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Introduction

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Introduction

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This volume contains twelve contributions on language change in ancient literary traditions with an oral (pre)history. Ten papers have language change in the Greek epic tradition as their subject, and two other papers deal with similar phenomena in the traditions of Biblical Hebrew and Quranic Arabic. Most of the papers are derived from presentations at the conference ‘Language Change in Epic Greek and other Oral traditions’, which was held in Leiden from 27 to 29 October 2016. The publication of this volume was unfortunately delayed by several factors, including Covid-19, but I am proud and happy that the product is finally there, and I thank all contributors for their patience in waiting for its appearance.¹

The idea for the 2016 conference and the present volume arose out of my research on the development of the syllabic liquids in Ancient Greek. In my 2013 PhD dissertation,² I proposed a new model for linguistic change in the Greek epic tradition, which modifies the dominant model of scholars like Milman Parry in one crucial respect. An unspoken assumption had always been that bards working in this tradition would follow their vernacular regarding phonology and the realization of segments. My new hypothesis entails that the epic tradition, being a supra-regional variety, may have retained older phonological and phonetic features (such as syllabic liquids) for a considerably longer time than the vernacular dialects, especially in pre-Homeric times. The relationship between the traditional language of epic and the different Greek dialects could be viewed in terms of contact between independent linguistic entities: Epic singers did not automatically export morphological, phonological, syntactic and lexical features from their native dialects into their performance languages, but they borrowed from their own vernacular on a piecemeal basis.

This idea was first conceived in order to account for various peculiarities relating to traces of syllabic liquids in Homer. But the idea is also consonant with facts about Epic Greek that have been known for a long time. Epic poets

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2 A revised and updated version of the dissertation has been published as Van Beek 2022a.

are known not only to have retained many archaisms, but also to have created different sorts of artificial linguistic forms. The reason for these linguistic changes was clearly that the poets were used to composing in a meter (the dactylic hexameter) that placed high demands on their skills: many normal and everyday words, phrases and constructions could not be used in this meter. We also know that the lexicon of Greek epic was different in many respects from that of spoken Ionic, and that its stock of typical formulaic expressions goes back in time a long way.

Indeed, the idea that the language of an oral tradition may have a certain independence as a linguistic entity has plausibility in and of itself. In sociolinguistic terms, one may compare situations of diglossia, where a high register is used in certain specific social contexts while speakers use a lower register at home. Of course, epic is also a genre of elevated status. As such, its language can also be distinguished from the languages of other literary genres, such as choral lyric or elegiac poetry. The relation between epic and other genres is not focal in any of the studies in this volume, but this is not a shortcoming insofar as the genesis of Epic Greek, being the most prestigious genre with the oldest attestations, was probably independent of those other genres. The general point is: before epic was canonized as a genre, its 'literary language' must have undergone a formation process that we can try to trace.

Some general questions that arose from my research were, therefore: which kinds of evidence do we have for Epic Greek behaving and/or developing as an independent linguistic entity? Are there parallels of other oral or literary traditions that have an independent linguistic status? What restrictions are there on the sort of innovations that one expects in such a linguistic entity, and is Epic Greek very 'wild' in this respect, or does it behave rather like spoken vernaculars?

The studies gathered in this volume may help to give an answer to such questions. In particular, several papers deal with phonological changes in a tradition that are not identical to corresponding changes in the vernacular(s). Another central issue is the interaction between language and metre. Besides, the volume contains studies on syntax and constructions, on morphological features, on systems of formulae and epithets, on alleged interaction with non-Greek traditions, and also on the possibility to localize the poet we call 'Homer' in the linguistic landscape of the Aegean.

