Educating the Public, Defending the Art:  
Language use and medical education in  
Hippocrates’ *The Art*  

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*Summary*

The Hippocratic treatise *The Art* is an epideictic speech in defence of medicine against certain unnamed detractors. The author of *The Art* is fully aware of the fact that for him, language (as opposed to, say, a live demonstration) is the medium of education. Accordingly, the author shows full command of the main issues of the late fifth century ‘sophistic’ debate on the nature and the correct and effective use of language. In his views on language, the author seems to adopt a quite positivistic stance. For him, words reflect our perception and interpretation of the visual appearances or *eide* of the things that are, and these appearances prove the existence of things in nature. To this extent, language reflects reality, provided that we language users have the expertise to form correct interpretations of what we observe. At the same time, language remains a secondary phenomenon: it is not a ‘growth’ of nature, but a set of conventional signs that have a basis in reality only if they are applied correctly. There is always the possibility of incorrect interpretation of our perceptions, which will lead to an incorrect use of language that does not reflect real phenomena. Words remain conventional expressions, and not all words can be expected to reflect the truth. In fact, the unnamed detractors of the art are victim to many such incorrect interpretations. Consistent with his view of language as secondary to visual phenomena, the author claims in his peroration that as a medium for the defence of medicine, the spoken word is generally considered less effective than live demonstrations. This modesty, while undoubtedly effective as a means to catch the sympathy of his public, still seems slightly overstated. Our author is fully aware of the powers and limitations of his medium, and shows great sophistication in its use.
Introduction

The Hippocratic treatise *The Art* is an epideictic speech in defence of medicine against certain unnamed detractors. The speech addresses widespread reservations about the art of medicine and aims to counter scepticism among the public in general, and to attract well-educated laymen to an education in the medical profession. As such, the speech is a sophisticated piece of work and has received a deservedly favourable reception in modern scholarship,¹ even if attributions to one or another of the central members of the sophistic movement fail to convince in the long run.²

The author of *The Art* uses the spoken word as a tool of instruction in order to demonstrate the existence and the power of medicine. Indeed, he endeavours to prove the existence of the arts in general, and medicine in particular, by means of arguments derived from contemporary ideas concerning the relations between reality (*ta onta*) and its visual manifestations (*eidea*), and between language and the reality to which language is supposed to refer.³ As such, the author shows full command of the debate on the nature and the correct and effective use of language commonly associated with the fifth century sophistic movement. That is not to say that he is by any means a theorist of language himself: he seems to be more concerned with effective language use than with theoretical speculation. As far as his theoretical views are concerned, he seems to adopt a relatively ‘positivist’ stance. He is unreservedly optimistic about the reliability of visual appearances. He certainly does not regard them as inherently erratic manifestations of an underlying stable reality, in the way an Eleatic philosopher might do,⁴ nor does he share the epistemologic doubts concerning the relation between sensual perception and reality commonly attributed to Protagoras.⁵ With regard to language he is

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² Gomperz (1890) 26-34 attributes the piece to Protagoras or one of his pupils; Dupréel (1948) 242-251 to Hippias, cf. Jori (1984-1985) 261-267; Ducatillon (1977) 76-83 to Herodicus of Selymbria.
⁵ Jori (1996) 333-357 even identifies Gorgias and Protagoras as the main ‘adversaries of the arts’ attacked in the present treatise. Jouanna (1988) 174 also names Protagoras but