

*Sociolinguistic variation  
and diachronic evidence:  
A case of Laconian rhotacization  
in the Lysistrata\**

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*1. Introduction*

In the *Oxoniensis editio* of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* by Hall & Geldart (1988 [1901]), the Spartan herald, right after introducing himself, replies to Cinesias' racy questions by making the following comment:

*Lysistrata* 988

παλαιόρ γα ναὶ τὸν Κάστορα / ὄνθρωπος

"by Castor, such an old rogue!",

"by Castor, this loon's a rogue", in the translation by Bickley Rogers (Aristophanes, vol. III, Harvard University Press, 1979).

παλαιόρ shows the Laconian rhotacization of the final sibilant consonant (= Attic παλαιός).

It is well-known that in Aristophanic plays code switching is largely used: in fact, Aristophanes introduces characters who are not from Athens speaking in a dialect other than Attic and proper to their own hometowns (Colvin, 1999). This happens three times for long sections, in which evidence is provided of three dialects. Megarian and Beotian features appear in the *Acharnians*, in the language spoken by a citizen of Megara, who disguised his daughters as pigs in order to sell them

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(729-835), and a merchant from Thebes, who wants to sell goods (860-954), respectively. Laconian features appear in the *Lysistrata*, in the language spoken by three Spartan characters: Lampito (81-253), the Spartan herald (980-1013) and the Spartan ambassador (1076-1199, 11242-end).

We will focus on the Spartan herald's speech.

## 2. *The manuscript tradition of Lysistrata 988: a debated issue*

The lection *παλαιόρ* is debated and the philological interpretation of the passage in which it appears has not yet been solved. The recent *Oxoniensis editio* by Wilson (2007) provides the variant *φαλεός* instead of *παλαιόρ*. The Parisian edition "Les Belles Lettres" by Coulon & Van Daele (1977), does the same and chooses *ἀλεός*. Other editions show the variants *παλεός* and *παλεόρ* (= *παλαιός*; Schwyzer, 1959, p. 195).

Modern editions basically reproduce the scenario documented by the manuscripts. The *Ravennatis* (R = Ravenna, *Biblioteca Comunale Classense* 429, 10th century), «the most important manuscript» (Colvin, 1999, p. 117) provides *παλαι οργα*. In the *Laurentianus* (Γ = Florence, *Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana*, pl. 31. 15, 14th century), *παλεός* has been corrected and replaced with *παλεόρ*. Other manuscripts show the variant *παλεός*. Hesychius provides *παλαιόρ· μωρός*.

It is well-known that the rhotacization of sibilant consonants in word-final position is usual in Elis (Buck, 1955). But, because it belongs also to Laconian, the lections *παλαιόρ* and *παλεόρ* appear to be the best candidates to be used in the Spartan herald's speech. However, the fact that the rhotacization of the final -s is documented in the Laconian inscriptions much later than in Aristophanes (i.e., in the 2nd century A.D.) might argue against this hypothesis: «Van Leeuwen, remarquant que dans aucune inscription du v<sup>e</sup> siècle le rhotacisme final n'est attesté et que c'est l'unique exemple de ce fait chez Aristophane, pense que nous avons ici la preuve qu'un grammairien a suivi l'usage d'une époque plus récente et cru rétablir dans le texte un trait de laconien ancien» (Bourguet, 1927, p. 144). The same argument has been made by Wilamowitz Moellendorf (1927) and Colvin (1999, p. 114).