In my own contribution to this volume (chapter 1), I argue that the segmental, prosodic and metrical features of the Homeric verb $\rho\acute{\epsilon}\zeta\omega$ 'to do' can be accounted for only if the root of its pre-form contained a syllabic liquid. Although the Homeric text, as all later Greek sources, show $\rho\acute{\epsilon}\zeta\omega$ with an *e*-grade root vowel, the prosodic behavior (frequent absence of resyllabification

in prefixed forms like $\check{\epsilon}\rho\epsilon\xi\epsilon$) and metrical evidence (absence of position length before forms of $\acute{\rho}\acute{\epsilon}\zeta\omega$ in formulaic material) is shown to be incompatible with a reconstruction $*wre-$. Furthermore, we know from Mycenaean Greek as well as from comparative evidence that the present stem had zero-grade root vocalism, $*ur\acute{g}-$. I therefore propose that the pre-stage of the epic tradition which first incorporated the precursor of $\acute{\rho}\acute{\epsilon}\zeta\omega$ used forms with the zero grade root $*ur\acute{g}-$. Applying the scenario developed in my earlier work (van Beek 2013; 2022a), I show in detail how the forms and prosodic behavior of both $\acute{\rho}\acute{\epsilon}\zeta\omega$ and its Ionic variant $\check{\epsilon}\rho\delta\omega$ came into being. In this verb, we find evidence both for the retention of older phonology and also for the complete replacement of older by younger forms.

Several other contributions adduce evidence for similar phenomena. In chapter 9, Jeremy Rau tackles the reflexes of, and prosodic evidence for, three characteristic sound changes of pre-Homeric Ionic Greek: word-initial w -loss, isovocalic contraction over h -loss (notably in the genitive singular ending $-\omega < *-oo$), and the two rounds of quantitative metathesis. Applying a model of delayed phonological change in the epic tradition with respect to spoken Ionic that is very similar to the model proposed by myself (van Beek 2013, 171–175 and 2022a, 259–265), he shows that this accounts well for the distributions of forms and their metrical properties.

In chapter 8, Marijn van Putten delves deep into the tradition of Quranic Arabic, which involves not only the Quranic text but also takes into account the evidence of the various reading traditions. The challenge in this case study is to reconstruct how the written (consonantal) text of the Quran and the reading traditions have interacted. It is apparent that some parts of Classical Arabic grammar have been updated to reflect innovations, while others remain unchanged. Van Putten discusses the grammatical treatment of the tribal name *Tamūd*, whose spelling in the Quranic text “is difficult to reconcile with the grammatical norms of the language the Quran is recited in today”. He observes that *Tamūd* was considered a diptote in classical Arabic grammar (as reflected in the reading traditions), while in the Quranic text it figures as a triptote.

An interesting point for comparison with Homeric Greek is that the transmitted written text of the Quran seems to reflect a different stage of Arabic compared to how it is pronounced according to tradition. The parallel with the situation of Greek epic is that the Homeric text offers us instances of modernized orthography, where we are virtually certain that the pronunciation was different at an earlier stage (that is, when the text was composed or even at a prehistoric stage of the tradition).

Benjamin D. Suchard’s contribution (chapter 11) investigates for Biblical Hebrew “to what degree this corpus retained its phonological independence from

the vernacular forms of Hebrew and Aramaic spoken by the people who transmitted it". The text of the Hebrew Bible was fixed early on, but it does not write vowels and has a simplified spelling also in other respects. On the other hand, vocalizations as codified in the Tiberian reading tradition show that the text of the Hebrew Bible was also orally transmitted. Suchard argues that these vocalizations provide evidence for two categories of sound change affecting the orally transmitted text: vowel changes that also occurred in the (Hebrew or Aramaic) vernacular, and vowel changes that have no parallel in the vernacular. According to Suchard, then, there is evidence that the Hebrew reading tradition resisted vernacular sound changes, and even that it underwent sound changes that did not take place in the vernacular. Suchard proposes that these changes took place while Hebrew was still a spoken language.

In several other contributions, too, the relation between language and metre is of crucial importance. Besides van Beek and Rau, the papers by Blanc, Cassio and Pulleyn discuss evidence for artificial phonological or morphological change. What is at stake in these papers are the mechanisms and creative processes by which new forms emerged.

