Noisy Words on Page and Stage

The stage comedies of Plautus and other early Latin dramatists are full of "word-like" utterances that challenge literal interpretation. For example: *tuxtax, trit, prox, butubatta, heu, fu, attat, hahae*, and *st* — to list just a few. Such terms were exponentially more common in Latin comedy than in other genres (Denooz 2005). Latin grammars typically class them as "interjections," a category that dates to antiquity (Sluiter 1990), whereas current linguistic scholarship prefers the catchall category "expressives" because they indicate emotional rather than physical concepts (e.g.: *st = alarm*, *hahae = mirth*; cf. Potts (2007)). Indeed, meaning is the overwhelming focus of scholarship on Latin expressives (e.g., Richter ([1873] 1972); Hofmann and Ricottilli (2003); Unceta Gómez (2012)). As a result, scholars have largely ignored a crucial facet of these words: their realization in linguistic and theatrical performance.

The omission is understandable, as we have little information on how such terms were even pronounced. Spelling itself is poor evidence of pronunciation (Luck 1964): consider that English *tsk-tsk* and *tut-tut* both once represented the same vocal sound (a "dental click," /ǀ/). Grammatical commentaries are similarly unhelpful. Most date to centuries after Roman comedy went extinct, and are often inaccurate. For example, Festus claims that *prox* (*Pseudolus* 1279) is a "polite apology," but in context the word must signify a loud farting noise. (The consequences of these two readings could not be more different.) Similarly, Probus conflates the interjection *vae* with the coordinator *ve* (*Inst. Art.* IV, 146, 17–21 Keil), while Virgilius Grammaticus reports many fanciful, possibly spurious, expressions (e.g., *quesgoor, faticalpin*; *Epist.* VII). Despite the assurances of the grammatical tradition, basic qualities of Latin expressives are a mystery. Our best evidence for their realization in performance remains the texts in which they appear.

We cannot reconstruct the expressive comic noises accurately, given available evidence, but we can approach them obliquely. Cross-linguistic scholarship reveals that in all languages "lexical noises" serve as "verbal gestures"—expressions speakers use to mediate linguistic and bodily communication (Eastman 1992). So, for example, specific hand gestures generally accompany and reinforce "shushing" sounds, like Latin *st* or English *shh*, and these gestures can sometimes be reconstructed (Dutsch 2013). Comic actors would have coordinated expressives (and expressive gestures) with other cues—inflectional, positional, musical—to powerful effect. We cannot describe these combinations precisely, but can certainly mine textual evidence in order to develop plausible reconstructions. This paper will do just that: after briefly surveying "expressive sounds" in Latin, as well as their problems, I will present several scenes from Plautus (e.g., *Ps.* 1279, *Per.* 264, *Truc.* 209) in which verbal gestures are prominent, along with alternate readings for each based on how the expressives involved might have been performed and/or interpreted. In each case, specific qualities of the word—e.g., politeness value (*prox*), duration (*hahae*), gestural accompaniment (*tux tax*)—affects its potential meanings. Despite being theoretical, scholars have achieved good results with similar performance reconstructions (e.g., Marshall (2006)). In the case of "noisy Latin words," informed reconstruction allows us to explore an otherwise hidden aspect of Latin comedy, and thus, its significance for contemporary audiences.

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