

A LINGUISTIC COMMENTARY ON
LYSIAS, *ON THE MURDER OF ERATOSTHENES*, 1.1-1.2

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A Linguistic Commentary on Lysias, *On the murder of Eratosthenes*, 1.1-1.2

Primary source: Λυσίας 1, Ὑπὲρ τοῦ Ἐρατοσθένους φόνου ἀπολογία¹

[1] περὶ πολλοῦ ἂν ποιησαίμην, ὦ ἄνδρες, τὸ τοιούτους ὑμᾶς ἐμοὶ δικαστὰς περὶ τούτου τοῦ πράγματος γενέσθαι, οἷοίπερ ἂν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς εἴητε τοιαῦτα πεπονθότες· εὖ γὰρ οἶδ' ὅτι, εἰ τὴν αὐτὴν γνώμην περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἔχοιτε, ἤνπερ περὶ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν, οὐκ ἂν εἴη ὅστις οὐκ ἐπὶ τοῖς γεγενημένοις ἀγανακτοίη, ἀλλὰ πάντες ἂν περὶ τῶν τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐπιτηδευόντων τὰς ζημίας μικρὰς ἡγοῖσθε.

[2] καὶ ταῦτα οὐκ ἂν εἴη μόνον παρ' ὑμῖν οὕτως ἐγνωσμένα, ἀλλ' ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ Ἑλλάδι· περὶ τούτου γὰρ μόνου τοῦ ἀδικήματος καὶ ἐν δημοκρατίᾳ καὶ ὀλιγαρχίᾳ ἡ αὐτὴ τιμωρία τοῖς ἀσθενεστάτοις πρὸς τοὺς τὰ μέγιστα δυναμένους ἀποδέδοται, ὥστε τὸν χεῖριστον τῶν αὐτῶν τυγχάνειν τῷ βελτίστῳ· οὕτως, ὦ ἄνδρες, ταύτην τὴν ὕβριν ἅπαντες ἄνθρωποι δεινοτάτην ἡγοῦνται.

TRANSLATION²

Lysias 1, *On the murder of Eratosthenes*

[1] I should greatly appreciate, gentlemen, your behaving towards me in judging this case as you would behave towards yourselves if you had suffered the same things. For I am confident, if you hold the same opinion about other people, which you actually hold about yourselves, there would not be a single one of you who would fail to be indignant at what has happened; rather you would all regard as trivial the penalties for those who engage in things like these.

[2] Indeed, these opinions would be the considered view not only among yourselves, but throughout Greece: for this is the only crime for which, in both democracy and oligarchy, the same redress is delivered to the weakest as to those who are most powerful so that the humblest is granted the same rights as the greatest. Clearly therefore, gentlemen, the entire mankind believes this is the most terrible outrage.

¹ Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University (n.d.) *Lysias, On the murder of Eratosthenes*, 1.1-2

² Based on Gagarin, 2011, p.78; Todd, 1989, p.63

A Linguistic Commentary

In sections 1.1–1.2 of the *προοίμιον* (prooemion) of his speech, *On the murder of Eratosthenes*, Lysias adopts a periodic style (*κατεστραμμένη λέξις*) in which the arguments are organised into long sentences and the syntax is integrated with rhetoric to create vividness and a natural flow of the speech.³ Embracing the stance of a plaintiff, Euphiletos opens with sentiments which invite the jurors to identify with him as fellow sufferers, and characterises the offence as a *ὕβρις* (outrage) that calls for just requital.

