

The Pragmatics of Menandrian Dialogue: A Pilot Study

Scholars have investigated extensively the pragmatics of New Comedy dialogue (Bain 1984, Krieter-Spiro 1997, Risselada 1993, Sorrentino 2012). The present paper is based on a comprehensive database of all directives (commands and requests) in the *Dyskolos*, the most complete play we have, on a calculation of the total words in the play, and on the total words assigned to each character in it. Directives have been gathered by reading through the play. Counting of words is done using the TLG database.

We may use this data to tentatively answer a number of questions. Are there significant differences in usage of commands and requests between Menander and his Latin New Comedy adapters? Do traditionally subordinate groups – women, slaves, children – soften directives and avoid them more often than do authoritative groups?

This paper, though based on the directives from a single play, will nevertheless point towards answers. The following results will be discussed:

First, there is a good likelihood that Menander avoids assigning imperatives – whether aorist or present imperatives – to female characters. (It is assumed that there are no differences on the pragmatic or discourse level between aorist and present, active and middle/passive imperatives). Specifically, female characters in *Dyskolos* (the maid Simiche, Korê, and Sostratos' mother) speak 2 of the total 125 imperatives, representing 1.6% of the total; the expected proportion was 5.2%. The expected proportion is based on the total speech assigned to women in the play, which is 5.2%. (The total speech in the play is measured heuristically as the total words in the play.)

Second, the breakdown among character types is revealing (I define a “line” as a 10-word unit):

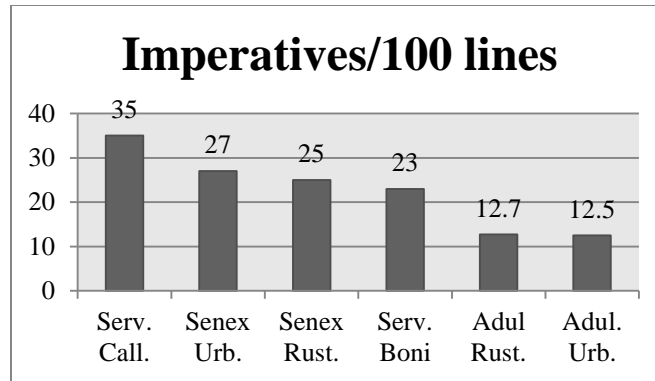


Table 1: Aorist and Present Imperatives/100 Lines in the *Dyskolos*

My own data show that in Terence and Plautus, tricky slaves are the most imperious, while all other (non-tricky) slaves are the *least* commanding of all the male character types. We may identify this same pattern already in the *Dyskolos*, if we classify Sikon and Getas as the tricksters in the play (*serv(i) call(idi)* in the chart above). (Recall the boisterous final scenes in trochaic tetrameters, as they razz and bait the old misanthrope [880-958].) The bossiness of the tricky slave appears to be not particular to the Latin genre, but to the New Comedy tradition as a whole.

There are only two imperatives in the speech of women. At *Dysk.* 591, the old maid Simiche querulously asks her master what he intends to do with her now that she has accidentally dropped a bucket down a well: τί ποιεῖν δ', εἰπέ μοι, μέλλεις; At *Dysk.* 212, Korê asks Sostratos (*adul(escens) urb(anus)*, in the table above), to bring her the bucket: φέρε δεῦρο. It may be noted that the old maid speaks the present imperative least frequently of any character type, at an incidence of 5.5/100 lines, while the figure for Korê, 13.7/100, occupies the “less frequent” end of the spectrum, alongside the *adulescentes* (see the table above).

Here, too, there are close connections with Latin New Comedy. For this genre, my figures show that *ancillae* are among those character types that use the present imperative least frequently. Similarly, in Plautus and Terence, *adulescentes*, of all male character types, use the

form, alongside “good” slaves, least frequently. All this suggests that Plautus and Terence are closely following their New Comedy Greek models to represent the speech of the foregoing character types. But clearly more data, from more Menandrian plays are needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Finally, if we define level of politeness as the number of softeners per 100 imperatives, we arrive at the following results:

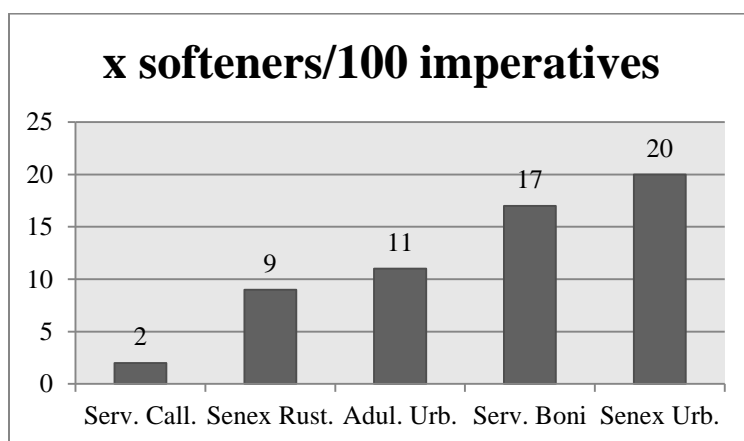


Table 2: Politeness of Characters in *Dyskolos*.

Unsurprisingly, Kallipides, the urbane “city father” is the most polite of the characters in the *Dyskolos*, while the “*servi callidi*”, Getas and Sikon, who taunt Knemon at the end of the play, are least polite.

The preceding results raise additional questions. Are they representative of the corpus as a whole? And how can they help us interpret the plays? Would any *differences* between Plautus and Terence on the one hand and Menander on the other point to differences in the culture and society that the plays represent? What can the data tell us about the pragmatic dimensions of the Greek directive? In my concluding remarks, I shall suggest answers to some of these questions.

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