

Free Indirect Discourse in Ancient Greek?

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In the narratological literature on speech and thought representation we repeatedly find the claim that the so-called Free Indirect Discourse technique was already present in Ancient Greek (e.g. McHale 2011, Fludernik 1993). The same statement can be found in work by classical scholars (e.g. Bakker 1997, Wakker 1997). In this talk I will dispute the truth of this claim.

Free Indirect Discourse (FID) is the narratological technique in which the thought or utterance expressed by a sentence is attributed to a character rather than the narrator but where this thought/utterance is not embedded under an attitude verb or a verb of saying (as is the case in direct or indirect discourse). This technique has drawn considerable attention in both linguistics and narratology. A canonical example is (1):

- (1) Tomorrow was Monday, Monday, the beginning of another school week
(Lawrence, *Women in Love*, p. 185)

In narratological terms, two perspectives are simultaneously present: that of the protagonist, who thinks ‘Tomorrow is Monday, Monday, the beginning of another school week’ and that of the narrator from whom the past tense of *was* seems to originate. Linguistic research has mainly focused on the remarkable behaviour of indexical or deictic expressions in FID: *tomorrow* and the past tense of *was* would be incompatible if they were interpreted with respect to one and the same context. This has made linguists to distinguish between two contexts of thought/utterance: that of the protagonist and that of the narrator (see e.g. Banfield 1973, Schlenker 2004, Sharvit 2008).

FID is a rather fixed technique in that the indexical pattern is always the same: tense and person features are interpreted with respect to the context of the narrator whereas all other indexicals are evaluated from the context of the protagonist. Moreover, not only indexical expressions (apart from tense and person features) but also the rest of the wording is always interpreted as a literal report of the protagonist’s original thought or utterance. In this respect it behaves like direct rather than indirect discourse.

Despite the fact that several scholars have claimed that FID is already present in Ancient Greek I believe that it is not. I’ll trace back the sources of confusion and discuss alleged examples of this technique, such as Th. 8.1.1, put forward as an example of FID by Bakker (1997):

- (2) Ἔς δὲ τὰς Ἀθήνας ἐπειδὴ ἠγγέλθη, ἐπὶ πολὺ μὲν ἠπίστουν καὶ τοῖς πάνυ τῶν στρατιωτῶν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἔργου διαπεφυγῶσι καὶ σαφῶς ἀγγέλλουσι, μὴ οὕτω γε ἄγαν πανσυδὶ διεφθάρθαι· ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἔγνωσαν, χαλεποὶ μὲν ἦσαν τοῖς ζυμπροθυμηθεῖσι τῶν ῥητόρων τὸν ἔκπλουν, ὥσπερ οὐκ αὐτοὶ ψηφισάμενοι, ὠργίζοντο δὲ καὶ τοῖς χρησμολόγοις τε καὶ μάντεσι καὶ ὁπόσοι τι τότε αὐτοὺς θειάσαντες ἐπῆλπισαν ὡς λήψονται Σικελίαν.

‘When the news reached Athens, for a long time people would not believe it, even though they were given precise information from the very soldiers who had been present at the very event and had escaped; still they thought that this total destruction was something that could not possibly be true. And when they did recognize the facts, they turned against the public speakers who had been in favour of the expedition, as though they themselves had not voted for it, and also became angry with the prophets and soothsayers, and all who at the time had, by various methods of divination, encouraged them to believe that they would conquer Sicily.’

Not only is this passage not free (the thoughts are embedded under attitude verbs), but it is also not constructed as a faithful report of the Athenians’ thoughts at the time of the news (as witnessed by e.g. the phrase ὥσπερ οὐκ αὐτοὶ ψηφισάμενοι ‘as though they themselves had not voted for it’).

The absence of FID would not make perspective in Ancient Greek less interesting. To the contrary, if indeed this rather fixed technique does not exist, but we do find frequent shifts to the perspective of a character, as has been argued extensively by De Jong (e.g. 2001, 2004), the investigation of the linguistic mechanisms of these shifts becomes even more pressing in order to understand the means that languages offer to express perspective.

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