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Style, Genre and Author

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Let us take two passages of Greek and for the moment defer their identification, observing only that they are both prose, both Attic and close in time. I will call them simply "Text I" and "Text II." Let us now compare them in respect of five formal parameters:

(A) Nouns ending in -ή, -ίᾱ, -ειᾰ, -οιᾰ, -σις or -τις, -της (stem -τητ-) and -σμός. This category is largely coincident with the semantic category "abstract noun," though it omits some nouns which are certainly "abstract" (e.g. τύχη, φθόνος) and includes one or two which are not (e.g. φυλή).

(B) Other nouns, excluding names of persons, nations and places.

(C) Noun-phrases consisting of the definite article with an adjective, participle, infinitive, adverb (e.g. τὰ ἐκεῖ), phrase (e.g. οἱ ἐκ τοῦ στρατοπέδου) or genitive (e.g. τὰ τῆς πόλεως).

(D) Adjectives, participles used adjectivally and regular adverbs in -ως / -ῶς, together with neuter adjectives used adverbially.

(E) Finite verbs, participles (except as in [C] and [D]) and infinitives without the article.

The following, however, are excluded throughout: names of persons, nations and places; numerals, cardinal and ordinal, and πρότερον and ὕστερον; πᾶς and ἅπας; πολύς and ὀλίγοι, with their comparative and superlative; words which function sometimes as adjectives and sometimes as pronouns (e.g. ἄλλος); finite tenses of εἶναι.

In respect of categories (A)–(E), Text I and Text II differ as shown in the following "contingency table":

	A	B	C	D	E	Total
I	52	53	60	52	81	298
II	19	118	13	23	133	305

Table 1

(The figures represent not the number of lexemes but the number of "tokens," i.e. instances or occurrences, and in each text there are several lexemes which occur more than once.)

It is obvious that the two texts are extraordinarily different stylistically, whatever their subject-matter, and that they are bound to make profoundly different impressions on any hearer or reader. Since the literary historian is rather apt to treat differences as significant without specifying, as a statistician would require, a level of significance, it is desirable to calculate, for any contingency table such as the above, the probability that Text I and Text II could be two random samples taken from the same population. The procedure for calculation of the value χ^2 has been described in several recent works for the non-statistician.[1] For the table above it is 89.854. For four "degrees of freedom" (i.e. 2 – 1 rows × 5 – 1 columns) $\chi^2 = 18.467$ would have meant a probability of one in a thousand, and $\chi^2 = 89.854$ means—if rhetoric may intrude on the mathematical domain—what I am tempted to call an "inconceivably" low probability.

If we identify a style with an author and consequently speak of "Thucydides' style" or "Plato's style," it is disconcerting to discover that Text I is Thucydides 3. 82–83, the famous generalising description of the effects of stasis on political morality, and Text II is the military narrative (85–91) which follows (84 is a spurious chapter). It is not, however, surprising to find a certain degree of dependence of style upon content—generalisation naturally tends to raise the total of phenomena in categories (A) and (C)—which requires us to recognise that a passage in which an author generalises may not belong to the same "population" as one in which that same author particularises. It is clear that classification of style by author is subordinate to classification by genre.

It could still be the case that in 3. 82–83 Thucydides has realised the stylistic potential of generalisation to a far greater degree than other authors, thereby creating a distinctive "Thucydidean generalising style." To test this we can compare Thuc. 3. 82–83 with a passage of Isocrates (7. 20–33) which generalises about the morality of an earlier age. Using precisely the same parameters as in the previous table, we get:

	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Thuc.	52	53	60	52	81	298
Isocr.	49	53	53	54	97	302

Table 2

Here $\chi^2 = 1.648$, which means the exceedingly high probability of (approximately) 4/5 that both texts are samples from the same population—

[1] E.g. A. Kenny, *The Computation of Style* (Oxford and New York 1982) 110–19 and D. F. McCabe, *The Prose-Rhythm of Demosthenes* (New York 1981) 176–83. I have applied "Yates' correction" (Kenny 118 f.) in all my calculations.

false if we interpret "population" in terms of author, but entirely acceptable in terms of genre.

For the sake of completeness let us add a comparison of Thuc. 3. 85–91 with a particularising narrative of Xenophon (*HG* 3. 1. 1–14):

	A	B	C	D	E	Total
Thuc.	19	118	13	23	133	305
Xen.	7	99	12	30	165	313

Table 3

Here $\chi^2 = 7.507$, with a probability of approximately 1/10.

