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The language(s) of comedy

Continuities

The peripeteia in the fourth act of Menander's *Dyscolus* begins with a cry for help. In an attempt to recover a hoe and a bucket his maid Simiche had dropped in a well, the play's title figure, grumpy old Cnemon, has himself fallen into the depth. In order to rescue him Simiche first entreats the cook Sicon, who is at work nearby, but when Sicon refuses to help she turns to Gorgias, Cnemon's estranged stepson and friend of rich young Sostratus who would like to, and eventually will, marry Cnemon's lovely daughter (Men. *Dysc.* 620–38):

- Σιμ. τίς ἂν βοηθήσειεν; ὦ τάλαιν' ἐγώ.
τίς ἂν βοηθήσειεν;
- Σικ. Ἡράκλεις ἄναξ,
ἐάσαθ' ἡμᾶς πρὸς θεῶν καὶ δαιμόνων
σπονδὰς ποῆσαι. λοιδορεῖσθε, τύπτετε·
οἰμῶζετ' ὦ τῆς οἰκίας τῆς ἐκτόπου.
- Σιμ. ὁ δεσπότης ἐν τῷ φρέατι.
- Σικ. πῶς;
- Σιμ. ὅπως;
ἵνα τὴν δίκελλαν ἐξέλοι καὶ τὸν κάδον,
κατέβαινε, κάιτ' ὄλισθ' ἄνωθεν, ὥστε καὶ
πέπτωκεν.
- Σικ. οὐ γὰρ ὁ χαλεπὸς γέρων σφόδρα
οὔτος; καλὰ γ' ἐπόησε νῆ τὸν Οὐρανόν.
ὦ φιλάττη γραῦ, νῦν σὸν ἔργον ἐστί.
- Σιμ. πῶς;
- Σικ. ὄλμον τιν' ἢ λίθον τιν' ἢ τοιοῦτό τι
ἄνωθεν ἔνσεισον λαβοῦσα.
- Σιμ. φίλτατε
κατάβα.
- Σικ. Πόσειδον, ἵνα τὸ τοῦ λόγου πάθω,

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ἐν τῷ φρέατι κυνὶ μάχωμαι; μηδαμῶς.
 Σιμ. ὦ Γοργία, ποῦ γῆς ποτ' εἶ;
 Γο. ποῦ γῆς ἐγώ;
 τί ἐστι; Σιμίχης;
 Σιμ. τί γάρ; πάλιν λέγω·
 ὁ δεσπότης ἐν τῷ φρέατι.
 Γο. Σώστρατε,
 ἔξελθε δεῦρ' ἡγοῦ, βάδιζ' εἴσω ταχύ.

Simiche Who can help? Ah, poor me! Who can help?

Sicon Good lord Heracles, by the gods and divinities let us get on with our libations. You swear, you hit – go to hell! What a weird place . . .

Simiche The master's in the well.

Sicon How?

Simiche How? He was just going down to get the hoe and the bucket out, but then he slipped at the top, and fell in.

Sicon Isn't that this extremely nasty old guy? Well done, by Heaven. Good woman, now it's your turn.

Simiche What?

Sicon Take a mortar or a rock or something like that, and throw it in from above.

Simiche Good man, please go down!

Sicon By Poseidon, to experience the proverbial fight with a dog in the well!
 No way!

Simiche Oh Gorgias, where on earth are you?

Gorgias Where I am? What's the matter, Simiche?

Simiche What the matter is? Once again: the master's in the well!

Gorgias Sostratus, come out; and you, show us the way, go in, quick!

Calls for help are not uncommon in Old Comedy either. One of our earliest examples occurs in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* when Dicaeopolis turns up at Euripides' house and wants to borrow some tragic dresses. He too is first turned away, by Euripides' servant, but eventually he gets what he wants (*Ar. Ach.* 393–415):

Δι. ὦρα ὅστιν ἦδη καρτερὰν ψυχὴν λαβεῖν.
 καὶ μοι βαδιστέ' ἐστὶν ὡς Εὐριπίδην.
 παῖ παῖ.
 Οἰ. τίς οὗτος;
 Δι. ἔνδον ἔστ' Εὐριπίδης;
 Οἰ. οὐκ ἔνδον ἔνδον ἐστίν, εἰ γνώμην ἔχεις.
 Δι. πῶς ἔνδον, εἴτ' οὐκ ἔνδον;
 Οἰ. ὀρθῶς, ὦ γέρον.
 ὁ νοῦς μὲν ἔξω ξυλλέγων ἐπύλλια
 κοῦκ ἔνδον, αὐτὸς δ' ἔνδον ἀναβάδην ποεῖ

- τραγωιδίαν.
- Δι. ὦ τρισμακάρι' Εὐριπίδη,
 ὄθ' ὁ δοῦλος οὐτωσί σοφῶς ἀπεκρίνατο.
 ἐκκάλεσον αὐτόν.
- Οἱ. ἀλλ' ἀδύνατον.
- Δι. ἀλλ' ὅμως.
 οὐ γάρ ἂν ἀπέλθοιμ'. ἀλλὰ κόψω τὴν θύραν.
 Εὐριπίδη, Εὐριπίδιον·
 ὑπάκουσον, εἴπερ πώποτ' ἀνθρώπων τινί.
 Δικαιοπόλις καλεῖ σε Χολλήιδης ἐγώ.
- Εὐ. ἀλλ' οὐ σχολή.
- Δι. ἀλλ' ἐκκυκλήθητ'.
- Εὐ. ἀλλ' ἀδύνατον.
- Δι. ἀλλ' ὅμως.
- Εὐ. ἀλλ' ἐκκυκλήσομαι. καταβαίνειν δ' οὐ σχολή.
- Δι. Εὐριπίδη—
- Εὐ. τί λέλακας;
- Δι. ἀναβάδην ποεῖς,
 ἐξὸν καταβάδην; οὐκ ἐτὸς χωλοῦς ποεῖς.
 ἀτὰρ τί τὰ ράκι' ἐκ τραγωιδίας ἔχεις,
 ἐσθῆτ' ἔλεινῆν; οὐκ ἐτὸς πτωχοῦς ποεῖς.
 ἀλλ', ἀντιβολῶ πρὸς τῶν γονάτων σ', Εὐριπίδη,
 δὸς μοι ράκιόν τι τοῦ παλαιοῦ δράματος.