In chapter 4, Albio C. Cassio treats the various future forms of the verb 'to be' in Homer. The form ἔσεται is exclusively Homeric and is routinely taken to be an older (while expected) form of the 3rd singular indicative ἔσται. By considering metrical and phraseological evidence, Cassio convincingly argues that ἔσεται was probably not taken from some Greek dialect but, rather, an inner-epic creation. Furthermore, Cassio argues that the alternative form ἐσσεῖται, a future of a type well-attested in Doric dialects, entered Epic Greek only shortly before Homer. In his view, however, ἐσσεῖται does not show that Doric poets contributed directly to the tradition; instead, he suggests that ἐσσεῖται, too, may have originated as a modification by Ionic singers, and that the form may have been considered linguistically acceptable because these singers knew that it was current in contemporary West Greek dialects. Thus, Cassio's analysis not only adds to the evidence for inner-epic formulaic modification, but it also constitutes a warning against linking specific linguistic features of Epic Greek to a direct influence of specific dialects.

In chapter 7, Simon Pulleyn discusses various verbs occurring in Homeric prayer. The main portion of his article deals with the Homeric imperative κλῦθι, which stands out because it is athematic (besides the thematic aorist ἔκλυον) but also because it has a long vowel that is unexpected if one considers its linguistic prehistory. Pulleyn argues that this long *ū* is not the result of metrical lengthening, as is often assumed, but the result of linguistic analogy in some spoken variety. He also discusses the case governance of κλῦθι, arguing that μοι in κλῦθί μοι 'hear me' is a real dative, and that this syntactic use is older than that

of the genitive in κλῦθί μεν. Pulleyn also discusses the option that the forms ἴληθι and δίδωθι arose by normal linguistic analogy, that is, outside of the context of epic production. In this sense, his contribution runs against the trend seen in various other contributions to this volume, which rather stress the possibility of ‘artificial’ inner-epic linguistic innovation. Surely, both types of change were real.

In a discussion of three Homeric epithets, Alain Blanc (chapter 2) illustrates how concrete forms were adapted in reaction to phonological or morphological changes. In the odd form εὐηγενής, Blanc sees the product of various processes affecting the input form *ἔϋγενής ‘of good descent’: contraction occurred in the spoken language, while artificial processes such as metrical lengthening, blending, and phonological adaptation took place within the epic tradition. In the second part of his contribution, Blanc studies the consequences of a gender change that may have affected an old word for ‘house’, δῶ. When this change occurred, the epithets qualifying δῶ had to be adapted to maintain agreement. The solution chosen by the poets, according to Blanc, was to transfer these epithets to a different inflection type. Recently (van Beek 2022b), I have proposed that similar processes of inflection change and blending were operative in the creation of the feminine form θοῦρις alongside θοῦρος.

To summarize, the papers dealing with phonological and/or morphological innovations show that Homeric poets went beyond ordinary processes of language change. When modifying pre-existing phrases in their compositions, they not only adapted linguistic forms using normal analogical processes, but they did so on a much larger scale, and they also applied processes like blending in order to keep the language intelligible to their audiences. Moreover, as for phonological changes, there is evidence suggestive of a lagging behind of poetic language with respect to the developments of the vernacular(s).

An entirely different take on Epic Greek as an artificial language is found in Rudolf Wachter’s contribution (chapter 12). He writes on the identity and linguistic background of the poet we call Homer and who, in his view, was author of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Wachter follows the mainstream of ancient traditions, which state that Homer was born in Smyrna and active on Chios for the major part of his life. He then backs up this biography of Homer with a linguistic scenario that is, in his view, not only typologically realistic but also accounts for certain data found in both epics. Famously, Homeric Greek is thought to have a mixture of structurally alternating Ionic and Aeolic features, with the Aeolic features present mostly when they offer a metrical alternative for an Ionic form. Wachter, however, observes that Homeric Greek also contains various ‘unnecessary Aeolisms’, and connects this to Homer’s origin from Smyrna and his activity on Chios. He hypothesizes that these localities had bor-

der dialects, where lots of contact phenomena occurred, and argues that in Smyrna in particular a dialect shift from Aeolic to Ionic may have taken place not long before Homer was active. Adducing parallels from modern dialectology, in particular from Swiss dialects, Wachter notes that mixed dialects usually arise at the border between two different linguistic areas. Thus, in his view, the mixture of dialect forms in Homeric language mirrors fairly closely the linguistic situation of Smyrna and Chios, and in this respect Homeric Greek should not be called 'artificial'.

