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[Pseudo?]Demetrian thoughts on the Homeric phonetic idiom

Abstract

The paper begins by criticizing, theoretically and practically, a view that may be termed “the picture – soundtrack dogma”: the view that the sound patterns of a text become expressive only on certain occasions. Then it turns to the analysis of dysphony of the grand style (essentially the substrate of the Homeric style) in [Pseudo?]Demetrius’ treatise *De elocutione* (*Περὶ ἐρμηνείας*). The main argument is that dysphony is based on phonic density and also that it relates very closely to other levels of the text: metrical, syntactic, semantic etc.

Keywords: dysphony, compositionality, phonostylistics, Homer

It is a paradox that some of the most assiduous studies of the phonetic organization of literature do not fully appreciate the contribution of phonetic elements to the ordinary meaning of a text¹. Semantic compositionality – the idea that the meaning of an expression is a function of the meanings of its parts – is usually acknowledged for syntactic constituents and charitably extended down to the level of morphology, but almost never to that of phonetics². As a result, a view arises

¹ One might take a look at the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (especially with regard to Homer see Testenoire 2013), Radosvet Kolarov (Коларов 1983; for a review in English see Kyossev 1986) and Sergio Cappello (Cappello 1990). Saussure’s work on anagrams remains largely unpublished. Manuscripts can be found at the Bibliothèque de Genève. Recent overviews of Saussure’s anagram theory are to be found in Wunderli 2004, Bennett 2021, Паскалева 2022: 176 – 209. I am grateful to Bogdana Paskaleva for providing me with the link to Saussure’s manuscripts and for introducing me to the editorial work of Pierre-Yves Testenoire. I use the occasion to thank Bogdana Paskaleva (again), as well as Darin Tenev, Georgi Iliev and Martin Steinrück for asking fruitful questions and commenting on ideas that I have presented to them in talks. Any mistakes in the respective talks and in the present paper are, of course, mine.

² A compelling argument for extending compositionality down to the level of phonetic elements is developed by Янакиев 1977: 157 – 160. Especially with regard to poetry see

that may be called, in a cross-sensory metaphor, *the picture – soundtrack dogma*³. The meaning of a text (i.e. of its sentences, clauses, lexemes, morphemes) is for the greater part channeled through an inconspicuous flow of phonetic elements, comparable to the seemingly self-explanatory pictures of a movie passing in cinematic silence in front of the viewer's eyes. Whereas on some special occasions sounds step forward, they become expressive – e.g. through an unusually frequent repetition of a phonetic element or conversely, through its perceivable absence in the text – and begin to signal a secondary, more inarticulate, generally complementary meaning... and *voilà*: on is the soundtrack! However, if one endorses the idea of semantic compositionality or alternatively, a semiotic theory that allows signifier and signified to go hand in hand, there should be no special reason to keep the phonetic elements out of the realm of meaning proper or to compensationally charge them with an additional, shadow version of it. No reason apart from our ignorance of the particular ways in which those elements contribute to the meaning of their larger scale counterparts.

Theory aside, there are also some practical infelicities attached to the picture – soundtrack dogma. In the first place, it seems to favor special cases that are often statistical outliers for a tested variable in a given text. Thus, the general phonetic tendencies characteristic of the text remain hidden. Second, it seems to privilege the syntagmatic realization of phonetic elements over their paradigmatic ones. Sound patterns are, no doubt, part of phonic segments, but they are also part of paradigms such as the parts of speech, the inflectional, the derivational, the semantic categories, the syntactic constituents, the prosodic phrases, the metrical phrases (in poetry) etc. The fact that a phonetic element occurs with a significantly higher or lower frequency within a chosen phonic segment against the background of its usual appearance in segments of the same length might not signal an otherwise peculiar event in a text. Rather it might have its grounds in a quite

Янакиев 2023 [1960]: 35.

