A REMARK ON ‘PERIPHRACTIC’ CONSTRUCTIONS IN GREEK

BY

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In a recent article 1) Prof. H. B. Rosén of Jerusalem drew attention to the Greek constructions of the type λῶν...ἐστι, λῶν...ἡ, λῶν...ἐίναι beside λύει, ἔλυε, λύειν. Basing himself especially on a complete research of the relevant passages in Herodotus he arrived at the conclusion that these periphrastic constructions were, by this historian and other ancient Greek authors, used when the idea expressed by the verb is not, logically speaking, the predicate of the sentence, but the subject, and when at the same time the ‘logical’ predicate is not the agent of the verb, but a complement to the latter, the term complement being taken in a large sense including *inter alia*, object, an adjunct, etc.

Rosén’s argument, however interesting, could, in my opinion, be clarified if this conclusion were restated as follows 2). A sentence such as Hdt. IX 15, 4 (16) ἦν δὲ τὸ δεῖπνον ποιεόμενον ἐν Θῆβαισι does not exactly mean “the meal took place at Thebes”, but rather “it was at Thebes that the meal took place”, and similarly I 146, 3 ταῦτα δὲ ἦν γινόμενα ἐν Μίλησι: “it was at Milete that those things came to pass”. That is to say, in translating these sentences into English (or French and other languages) a “cleft sentence” (phrase coupée) must as a rule be preferred if the sense is to be rendered as exactly as possible. Even Kühner-Gerth 3) who whilst giving a mere enumeration of periphrastic structures did not notice this point, translated the former passages: “der Ort, wo das Mahl veranstaltet wurde, war Theben”. This means that it is the contents of the verb which is the *thema* of the sentence, not the subject proper from the logical point of view. The idea contained in the verb is the *thema* i.e. starting-point of the speaker’s or author’s argument or

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2) I limit my observations to the type of sentence discussed by Rosén.

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communication. The adjuncts (or objects etc., in general ‘the complements’) are the *propos*, that is, that which the speaker or author wants to bring forward with regard to the *thema*, ‘the predication’. In the first sentence the taking place of the meal is the *thema*, the fact that this event took place at Thebes is the *propos*. The context had made it clear that a dinner would be held. The new fact which is brought to the reader’s notice with, perhaps, some emphasis is that the place where it took place is Thebes. This frequent construction is often found in sentences expressing an ‘antithesis’: II 134, 2 κατὰ Ἁμασιν βασιλεύοντα ἡν ἀκμάζοντα Ἐδόπις, ἀλλ’ οὐ κατὰ τοῦτον, in contradistinction to the mere statement of a historical fact in III 57, 1 τὰ δὲ τῶν Σιφνίων πρήματα ἔκμαξε τοῦτον τίν  χρώνον. Not rarely μὲν ... δὲ ... are added to underline the contrast: II 99, 1; VII 3, 3; or the idea of opposition is expressed by antithetic pronouns (e.g. I 112, 3) or ἄλλος (e.g. II 48, 2).

In the same way, Soph. O.R. 968 ff. wrote ἔγω δ’ ὃδ’ ἐνθάδε / ἄφαυστος ἐγχύους - εἰ τι μὴ τόμωι τόθω / κατέφθυ’’. οὕτω δ’ ἄν θανών εἴη ’ζ ἐμοῦ, words rendered by Storr¹) as follows: “and here am I who ne’er unsheathed a sword; unless the longing for his absent son killed him and so I slew him in a sense”. It is the words ἔθε ἐμοῦ which are thrown into relief, also by the position of emphasis in which they appear. It is well known that in spite of the general principle by which emphatic words tend to an initial, or at least early, position they are, in certain cases, also placed at the end of a clause or sentence ²). Kühner-Gerth made the attempt to express this nuance by interpreting “dann wäre er freilich ein von mir getöteter” (“dann wäre ich sein Mörder”).

It is clear that the succinct treatment of these constructions by Schwyzer-Debrunner ³)—who say that they are “eine expressive Umschreibung des verbum finitum”—is not complete and exhaustive. Kühner and Gerth’s statement ⁴): “Soll der Verbalbegriff

²) For particulars see J. D. Denniston, Greek Prose Style (Oxford, 1952), 45 ff.
³) E. Schwyzer-A. Debrunner, Griechische Grammatik, I (München, 1939), 812, sub α 4; II (München, 1950), 407 f.
⁴) Kühner-Gerth, I.e.