CHAPTER THREE

ORAL STRATEGIES IN THE LANGUAGE OF HERODOTUS

Simon R. Slings

It is a platitude to say that Herodotus stands on the watershed between the oral and literate phases of Greek culture. Many idiosyncrasies of his style suggest that he stands in a tradition of telling stories, and that the written language in his time was only in its infancy. The challenge is to turn this impressionistic triviality into scholarship. One branch of linguistics, called Discourse Analysis, may help us out here. Most linguistic studies are concerned with language as a system, the *langue* in Saussurean terms. But Discourse Analysis typically focuses on the concrete manifestations of the system, the *parole*. Discourse Analysis is first and foremost a part of the study of living languages, in which it analyses linguistic behaviour in certain communicative situations. But its results may also be applied, and have been applied with great success, to texts, literary or otherwise.

Now, it is of course a drawback that Ancient Greek is not a living language, even though few classical scholars seem aware of the extent of the limits which this sets on our knowledge. But even though the real spoken language of the Greeks is lost irretrievably, there is no need for a confession of total *aporía*. First, we do have an ample corpus of people portrayed in conversation: tragedy, comedy (old and new), philosophical dialogue. And secondly, even though each language is different from all others, there are some universals of oral speech which there is no good reason to doubt were true of Ancient Greek as well. So by dint of careful extrapolation from Discourse Analysis of oral use of modern languages and comparison with the corpus of quasi-spoken language preserved from Ancient Greek we may try to learn something more concrete on Herodotus’ place in the oral/written continuum.

There are several ways of doing this. One way would be to concentrate on what I have elsewhere called ‘downslip’. It is a characteristic of all spoken language, as we can observe daily ourselves,
that speakers tend to start sentences of a relatively complex structure; in the course of the sentence the structure proves too complex, so the speaker shifts to a more simple structure. Downslip creates all sorts of anacolutha: from part to whole, from paraphrasis to the entity that is paraphrased, from indirect to direct speech, from infinitive to finite verb, from subordinate clause to main clause, and from marked case (dative, genitive) to unmarked case (accusative, nominative). I have studied downslip in Homer and in Plato (Slings (1994) and (1997a), respectively). In the present study I will concentrate not on such involuntary phenomena but on strategies used on purpose in oral language to make information more accessible.

The primary difference between speech and text, oral and written language, is the organization of its units. In text, there is a central syntactic unit, the main clause: the writer is at liberty to add subsidiary information in various types of embedded clauses, which are organized around the central unit.\(^1\) By contrast, speech has as its basic unit the chunk, a unit which in spoken language is recognizable by its intonation pattern, and which is therefore often called intonation unit.\(^2\) These intonation units are information units at the same time: sometimes they give new information (Focus) about an already given entity or state of affairs (Topic): in these cases the information unit is a clause. In other cases information units consist of one constituent only; if so, they precede a clause and help to understand it (Theme) or follow it and give additional comment or information (Tail). For instance:\(^3\)

\[(1) \text{ As for } John_{\text{theme}}, \text{ he}_{\text{topic}} \text{ ran away}_{\text{focus}}, \text{ the poor chap}_{\text{tail}}.\]

It is perhaps the most typical property of the flow of information in speech that 'the density of information packing in spoken language is appropriate for the listener to process comfortably' (Brown and Yule (1983) 18). (1) is an illustration of how what might be a feasi-

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\(^1\) This is a simplification in that some subordinate clauses, for example restrictive relative clauses, cannot be said to provide subsidiary information; vice versa, not all main clauses contain foreground information, for example main clauses introduced by means of the particles ὅτι and, to a certain extent, μὲν. But as a rough outline of the entirely different principles of organization of speech and text, the above may suffice.


\(^3\) See Slings (1999) 61–2 for further analysis of this example.