CHAPTER FIVE

THE MOST CORRECT ACCOUNT: PROTAGORAS ON LANGUAGE

Adriaan Rademaker

1. INTRODUCTION: PROTAGORAS ON LANGUAGE

The limited number of testimonies concerning Protagoras’ views on language credit the sophist with at least rudimentary theories concerning word gender and congruence, concerning the relation between the moods of the verb and the various ‘basic types of speech’ or speech acts, and possibly also concerning the tenses of the verb (as discussed in section 2). In modern scholarship, it nowadays seems to be widely accepted that these views on language are not to be regarded as part of a systematic and independent body of early linguistic theory; rather, they seem to have been developed within the context of Protagoras’ criticism of the poetry of Homer and other poets (section 3). In the present article, it will be argued that Protagoras analysed Greek poems in order to see whether they met the criterion of ὑβοτής ὑνομίας, a notion of ‘correctness of utterance’ that encompasses both the use of single words and expressions (elsewhere termed ὑβοτής ὑνομίας) and the consistency of content of whole poems and other pieces of discourse (section 4).

At first sight, this concern for ὑβοτής ὑνομίας may seem to be something of a separate strand in Protagoras’ teaching, quite unrelated to the sophist’s alleged main goal of teaching εὐβουλία, the skills that prominent Greek
citizens in the *polis* need to meet the demands of the courts and councils. However, a case can be made (section 5) that these critical analyses of poetic texts are not merely sophisticated examples of linguistic hair-splitting, but that they provide serious training material for aspiring politicians and speakers in court. In public life, the ability to detect inconsistencies in the seemingly self-evident views of an opponent must have been an important asset, just as the ability to reframe seemingly obvious facts by means of a ‘correct reasoning’ that allows one to infer the most desirable consequences from them. In a world where man is the measure of everything, no political or juridical *logos* can be said to be objectively true; the only way to argue for the justice of one’s position is to show that a consistent account can be given in its defence, and to point out flaws in the position of one’s opponent. In such a culture of competing *logoi*, Protagoras’ criticism of the poets, his ability to detect flaws even in the very first verses of the *Iliad*, the most respected poem of all, is not merely a means to show off his cleverness. It also a means of training his students in the modes of thought and schemes of reasoning that enable them to detect flaws in the discourse of their opponents. In keeping with Protagoras’ own claims (Plato *Prot.* 318 D 7–319 A 2), his students do not study poetry for purely literary or linguistic ends; rather, they use it to train their linguistic competence with an eye to their later career in the public life of the Greek *polis*.

2. **Protagoras’ Views on Language: The Ancient Testimonies**

On the evidence of the ancient testimonies, Protagoras’ theories of language addressed at least two main issues. In the first place, there is a number of fragments on the topic of *word gender* and congruence between nouns and verbal forms. Secondly, there is a group of testimonies concerning Protagoras’ remarks on the *moods* of the verb, and the relation of these to the basic types of speech. Finally, a remark in Diogenes Laertius 9.52 is sometimes taken to mean that Protagoras also distinguished the *tenses* of the verb.

Let us first consider the testimony concerning word gender. In his *Rhetoric* Aristotle gives five rules for the proper use of the Greek language (1407 a 19–20 ἔστι δ’ ἀρχὴ τῆς λέξεως τὸ ἔλληνιζειν· τούτο δ’ ἐστίν ἐν πέντε, ‘the basis of style is the proper use of the Greek language, and that depends on five rules’). These five rules are (1) the proper use of connecting particles; (2) the use of specific rather than general terms; (3) the avoidance of ambiguities, and the proper use of (4) word gender and (5) number.