Dicaeopolis Now it's time to seriously take heart. I've got to go to Euripides.

Hello, hello!

Servant Who's there?

Dicaeopolis Is Euripides at home?

Servant Not at home at home he is, if you have insight.

Dicaeopolis How 'at home' and also 'not at home'?

Servant Correct, old man. His mind is out collecting phrases, so not at home, but he, he is at home, upstairs, writing a tragedy.

Dicaeopolis Oh three times blessed Euripides, since your servant answered so wisely! Call him out.

Servant Impossible.

Dicaeopolis All the same. I wouldn't go away, but I'll knock the door. Euripides, dearie Euripides. Heed me, if thou hast ever heeded a man. Dicaeopolis calls you, I'm from Cholleidai!

Euripides No time to spare.

Dicaeopolis Then wheel yourself out!

Euripides Impossible.

Dicaeopolis All the same.

Euripides I'll wheel myself out. But I haven't got time to come down.

Dicaeopolis Euripides—

Euripides What dost thou speak?
Dicaeopolis You're writing upstairs, although you could do it downstairs?
 No wonder you write about cripples. But why do you wear the
 rags from tragedy, a pitiful garment? No wonder you write about
 beggars. But, Euripides, please, I entreat you on my knees, give
 me some little rag of that old play.

The differences between the two passages are glaring, thematically and formally. However, just as one might nevertheless group them together in a single category of 'entreaty scenes', certain similarities are also undeniable if one takes a distanced look at their linguistic set-up. Relevant continuities here concern four areas: the texts' dialect, register, pragmatic function, and mode of speech.¹

Dialect

During the fifth and fourth centuries BCE Ancient Greek was dialectally very diverse. Distinct local varieties were spoken and written in every city or region and, at least initially, none of these dialects had a higher status than all the others. When Greeks from different places met, everybody continued to use their own dialect, as the varieties were similar enough to ensure mutual intelligibility. Only with the growing political and cultural importance of Athens did this situation begin to change. The Athenian dialect, Attic Greek, gradually became an international medium of expression, first in prose writing, later more generally. As a consequence it began to lose its most peculiar local features and, under the influence of the competing Ionic and Doric dialects, acquired a number of originally un-Attic characteristics. The end product of this amalgamation process was the so-called 'common' or 'Koine' Greek of the Hellenistic period.²

The phonological and morphological material used in our two sample passages (or indeed in almost every other similar-sized passage from Old, Middle or New Comedy) shows unambiguously that they are written in Attic.³ For instance, Dicaeopolis' καρτερὰν ψυχὴν and Sicon's τῆς οἰκίας would sound differently in both Ionic (καρτερὴν ψυχὴν, τῆς οἰκίης) and Doric (καρτερὰν ψυχάν, τᾶς οἰκίας). Of course certain diachronic changes can be observed here and there, as one might expect for texts written at a distance

¹ In the footnotes reference will be made only to some major contributions on comic language; Willi (2002b) provides a more comprehensive bibliographical sketch.

² On the history of Greek consult e.g. Meillet (1965); Palmer (1980); or Horrocks (2010).

³ For Aristophanes see Hoffmann, Debrunner and Scherer (1969) 116–19; Hiersche (1970) 163–9; López Eire (1986); and Willi (2003a) 232–69; for Menander a detailed treatment is lacking, but see Körte (1931) and Hiersche (1970) 178f.

of roughly a century, but on the whole an Aristophanic text is dialectally close to a Menandrian one. Since both Aristophanes and Menander were Athenians, this may be unsurprising, but it is equally true of the fragments of, say, Menander's contemporary Philemon from (Doric-speaking) Syracuse or the slightly earlier Alexis from Thourioi in Southern Italy. Hence, just as there was a convention invariably to use an established dialect in many other literary genres of classical Greek literature (see below), so the use of Attic must have been conventionalized in comedy by the end of the fifth century at the latest. Largely this situation must have come about because the comic competitions at the Athenian Lenaia and Dionysia festivals, with their predominantly Athenian audience, constituted *the* institutional forum for the genre. However, while Old Comedy did have a close connection with polis life in Athens, it would be rash to assume that Middle or New Comedy also lived exclusively in and for this one city. It is unlikely that a Philemon or a Menander, who wrote around 100 plays each, let alone an Antiphanes, who wrote more than twice that number, did this only for the Athenian market. If the minor third-century poet Machon of Sikyon could stage his comedies at Alexandria (test. 1, from Athen. 14.664a), a similar artistic demand abroad must have existed for his greater predecessors.⁴

Register

Turning to comedy's register we will at first limit ourselves to a similarly superficial analysis. The term 'register' refers to a linguistic variety used in a specific communicative situation.⁵ The register of, say, an academic discussion is different from that of a chat at the local pub: different words are used, the pronunciation may be more or less careful, sentences polished or not, etc. Very broadly one may therefore separate formal from less formal, or more colloquial, registers. Considering the entire range of Greek literary genres, comedy – both Aristophanic and Menandrian – undoubtedly gravitates towards the colloquial end. Strictly speaking, it is of course impossible to prove this, for we would need recordings of actual informal conversations in Ancient Greek to show that they were linguistically more similar to a comic dialogue than to a tragic one, an orator's speech, or a piece of historiography. However, there are a number of features in comic language which are rare in other texts and whose functional value, for instance in terms of expressiveness, appears to make them particularly suitable to colloquial or

⁴ Compare the wide dissemination of Athenian tragedy, as discussed by Taplin (1999).

