

When Words Change Their Meaning (Thucydides 3.82)

The most famous sentence in Thucydides is "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." But perhaps more important is another sentence, in Thucydides' description of what civil war (*stasis*) did to the Greek cities in the course of the Peloponnesian war: "Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question inaptness to act on any." (3.82.4) The key phrase here is, "they changed the usual *axiosis* of words" (τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων . . . ἀντήλλαξαν).

Crawley here, like others, says that "words changed their meaning." This has been criticized, most notably by Wilson (1982). The recent commentary by Hornblower translates: "And they exchanged their usual verbal evaluations of actions for new ones, in the light of what they thought justified." Wilson's version is closer to the mark: 'the accustomed evaluations given by words to things.' That is, it is not that they exchanged one word for another, but that they changed the *axiosis* ("evaluation") of that new word.

I think we can see what is up when we look at some of the examples Thucydides gives. "They called reckless audacity the courage of a loyal ally." Later in this paragraph Thucydides again mentions what happened to language: "Thus religion was in honour with neither party; but the use of fair phrases to arrive at guilty ends was in high reputation." The phrase translated "fair phrases" by Crawley is εὐπρεπεία δὲ λόγου, "with pretty words." That is what "the courage of a loyal ally has become," pretty words to cover up a foul act. On the other hand, the narrator says that the opposite has

happened to "moderation;" it is "specious (i.e., a screen in front of, πρόσχημα) cowardice." That is, "moderation" is turned into a negative quality. Gomme calls this "changes in meaning." What is the problem?

I think the problem lies with "axiosis." LSJ defines this particular example as "meaning": "the established meaning of words." But all the other examples of "axiosis" in the LSJ entry refer to *value*. This is what "mean" means here. It is not the definition of these words that is being changed to fit the actions; the words are being applied to inappropriate actions, to dress them up or to muddy them, and consequently these words' *value* is changed. To zero.

Thucydides, significantly, says that "oligarchy" and "democracy" are just that, pretty words, when parties are vying for power "The leaders in the cities, each provided with the fairest professions (μετὰ ὀνόματος. . . εὐπρεποῦς) , on the one side with the cry of political equality of the people, on the other of a moderate aristocracy, sought prizes for themselves in those public interests they pretended to cherish." (3.82.8) In peacetime, perhaps these words mean something. The only government praised by Thucydides the narrator, however, is the "5000" in book eight, where he praises it "because there was a moderate mixing with respect to the many and to the few." (σύγκρασις, 8.97.3). And if it was the best "in my time," as he says, that means the fake democracy of Pericles does not come in first place.

So why have Hornblower and others produced these word salads to translate a sentence that is describing the kind of abuse of language that occurs in politics that is obvious to anyone? I think that it lies in the assumption that "meaning" means

"definition." And what happened to these words? They didn't change their definition; they lost their meaning, their value. And when that happens, what is left?

Bibliography

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