7. LANGUAGE

ἀλλ᾽ ἄνα ἐξ ἑδράνων 194a
ὅπου μακραίωνι 194b
στηρίζῃ ποτὲ τῷδ᾽ ἀγωνίῳ σχολᾷ 195
ἄταν οὐρανίαν φλέγων.

Come now, up from your seat, where you remain fixed in this long rest from battle, ablaze with ruin that reaches heaven. (*Ajax* 194a–6)

At the end of the parodos of *Ajax*, the chorus urge their lord to leave his hut and appear: in vain, since when the door opens not Ajax but Tecmessa comes on stage. This failure reflects no lack of intensity in their appeal; one phrase in particular showcases the density of Sophoclean language. μακραίωνι...τῷδ᾽ ἀγωνίῳ σχολᾷ literally means 'in this long leisure related to conflict/struggle (*agônios*)', and that expression takes the phrase in several directions. An obvious initial sense is 'rest from battle': Ajax the warrior is not fulfilling his duty to fight. Yet the phrase evokes not just his withdrawal, but its cause: Ajax's 'rest from battle' results from his furious reaction to the Judgment of the Arms, in which Odysseus, not he, received the dead Achilles' armour. That Judgment was itself a conflict, later explicitly designated as an ἀγών (936, 1240): so here 'idleness provoked by the Judgment of the Arms' is a natural additional translation. A third sense arises from a third conflict of Ajax's: with the Greeks, his erstwhile comrades, who acquiesced in what Ajax regards as a crooked decision. His failure to fight the Trojans is a form of conflict against his fellow-soldiers, which suggests the meaning 'contentious inactivity',[1] with a powerful paradox: this is σχολή, 'leisure', with a purpose. Fourthly, the conflict or struggle is one that Ajax is having with himself: 'however his leisure was employed, it was becoming full of danger to him'.[2]

[1] Davidson 1976: 131; cf. Campbell 1881: *ad loc.* 'the inactivity of Ajax was his manner of contending with the chiefs'.
[2] Campbell 1881: *ad loc.*

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Few spectators will have caught every nuance of dense Sophoclean phrases like this. Nevertheless, good poetry requires a thoughtful audience, keen to ponder the significance of striking phrases; and the repeated performance of dramas after their first production, and the incorporation of passages, especially lyrics, into the symposium (pp. 37–8 above), will have encouraged reflection on individual expressions and words. In this case, the complex semantics reflect Ajax's extraordinary position: dishonoured (as he sees it) by his own army and in effect at war with them, a war which the chorus present as essentially passive on his part, and yet which involves internal conflict as he attempts to reconcile different responsibilities, to himself and to the wider groups to which he belongs.

Even these multiple meanings prove insufficient to describe in full Ajax's state. The chorus soon learn that he has intended a struggle, an *agôn*, of a more direct kind: during the night he attempted to murder the entire Greek army in their beds. So far from indulging in σχολή, 'leisure', he committed himself to a criminal course while everyone else was asleep (see 291). Thanks to Athena in the prologue the audience already knows this, which lends dramatic irony to the chorus's words. That irony faces forward, too ('proleptic irony'), since Ajax will shortly decide on a course, his suicide, which he will achieve with dispatch (852–3); at the opening of his suicide speech he specifically denies that he has σχολή for reflection (816).

All this, then, out of one phrase, at a not especially fraught moment, at least by Sophoclean standards. The same could not be said of the point in *Oedipus the King* when Jocasta rushes inside the palace after realizing Oedipus' identity; her actions once inside are described in a messenger speech.

> πύλας δ', ὅπως εἰσῆλθ', ἐπιρράξασ' ἔσω,
> καλεῖ τὸν ἤδη Λάϊον πάλαι νεκρόν,
> μνήμην παλαιῶν σπερμάτων ἔχουσ', ὑφ' ὧν
> θάνοι μὲν αὐτός, τὴν δὲ τίκτουσαν λίποι
> τοῖς οἶσιν αὐτοῦ δύστεκνον παιδουργίαν.