⁵ On registers in Ancient Greek see Willi (2010b), with bibliography.

informal registers as we know them from modern languages.⁶ To cite again a few examples from our sample passages, the phrase οὐκ ἐτός ‘[it’s] no wonder [that] . . .’ in Dicaeopolis’ οὐκ ἐτός χωλοῦς/πτωχοῦς ποεῖς occurs mainly in comedy, rarely in Platonic dialogue, and never elsewhere; the frequency of the varied oaths in Sicon’s utterances (Ἡράκλεις ἄναξ, νῆ τὸν Οὐρανόν, Πόσειδον) is unparalleled in other genres; and even the inconspicuous added -ί in Dicaeopolis’ οὐτωσί is an emphatic particle which is commonly found attached to pronouns and adverbs in comic dialogue, less often in oratory, and hardly ever in tragedy.⁷ The consistency with which phenomena like these are found throughout our comic texts, and in the mouth of otherwise dissimilar stage characters, allows us therefore to regard colloquial everyday Attic as the basic or default register of Old, Middle and New Comedy alike.

Function

A further basic similarity between the languages of Old and New Comedy relates to their pragmatic function. At the level of the stage action, most comic utterances share the functions of real-life ones: they establish contact (‘Who could help?’), express feelings (‘Go to hell!’), communicate facts (‘The master’s in the well’), aim at appropriate supportive responses (‘Please go down!’), and so on. At a higher level, however, the comic text has another overarching aim: to entertain and make laugh an audience that does not take part in the verbal exchange and is therefore directly addressed only rarely, as in the parabasis of Old or the prologues of New Comedy. The methods employed in pursuit of this higher pragmatic function are, of course, far from uniform and subject to considerable change.⁸ In Old, or at least Aristophanic, comedy more weight is given to two types of humour which operate at the linguistic surface and which can be termed ‘paradigmatic’ and ‘syntagmatic’. Paradigmatic humour exploits the associative relationships linguistic expressions have in the mind of the hearer, be it for formal or semantic reasons. Typical examples include ambiguities, punning and word-play – as when Dicaeopolis is said to be from the deme Cholleidai because Χολλήιδης

⁶ See (after Lottich (1881); Legrand (1910) 331–40; and Dittmar (1933)) Del Corno (1975) 36–47 and Krieter-Spiro (1997) 217–33 on Menander, and López Eire (1996) on Aristophanes.

⁷ On deictic -ί see Dover (1997) 63f.; Martín de Lucas (1996).

⁸ See Halliwell, Chapter 9. Aristophanes’ verbal humour is analysed in e.g., Kronauer (1954); Michaël (1981); Bonanno (1987); Silk (2000a); Kloss (2001); López Eire (2002b); and Robson (2006); his metaphors and imagery in Newiger (1957); Komornicka (1964); Taillardat (1965); and Moulton (1981). Again the situation in Menander is less thoroughly explored, but note Cavallero (1994).

evokes *χωλός* ‘lame’ (thus Σ Ar. *Ach.* 406; for a semantic example see e.g., Ar. *Clouds* 1156 playing with the ambiguous meaning of *τόκος* ‘offspring’ and ‘interest’) – or also the invention of comic metaphors and speaking names (e.g., *Κινησίας* for a love-sick husband in the *Lysistrata*: cf. obscene *κινέω* ‘to bang’). Syntagmatic humour, on the other hand, results from the incongruous juxtaposition of linguistic items. For instance, in Dicaeopolis’ *Εὐριπίδη, Εὐριπίδιον ὑπάκουσον, εἴπερ πώποτ’ ἀνθρώπων τινί* the stylistically neutral initial vocative first clashes with the subsequent diminutive as an intimate form of address, and this again with the next phrase which is parodically borrowed from solemn prayer language.⁹ Although neither of these two types of linguistic humour is entirely unknown in New Comedy, a comparison with the Menandrian sample text illustrates well that comic language generally entertains in a different, less local, manner here. No doubt there is also a clash between, say, Sicon’s rough words and Simiche’s humble ways, but it is less marked – or more ‘motivated’ – than what we find in Aristophanes. Also, it does not involve stylistic parody, nor is it violating basic communicative rules (e.g., ‘Avoid ambiguity’). What incongruity there is arises from the speakers’ words only inasmuch as these reflect incongruous characters. Even so, the projected audience response to the scene remains laughter and the verbal arrangement is thus still essential to the comedy’s success or failure.

