Community-specific grammar? The case of Aelius Aristides

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Language was an obsession of Greek intellectuals of the High Imperial period. Debates about the classical pedigree of a given lexeme or form were widespread, as was ridicule of overly pedantic attitudes towards linguistic matters.[1] Importantly, however, these debates reflected the Greeks' concerns about their own status and, particularly, about their status as a community with a present firmly anchored in the past.[2] They had—at least for some—a direct bearing on issues of group identity, whose boundaries were always prone to be contested and renegotiated.

These concerns came to the fore especially in the context of sophistic performance. Common to Imperial-era rhetoricians, in one way or another, was a twofold distinction: first, between the uneducated and the educated and second, within this latter group, between a generally educated audience on the one hand and 'cultural experts' on the other who were also potential rivals for the practicing sophist.[3] Thus, group identity and its boundaries lay at the very core of sophistic activity. The central claim of this paper is that these concerns found a reflection in the actual grammar of the Greek sophists used, with special attention to Aelius Aristides, who is in many ways the central figure for Imperial-era Greek rhetoric and was considered such already in Antiquity.[4]

The paper focuses on Aristides' use of the optative. While the 'revived' optative in postclassical Greek has been often viewed as a hallmark of linguistic Atticism, its morphosyntactic behavior in Atticist Greek displays important differences compared to classical Greek prose.[5] Comparing a selection of Aristides' speeches with a baseline corpus of classical prose (Demosthenes, Isocrates, Lysias, Plato, Thucydides, Xenophon), the paper first presents statistical data pointing at rather significant differences in the use of main clause optatives between the two corpora. It then identifies several lexically highly specified optative constructions which Aristides makes systematic use of. On the one hand, these often have a traceable Attic genealogy, on the other, they are precisely what accounts for a rather large share of divergences berween Aristides and classical prose. It is then argued that these constructions were Atticistic *shibboleths*[6] in that they possessed a particularly salient link with particular classical authors and, through them, with particular subregisters of higher-level Greek as part of their social meaning—even if their morphosyntax differed in significant respects from the classical prototype. Importantly, these shibboleths were a means to negotiate group identity as they were likely recognized primarily by insider 'experts.' Thus, Aristides' Greek emerges as a telling example of comunity-specific speech[7]—that is, of language in which the insider/outsider boundary is mapped out as part of its very pragmatic structure, and in this case pragmatic significance exerts an influence on morphosyntax. Finally, other features of Aristides' style are addressed which can be accounted for within this framework.

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[1] Whitmarsh (2005, 41-49)
[2] Eshleman (2012)
[3] Korenjak (2000, 52-65)
[4] Cf. recently Miletti (2018).
[5] Anlauf (1960), Dundua (2024)
[6] Silverstein (2017)
[7] Herbert & Kukla (2016)

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