When she went in, slamming the double doors shut from the inside, she called upon Laius, long ago now a corpse, calling to mind their lovemaking from long ago, through which he himself perished, and left her as the mother of an ill-fated brood of children by his own child. (*Oedipus the King* 1244–8)

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παιδουργία ('the begetting of children') carries a double meaning: it can stand both for the person who produces children (in apposition to τὴν…τίκτουσαν, 'the mother') and for the children who are produced (the object of τὴν…τίκτουσαν). Normally context would clarify which sense was to be preferred; here, however, there is no way to tell. Sophocles 'ignores the distinction between cause and effect, for παιδουργία expresses both the act of reproduction and its results';[3] his language meets the challenge of expressing the unparalleled, suicide-prompting situation in which Jocasta suddenly finds herself. 'The contorted relationship of incest is presented in words whose syntax is itself unusual', remarks Buxton:[4] linguistic polysemy mirrors the polysemy of relationships which has only just been revealed.

Similarly productive straining can be observed in Oedipus' language after his blinding:

ὦ γάμοι γάμοι,
ἐφύσαθ' ἡμᾶς, καὶ φυτεύσαντες πάλιν
ἀνεῖτε ταὐτὸν σπέρμα, κἀπεδείξατε
πατέρας ἀδελφούς, παῖδας αἷμ' ἐμφύλιον,
νύμφας γυναῖκας μητέρας τε, χὠπόσα
αἴσχιστ' ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ἔργα γίγνεται.

O marriage, marriage, you created me, and having created me you sent forth the same seed, and revealed fathers to be brothers, children the shedders of kindred blood, brides to be wives and mothers, and whatever deeds are most shameful among mortals. (*Oedipus the King* 1403–8)

Invocation and personification of marriage prompts the question: which? Laius' with Jocasta certainly, since that marriage created Oedipus; but also Oedipus' with Jocasta, since the marriage sent forth the 'same seed', equating Oedipus with his children. γάμοι turns out to be more than just a poetic plural. An ancient commentator remarks on the rhetorical power, noting that 'the expansion into the plural serves to make the misfortunes plural as well';[5] but the plural has a significance beyond even this.

[3] Long 1968: 122.
[4] Buxton 1984/1995: 9, on *OT* 424–5.
[5] [Longinus], *On the Sublime* 23.3: χυθεὶς εἰς τὰ πληθυντικὰ ὁ ἀριθμὸς συνεπλήθυσε καὶ τὰς ἀτυχίας (translated by Fyfe and Russell 1995: 243, 245); Finglass 2018e on *OT* 489–496/7.

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Sifting the complexities of Sophocles' language has been a preoccupation of recent scholarship.[6] If 'tragic language and Sophocles' language in particular continues to provoke serious scholarship, and often heated argument',[7] that is only to be expected, since 'no other author reveals such subtle nuances, and no other goes so far in bending language to his will'.[8] But in admiring recent work we should not overlook our predecessors. Two scholars have claimed that 'better modern commentaries have moved away from the more positivistic aspects of Victorian philology';[9] yet it was a Victorian philologist whose move from posivitism had a lasting influence. The edition of Sophocles by Lewis Campbell was prefaced by an 'Essay on the Language of Sophocles' emphasizing the flexibility of his vocabulary and syntax.[10] For Campbell, Sophocles 'made subtle use of a material full of subtlety, which was plastic to his touch, and the resulting lines are more difficult to trace than those which have been impressed by some generally accepted mould';[11] no dogmatic posivitism here.

Campbell was reacting against a mid-century trend towards excessive emendation, often through strict application of semantic and syntactic rules. His essay itself provoked a diatribe from Benjamin Hall Kennedy,[12] which Campbell answered in a second edition, arguing that

> No language was ever more harmonious, more finely modulated, more exactly calculated to produce the right effect on the mind of a contemporary hearer. I was anxious to show, not that Sophocles is 'capable of saying anything', but that a rational account can be given of his language where it seems irregular. If we can only treat it naturally, as we would interpret the idiom of some living tongue, his way of speaking is for the most part quite intelligible even now.[13]

Kennedy's successor in the Greek chair at Cambridge, Richard Jebb, published an edition of Sophocles in sympathy with Campbell's view of Sophoclean language; Campbell's own thoughtful reaction to Jebb's edition remains essential reading today.[14] Since Campbell and

[6] Long 1968; Moorhouse 1982; Budelmann 2000; De Jong and Rijksbaron 2006; Battezzato 2012; Goldhill 2012; McClure 2012; Rutherford 2012; also Easterling 1999.
[7] Goldhill and Hall 2009b: 19.
[8] Lloyd-Jones 1983: 171.
[9] Goldhill and Hall 2009b: 19.
[10] Campbell 1879: 1–107 (first published 1871). For Campbell's edition compared to that of his younger contemporary, Jebb, see Finglass 2014b ≈ 2016a.
[11] Campbell 1879: 4.
[12] Kennedy 1874.
[13] Campbell 1879: xiv.
[14] Campbell 1907.