Mode

Finally, earlier and later comedy resemble each other as far as their principal mode of speech is concerned. In both Old and New Comedy descriptive and narrative monologues¹⁰ as well as songs had their place, but the most prominent mode is the mimetic representation of dialogue. Obviously, mimesis has to be understood broadly in this context. A conversation like that between Dicaeopolis, Euripides’ servant and Euripides himself defies any notion of naturalistic conversational behaviour, and even the Menandrian sample is unnatural in the sense that the ancient Greeks did not normally talk to each other in iambic trimeters. Yet, the fact that comedy provides at least an approximative image of natural speech production makes it invaluable to the linguistic historian. Without comedy, be it Aristophanic or Menandrian, our idea of what a real conversation in Athens must have sounded

⁹ On diminutive vocatives in Aristophanes see Schmid (1945); on the parody of prayers and ritual language Kleinknecht (1937); Horn (1970); and Willi (2003a) 8–50.

¹⁰ On monologues and monologue technique, especially in Menander, see e.g., Blundell (1980); Lamagna (1998); and Nünlist (2002).

like would be even vaguer – or, quite literally, more Platonic – than it is anyway.¹¹

Discontinuities

Despite its focus on continuities, the preceding discussion already had to concede that the language of comedy is a universe of change as well as stability. Given the relatively abstract nature of what has been said so far, it will not come as a surprise if a closer analysis confirms what our sample passages suggest: that discontinuity prevails. There is no other genre in ancient Greek literature whose language changed so fundamentally within less than 200 years. In order to understand how and why we will again look separately at each of the four areas individuated above.

Dialect

To start with dialect, we have so far neglected the existence of Doric comedy. Its greatest representative, Epicharmus, was active in Syracuse long before Aristophanes, Eupolis or Cratinus – indeed, if we believe Aristotle (*Poet.* 1448a33-34 = Epich. test. 4), even before Chionides and Magnes, two of the early authors of Attic comedy. The extent to which Doric comedy influenced its Attic sister genre is a matter of dispute, but there is little reason not to accept Aristotle's remark (*Poet.* 1449b5-7) that one of the central features of classical Attic comedy since Crates (and probably the one feature that survived best into New Comedy) is rooted in this Western tradition: the presence of a unitary story-line in every play. In comparison with this, the second source of influence highlighted by Aristotle, improvised phallic songs (*Poet.* 1449a9-14), seems less pivotal to the subsequent evolution of the genre. All the more, the dialectal appearance of Attic comedy, which is often simply taken for granted, deserves our attention. Greek literary genres typically perpetuate the use of that dialect in which they were written during their formative period. Greek epic, for example, once it had found its canonical form in the Homeric poems, continued to be composed ever after in 'epic Ionic', even though it had also existed before Homer and in parts of the Greek world where Ionic was not normally used. Similarly, Greek tragedy, a product of Athens, retained the Attic dialect when it was transferred to Sicily through Aeschylus, by invitation of Hieron of Syracuse. Not so comedy. However revolutionary the introduction of plots *à la Sicilienne* must have been, and however much Attic comedy as we define it existed

¹¹ See e.g., Dickey (1995) on forms of address.

only after this formative shift, the new Sicilian ingredient did not in any way affect the use of the Attic dialect which must have characterized the subliterate phallic songs mentioned by Aristotle. In other words, by existing in (at least) two equally recognized dialect versions throughout the fifth century BCE, in (Doric) Syracusan as well as Attic, comedy is the odd one out among Greek literary genres; and that raises the question why.

Unfortunately, most Epicharmian fragments are short and/or badly preserved. Even so a look at the following damaged lines from his *Pyrrha* and *Prometheus* may help to find an answer (while also illustrating Epicharmus' Doric dialect).¹² We are apparently witnessing a conversation between Pyrrha and Deucalion who are advised by a third person (Prometheus?) to build an ark large enough for both of them as well as food and drink for a month, in order to survive the Flood; but Pyrrha seems to suspect that Prometheus only means to cheat them and steal either the ark itself when it is ready or, perhaps more likely, those of their belongings which they will not have taken inside (Epich. fr. 113.4–15):

παλίκαν τὸ μ]έγαθος; :: ἀλίκα χ' ὕμ' ἐγγά[δηι
 κ]αὶ μηνιῆιον ἐφό[διον
] .[.] . ε λάρναχ' οὔτω ποικίλ[αν
]ε ποικίλας ἀπόχρη κάφελ[
 ἀπ]οχρησεῖ· στεγάζειν δεῖ μόνο[ν
 λά]ρναξ κῆν στέγαι κῆτ [

(Πυ.)]ἔστ[ὕ]ποπτεύω γα καὶ δέδοικ' ἐγών
 μῆ δ[τ]ὰ σκευάρια πάντα βᾶ φέρω[ν
 ὁ Προμα[θεύς] ἦσθαι προμαθεούμενος
 κάρτα τ[]κόν τε χᾶμαρτωλικόν
 αἰ γένοιθ' ὃ ἴσ[] Προμαθέος
 μηδαμῶς του[]ν, ὦ Πύρρα, κακ[

[Deucalion?] What size?
 [Prometheus?] Large enough to hold you two [...] and provisions for a month [...]
 [???] [...] such a colourful ark [...] colourful [...] is sufficient and [...]
 [Prometheus?] [...] will be sufficient: one will just have to put a roof on [...]
 [???] [...] ark and on the roof [...]
 [Pyrrha.] [...] I do suspect and fear that [...] Prometheus takes all the stuff and is off with it [...] foreseeing very [...] and deceitful
 [???] If it came about what [...] of Prometheus
 [Deucalion?] Do not [...], Pyrrha, bad [...]

¹² On Epicharmus' language see Cassio (2002); Bellocchi (2008) 262–9; and Willi (2008) 119–61; on his style also Berk (1964) 42–54.