## 3. *Dialectal features and archaisms*

Epigraphic documents testifying the Laconian rhotacization of the final -s (which have been mostly found in the dedications to Ὀρθία) are

actually late. However, it is worth noting that they date back to a period (2nd and 3rd century A.D.) in which dialect features, that are confused with archaisms, are introduced in written language as a consequence of the great vogue for texts in an archaizing style (Thumb, 1974 [1901], p. 30 ff.). Cicero's observation *rustica vox et agrestis quosdam delectat quo magis antiquitatem, si ita sonet, eorum sermo retinere videatur* (De Or., III, 11, 42) perfectly applies also to the Greek language system at that time (Lebek, 1970; Müller, 2001). Certain dialect features preserved in the lower diastratic levels of Spartan population have been revived in written language to react against the dominant κοινή: «la langue écrite du pouvoir, peut être même la langue parlée des détenteurs de ce pouvoir» (Brixhe, 2000). Significantly, dialects often preserve in common use many features and terms that have long disappeared from the standard language. Such features owe their inclusion in literary texts to this grade of *antiquitas*. The rules of literary genres would otherwise require an exclusion of all that is rustic or dialectal<sup>1</sup>.

#### *4. Rhotacization and itacism: diatopic and diastratic variants*

The rhotacization of the word-final -s certainly represents a rustic and dialectal feature. But how old is it? Its degree of antiquity still has to be defined.

We start by observing that the date in which a feature is first documented in written language does not necessarily corresponds (or, rather, never corresponds) to the date in which this feature appears (or becomes common) in language use: Latin *exoticus* is documented earlier than its Greek antecedent ἐξωτικός (Gusmani, 1993). The case of the itacistic pronunciation of Greek η also supports this observation, as it shows how the dynamics of diastratic dimensions and their relationship with diatopic features may shed light on the historical patterns of interaction between oral and written language. The itacism of η dates back to an older time than the first written texts in Beotian (Bechtel, 1921), whereas it is traditionally attributed to Attic only in

<sup>1</sup> A somehow similar example is provided by the use of Sicilian *nui* (= Italian *noi* "we") in A. Manzoni's poems: *nui chiniam la fronte al massimo fattor* (Il cinque maggio, vv. 32-34). *Nui* is a dialect feature that belongs to the Sicilian poetry school and is used by Manzoni because of this quality of *antiquitas* and its noble status. However, if we did not have traces of the Sicilian poetry school, but only had evidence of Sicilian dialects, we could claim that a dialect feature, proper to the everyday use of language in Sicily, appeared in a literary text.

a much later date: in fact, it is supposed to have been spread within the Attic system only during the Hellenistic period (Lejeune, 1972, p. 237). Nonetheless, Wackernagel (1909, p. 326 ff. = 1953, p. 1022) proposed to date the itacism in Athens back to the 5th century B.C., on the basis of epigraphic traces. One of these has been found in a potsherd dated to the late 5th century B.C.: in this potsherd, the name *Ἀριστοτέλης* is written *Ἀρηστοτέλης*, where the clear hypercorrection reveals a stigmatized pronunciation (for further evidence, see Threatte, 1980, p. 170). Wackernagel's hypothesis was not highly acclaimed at that time, but was significantly confirmed many decades later. In 1957, in fact, in Athens and, precisely, in the area of Plato's Academy, archeologists found several slate boards on which young students had written their spelling exercises. These boards are dated to the 5th century B.C. and, nonetheless, provide robust evidence of itacism: e.g., *Ἀθίνα*, *Ἀρίς*, *Δίμοσθενίς* etc. (Threatte, 1980). These spelling "errors" clearly reproduce the actual pronunciation of the Athenian kids and, therefore, significantly testify to the substandard (informal) language spoken in Athens at the age of Pericles.

Despite evidence of the Attic use of the itacism in the 5th century B.C., there have been further attempts to date it to a later age. Decisive arguments have been made by Brixhe (2000): in summary, the itacism is a substandard (informal) feature excluded from the standard language of the official written texts. Significantly, even in the 2nd century A.D., the itacism in the Athenian texts is rare and appears almost exclusively in the most informal documents (Threatte, 1980, p. 170; Meisterhans, Schwyzer, 1971 [1900]): the laws of written language enforce a rigid exclusion of this feature. Attica and Beotia are neighboring regions: therefore, it is unlikely that the itacism emerged independently at different points in time and had parallel and separate pathways in these two adjacent areas (Thumb, 1974 [1901]; Lazzeroni, 1999). We may, then, suggest that this is a case of diatopic adaptation of diastratic variants. That is, itacism is not more recent in Attica than in Beotia; differences, rather, rely on the interaction between diastratic and diatopic dimensions: the same feature belongs to the standard language spoken by high diastratic levels of the population in Beotia, whereas it is informal and has a low diastratic status in Attica, where is, therefore, stigmatized and excluded from official texts.

