refers to it – but it must have already occurred in the past).³

The uses of the aorist tense in Greek is an area in which the temptation to offer speculative explanations has proved strong. This is partly because a purely descriptive-predictive account was impossible in some cases, for the simple reason that the use of the aorist (or the aorist stem) is so genuinely perplexing that the precise conditions could not accurately be specified. However, the opening up of traditional syntactic categories to make room for the linguistic approach generally known as pragmatics has been particularly helpful in shifting attention from the traditional subjective/objective distinction to considerations of function, discourse structure, and a wider communicative context.⁴ A class of aorists that might be amenable to a functional analysis is the usage that has been called both the *Aoristus tragicus* (Brugmann) and the dramatic aorist, terms which reflect its relative frequency in tragic drama, and the belief that it is a feature of poetic syntax. The term *tragic aorist* is unfortunate, but was revived in a recent essay which attempts to show that «aorists of this type are especially common in tragedy, and thus belong to a particularly elevated style» (Lloyd 1999: 25). The author proceeds to conduct his discussion in terms of *forcefulness*, and tells us that «investigation does ... reveal that such aorists are actually less forceful than the equivalent presents» (but forcefulness is difficult to quantify). One of his main conclusions is that «the function of the tragic aorist is to distance the speaker from the full force of the present performative ... ἀπέπτυσσα [is less forceful] than the act of spitting» (p. 26).

This raises an interesting question about the genesis of poetic language. We have a syntactic feature which is on this view neither colloquial Attic, nor taken over from Homeric diction: it is not known from dialect literature, and no one has tried to argue that it is a feature of archaic Attic. Lloyd (1999) has argued that it reflects a convention of the tragic stage (no spitting, like no on-stage murder); and he offers other vaguely-defined categories (politeness, etc.) to account for predicates that are hard to analyse on the model of *spit*. A problem with the account is that it offers no explanation of where (which social or literary variety of Greek) the feature originated. More importantly, it

³ Cf. Kühner & Gerth (1898: 159) on Theognis 329. Many languages have a true or dedicated aorist, such as the *geniş zaman* («broad tense») of Turkish: *it ürür kervan geçer* 'the dogs howl, the caravan moves on' (Lewis 1967: 117).

⁴ A straightforward syntactic analysis would be objective; descriptions which have recourse to terms like «expressive», etc., would be subjective. Contrast the approach of Sicking and Stork (1997).

should be clear from looking at the examples that the phenomenon is grammaticalized, and calls for a different order of explanation. Apart from the intrinsic linguistic interest, if it turned out to be a feature of high literature we would want to compare its distribution in tragedy and comedy over the course of the 5th century with other features commonly taken to be markers of realism (e.g. increasing use of the dual).

The claim that this is a feature of elevated style is false. It occurs throughout Aristophanes (and Euripides' *Cyclops*) in places where we have no reason to suspect paratragedy. Certainly, the range of verbs is more restricted in Comedy: this merely reflects the fact that an expression such as ἐδάκρυσα is less likely to turn up in Comedy, unless in a paratragic context.

Analysis of the contexts of occurrence in drama points up some interesting restrictions. They do not appear randomly, but specifically in dialogue: their function is reactive and performative (we shall return to these terms in an effort to sharpen them). Their position in the utterance can be coordinated in a revealing way with oaths and expletives, suggesting that they are performing a similar role:

(a) *E. El.*

- 1165 (Cly.) ὦ τέκνα, πρὸς θεῶν, μὴ κτάνητε μητέρα.
 (cho.) κλύεις ὑπώροφον βοάν;
 (Cly.) ὦ μοί μοι.
 1168 (cho.) ὦ μωῖα κάγῳ πρὸς τέκνων χειρουμένης

«Oh children, by the gods I beg you, kill not your mother! – You hear a shout within? – Ay me, me. – I also moan, as her children overpower her» (Cropp 1988).

(b) *Ar. Nu.*

- 818 (Strep.) ἰδοῦ γ' ἰδοῦ Δί' Ὀλύμπιον. τῆς μωρίας.
 820 (Pheid.) τί δὲ τοῦτ' ἐγέλασας ἔτεόν;

«Just listen to that! Olympian Zeus! How stupid can you get! – Why ever do you laugh like that?» (Sommerstein 1982).