In terms of content not much can be learned from a passage like this. Importantly, however, we see how three mythological figures converse with each other in what looks like pure Syracusan Doric, not a literary Doric as in choral lyric texts or the like. To be sure, most of what we know about Syracusan comes from the fragments of Epicharmus so that this statement might look circular. However, we do know enough about the various Doric dialects as a group to say that (a) at least there is nothing here that would seem odd for ‘real’ Syracusan, and (b) certain Epicharmian forms, such as προμαθεύμενος (instead of προμαθεύμενος), would be unusual in other Doric literature; that is, their belonging to a local dialect actually spoken, not just written, is most plausible. Meanwhile, in Epicharmus too we find a good number of features that point to a colloquial register, such as in the above sample the exceptional adjective ἀμαρτωλικός (with the productive suffix -ικός, for more usual ἀμαρτωλός) or the diminutive σκευάρια, which is predominantly found in comedy. *Mutatis mutandis* the situation is therefore the same as in Attic comedy, the difference really residing only in the basic dialect, not in the stylistic level of expression. But the fact that even mythical heroes (such as Prometheus) are made to speak like ordinary men suggests that it is precisely this assimilation of the stage characters’ language to the language of the audience that lies at the heart of comic discourse: the issue is not so much linguistic naturalism (which would be a silly notion with regard to a mythical past) but linguistic closeness. Where other genres distanced themselves from the audience by means of their explicitly ‘literary’ code, fifth-century comedy did the opposite – and that entailed the use of the present audience’s dialect, no matter what else any individual author’s wish to preserve or highlight the genre’s legacy could have suggested. That this special relationship between genre language and audience language may have been lost later on, with Attic Greek truly becoming a genre-conditioned, not audience-conditioned, dialect in Middle and New Comedy, has already been said; but since this loss happened at a time when dialectal differences were being levelled in favour of Attic-based Koine Greek anyway, the production of a fourth-century comedy in Attic outside Athens will no longer have seemed as outlandish as the production of a comedy in Syracusan Doric at the Lenaia would have been a century earlier.

Yet, by talking about a well-defined ‘(primary) audience dialect’ we might again be simplifying things too much. Like any natural language, Attic Greek was not diachronically stable. The eventual transformation of spoken Attic into spoken Koine Greek is one difficulty. Already in antiquity there was some debate about how ‘Attic’ Menander’s Attic still was. The purist grammarians Phrynichus (*passim*: e.g., *Ecl.* 394, 402, 408 Fischer) and Pollux

(e.g., *Onom.* 3.29) condemned it, arguing that too many lexical elements typical of Koine Greek had already crept in. However, although it is indeed possible to single out certain words that were not used by the classical authors of the late fifth century, it is impossible to regard Menander's vocabulary *in toto* as fully Koineized.¹³ To give but one or two examples, the word for 'ship' is still normally ναῦς, not πλοῖον, and that for 'slave' can still be παῖς, instead of παιδίον. Similarly, word formation, syntax and phonology remain distinctly Attic wherever a sensible boundary can be drawn between Attic and Koine Greek at all.¹⁴ Words like the one for 'sea', for example, consistently appear with ττ, not σσ (i.e. Attic θάλαττα, not Koine θάλασσα), and when in Menandrian syntax the dual number virtually disappears or the subjunctive encroaches on the domain of the optative it is primarily a matter of nomenclature whether one wants to diagnose here a 'Koineized' form of Attic or simply a 'late-fourth-century' one.

But what we cannot, of course, tell is how many Athenians in Menander's theatre really still spoke such 'good' Attic: perhaps most of them, perhaps only a small minority. And a similar problem arises when we look back at the Attic of Old Comedy. In Aristophanes' last comedy, *Wealth* of 388 BCE, a number of linguistic features are noticeably 'late' when compared with how Aristophanes wrote in his earlier plays. On its own the relatively short time-gap between *Wealth* and the preceding Aristophanic plays (*Assembly Women*, *Frogs*) cannot account for these innovations. Hence, the change in style which manifests itself in a greater openness for less conservative forms of expression may instead relate to a change in the character of the comic genre, *Wealth* being a less polis-oriented comedy than its predecessors.¹⁵ In other words, as long as Aristophanes was writing polis-comedies (or 'Old' as opposed to 'Middle' comedies), his dialect may have been consciously conservative, favouring traditional over innovative Attic wherever actual usage was divided. If this is true, it entails that the Attic heard on stage was not necessarily the same as the Attic spoken by a majority of the audience. Rather each comic poet could (or had to) decide afresh where to situate himself on the scale between linguistic conservatism and linguistic innovation. If we had more than fragments of Aristophanes' rivals, it would probably be possible to discern some of this synchronic genre-internal differentiation. As it is, we are at best left with some vague intuitions. Thus, the greater frequency with which the so-called 'Antiatticist' grammarian (second century CE) cites the fifth-century comedians Plato and Phrynichus in order to

¹³ The contributions by Bruhn (1910); Durham (1913); and Klaus (1936) are still useful; on Menander's reception by the grammarians see Lamagna (2004).

¹⁴ See Poultney (1963); Rosenstrauch (1967); Horrocks (2010) 52–5; López Eire (2002a).