³ A purely acoustic – musical, in particular – metaphor is also possible, if not even more appropriate, allowing us to further distinguish between *homophonic* and *polyphonic* dogmatism. The former might be taken to envisage a phonetic texture of one dominant voice (conveying a primary meaning) accompanied by some phonetic chords (conveying any secondary meanings) and the latter – a texture of two or more identifiable phonetic lines (with their respective meanings). If we extend the metaphor further, the stance I take in this essay could be termed phonetic *monophony*: phonetic elements form just one voice, thus contributing in their own way to the meaning of the text. Of the two dogmatisms in this acoustic metaphor, the first one (the homophonic) is closer to the *picture – soundtrack dogma* described above, as the chord layer is more inarticulate than the melodic line. The reasons I nonetheless prefer the cross-sensory metaphor to the acoustic one is twofold. (1) It emphasizes the *discontinuity* between the two modes: the ordinary phonetics together with its ordinary meaning (the picture) *versus* the extraordinary phonetics together with its extraordinary meaning (the film score). (2) It better represents the *temporal* relations within a performed, vocalized or subvocalized text: the soundtrack is a type of incidental music, it is featured only on certain special occasions, which is rather rarely the case in homophonic or polyphonic music, where chords or additional melodic lines are typically omnipresent.

usual (for the particular text) distribution within the mentioned paradigms, which is, usual as it is, interesting in its own right. On the other hand, even if we accept the dogma, we would potentially assign a different value to a phonetic distribution that is untypical both for the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic levels. And lastly, the dogma seems to narrow the focus down to the phoneme as a discrete unit of language, thus leaving out phonemic properties, such as the distinctive features on the articulatory side or the formant dispersions on the acoustic side⁴. Yet another prejudice to the compositionality of meaning and the unity of signifier and signified.

The matter becomes rather intricate in the case of poetic texts, where meter imposes additional regulations on language due to its bridging role between the linguistic conventions and the conventions of an external medium, prototypically the musical. And infinitely more intricate, if we have reasons to suspect that a poetic text is broadly a diachronic product – as the Homeric poems – if not of many mouths or many hands, at least one, in which the outlines of a primeval tradition are discernible. It was only fairly recently that the idea of understanding metrics through its multifaceted relations with the other levels of poetry has crystallized. This idea was programmatically expressed by Mikhail Gasparov in a call to verse scholars

to think of expanding the discipline's [i.e. verse studies] field of vision, establishing a structural link between verse phenomena as such and those belonging to other levels within the structure of the poetic work, its phonetics, grammar, style, and semantics. (Гаспаров 1996: 5, quoted and translated by Polilova 2021: 142)

To take up Gasparov's call, in my reading, means, first of all, to dispense with any prejudice regarding the functions of meter and its phonetic realizations in poetry, and secondly, to rely on thorough observation that can be made explicit only by multi-dimensional statistical surveys of the texts. Before that, however, we need to conceptualize the unity of sound and meaning, possibly at the most basic stylistic level (see Янакиев 1977: 159 – 160), as well as to find an integrative way to all of the linguistic realizations of poetry. The aim of this essay is to analyze [Pseudo?] Demetrius' framework of *dysphony* in the grand style of literature as such a possible and indeed quite elegant way out of the picture – soundtrack dogma.

In the peripatetically informed treatise *De elocutione* (*Περὶ ἐρμηνείας*), [Ps.?] Demetrius takes care to comment on the phonetics of the grand style, which arguably forms the main substrate of the Homeric poems, in the following way:

ποιεῖ δὲ καὶ δυσφωνία συνθέσεως ἐν πολλοῖς μέγεθος, οἷον τὸ Αἴας δ' ὁ μέγας αἰὲν ἐφ' Ἑκτορι χαλκοκορυστῆ. ἄλλως μὲν γὰρ ἴσως δυσήκοος ἢ τῶν γραμμάτων σύμπληξις, ὑπερβολὴ δ' ἐμφαίνουσα τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ ἥρωος· λειότης γὰρ καὶ τὸ εὐήκοον οὐ πάνυ ἐν μεγαλοπρεπείᾳ χώραν ἔχουσιν, εἰ μὴ που ἐν ὀλίγοις.

⁴ This last drawback has been overcome by a recent study by Auracher et. al. 2019.