### *5. The chronology of Laconian rhotacization*

Going back to the rhotacization of -s in word-final position, we can

observe that it occurs at Sparta and in Elis, and spreads throughout the Peloponnesus: significantly, Zaconian dialect shows the *-s* rhotacization also today. In Elis and, specifically, at Olympia, it is diachronically high and ancient, as it is documented in inscriptions dated to the 6th century B.C. (Thévenot-Warelle, 1988, p. 79 ff.). Outside the Peloponnesus, the rhotacization of *s* appears in syllable-final position: specifically, in Thessalian; at Gortyna, where it appears only before *μ* and not earlier than the 4th century B.C., and in Euboea, precisely at Eretria and Oropos, also between vowels and occasionally before sounded consonants (ἐχουριν < ἐχουσιν, Μίρυος < Μίρυος; Buck, 1955, p. 56 ff.).

The most ancient documents from Elis show that the rhotacization of *-s* in word-final position started in function words (i.e., articles, pronouns, etc.) followed by a word beginning with a sounded consonant (Thumb, Kieckers, 1932). It is well-known that word boundaries are weaker in function words (and, in particular, articles) than in content words. The rhotacization of *-s*, thus, started in sequences in which the word-final sibilant occupied a similar position to the internal syllable-final sibilant when the following syllable begins with a sounded consonant (Buck, 1955, p. 56). This phonotactic context was crucial to the rhotacization of *s*, as shown by Thévenot-Warelle (1988, p. 77): in Elean, *ρ* alternates with *ς* before vowels and silent consonants (e.g., τὰρ ἐπιφοικίας / ἄδικῶς ἔχει; αἱ τῆρ ταῦτα / αἱ ζε τις τον), but not before sounded consonants, where *ρ* is the only option.

The same conditions apply to the rhotacization of *s* in both syllable-final and word-final positions. This makes an isolated but ancient Spartan evidence of *-s* rhotacization be particularly important. An inscription dated to the 5th century B.C. provides the anthroponym Θιοκορμιδας, where *-σμ-* > *-ρμ-*. On the basis of this evidence, Bechtel (1923, p. 154) supposed that also the rhotacization of *-s* in word-final position were ancient, despite its later epigraphic proofs. Bourguet (1927, p. 120 n.1) argued that the name Θιοκορμιδας could be of a Cretan (probably from Gortyna, as the rhotacization does not appear anywhere else in Crete), but his hypothesis is biased against the possibility to fill the temporal gap between this and the other (later) proofs of rhotacization and is not supported by any other evidence and arguments.

But is it actually impossible to fill that temporal gap? Let us consider the following examples. Greek *v* followed by a velar consonant becomes velar: however, it is written *γ* in word-internal position, but *v* in word-final position. Italian *-m-* < *-n-* before bilabial consonant is

recorded in written language only in word-internal position (*imprimere* “imprint”, *impressionare* “impress”), but not in word-final position, where it is written *-n* even if it is pronounced *-m* (*in procinto* “about to”, *in pretura* “in the trial court”). Written language is particularly resistant to record the outcomes of the phrasal phonological rules: for languages like Italian and Greek, a possible explanation is that the word-final position is often taken by morphological markers, that tend to be stable in written language even if changed in oral speech.