Lysias' persuasive Attic style⁴ is demonstrated in the first sentence, *περὶ πολλοῦ...πεπονθότες*. The common idiomatic expression *περὶ πολλοῦ ποιεῖσθαι*, emphasised by the pi alliteration expresses the speaker's wish that the jury act favourably whereas the simple preposition *περὶ* throughout the two sections of the speech conveys modesty. The first optative of potentiality (out of the seven in total in the both sections), *ποιησαίμην*, in aorist, accompanied by the particle *ἄν* to increase the remoteness of the possibility conveys Euphiletos' polite hypothetical reasoning rather than certainty.⁵ He directly addresses the audience with the vocative *ὦ ἄνδρες*, a standard forensic convention in Athenian courts.⁶ The articular infinitive *τὸ ... γενέσθαι* is functioning as the object of *ποιησαίμην* and with *ὕμᾱς* as its subject and *δικαστάς* its predicate complement, it expresses a stronger degree of potentiality than a remote future conditional clause (*εἰ γένοισθε*=if you were to).⁷ The dative of interest *ἐμοί* indicates the speaker's personal interest without asserting dominance over the jurors.⁸

With the relative clause *οἷόιπερ...πεπονθότες*, Lysias introduces a moral analogy. The verb *εἶητε* (second person plural, present, optative, active of *εἶμι*) continues the potential optative mood framing the speaker's reasoning as a hypothetical dialogue with the jury rather than a dogmatic assertion. The subject of *εἶητε*, the relative pronoun *οἷόι-*, is emphasised by the use of the enclitic particle *-περ* meaning “exactly”, “precisely”.⁹ Lysias also uses the perfect participle of *πάσχω*, *πεπονθότες*, which along with the pi alliteration, denotes a complete action

³ Carey (1989), p.8

⁴ Dover (1968), pp.115-40

⁵ Edwards (1999), p.64

⁶ Campbell (1997), p.12

⁷ Carey (1989), p.64

⁸ Smyth (1956), p.341

⁹ Campbell (1997), p.14

calling upon the jurors' empathy.¹⁰ The repetition and chiasmic structure, *τοιούτους ... οἷοίπερ ... τοιαῦτα*, reinforces the rhythm and the semantic focus of the argument.

The following sentence is governed by *εὖ γὰρ οἶδ'* with which Lysias is moving from hypothetical appeal to reasoning. The main verb *οἶδα* ("I am confident") introduces an indirect statement, *ὅτι...ἀγανακτοίη*, with three dependent clauses embedded to keep the audience in suspense: a future remote condition (*εἰ...ἔχοιτε, οὐκ ἂν εἴη...*), one relative clause (*ἣνπερ περὶ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν*) of which the antecedent is *γνώμην*, the verb (*ἔχετε* or *ἂν ἔχοιτε*) is implied and the reflexive pronoun *ὑμῶν αὐτῶν* ("concerning yourselves") contrasts *τῶν ἄλλων* ("about other people"), and finally one more relative clause (*ὅστις...ἀγανακτοίη*). Here the repeated optatives, *ἔχοιτε, (ἂν) εἴη, ἀγανακτοίη*, maintain the polite and deliberative tone. The structure *οὐκ ἂν εἴη ὅστις οὐκ...ἀλλὰ πάντες ἂν...* forms an antithesis and an isokolon, characteristic of Lysias' rhythmically balanced style.¹¹ In the last sentence of section 1, *ἀλλὰ πάντες...μικρὰς ἡγοῖσθε*, the potential mood (*ἂν ἡγοῖσθε*) is combined with a moral evaluation: the audience would all regard punishments for such wrongdoers as too trivial. The structure is clear and rhetorical, balancing *πάντες* (universality) with the moral weight of *μικρὰς ζημίας* ("inadequate penalties").

Section 2 opens with a typical negative–positive contrast: *καὶ ταῦτα...ἀλλ' ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ Ἑλλάδι*. The construction *οὐκ ... ἀλλ'* ("not ... but") is one of Lysias' favourite ways to give his argument rhythm and structure as it produces a balanced and persuasive rhythm where ideas are set side by side in neat opposition.¹² The present optative *εἴη* with the modal particle *ἂν* attached, makes the statement sound polite and probable rather than forceful or arrogant, a key part of Lysias' style as he avoids exaggeration and prefers what seems reasonable or likely.¹³ The passive perfect participle *ἐγνωσμένα* with *ταῦτα* as its subject indicates the completed action, namely, the accepted view. In the prepositional phrase *ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ Ἑλλάδι* the line of argument is supported by a figure of authority rather than some reasoning or evidence, the Aristotelean topos (locus ab auctoritate).¹⁴ The phrase *παρ' ὑμῖν ... ἐν ἀπάσῃ τῇ Ἑλλάδι* moves from the particular (you, the jurors) to the universal (all Greece). This widening of scope is not only logical but also persuasive, suggesting that the values of the Athenian court are shared everywhere.¹⁵

