

Reports in Ancient Greek

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Imagine I utter (1) and you want to report my utterance:

(1) Well, I am tired.

In this scenario, you can use (2) or (3):

(2) Corien said: “Well, I am tired.”

(3) Corien said that she was tired.

English clearly distinguishes between direct reports (2), in which the original utterance is exactly retained, and indirect reports (3), in which person and tense features are obligatorily adapted to the new context: *I* becomes *she* and present tense *am* becomes past tense *was*. Moreover, particles like *well* are retained in direct reports, but often lost in indirect reports.

Such a clear distinction is not found in every language. In Russian, for instance, indirect reports retain the tense of the original utterance (Comrie 1986), which makes them more similar to direct reports than is the case in English. I claim that Ancient Greek blurs the distinction even further. In this language not only tense is retained, but optionally also person. And the language provides even more options: After a reportative verb in the past, the optative may be used in the report complement. Moreover, instead of a report construction introduced by ὅτι/ὥς, we also find infinitive and participle constructions (although the latter more often with reports of perceptions and beliefs than with speech reports). Thus, Ancient Greek lacks a clear dichotomy between direct and indirect reports. Instead we find a gradient scale ranging from minimal to maximal integration of the reported utterance into its new context (Wakker 1994).

The difference between direct and indirect reports and the related language-philosophical distinction between mention and use has long been considered fundamental to language (e.g. Quine 1940). I will discuss the way in which Ancient Greek challenges this traditional distinction and falsifies current semantic theories of reports like Kaplan (1989), von Stechow (2002), and Schlenker (2003). One of the problems for these theories lies in the existence of indirect discourses stretching over more than one sentence (as we find, for example, at the beginning of Herodotus, book one).

Special attention will be paid to the use of particles in report constructions. Particles often concern the speaker’s attitude towards his utterance. This is particularly interesting in the context of reports, since reports are unique in containing two attitudes towards the utterance, that of the reported person and that of the reporter (Wakker 1997).

References

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