The fact that the Laconian rhotacization of *s* in the 5th century B.C. appears only in a proper name and in word-internal position does not exclude that in the same period it could also be proper to the Laconian dialect system and appear in word-final position. As remarked by Striano (1993, p. 296), indeed, «if we consider the independent and sometimes isolated nature of proper names, we should not exclude the possibility that spelling deviations appear more frequently in the transcription of proper names. In this case, it is not surprising that the only written evidence of a given phonetic phenomenon is found precisely in a proper name. In addition, the casual character of our documentation and the peculiar spelling norms, that are necessarily stricter in other word types than in proper names support this argument». An Italian example is provided by the proper names *Zani* and *Zanetto*, which although hypocoristic and dialectal appear in the register of births instead of *Giovanni* (De Felice, 1987, p. 155).

#### 6. *Written language and imitation of oral language: a methodological principle*

To conclude, although there is a need for caution because of the poor documentation, we can suppose that *s* was rhotacized before sounded consonants in the language spoken in Sparta in the 5th century B.C., but this rhotacization belonged to some registers of oral language and was, instead, excluded from written language until it was revived in the Hellenistic period as a noble variant.

This case is not isolated: the change of the silent aspirate consonants into fricatives (in particular,  $\sigma$  for  $\theta$ ) appears in Aristophanic plays (for instance, in the formula  $\nu\alpha\iota\ \tau\acute{o}\ \sigma\tau\acute{\omega}$  “yes, for the two gods”) and is frequent in the *Lysistrata*; however, it is documented in the inscriptions only later, in the 4th century B.C., after the introduction of the Milesian alphabet. Moreover,  $\sigma$  for  $\theta$  is even more ancient than Aristophanic evidence, as it probably dates back to the foundation of the Spartan colony of Taranto. In fact, the word *damusennia*, which

refers to the public banquet in the *Iovilas* from Capua, is a loan from Taranto and corresponds to δαμοσεινία, the version of Attic δαμοθoinία in the Laconian dialect spoken in Taranto (Prosdocimi, 1976, 1978; Peruzzi, 1978; Lazzeroni, 2006): Attic θoinία corresponds to Spartan σεινία (IG, v, 1, 129). According to De Simone (1972), analogous indications come from the Messapic transcriptions of the alphabet of Taranto, where -tθ- appears in place of -ts-. It is worth noting that σ for θ does not appear in the inscriptions from Taranto, which shows how the rules of the written language of the colony match those of the motherland<sup>2</sup>.

Going back to Lysistrata 988, scholars who do not admit even the bare possibility that the *lectio palaióρ* was authentic, on the basis of the observation that it is too distant in time from the first Laconian epigraphic documents of the final -s rhotacization, do not take into consideration the following methodological principle: epigraphic (and non epigraphic) texts, including very informal texts, intended for written communication, such as the late Spartan dedications to Orthia, which shows the final -s rhotacization, should not be considered on the same level as dialogical texts, such as the Aristophanic passage examined here, which has the aim of reproducing the oral language use. The reproduction of a dialect other than one's language/dialect, such as the Spartan herald speech in the Lysistrata, inevitably includes the most peculiar features to that dialect, which are usually excluded from written texts more often than other local features, exactly because of their distinctive nature.

Then, if the arguments made so far are held to be true, the next step will be providing independent evidence of the low diastratic status of the s rhotacization and, specifically, that the diastratic status of the s rhotacization was lower than the diastratic status of dialect features such as σ for θ that, although documented at a relatively late stage and only occasionally, appears earlier than the s rhotacization in written language.

It is useful for our purpose to apply the principle of the implicational scales to sociolinguistic variation: sociolinguistic variants often appear in a hierarchical order, and the access to the lowest feature entails the access to the features that are higher in the hierarchy (De Camp, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> On the chronological distance between two documented sociolinguistic variants determined by the emergence of substandard sociolects, see also Varvaro (2013).