In many passages grandeur is produced by a series of ugly sounds, for example by the line “mighty Ajax aimed always at bronze-helmeted Hector” (*Aiās d’ ho megas aien eph Hektori chalkokorustēi*). In other respects the ugly clash of sounds is perhaps unpleasant to the ear, but by its very excess it brings out the greatness of the hero, since in the grand style smoothness and euphony find only an occasional place. (*De elocutione*, § 48; transl. Doreen Innes: Innes 1995)

And a bit further he returns to the same hexameter line from the *Iliad*, this time quoting it partially:

συμβέβληται δὲ καὶ ἡ ὁμοιότης τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ ἡ δυσφωνία ἢ φαινομένη· καὶ γὰρ τὸ δύσφωνον πολλαχοῦ ὀγκηρόν, ὡσπερ Αἴας δ’ ὁ μέγας αἰὲν ἐφ’ Ἑκτορι. πολὺ γὰρ μᾶλλον τὸν Αἴαντα μέγαν ἐνέφηνην ἢ τῶν δύο σύμπληξις τῆς ἑπταβοείου ἀσπίδος.

The assonance of the words and the conspicuous lack of euphony have also contributed to its impact. For cacophony is often impressive, as in the words “mighty Ajax aimed always at Hector” (*Aiās d’ ho megas aien eph Hektori*) where the clash of the two sounds brings out the greatness of Ajax more vividly than his famous shield with its seven layers of oxhide. (*De elocutione*, § 105, transl. Doreen Innes)

At a first glance it is not immediately apparent what the author means by expressions such as *δυσφωνία* (ugly sounds, lack of euphony, cacophony) and *σύμπληξις* (clash) or to which hero’s name he is referring to when mentioning heroic greatness in the first passage (§ 48): Ajax, Hector or the Homeric hero in general. The second passage (§ 105) seems to narrow down the focus on Ajax. Quite apart from [Ps.?]Demetrius, Ajax as a potentially cacophonous name calls up Sophoclean associations:

αἰαῖ· τίς ἄν ποτ’ ὄφθ’ ὄδ’ ἐπόνυμον
τοῦμὸν ξυνοίσειν ὄνομα τοῖς ἐμοῖς κακοῖς;
νῦν γὰρ πάρεστι καὶ δις αἰάζειν ἐμοὶ
καὶ τρίς· τοιοῦτοις γὰρ κακοῖς ἐντυγχάνω·

Aiai! Who would ever have thought that my name would so descriptively suit my troubles? For well now may Ajax cry “Aiai” – yes, twice and three times. Such are the harsh troubles with which I have met. (Sophocles, *Ajax*, 430 – 433; transl. Richard Jebb)

Neither Homer, nor indeed [Ps.?]Demetrius do show any signs of sharing in this sort of re-etymologization of the name Ajax. [Ps.?]Demetrius quotes Praxiphanes on saying that woeful interjections (such as αἰαῖ) are usually substituted for by expletive particles (such as δῆ) in the grand style (§ 57, cf. *Od.* 5.204). But the reasons for this may be not so much phonetic as thematic. Thus, [Ps.?]Demetrius’ own account of dysphony should be reconstructed on the basis of a few other places in his work. A good starting point for this is Doreen Innes’ note to [Ps.?]Demetrius’ quotation of *Il.* 16.358 in *De elocutione*, § 48:

Hom. *Il.* 16.358. The whole line is harsh, but the focus is on Ajax and § 105 specifies a clash of two sounds, so note either, *Aias* and *aien*, with their internal hiatus, or the “irregular” lengthening of *ho mmeegas* (see note on *ophhin*) in § 255. (Doreen Innes on *De elocutione*, § 48)

With respect to the possibility of internal hiatus in Αἴας δ' ὁ μέγας αἰέν ἐφ' Ἑκτορι χαλκοκορυστῆ one might ask two questions: is there really internal hiatus in this line and is it really dysphonic by [Ps.?]Demetrian standards? First, αἰέν should probably be regarded as αἰρέν (cf. Beekes 2009, *sub voce* αἰεῖ), i.e. strictly speaking, there might be no hiatus in αἰέν. Besides, when it comes to hiatus after the ι-diphthongs (as in Αἴας), it may have been mitigated or eliminated by gliding (Devine/Stephens 1994: 22; Gentili/Lomiento 2008 [2003]: 44). Second and more interestingly, [Ps.?]Demetrius seems to consider hiatus (σύγκρουσις φωνηέντων⁵) not entirely dysphonic. He tells us of the denunciation of hiatus in Isocrates' school (§ 68)⁶ and then makes his own argument in favor of an appropriate use of hiatus (§ 68) – involving the same long vowels and the same diphthongs or different ones (§§ 72 – 73) – in order to achieve grandeur due to inherent melodicity of hiatus (§§ 69 – 71), which produces (presumably only in the case of different-vowel hiatus) an effect similar to that of melisma (§ 74, compare Stanford 1967: 58 – 59). Curiously, [Ps.?]Demetrius' examples of euphonic hiatus from ordinary (not poetic) speech (§ 69) all involve ι (e. g. χιών) and the proper names among them all involve a ι-diphthong (Εὔτιος, Αἰακός, Αἰαίη). Thus, the name Αἴας from *Il.* 16.358, if at all featuring hiatus, should definitely be considered euphonic on [Ps.?]Demetrian terms.

