Protagoras' dialectology: performative identity in Greek ethnicity

Was dialect an important or useful part of identity formation in Archaic and Classical Greece? Jonathan Hall made a pointed argument against understanding the major Greek ethnic groups (Dorian, Ionian, Aiolian, etc) as linguistic groups despite the standard use of these ethnic categories in modern studies of dialect genetics (1995, see also 1997, 2002). Although Hall has since moderated his emphasis on kinship criteria to the exclusion of other criteria and indicia (2015, with Vlassopoulos 2015), it is still reasonably argued that scientific dialectology and cladistic models, in particular, cannot be properly applied to the development of the major ethnic groups in the Bronze Age–Iron Age transition (García Ramón 2017). Recent work has made some tentative steps towards exploring dialectal variation and linguistic choice in periods with more copious evidence, although restricting observations to cultural rather than ethnic identity (e.g. Hallmannsecker 2022, esp. ch. 5). It would be good to think more carefully about how this operates and to address the instability of linguistic identity which Hall considered so problematic.

This paper will reconsider well known examples of dialect switching in Thucydides and Xenophon by adopting and adapting Judith Butler's concept of 'performativity' to dialect. 'Performativity' suggests that identity is constituted by repeated acts (here, utterances). I will argue that the vocabulary shared between linguistics and other forms of expression will allow us to see that early grammatical discourse in Greek were highly aware of the performative potential of their dialect. The paper will then focus on what Plato's *Protagoras* has to say about dialect performance, when Socrates and interlocutors analyse the language of Simonides' poetry by employing a form of basic sociolinguistics. It is hoped that, through an increased appreciation of such ancient perceptual dialectology, we can reintegrate the use of linguistic expression in the study of ethnicity, without relying too heavily on presuppositions about the existence of the identity.

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