The principle of the implicational scales underlies the Hellenistic revival of Spartan dialect in the 2nd century A.D.: «die junglakonischen Sprachformen sind also nicht ein plötzlich erscheinendes Gebilde, sondern sie drängen die schon gebräuchlich gewordenen Koineformen allmählich wieder zurück» (Hermann, 1913, p. 359). Specifically, 1.  $\bar{\alpha}$  in place of  $\eta$  (that was proper to the κοινή) does not necessarily entail other dialect features; 2.  $\omega$  in place of  $\omicron\upsilon$  (the κοινή version) entails  $\bar{\alpha}$  and frequently (but not systematically) the change of  $-\sigma-$  into fricative (and  $\sigma$  for  $\theta$ ); 3. the rhotacization of  $s$  entails all the other dialect features systematically (Lazzeroni, 2006, p. 87). In a schematic representation:

$$[\varsigma > \rho] \supset [\sigma > h / \theta > \sigma] \supset [\eta > \bar{\alpha}]$$

This scheme clearly shows that, among the dialect features revived in the late Laconian, the  $s$  rhotacization belongs to the lowest diastatic level.

However, a difficulty still remains: why do the other dialect features appear repeatedly in the language spoken by the Spartan characters in the *Lysistrata*, whereas the  $s$  rhotacization appears only once in the Spartan herald's speech? Considering the context of the whole passage will allow us to overcome this difficulty:

*Lysistrata*, 980-992, translated by Henderson (2000)

HERALD Where be the Senate of Athens or the Prytanies? I wish to tell them some news.

CINESIAS And what might you be? Are you human? Or a Conisalus?

HERALD By the Twain, I'm a Herald, youngun, come from Sparta about the settlement.

CINESIAS And that's why you've come hiding a spear in your clothes?

HERALD I'm not, I swear!

CINESIAS Why are you twisting away from me? And why hold your coat out in front of you? Got a swollen groin from the long ride, maybe?

HERALD By Castor, the man's crazy!

CINESIAS Why, you've got a hard-on, you dirty rascal!

HERALD I certainly do not! Don't be talking twaddle.

CINESIAS Then what do you call *that*?

HERALD A Spartan walking stick.

CINESIAS Then *this* is a Spartan walking stick too.

A feature excluded from other contexts may, indeed, appear in such a racy dialog, which is full of winks at the sign of the forced abstinence of the Spartan herald, that is perfectly visible under his coat: the walking stick (σκυτάλα Λακονικά), a wooden stick to carry State messages, clearly has a sexual reference (Paduano, 1986, p. 159 n. 98).

As regards the meaning of παλαιόρ, Hesychius's gloss is παλαιόρ μωρός, on which Wilamowitz Moellendorf (1927, p. 179) comments: "ist nicht zu zweifeln". The derogative meaning (old → senile, gaga → idiot), which appears to belong only to the rhotacized variant παλαιόρ (or, if παλεόρ has to be accepted, to this additionally marked version that shows -ε- instead of -αι-: Schwyzer, 1959, p. 195), may be the outcome of a sort of synonymic differentiation between the standard form and the dialectal form. Similarly, the Italian *redo*, rustic variant of *erede* "heir", denotes the newborn calf in the area of Pistoia and in other areas in Tuscany (Fanfani, 1855, 1863).

### 7. Conclusions

In conclusion, in this paper, without affirming the certain authenticity of the lection παλαιόρ (or παλεόρ), we showed that this lection is legitimate, whereas the argument made to expunge it is not, from a linguistic perspective. In fact, 1. the date in which a variant is first documented in written language does not necessarily corresponds (or, rather, never corresponds) to the date in which this variant appears (or becomes common) in language use; 2. the two dates may be even very distant; 3. the two dates are as more distant as the variant is more stigmatized, since it belongs to a low diastratic level. These general principles are particularly relevant to the analysis of distinct types of texts: specifically, the evidence from texts intended for written communication should not be considered on the same level as the evidence from dialogic texts that aim at reproducing oral speech.

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