Could dysphony then stem from an “irregular” lengthening within the phrase ὁ μέγας in *Il.* 16.358? One might take the doubling of μ as a case of graphic σύμπληξις because in early papyri the consonants λ, μ, ν, ρ, σ were written double if they had been placed in the composition in such a way that to lengthen a preceding short syllable. Phonetically, however, this is not a case of σύμπληξις of two consonants: it is one consonant that is being prolonged in order to delay the release of the next syllable (West 1982: 15 – 16). A true σύμπληξις of two consonants, on the other hand, is more readily assumed in another verse that is commented upon by [Ps.?]Demetrius (this time in the context of the forceful style, not the grand) and that Doreen Innes quotes as a parallel to ours with regard to ὁ μέγας:

⁵ He uses also the verb συμπλήσσειν (§§ 68 – 69) for the clashing of vowels from which the noun σύμπληξις in § 48 and §105 is derived. There it is used probably in the same sense, although it might include also another aspect (see below).

⁶ Isocrates' denunciation of hiatus might have given license to [Ps.?]Demetrius to qualify hiatus (σύμπληξις in § 48) as dysphonic, at least along the lines of this tradition. As we saw, in § 105 he speaks of ἡ δυσφωνία ἢ φαινομένη which may be taken to mean “a conspicuous lack of euphony” (Doreen Innes) or alternatively, a seeming lack of euphony, thus implying that Isocrates' view has been rejected by [Ps.?]Demetrius' own argument from §§ 68 – 74.

ἔστι δ' ὄπη κακοφωνία δεινότητα ποιεῖ, καὶ μάλιστα, ἐὰν τὸ ὑποκείμενον πρᾶγμα δέηται αὐτῆς, ὥσπερ τὸ Ὀμηρικὸν τὸ *Τρῶες δ' ἐρρίγησαν, ὅπως ἴδον αἰόλον ὄφιν*: ἦν μὲν γὰρ καὶ εὐφωνοτέρως εἰπόντα σώσαι τὸ μέτρον, *Τρῶες δ' ἐρρίγησαν, ὅπως ὄφιν αἰόλον εἶδον*: ἀλλ' οὔτ' ἂν ὁ λέγων δεινὸς οὕτως ἔδοξεν, οὔτε <ὄ> ὄφιν αὐτός.

Occasionally cacophony produces vigor, especially if the nature of the subject calls for it, as in Homer's line: "the Trojans shuddered, when they saw the writhing serpent" (... *idon aiolon ophin*). It would have been possible to him to construct the line more euphoniously, without violating the meter, "the Trojans shuddered, when they saw the serpent writhing" (... *ophin aiolon eidon*), but then neither the speaker, nor the serpent itself would have been thought forceful. (*De elocutione*, § 255, transl. Doreen Innes)

The aspirated labial plosive φ would not have been by itself able to lengthen the preceding short syllable -vo-, thus leading [Ps.?]Demetrius to recognize both a violation of meter and a case of cacophony (not dysphony!)⁷. What we observe here is probably the Ionian form ὄφρις with a doubled labial that lengthens the preceding syllable and could be interpreted as a consonantal sort of σύμπληξις (West 2018: 370 – 371), a case markedly different from ὁ μέγας.