¹⁵ Willi (2003b).

disprove stricter purists and show that a certain word or expression did occur in ‘classical’ Attic, may indicate that the dialect of these two poets was less traditionalist than that of, say, Cratinus and Aristophanes.¹⁶

Register

The truism that different writers may have written differently is equally valid when we next reconsider the register of comedy. In everyday life some people unavoidably express themselves in more educated ways, others in more vulgar ones. So, just as there was a diachronic range of Attic Greek(s) at any point in time, there was also a range of colloquial registers to act as default registers for comedy. For whatever it is worth, Aristophanes himself attacked the coarse humour of some of his rivals (*Frogs* 12–15; cf. *Clouds* 524–5, *Wasps* 66) and such humour may well have been expressed in similarly vulgar language. But vulgar and obscene words and expressions are not absent from Aristophanes either, and some evidence for them is found already in Epicharmus. Moreover, as far as Attic comedy is concerned we must bear in mind that such material might simply reflect a generic inheritance from iambography and/or phallic song-writing. After all, although some sources observe that Cratinus and Eupolis were particularly fond of λοιδορία (‘abuse’; see Cratinus test. 17, 25, Eupolis test. 2, 20, 42), the abuse of public figures (and, in connection with this, a high degree of freedom of speech) had an important social-regulatory role also in Aristophanes’ plays.¹⁷

More important than any individual’s divergence from an imaginary generic average, therefore, are the omnipresent register discontinuities *within* each comic text. Until now we have concentrated only on what has deliberately been called the ‘default’ register of comedy. But it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the continuous shifting of registers is the single most important defining feature of comic language before New Comedy.¹⁸ On one level we see this when we compare different constituent parts of a classical comedy. An Aristophanic parabasis often comes across as less colloquial

¹⁶ For a more detailed argument along these lines see Willi (2010a); Aristophanes’ relative conservatism is highlighted in Willi (2003a) 232–69, to be held against López Eire (1991) 9–61.

¹⁷ On the origins and function of comic abuse and *aiskhrologia* see Rosen (1988); Degani (1993); Treu (1999); Bowie (2002); Saetta Cottone (2005); and Halliwell (2008) 215–63; on obscenity in Aristophanes Henderson (1991a); on terms of abuse and negative evaluation also Müller (1913) and Dover (2002). For some less prominent material in Epicharmus and Menander see, respectively, Willi (2008) 150 and Legrand (1910) 611f.

¹⁸ Silk (2000a) 110–17, 136–40; cf. Dover (1970).

and more stately than a passage in iambic trimeters, both in the spoken parts and in the odes which may even contain non-parodic lyrical elements (words, syntax).¹⁹ On another – and yet more crucial – level, comic parody itself is recognizable only because it highlights, and exploits for humorous purposes, differences between linguistic varieties. Some of the most easily recognizable examples concern not registers, but foreign dialects, as when Dicaeopolis in *Acharnians* meets a Megarian and a Boeotian or when Lysistrata talks to her Spartan friend Lampito. The rendering of these foreign dialects appears to be fairly accurate and thus constitutes a precious source for our knowledge of fifth-century non-Attic Greek.²⁰ To be located somewhere between a foreign dialect and a register of Attic is the broken Greek of characters like the Persian ambassador in *Acharnians*, the Triballian visitor in *Birds*, or the Scythian archer in *Women at the Thesmophoria*. These passages are important because they tell us something about Athenian perceptions and representations of ‘barbarians’.²¹ Most common, however, is register parody properly speaking. A prime example occurs in our sample passage from *Acharnians*. Euripides’ τί λέλακας, for instance, contains a high-flown verb λάσκω which, with the meaning ‘to utter aloud’, is peculiar to tragedy; and the servant’s οὐκ ἔνδον ἔνδον ἐστίν employs a type of chiasmic oxymoron that is typically associated with (sophistic/Euripidean) tragedy. But it would be wrong to infer from this scene that similar register parodies are always consistent in the sense that, for example, ‘tragic’ utterances could only come from ‘tragic’ poets and their entourage. In fact, Dicaeopolis himself is increasingly affected by the Euripidean note in the conversation, and at the end it is he who takes leave with the paratragic words καὶ γὰρ εἴμ’ ἄγαν ὀχληρὸς, οὐ δοκῶν με κοιράνους στυγεῖν ‘for over-molesting I am, albeit unwitting of the masters’ spite’ (Ar. *Ach.* 471–2).²² Overall, such more or less unexpected departures from the default register are frequent and varied enough throughout the plays of Aristophanes to suggest a description of his language as quintessentially ‘centrifugal’; and the same is probably true of Old Comedy more widely, given parodic fragments such as Archippus fr. 27 (with a treaty in officialese between Athens and the fishes); Cratinus fr. 259 (with a para-epic genealogy of Pericles’ wife Aspasia born of Καταπυγούση ‘Lewdness’); or Eupolis fr. 16 (with a hymn to the Graces, αἴσι

¹⁹ See Mastromarco (1987).

²⁰ See especially Colvin (1995), (1999), and (2000); cf. Kloss (2001) 34–54.

²¹ Cf. Willi (2002c) 142–9 and (2003a) 198–225, after Friedrich (1918); Brixhe (1988); and Sier (1992).

²² On Aristophanic paratragedy see Rau (1967); on parodies of other styles and registers e.g., Adami (1901); Burckhardt (1924); Bernabé (1995); Kloss (2001); and the literature cited in n. 8 above and n. 26 below.