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Jebb there has been no serious challenge to the idea that Sophocles' language is productively complex. Any individual claim of polysemy needs justification, of course; but no-one today would, on principle, take Kennedy's position over Campbell's.

Complexity can shade into dramatic irony, when a phrase has a sense unintended by the speaker and picked up by the audience. The study of irony in Sophocles goes back nearly two centuries, to a famous article by Connop Thirlwall which coined the term 'dramatic irony'.[15] Before then, the Byzantine commentator Thomas Magister, active in the first half of the fourteenth century, identified expressions which could be understood in more than one way.[16] The phenomenon interested ancient commentators too, as in the following passage from *Oedipus the King*, a play which, revolving as it does around the discovery of dreadful facts largely familiar to the audience from the beginning, 'teems with unnerving moments of irony':[17]

> στέγαι μὲν αἵδε, καὐτὸς ἔνδον, ὦ ξένε·
> γυνὴ δὲ μήτηρ θ' ἥδε τῶν κείνου τέκνων.
>
> This is his home, and the man himself is inside, stranger. And this woman is his wife and mother of his children. (*Oedipus the King* 927–8)

Thus the chorus to the Corinthian messenger, who is in search of Oedipus. The first half of line 928 means 'this woman is his wife and mother'; only at τῶν κείνου τέκνων ('of his children') does it become clear that 'mother' has a further qualification, but by that point Sophocles has already suggested the awful truth to his listeners, who must be temporarily stunned at this apparently damning admission; this is an ominous beginning to the scene in which Jocasta herself realizes her twofold relationship to Oedipus. The technique was clear to an ancient commentator, whose laconic remark 'and at this point he inserts an ambiguity, which delights the spectator' has been preserved in the scholia.[18]

[15] Thirlwall 1833. Hug 1872 attempts to list every instance of irony in *Oedipus the King*, a noble if doomed enterprise. For more recent discussions see Goldhill 2009b; Liapis 2012: 91–2; Lloyd 2012.

[16] Finglass in press 2.

[17] Buxton 1984/1995: 17; see further Williams 1993: 147–9.

[18] Σ p. 199.12–13 Papageorgius: κἀνθαῦθα ἔθηκεν τὸ ἀμφίβολον ὃ τέρπει τὸν ἀκροατήν. As always with scholia, the commentator's remark may have been fuller in its original context.

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Yet the manuscripts of Sophocles offer simply γυνὴ δὲ μήτηρ ἥδε, 'this woman is mother': no self-contained phrase pregnant with double meaning, but an innocent expression requiring τῶν κείνου τέκνων to give it any sense at all. The loss of elided τε transforms the line; our only evidence that particle and irony were there at all is the comment in the scholia, which certifies its presence in some ancient copies (since without it, no ambiguity delights the listener), and the text as cited by the fifth-century Neoplatonist Syrianus.[19]

Without these secondary witnesses, we would have no evidence for the τε, and thus nothing would have survived of the ambiguity that opens this pivotal scene. Some scholar may have conjectured τε, noting that the addition of the particle gives an otherwise colourless line remarkable ironical force, and that the tiny word could easily have dropped out; yet that conjecture would have met with scepticism, on the grounds that the transmitted text was perfectly comprehensible and that the emender was attempting to improve on Sophocles. So the line would still generate an irony, if not quite the irony that the poet had originally intended. 'How much ambiguity can the criticism of Sophocles bear?', ask Goldhill and Hall;[20] the answer will sometimes depend, surprisingly, on our attitude to textual criticism.

Other particles in Sophocles produce results out of proportion to their size:

Ηλ. οὕτως ἄτιμός εἰμι τοῦ τεθνηκότος;
Ορ. ἄτιμος οὐδενὸς σύ· τοῦτο δ' οὐχὶ σόν. 1215
Ηλ. εἴπερ γ' Ὀρέστου σῶμα βαστάζω τόδε.
Ορ. ἀλλ' οὐκ Ὀρέστου, πλὴν λόγῳ γ' ἠσκημένον.