They belong not to the discourse of the knower, but to that of the experiencer. It should be stated in a syntactic description that this aorist occurs only in the 1st or 2nd persons. That the 1st person and the 3rd person of a verbal paradigm are not functionally equivalent is not a new discovery in classical philology: in the 1950s Benveniste showed very clearly that some pronouns (3rd person) belong to the syntax of a language, while others (1st and 2nd person) are characteristic of «instances of discourse» (1956: 34). These aorist expressions can, similarly, be compared to demonstratives and interjections in the semantic and syntactic challenges that they pose. A feature they have in common with these parts of speech is a role in the management of discourse: in dialogue they are a mechanism in turn-taking, as one speaker seizes the floor by picking up a (perhaps insignificant) feature of his interlocutor's talk and dragging it into focus in a highly subjective way (as in [b] above). They also constitute a brief and effective way to signal that the implications of the interlocutor's utterance have been understood: in response to an omen, for example, they do not report the reaction: they are the reaction.

- (c) *S. El.* 668
(Cly.) ἐδεξάμην τὸ ὀηθέν

«I accept the omen» [or «welcome the omen»]

- (d) *E. Hec.* 1275-6
(Pol.) καὶ σὴν γ' ἀνάγκη παῖδα Κασάνδραν θανεῖν.
(Hec.) ἀπέπτυσ'· αὐτῶι ταῦτα σοὶ δίδωμ' ἔχειν.

«... it is fated that your daughter Cassandra must die. – Pah! I give you back these words to apply to yourself!» (Kovacs 1998).

That they do not appear in prose does not prove that they are poetic rather than colloquial. It is hardly surprising that they play no part in the complex philosophical prose of Plato, which, although it takes the form of dialogue, is a genre wholly distinct from drama; it lacks the interactive and reactive features of dramatic dialogue, and the linguistic markers of (realistic) turn-taking.

These forms occur in dialogue in tragedy and comedy, and rarely in Homer also:

- (e) *Il.* 14. 95 (Odysseus to Agamemnon)
νῦν δέ σευ ὀνοσάμην πάγχυ φρένας, οἶον ἔειπες.
«but now have I altogether scorn of thy wits, that thou speakest thus» (Murray 1925).

Unlike narrative aorists, speakers are not describing themselves or others. Compare the following:

- (f) *Ar. Eq.* 623–4 (cho.), narrative present
θαρήσας λέγ' ὡς ἅπαντες ἠδόμεσθά σοι
«take courage and speak, because we all love you».

- (g) *Ar. Ach.* 2-4 (Dic.), narrative aorist
ἦσθην δὲ βαία ...
«My moments of delight have been scant ...» (Sommerstein 1980).

- (h) *Ar. Eq.* 696 (sausage seller), non-narrative aorist
ἦσθην ἀπειλαῖς· ἐγέλασα ψολοκομπίαις·
«I rejoice in your threats! I laugh at your insults!»

4. Analysis of the many examples of the instantaneous from Homer, all three tragedians, and Aristophanes indicates that they fall into two broad classes:

- I. 1st-person forms which are performative in the classic sense of Austin: in saying the word(s) a speaker performs an action.
- II 1st- and 2nd-person forms: these share the punctuality of the first class. They encode the reaction of the speaker to an interlocutor and/or a situation, generally with a psychological predicate. Some instances could be termed expressive; but the word has a history of wide and vague use in Classical grammar, and is

probably best avoided. Other instances, while not performative, involve non-psychological predicates: *cf.* (q) below.

Examples of the first category:

- (i) *Ar. Ach.* 266 (Dic.): ἔκτωι σ' ἔτει προσείπον
«In the sixth year I greet you»
- (j) *Ar. Av.* 630 (chor.): ἐπηείλησα καὶ κατώμοσα
«I give notice and I make oath ...» (Sommerstein 1987)
- (k) *A. Pers.* 685 (Dar.): χοῶς δὲ πρευμενῆς ἐδεξάμην
«I graciously accept the offerings»
- (l) *E. HF* 177 (Amph.): Διὸς κεραυνὸν δ' ἠρόμην
«I hereby ask Zeus' thunderbolt»

Examples of the second category: (h) above and the following:

- (m) *E. HF* 1235 (Herc.): ἐπήνεσ'· εὖ δράσας δέ σ' οὐκ ἀναίνομαι
«You're right: I don't deny that I did you a good service»
- (n) *Ar. Eq.* 999 (Paphl.): ἐθαύμασας;
«Are you surprised?»
- (o) *S. OT* 337 (Teir.):
ὀργὴν ἐμέμψω τὴν ἐμήν, τὴν σὴν δ' ὀμοῦ
ναίουσας οὐ κατείδες, ἀλλ' ἐμὲ ψέγεις.
«Thou blamest my temper, but seest not that to which thou thyself art wedded: no, thou findest fault with me» (Jebb 1883)
- (p) *Ar. Av.* 540 (cho.): ὡς ἐδάκρυσα γ' ἐμῶν πατέρων / κάκην
«how I bewail the sloth of my fathers» (Sommerstein 1987)
- (q) *E. El.* 215 (El.): οἴμοι, γυναῖκες, ἐξέβην θρηνημάτων.
«Alas! I leave my lamentations, women» (Cropp 1988)
- (r) *A. Ch.* 887 (Cly.): οἶ ᾿γά, ξυνήκα τοῦπος ἐξ αἰνιγμάτων
«Ah woe! I understand your words, despite the riddle!» (Lloyd-Jones 1970)

Examples such as (p) and (q) above show the close connection between the two classes: while ἐδάκρυσα gives expression to the reaction, there is a sense in which it could be seen as performative (the expression constitutes the act of mourning). This stretches the notion of the performative utterance beyond its useful limits, however; and in the case of (p), it will be argued below that psychological predicates have separate properties which make it helpful to distinguish them from performatives. Examples (p) and (q) give voice to a state of affairs that the speaker wishes to mark.

Examples (f) – (h) above show how, for a single predicate, the event structure of the 1st/2nd persons is different from that of the 3rd person: as in English,

<i>I accept the verdict</i>	performative (could also be descriptive)
<i>I accepted the verdict</i>	descriptive
<i>He accepts the verdict</i>	descriptive

It is of course true (by definition) that the instantaneous aorist encodes events with specific aspectual properties. But – to the extent that a verb can be said to have a *basic* meaning (meaning and aspect can be affected by tense, voice, presence/absence of a grammatical object, etc.) – the list of verbs which are found in the instantaneous aorist covers three out of the four classes identified by Vendler (1957):⁵

- I State: *understand, love* Cf. (r)
- II Dynamic
 - 1. Atelic (activities): *weep* Cf. (p)
 - 2. Telic (a) durative (accomplishments): *eat an apple, run a mile*
(b) punctual (achievements): *accept* Cf. (c)

Telic verbs with duration (II.2a) do not appear in the instantaneous aorist for reasons which are easy to see: one cannot make these predicates punctual in present time, only in the past and the future.⁶ In even the most excited interaction, the response in an exchange preserves durative aspect:

«What are you doing?» – «I'm eating the evidence.»

Performative utterances are punctual (and the use of the aorist here is unsurprising, since predicates are made punctual in the aorist). But telicity is not a distinctive feature of this category of utterance: this is perhaps because the telic/atelic distinction applies only to predicates that report an action or state, i.e. «narrative» verbs. To accept or reject (something), to order or warn (someone), to swear or to summon by means of speech is *ipso facto* an action.

Psychological verbs are generally associated with state verbs (*I love paella*) and achievement verbs (*bullfights frighten me*). State verbs are, of course, classed as atelic, while psych-verbs such as *frighten* are generally classed as telic. However, predicates such as *frighten* and *fear* are not typical of the categories telic or atelic: it has long been recognized in linguistics that psych-verbs are peculiar in numerous respects, and it is probably misleading or unhelpful to analyse them in the normal (Vendlerian) telic/atelic framework.

The application of the aorist to state verbs in Greek has a number of peculiar and interesting features (for example, it can signify entry into a state in narrative contexts); in the 1st person of psychological state verbs (ἀλλέω, ἤδομαι), in a reactive context, it

⁵ In Vedic Sanskrit the aorist is restricted to telic verbs (Kiparsky 1998: 45). This is because it encodes a resultative reading (as in «She has found her keys»), which is confined to accomplishment and achievement predicates (p. 40), in the terminology of Vendler (1957).

⁶ These predicates can, however, appear in the special aorist τί ... οὐ ... ; construction («Why don't we ... ?»), because the action can be presented punctually in the future.

encodes an emotion which is instantaneous in the sense that its onset has been provoked by the situation, but which is not otherwise marked for duration. The same is true for verbs which are not classed as stative: ἐπαινέω «I praise» → ἐπήνεσα «I agree!», «Well done!».

I hope it will now be clear why this account rejects traditional explanations of the type offered by Dunbar (1995) on (p), «The aor. ἐδάκρυσα refers to the moment a short time before when grief made the chorus burst into tears»; or Dover (1968) on Ar. *Nu.* 174 «The aor. often puts into words a movement or noise already made». The instantaneous aorist was a feature of the spoken language; it represents a survival from Indo-European, where the aorist marked not past time, but presented an event punctually, complete, and with no reference to duration.

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