Anyhow, both the "hiatic" and the "irregular" interpretations of dysphony in *Il.* 16.358 have their deficiencies. An alternative interpretation, which might find support in lexical choices such as ὑπερβολή ("excess" in the ugly clash of sounds) from § 48 and ἡ ὁμοίότης τῶν ὀνομάτων ("the assonance of the words") from § 105, is that dysphony ensues from the excessive use of similar sounds in the quite narrow metrical spaces of two neighboring metrical phrases (*cola*) divided by the main caesura in the third foot of the hexameter. The overall effect of these phonically dense phrases is that of a labored pronunciation, a kind of tongue twister⁸. Furthermore, there is a sharp contrast in the phonetic repertoire of two parts of the line: the first *colon* (Αἴας δ' ὁ μέγας αἰὲν) is characterized, at a more abstract level, by high sonority (not necessarily hiatic sonority, as we have seen), whereas the second *colon* (ἐφ' Ἐκτορι χαλκοκορυστῆ) is characterized by low sonority⁹.

⁷ This interpretation of the "unmetrical" verse is not universally supported. The scholiast to Herphaestion acknowledges the breach of meter, but unlike [Ps.?]Demetrius, he interprets it as *euphonious* by stating that the aspiration of φ adds additional force (διὰ τὴν σφοδρότητα τοῦ πνεύματος) to the onset of the verse-final syllable (*Schol. B ad Heph.* xvii. p. 291 Consbruch).

⁸ The word *δυσφωνία* is used in the meaning of impaired pronunciation by Galen (*De symptomatum differentiis* 7.59.9 Kühn). That the "dysphony" of tongue twisters is entirely of articulatory nature, yet on the neuronal level, becomes clear from the fact that phonemes are categorized by the human brain based on the muscle movements generally required to pronounce them (Bouchard et al. 2013), although this might also be unpleasant on the acoustic side (see *δυσήκοος* in § 48).

⁹ There is also considerable, although not untypical, consonantal clustering in the second *colon*: *κτ, λκ, στ*. In [Ps.?]Demetrian terms this seems to produce harshness not on the level of composition, but on the level of individual words (see smooth *βοῶν* vs. harsh *κεκραγῶς* and smooth *φερόμενον* vs. harsh *ρηγνύμενον* in § 49). Such perceptions were

The most appropriate term for this phonetic phenomenon in stylistics is Georgyi Shengelis term *kinetic instrumentation*: the phonetic repertoire changes rapidly together with an unfolding change in the phrasal structure (Шенгели 1960: 266; see also Филипова 2010, *sub voce* „кинeтична инструментовка“). In our case, it is the clash between the two heroes that is reflected in an emerging contrast on the metrical, syntactic and phonetic levels. Thus, [Ps.?]Demetrius’ use of the word σύμπληξις might invoke here not only a purely phonetic phenomenon (high phonic density), it might bring to mind, through the whole spectrum of linguistic realizations, the famous duel of Ajax and Hector described in *Il.* 7.219 – 305 (cf. also § 105 and the description of Ajax’ shield in the duel scene of the *Iliad*).

[Ps.?]Demetrius’ framework of dysphony, as interpreted here, contains two valuable lessons for modern verse scholars. In the first place, it teaches us *by reflection* that there is a Homeric phonetic idiom that is as indispensable to Homeric poems as the heroic meter is (see especially § 5 on the heroic meter). The main substrate of this idiom is the dysphony of the grand style, but it might be argued that it includes also elements of the other styles (§ 37). In any case, we have to emphasize that this idiom characterizes the whole extension of the Homeric style. It is ubiquitously in a close and unrenounceable link with the semantic and the other levels of the Homeric text. In this way, [Ps.?]Demetrius provides us with an essential counteraction to the drift of the picture – soundtrack dogma. In the second place, it teaches us *by example* (viz. *Il.* 16.358) that sound patterns should be considered paradigmatically at least in their relation to the metrical, syntactic and semantic levels of the text (if not to other levels, too)¹⁰. In this respect, the concept of phonic density (the type – token relation of phonemes to phones, i.e. the instances of phonemes in a particular message), which underlies the idea of dysphony, could be fruitfully applied for statistical studies of the correlations between phonetics, morphology, syntax, metrics and semantics.

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obviously common in Greek phonostylistic criticism. One might compare the ‘Dionysian’ score of harshness (see Packard 1974: 257) for the two *cola*: 7.75 for the first one against 21 for the second (or divided by the length of the *cola* measured in phones, respectively 0.59 against 0.95).

¹⁰ A recent instructive study of the metrics – syntax interface in Homer is Blankenburg 2014.

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