Thucydides 1.22.1 is one of the most discussed passages of ancient literature. Scholarly work has produced close and sophisticated analyses of the syntax and vocabulary of the historian’s words and has offered illuminating comparisons and contrasts between the programmatic statement and the actual speeches which are found in the narrative. The aim of what follows here is not to respond to earlier work directly, but to approach 1.22.1 from a so far unexplored angle, that is to try to further our understanding of what Thucydides means by taking notice of the views he expresses on language and on the relation between language and reality in his study of the Corcyrean revolution in Book Three. It is hoped that this approach will inject new life into what sometimes seems a question with necessarily restricted answers. In suggesting the comparison between 1.22.1 and 3.82, especially 3.82.4, no claims are being made against the results of previous philological and narratological interpretative methods (though I shall have cause to disagree with some of them); rather, it is hoped to add something new to the debate, which has the merit of associating two authorial comments and relates 1.22.1 with Thucydides’ perception of the place of speech in the real world.

It is not difficult to show that Thucydides has a deep interest in the workings of human society. He is in fact constantly exploring how far people absorb and reproduce or deviate from shared symbols and values. This aspect of the History is sometimes missed through concentrating too hard on a political and military reading of the narrative; but it is important. One has only to consider Thucydides' portrayal of individualists and their relations with their cities, such as Themistocles and Pausanias in Book One or the great figures of Pericles, Cleon, Brasidas, Nicias, and Alcibiades. Again, to take an obvious example, there is the whole pattern of the Funeral Speech and its presentation of the ideal democratic city of Athens juxtaposed with the following chapters on how that society actually reacts to the pressures of the Plague. And, perhaps most importantly, there is the account of the revolution at Corcyra in Book Three, where the historian carefully analyzes why society divides against itself. Thucydides has often been held to be an 'immoralist'. This implies a total denial on his part of the norms and values sanctioned by the majority in a society and associates him with the views of Plato's Thrasymachus and Callicles and their like. If the History is read purely from a military or political point of view, it is not difficult to see how this verdict might arise, for Thucydides makes very few moral judgements about what happened during the War (the clearest exception being, of course, 7.30.4 on Mycalessus). The History is a work where the strong rule at the expense of the weak. In the speeches, indeed, the theme of power and its workings is so common that Thucydides has seemed to many scholars to be discussing it as an end in itself with little reference to how men actually live with each other. This view of the work is profoundly unsatisfactory. The way in which Thucydides in fact manipulates his narrative and the speeches embedded in it makes it clear that, far from thinking of power as an absolute, he is interested in power relationships, their organization, their asymmetries, their reciprocities, and their changes, both between societies like Athens and Sparta or Athens and Syracuse and also within societies like Athens or Corcyra. Nowhere is this clearer.

2) See de Ste. Croix (above, note 1), 18-25; Hornblower (above note 1), 189-190.