

Modality and Injunctive in Homeric Greek: the case of counterfactual and epistemic constructions

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Homeric unaugmented aorists and imperfects are the oldest verbal forms attested in Greek, which continue the so-called Indo-European ‘injunctives’. The latter were inflectionally underspecified as regards verbal categories such as tense or mood (Hoffmann 1967; Kiparsky 1968). Thus, the question arises as to how the attitude of the speaker towards the content of his utterance was expressed. The aim of this paper is to investigate the role of epistemic particles co-occurring with injunctives in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, focusing in particular on past counterfactual constructions. Crosslinguistic studies have shown that such modal constructions reflect the universal semantic distinction between *realis* and *irrealis* (Wierzbicka 1997: 38). Specifically, the data show epistemic particles like ἄρα, δή, που, etc. (cf. Denniston 1954) occurring in the *if*-clause or protasis, which is usually made of εἰ μὴ + injunctive or past indicative and refers to an actual event in the past for which the outcome is already known. Differently, the main clause or apodosis is always (lexically) marked by the *irrealis* particle κέν + injunctive or past indicative, as also expected in a typological perspective (Elliott 2000), and refers to a potential event in the past, which in fact never happened (see also Hettrich 1998). The analysis of all the occurrences of such complex constructions shows a not random distribution of those epistemic particles, whose frequency significantly decreases when the protasis has an indicative rather than an injunctive. It might be argued that the use of epistemic particles was initially the only (lexical) means to express the speaker’s commitment to the truth of a proposition, while the more recent indicative tensed forms rendered them redundant at a later stage, since the verb was already inflected according to modality. Another piece of evidence in favour of this hypothesis comes from the use of the epistemic verb μέλλω that develops into a periphrastic marker for future tense, especially as a future in the past (cf. Allan 2017). The Homeric poems show most instances of the unaugmented 3SG occurring with an epistemic particle, while there is variation with the augmented form. The remainder of the paper will discuss the development of the various readings of μέλλω in the epic language both in combination with and without epistemics.

References

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