μέλουσιν ἔψητοί ‘who care for boiled fish’). In contrast with this, the language of (certainly Menandrian) New Comedy, like that of nearly all other literary genres of Ancient Greece, is ‘centripetal’: most utterances converge on the default register and those that do disrupt it – as does, for instance, Men. *Sicyonian* 169–70 with a sudden switch into paratragic style – frequently aim at heightened emotionality rather than comic effect.²³

Function

While the preceding analysis thus corroborates our earlier suspicion that comedy over time loses some of its generic uniqueness, we must not conclude from this that it also loses its generic autonomy. On the contrary, because of Old Comedy’s stylistic diversity, which relies on the interplay with various forms of the linguistic Other, one might rather argue that Old Comedy is a *less* autonomous genre than New Comedy. However, (Aristophanic) Old Comedy is not to the same extent ‘heteronomous’ as some of the mythological persiflages must have been which are hinted at by many titles of Middle Comedy (and Doric comedy before). The way in which these latter plays lived off other texts was more comprehensive, and not just because, to judge from the fragments we have, the parodic element seems to have been more thematic than linguistic there. If an Aristophanic play – even one like *Women at the Thesmophoria* or *Frogs* – were stripped of all its parody, something essential would still be left: a cultural, social and/or political message. Hence, notwithstanding the importance of the entertainment function of comic language, language in Aristophanes also has an overtly didactic purpose. Old Comedy argues and ridicules on behalf of the sovereign *dêmos* of Athens.²⁴ For obvious reasons it can do so only through the medium of language. Admittedly this second, didactic, function largely falls to the *signifié* side of language, which lies outside the scope of this chapter, whereas the entertainment function is more often a matter (also) of the *signifiant* and as such of greater relevance here. But the linguistic centrifugality we have diagnosed for Old Comedy also has to be seen in a ‘political’ light.²⁵ By making fun of all that is deviant from the linguistic ‘norms’ set by the *dêmos* and embodied in the colloquial default register, comedy endorses these norms and reinforces civic cohesion among an audience which, despite its heterogeneity, discovers that it can laugh at one and

²³ See Oliva (1968); Sandbach (1970) 126–36; Webster (1974) 56–67; Hurst (1990); see also Nesselrath (1993) on Middle Comedy.

²⁴ Henderson (1990), after [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 2.18; see also Carey (1994); Henderson (1998).

²⁵ See Willi (2002c).

the same target: those ‘alien voices’ the average Athenian was socially and culturally bound to encounter in his or her city. Thus, it is no coincidence that the literary registers parodied preferentially by the poets of Old Comedy are those of tragedy and epic – two genres, that is, whose socio-cultural status was least likely to be questioned outside the institutionally carnivalesque framework provided by the comic performance.²⁶ Vice versa, the shift from the parody of tragedy to that of dithyramb in Middle Comedy (e.g., Ar. *Wealth* 290–315, Antiphanes fr. 55, 110, Anaxandrides fr. 6, Eubulus fr. 56) also acquires a new significance. From a purely formal point of view it may make little difference if paradithyrambic extravagant compound adjectives take the place of equally recherché paratragic nouns in $-\mu\alpha$, but the laughter they are supposed to provoke is no longer the same. To laugh at tragic language had a communal dimension, but to laugh at the language of dithyramb was primarily a statement of cultural and aesthetic attitude (see already Ar. *Birds* 1372–1409).²⁷

Mode

In this context, a further development deserving attention is the disappearance of dialect parody. We have seen that dialect parody occurs with some frequency in Aristophanes. In addition there is some, though often elusive, evidence for it in the fragments of other writers of Old Comedy (e.g., Crates fr. 1, Eupolis fr. 147, 149, Strattis fr. 29, 49). In Middle Comedy, whose thematic focus is less specifically Athenian, a similar dialectally configured ‘us vs. them’ dichotomy may no longer have worked well. It is true that Alexis fr. 146 also makes reference to the use of Doric instead of Attic, but what is at stake there is not a polar opposition to the audience’s local identity, but a doctor’s special language. Similarly, the fake doctor in Menander’s *Aspis* (444–64; cf. 374–9) has to speak Doric in order to sound impressive (presumably because the most eminent medical schools were located in Doric Cos and Cnidus). Hence, starting already with a doctor’s Doric utterance in Crates fr. 46 – a fragment which thus jeopardizes any clear-cut chronological boundary between Old and Middle Comedy – we can trace the development of a stock character who is associated with a foreign linguistic variety

²⁶ For Bakhtinian/carnavalesque readings of Old Comedy, see e.g., Carrière (1979); Goldhill (1991) 167–222; von Möllendorff (1995); and Platter (2007). Note that Aristophanes’ predilection for paratragedy need not be representative of Old Comedy as a whole: see Silk (2000b); Revermann (2006a) 101–4.

²⁷ On dithyrambic parody in Middle Comedy see Nesselrath (1990) 241–66 and Dobrov (2002); on paradithyramb in Aristophanes Zimmermann (1997); and on the cultural implications of the phenomenon Csapo (2004).

(and who is perhaps ultimately inherited from subliterate Doric farce: see Athen. 14.621d).²⁸

The mimetic mode involved with such stock characters is somewhat different from the one we observe in Dicaeopolis' conversation with Euripides and similar passages. Whereas the latter is limited to an approximative imitation of human dialogue (however communicatively derailed this dialogue may be), the former respects a vague form of naturalistic coherence and consistency. Up to a point, of course, a figure such as Aristophanes' Euripides in *Acharnians* is also a standardized tragedian whose use of tragic language is intrinsically motivated; and indeed, despite the presence of certain individualizing traits, this Euripides is perhaps linguistically more similar to the stage Agathon in *Women at the Thesmophoria* than to the Euripides appearing in *Frogs*. Overall, however, stage figures who are continuously characterized, notably by linguistic means, remain the exception rather than the rule in Aristophanes.²⁹ Even the dithyrambic poet of *Birds*, the tragedians Aeschylus and Euripides in *Frogs*, or the philosopher Socrates in *Clouds*, for all of whom a consistent linguistic identity could have been designed and all of whom do speak unlike ordinary Athenians at times, do not belong to this category.

