Grammatical Error or Poetic Purpose? Homer's Special Grammar in Light of Oral Poetics

Although Homer's text as we have is the result of an evolutionary performance tradition that underwent generations of editorial scrutiny, some expressions and episodes in the epics have pushed the limits of ancient and modern grammatical expectations. As Albert Lord (1960/2000) famously noted, however, Homer's grammar was "special"—or rather of a different species—due to its oral traditional nature. This paper explores Homer's so-called special grammar by examining two noteworthy instances of the *un*grammatical in Homer, one of which being the famously problematic instance of the dual case in *Iliad* 9, the other of which a little-noticed instance of a phrase Aristarchus deemed ἀκατάλληλος, or "ungrammatical." Reflection on this latter instance sheds light on the former and provides insights into Aristarchus' knowledge of Homer's traditional poetics. The paper ultimately concludes that post-traditional critiques of Homer's style often can often be resolved by examining Homer on Homer's own terms, as an oral and traditional work of art.

This paper first provides a brief introduction to the concept of "special grammar" and its application in contemporary linguistics and oral poetics (Lord 1960/2000, Person 2000). Lord's notion of special grammar was initially defensive against literary-critical claims that Homer's style was merely "habitual" thus inferior. Similar to Foley's approach to Homer's aesthetics (1991; cf. Arft 2022), Lord argued that Homer's grammar, however unique, served an essential, artful purpose in performance. Modern linguistic approaches to Homer's structure and meaning not only reinforce these ideas, but also conceptualize semantics as an essential component of grammar (Antović and Canevaro 2016, Bonifazi 2022). Homer's meaning itself, then, is conveyed through a special syntax, morphology, and phonology. So, when we find Homer

pushing the limits of grammatical rules and expectation, we should look for special poetic meaning.

The second part of this paper, then, analyzes two such examples of troubled or explicitly *ungrammatical* expressions. The first example is the famously problematic instance of the dual case in *Iliad* 9, where Achilles uses the dual to refer to three people in his presence, an apparent error that has troubled critics since antiquity. While Nagy (2004) has effectively argued this expression has poetic utility, a closer look at ancient commentary demonstrates that Aristarchus' tolerance for the ungrammatical was somewhat higher than that of modern critics (Schironi 2018). A second example, however, is unexplored in scholarship and deemed explicitly *akatallēlos*, or ungrammatical. At *Iliad* 2.353, Aristarchus and others noted the case of two participles is incorrect, one of which in an expression for Zeus "showing signs" (σήματα φαίνων). A closer examination of this phrase across Homer and Hesiod, however, shows this line-ending phrase is not only part of a formulaic system, but it also has special meaning: it is used to indicate the need for divine intervention in the face of being outnumbered. In this instance, the needs of the tradition demanded this exact expression, making it ungrammatical but also correct.

Taken together, these two examples offer scholars a roadmap for continued application of a linguistically informed approach to oral poetics: where literary and textual critics have found mistakes, we should look for special poetic meaning. Further, these examples show an important nuance in ancient critiques of Homer's style. Where some modern critics tend to see stylistic issues as a post-traditional problem, Aristarchus' willingness to elucidate "Homer from Homer" (cf. Porter 1992) represents an ancient willingness to accept these so-called errors on the basis of patterned usage, an approach similar to that of modern oral poetics. Aristarchus' sensitivity to

patterns, however, stopped short of formulaic patterns and their implied meanings, the very basis

of oral poetics which, as this paper shows, still demands attention and promises solutions to

longstanding problems.

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