Electra: Am I thus debarred from all rights in the dead man?
Orestes: You are debarred from nothing; but this is not yours.
Electra: It is, if indeed I am handling the body of Orestes.
Orestes: But it is not Orestes' body, except tricked out with words.
(*Electra* 1214–17)

At the climax of some stichomythia between Orestes and Electra, Orestes attempts to take the urn from his sister (which she believes holds Orestes' ashes) before revealing his identity. Electra resists, believing that she is being wrongly deprived of her brother's remains, until the limiting particle γε in line 1216 signals a first flash of doubt;

[19] Syrianus on Hermogenes, i.37.9–10 Rabe.
[20] Goldhill and Hall 2009b: 19.

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she no longer simply claims that the urn is hers, but says that it is *if* she is handling Orestes' body, the γε acknowledging that this condition might not be true. The particle portrays Electra's gradual realization of the truth, something now acted over several lines as she attempts to process Orestes' statements, first that the urn does not contain Orestes' ashes, and then that he is her brother.

The line has been called 'the second most overwhelming use of this particle in tragedy',[21] after Agave's words in Euripides' *Bacchae*, λέοντος, ὥς γ᾽ ἔφασκον αἱ θηρώμεναι ('It is the head of a lion, as at least the huntresses said it was', 1278), uttered when she holds the severed head of her son Pentheus, which she is coming to recognize. A further instance, from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, is worthy of being set alongside them. When the Corinthian shepherd tells Oedipus that his fear of killing Polybus and marrying Merope (whom Oedipus regards as his parents) is misplaced, Oedipus replies πῶς δ᾽ οὐχί, παῖς γ᾽ εἰ τῶνδε γεννητῶν ἔφυν; ('But how could I not be afraid, if indeed I am the child of these parents?', 1015). Again we have γε in an εἰ–clause, the truth of which has previously seemed self-evident to the speaker, but the negation of which (something that the particle indicates is now just conceivable) would force the speaker into a radical reassessment of what had been undeniable, with massive consequences for what remains of the play. The fronting of παῖς γ᾽ adds to the effect; 'order remarkable', notes Denniston on the phrase denoting a crucial family relationship shortly to be revealed as imaginary.[22]

Detecting ambiguities and drawing out their significance turns out to have quite a historical pedigree. Yet sometimes making progress in our understanding of Sophoclean language is as simple – or as complicated – as pointing out a long-established mistranslation:

δύο δ᾽ ἀργίποδας κριοὺς ἀνελὼν
τοῦ μὲν κεφαλὴν καὶ γλῶσσαν ἄκραν
ῥίπτει θερίσας, τὸν δ᾽ ὀρθὸν ἄνω
κίονι δήσας 240
μέγαν ἱπποδέτην ῥυτῆρα λαβὼν
παίει λιγυρᾷ μάστιγι διπλῇ,
κακὰ δεννάζων ῥήμαθ᾽, ἃ δαίμων
κοὐδεὶς ἀνδρῶν ἐδίδαξεν.

[21] Buxton 1984/1995: 9.
[22] Denniston 1954: 142.

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Taking two white-legged rams, from one he cut off the head and tongue by the roots and threw them away, but the other he tied straight upright to a pillar, and, seizing a huge strap from a horse-harness, struck it with a shrill-sounding double whip, uttering terrible insults, which a god taught him, not a man. (*Ajax* 237–44)

The phrase 'tongue by the roots', γλῶσσαν ἄκραν, is usually translated 'tip of the tongue' or similar, as if the furious Ajax delivers merely a delicate nick. Yet once we take into account that ἄκρος, 'furthest, uttermost', can refer to either extremity, it is easy to see that Ajax must be ripping out the beast's entire organ. This suits his frenzied state, and brings out the symbolism of the act – both that the animal, presumably Agamemnon in Ajax's eyes, is punished for giving a false verdict in the Judgment of the Arms by having his tongue removed; and that Ajax, the sacrificing priest in this parody of sacrifice, is taking the animal's tongue as a perquisite.[23] Context here clarifies semantics, and thus the resonances of the phrase.

How many other mistranslations still obscure the nuances of Sophocles' poetic craft? Probably more than we would like to think. 'Sophoclean scholars, it seems, live in a private world of their own, blissfully unaware of what their predecessors or contemporaries have been up to', Colin Austin once wrote, and this deficiency is sometimes manifested in our unthinking acquiescence in translations which reflection might show to be untenable.[24] For all the venerable history of scholarship on the language of Sophocles, new discoveries are still possible for anyone with a bit of Greek and an open mind.

[23] Finglass 2009c.
[24] Austin 2006: 105.

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