¹⁰ Edwards (1999), p.64

¹¹ Carey (1989), p.7

¹² Carey (1989), pp.64-5

¹³ Carey (1989), p.20

¹⁴ Rapp (2023), para.7.4

¹⁵ Campbell (1997), p.12

The same idea is continued through balanced phrasing in *περὶ τούτου γὰρ...ἀποδέδοται*. The pronoun with the definite article *ἡ αὐτὴ* intensifies the subject of the main clause, *τιμωρία*. The double *καὶ ... καὶ* (“both ... and ...”) gives the sentence clear symmetry, and the contrast between *δημοκρατία* and *ὀλιγαρχία* stresses that this type of offence is punished in every political system. This once again emphasises the moral force of the argument rather than its legal precision¹⁶ and by this, Lysias employs this sense of balance to make his reasoning appear both fair and inevitable.

The next expression, *τοῖς ἀσθενεστάτοις πρὸς τοὺς τὰ μέγιστα δυναμένους*, sets the two adjectives in direct opposition. The superlative forms from *ἀσθενής* and *μέγας* (the second, *τὰ μέγιστα*, being in adverbial accusative), contrast “the weakest” with “those who have the greatest power”. This is a good example of Lysias’ social antithesis in which opposites such as strong and weak or rich and poor are used to evoke sympathy and moral judgement. The result clause *ὥστε τὸν χείριστον...τῷ βελτίστῳ*, governed by *ἡ αὐτὴ*, has its verb in infinitive form (*τυγχάνειν*), to convey general or expected result and the object of the infinitive (in plural genitive), *τῶν αὐτῶν*, to underscore fairness. The pattern of opposition is still kept here with the adjectives *τὸν χείριστον* (in accusative as it is the subject of the infinitive and superlative of *κακός*, here meaning “the humblest”) and *τῷ βελτίστῳ* (a dative of disadvantage,¹⁷ after *τῶν αὐτῶν*, superlative of *ἀγαθός*, here meaning “the highest”). The adjectives mirror each other neatly giving the sentence a satisfying rhythm and moral concepts are conveyed through syntactic symmetry.¹⁸

Finally, the sentence *οὕτως, ὃ ἄνδρες...δεινοτάτην ἡγοῦνται* brings the argument to a strong conclusion. The verb *ἡγοῦνται*, third-person plural present indicative active of *ἡγέομαι*, expresses a general, timeless truth. The adverb of manner *οὕτως* (“thus”, “in this way”) links the reasoning to the final claim, while *ἅπαντες* (more emphatic than *πάντες*) broadens it again to all the humanity. The predicate accusative *δεινοτάτην* agreeing with *ταύτην τὴν ὕβριν*, is in superlative form (of the adjective *δεινός*) to give emotional force, showing that this offence, *ὕβρις*, (“outrageousness”, “insolence”) is considered the worst by everyone. Lysias’ diction is simple but the structure gives his words weight and moral clarity.¹⁹

Throughout this short passage, Lysias achieves elegance without complexity. His clear

¹⁶ Edwards (1999), p.66

¹⁷ Smyth (1956), p.342

¹⁸ Campbell (1997), p.14

¹⁹ Carey (1989), p.23

syntax, balanced clauses and careful rhythm create a persuasive tone that fits his character as a speaker of reason and fairness.²⁰ This combination of plainness and precision is what makes Lysias' style so admired in Attic oratory.

²⁰ Carey (1989), pp.7-8

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