Truly naturalistic mimesis, meanwhile, is something incompatible also with stock characters. Their creation is the dramatic counterpart to the recognition, by scholars like Theophrastus, of a number of character types in real life.³⁰ As such it is a first step towards a better understanding of individual psychology, but not more. We cannot therefore overrate the novelty of the linguistically consistent and naturalistic depiction of dialects which we find with Menandrian figures such as the stiff Gorgias in *Dyscolus* or the youthful Habrotonon in *Men at Arbitration*.³¹ It would even be reductionist to see the roots of this innovation exclusively in earlier stock-character comedy. Much rather it is a feature inherited from mime, a genre whose early interest in an adequate representation of natural language use gleams through the scanty fragments of the Syracusan writer Sophron. By way of illustration one may contrast the individualized language of Menander's cook Sicon in our initial sample with the bombastic and riddling stock-character language of a Middle Comedy cook (A) conversing with

²⁸ See Gigante (1969); Gil and Rodríguez Alfageme (1972); Rossi (1977).

²⁹ Dover (1976), after Plut. *Mor.* 853c–d; cf. Silk (1990) and (2000a) 207–55; Del Corno (1997); Beta (2004) 259–77.

³⁰ Broadly speaking, the differential treatment of women's speech also falls under this heading: see Bain (1984) on Menander and Sommerstein (1995/2009), Willi (2003a) 157–97 and Duhoux (2004) on Aristophanes.

³¹ See Zini (1938); Sandbach (1970); Webster (1974) 99–110; Del Corno (1975) 19–33; Katsouris (1975); Arnott (1995); Krieter-Spiro (1997) 234–50.

an exasperated employer (B) in Antiphanes' *The Parasite* (fr. 180; cf. e.g., Antiphanes fr. 55, Strato fr. 1):³²

(A) [. . .] ἄλλος ἐπὶ τούτῳ μέγας
 ἦξει τις ἰσοτράπεζος εὐγενής (B) τίνα
 λέγεις; (A) Καρύστου θρέμμα, γηγενής, ζέων
 (B) εἶτ' οὐκ ἂν εἴποις; ὕπαγε. (A) κάκκαβον λέγω·
 σύ δ' ἴσως ἂν εἴποις λοπάδ'. (B) ἔμοι δὲ τοῦνομα
 οἶει διαφέρειν, εἶτε κάκκαβόν τινες
 χαίρουσιν ὀνομάζοντες εἶτε σίττυβον;
 πλήν ὅτι λέγεις ἀγγεῖον οἶδα

A And another one will come after this, large, table-equalling, well-born–

B What are you talking about?

A A nursling of Carystus, earth-born, sizzling–

B Won't you say it? Get away!

A A casserole, I mean, but you might perhaps call it a dish.

B Do you think I care what its name is, if some call it a 'casserole' or a 'throw-a-roler'? All I know is you're talking about a vessel.

However pompous actual fourth-century cooks may have been, that they commonly used the literary words Antiphanes' character selects is out of the question. Moreover, although some experimenting with high-flown gastronomic poetry did take place at the time (Philoxenus, Archestratus; cf. Pl. Com. fr. 189), there is no intrinsic connection between the role of the cook and his linguistic register. So even if in one sense language is indeed more strictly conditioned by character in a case like this than it would (usually) have been in Old Comedy, in another sense its far-from-naturalistic use nevertheless remains closer to Aristophanic than to Menandrian practice. Admittedly, some of the earlier brilliance may have disappeared, the metaphors have become less colourful, the puns (even) flatter (as in the untranslatable κάκκαβος/σίττυβος example), the verbal inventiveness tame: comic names retreat and witty word coinages make room for a revival of the lexical catalogues known from some of the less charming Epicharmian fragments (e.g., fr. 40–61).³³ But comic language has not yet been placed in the naturalist painter's picture frame where Menander has it. It is still a toy to be played with at will by the poet, ultimately free from any but the most general constraints of its mimetic mode. The fundamental change

³² See Nesselrath (1990) 257–62, 297–309; Wilkins (2000) 369–414; Dobrov (2002).

³³ But verbal accumulation also exists in Aristophanes: see Spyropoulos (1974); Silk (2000a) 132–6. On the loss of metaphorical colouring in New Comedy see Chiarini (1983); on the non-comic character of New Comedy names Brown (1987); and on comic word formation in Old Comedy e.g., Uckermann (1879); Peppler (1910), (1916), (1918), (1921); da Costa Ramalho (1952); and Handley (1953).

in taste to which Menander's comedy testifies must have come later, promoted if not triggered by the loss of Athenian independence. Thematically comedy had long abandoned politics by then. But by becoming an image of real life, its language was only now taking leave from the stereotypes inherent in group representation. The civic community which had roaringly laughed the linguistic Other off the stage no longer existed. Instead, each spectator smilingly waited to hear his or her own voice rise from the comic stage.

Further reading

Since publications on the language(s) of comedy usually deal with specific formal or functional aspects, rather than the field in its entirety, pertinent references are best accessed through the footnotes to each section. A variety of approaches is represented in collective volumes such as De Martino and Sommerstein (1995); Thiery and Menu (1997); Ercolani (2002); and Willi (2002a). Important recent monographs include Henderson (1991a); López Eire (1996); Colvin (1999); Kloss (2001); Willi (2003a); Beta (2004); and Robson (2006), all of which focus on Aristophanes as a particularly diverse object of study.