Now, I am very far indeed from suggesting that the parameters I have chosen to present in the contingency tables are those which matter most in stylistic comparison, let alone that they are the only ones that matter. They were selected because in reading Thuc. 3. 82–83 I was struck by the prominence of phenomena of categories (A) and (C). We cannot be struck by the abnormal unless we have formed a conception of the normal. A priori decision on the choice of parameters to be used for stylistic differentiation is impossible, and trial and error is pointlessly tedious when adequate acquaintance with the literature under examination offers a much more promising approach. Writers hope to impress us, to elicit our admiration, to arouse our interest, by the power and beauty of their work. It is therefore reasonable that we should begin stylistic comparison from those linguistic features of a text which impress or attract us—and, conversely, from those to which we react with dislike, puzzlement or boredom.

We have seen that the parameters used in Table 2 suggested that the generalising narrative style of Thucydides and that of Isocrates are indistinguishable. But we know very well that they are not, and that is demonstrable from a more refined treatment of category (C) and from a different set of parameters not considered hitherto. Take first six sub-categories of (C):

(C^1) Article with masculine singular adjective or participle.
(C^2) Article with neuter singular adjective or participle.
(C^3) Article with masculine plural adjective or participle.
(C^4) Article with neuter plural adjective or participle.
(C^5) Article with infinitive.
(C^6) Article with adverb, phrase or genitive.

	C^1	C^2	C^3	C^4	C^5	C^6	Total
Thuc.	8	23	10	7	9	3	60
Isocr.	0	1	26	16	6	4	53

Table 4

$\chi^2 = 33.483$, probability very much less than 1/1,000.

The second set of parameters is likely to strike any reader of the Isocrates passage:

(F^1) Contrast between a negative and a following ἀλλά . . .
(F^2) Contrast between a negative and a following . . . δέ . . .
(F^3) Negative with ὅπως . . . and a following ἀλλά . . . , "so far from . . . that actually . . ."
(F^4) Negative with μόνον and a following ἀλλὰ καί . . . , "not only . . . but also . . ."
(F^5) Demonstrative (especially, but not exclusively, τοσοῦτος) followed by ὥστε . . .

I have entered in the table not the number of instances of these constructions, but the total number of mobile[2] tokens comprised in the instances of each category. This requires also a statement of the number not so comprised, (F^6).

	F^1	F^2	F^3	F^4	F^5	F^6	Total
Thuc.	0	9	0	0	0	348	357
Isocr.	167	0	11	13	30	206	427

Table 5

(The Isocrates passage actually contains 13 examples of F^1, 2 of F^3, 1 of F^4 and 2 of F^5.) We may spare ourselves the trouble of calculating χ^2 here.

This table reveals another very striking difference between the generalising narrative styles of the two authors, and it is worth looking to see if the same differences appear in their treatment of a different genre. A comparison which suggests itself is one between Pericles' argumentative and defensive speech in Thuc. 2. 60–64, heavily charged with generalisation, and Isocrates 8. 28–40, political argument resting largely on generalisation and (like Pericles' speech) critical of its audience. For parameters (C^1)–(C^6) the figures are:

	C^1	C^2	C^3	C^4	C^5	C^6	Total
Thuc.	10	21	2	5	4	4	46
Isocr.	0	5	20	8	7	1	41

Table 6

[2] I use "mobile" as the antonym of "appositive," denoting a lexeme which may appear both immediately before and immediately after pause, and "mobile token" to mean "token of mobile lexeme."

$\chi^2 = 31.135$, very close to Table 4 ($\chi^2 = 33.483$). And for parameters (F^1)–(F^6):

	F^1	F^2	F^3	F^4	F^5	F^6	Total
Thuc.	3	17	0	0	0	541	561
Isocr.	9	6	0	0	62	319	396

Table 7

These figures are much less spectacular than those of Table 5, but it should be observed that where either author's figure is positive the balance between the two takes the same direction.

This fact points to a possibility that may prove of the highest importance for the description of style: the possibility that a feature which strikes us as conspicuous in a specimen text is an extreme example of a tendency which may well prove to be on balance characteristic of the author's handling of the same genre in other specimens randomly selected. Conspicuous features are sometimes mannerisms or tags, which are a gift to the imitator and parodist but do not necessarily exemplify general tendencies; we have to find out, in each case, how far they do or do not. The existence of mannerisms in a text is itself a stylistic "epiphenomenon" which can be investigated (and quantified) irrespective of the phenomena whose recurrence constitutes mannerism.

My insistence on treating the aesthetic reactions of readers intimately acquainted with the language as the starting-point of stylistics—an insistence welcome, I hope, to the dedicated professional scholar in whose honour this volume is published—is in no way a devaluation of the "microstylistics" concerned with the statistical evaluation of linguistic habits of which the writers themselves are presumed (rightly, as a rule) to be unconscious. The two domains are independent of each other, just as the history of sculpture investigated from the standpoint of visual and tactile form is independent of the physical analyses which determine the composition and provenance of a sculptor's material.

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