Thomas McConnell's contribution deals with a syntactic phenomenon: tmesis, the separation of a preverb from its verb. The phenomenon is mostly absent from classical prose and poetry, but it is used extensively in Epic Greek. Given its occurrence in other ancient Indo-European languages, it seems that tmesis is an archaism. For McConnell, however, tmesis was also a stylistic device, and it was a conscious decision for poets to use it. Thus the phenomenon is not necessarily losing ground in Greek, but it may actually have gained productivity within the epic tradition. Of particular relevance is Hajnal's idea that one specific type of tmesis, that in which only a direct object intervenes between preverb and verb, saw its use artificially extended within the epic tradition. McConnell calls this type 'preverbal tmesis'; in his contribution he compares it to what he calls 'initial tmesis', where the preverb stands at the beginning of a sentence (and, usually, of a verse). Based on an extensive analysis of all Early Greek Epic texts, McConnell concludes that initial tmesis is disproportionally frequent in Homer when compared to Hesiod and the *Homeric hymns*. For McConnell, however, this difference is not due to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* being older and hence containing a higher ratio of archaisms, but it has a stylistic cause: poets of these great compositions may have deliberately sought to give their compositions more grandeur.

The relevance of McConnell's work lies in the fact that it challenges Janko's idea that the incidence of specific linguistic features develops predictably through time. In his recent monograph (McConnell 2025), the author makes similar points about other linguistic features of Greek epic. So the question is, ultimately, whether and how tmesis and other linguistic features can be used as evidence for dating individual texts.

Another paper using syntactic constructions as a quantitative tool is Chiara Bozzone's (chapter 3). A traditional and well-known point of discord among Homerists is the question what exactly constitutes a formula. In her contribution, Bozzone (who is also the author of a recent monograph on Homer's language: Bozzone 2024) presents a model for measuring the productivity of constructions. Since, in her model, formulaic constructions run through a life cycle, their productivity can be used to study the development of epic Greek and to

detect chronological differences between different poems. As a case study, she applies this model to speech introductions and speech conclusions with the verbs προσέειπε(ν), προσέφη and προσηύδα. Interestingly, in order to arrive at a synchronic definition of formula, Bozzzone takes recourse to a diachronic component of analysis.

The contribution by Stefan Höfler (chapter 5) contains a more traditional treatment of Homeric formulae in terms of a system of epithets. Zooming in on the epithets of νύξ ‘night’ (and the divine name Νύξ), Höfler discusses their etymologies and their phonological prehistory, arguing that they may all have an Aeolic origin. This could mean, he speculates, that the system of formulae was introduced into the epic tradition by Aeolic poets. More specifically, following a hypothesis of Martin Peters, Höfler thinks of Dark Age Aeolic poets stemming from the Peloponnese. Thus, Höfler’s contribution is an example of how internal Homeric evidence can be used to reconstruct the linguistic prehistory of the epic tradition.

Scholars have not only thought about language contact of the Greek epic tradition with spoken dialects, but also searched for possible evidence for contact with other literary traditions, especially those of the Ancient Near East. The most famous proponent of this idea among Hellenists has been Martin L. West. Zsolt Simon (chapter 10) investigates the possibility, which has recently been entertained, that certain phraseology was borrowed or calqued by Greek epic from Anatolian (Hittite, Luwian) literary traditions and thus reflected in Homer. Although modern scholarship tends to be in favor of such attempts, the linguistic evidence is not overwhelming. In his contribution, Simon displays a healthy skepticism towards using shared similarities in phraseology as evidence for contact between different traditions. As he warns, such similarities can often easily be ascribed to independent creative development.

In conclusion, the present volume offers new ideas in the historical linguistic study of Epic Greek as well as two other ancient traditions, Biblical Hebrew and Quranic Arabic. It is hoped that bringing these studies together will contribute towards a realization that a historical linguistic or comparative study of poetic languages will lead to a better understanding of the texts, of the poets that created them, and of the audiences that heard, read and transmitted them.

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