

Notes on a *Technē*: Psellus' Poem 6 W

ZOLTÁN FARKAS* 

Department of Medieval Studies, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, Hungary

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: October 12, 2022 • Accepted: October 19, 2022

Published online: February 14, 2023

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ABSTRACT

The second part of Psellus' poem on grammar is a glossary compiled from rare words (270–490), where the lines are ordered and linked according to the Greek alphabet. The first part (1–269) is not – as it might be expected of a didactic poem – a systematic descriptive Greek grammar, but rather a loose collection of teacher's comments lacking a definite logical structure. The didactic comments set in verse are organised to some extent by words (e.g. *ἐγκλισις*, *μεσότης*) that refer to several different grammatical phenomena functioning as cues and thus connecting the subsequent sections. At the time the novelty of this otherwise ordinary poem might have been that Greek grammar was set in political verse (*versus politicus*) in order to make it easy to memorise and the fact that it discusses Psellus' views on *koinē*.

KEYWORDS

Michael Psellus, *grammatica*, didactic poetry, *versus politicus*, dialect, *koinē*

Psellus' little known didactic poem on grammar was published by Westerink in 1992. His edition of *Pselli poemata*,¹ including a string of *didactica maiora*, did not meet with much response. Only a quarter of a century later did Raf Van Rooy publish a paper on the history of the ancient Greek and Byzantine usage of the Greek term 'dialect',² and another one, in which he

* Corresponding author. E-mail: farkas.zoltan@btk.ppke.hu

¹WESTERINK, L. G. (rec.): *Michael Psellus: Poemata*. [BSGRT]. Stuttgart–Leipzig 1992.

²ROOY, R. VAN: "What is a 'dialect'?" Some New Perspectives on the History of the Term *διάλεκτος* and its Interpretations in Ancient Greece and Byzantium. *Glotta* 92 (2016) 244–279.

focused on the meaning of the word ‘dialect’ in Psellus’ poem.³ There he presented an outline of the scope of the term and the oeuvre of the author, highlighted the parts of the poem which deal with dialectology, translating, interpreting and placing them into the grammatical tradition. It is this paper I am going to relate to, though not from the point of view of the history of science, but rather focusing on the poem itself, which will result in a different approach – or should I say, some shifts of emphasis?

In the manuscripts the poem was given different titles, which inform us about the circumstances of its writing. According to one of the titles the poem was commissioned by the emperor Constantine Ducas for the heir to the throne, Michael Ducas. According to the other one Psellus dedicated the poem to an earlier emperor, Constantine Monomachus. Westerink claims that Psellus rewrote the earlier version after receiving the commission and the new *recensio* was then dedicated to the young Michael Ducas, which explanation is supported by the fact that in the collection of rare words comprising the second part of the poem the number and arrangement of the loosely connected lines vary in the manuscripts.⁴

The first part of the two-part poem is a rather peculiar introduction to Greek grammar based on Dionysius Thrax and Byzantine *scholia*, while the second part is a lexicon compiled on the basis of several earlier collections of rare words. The first part of the latter is a list of words taken from a well-known lexicological tradition and set in alphabetical order. The second part is from a lexicon of a different origin in strict alphabetical order, with the beginning and the ending incomplete. The last unit is a thematic dictionary of medical terms.⁵

In the lexicon the definition of a word rarely takes up the whole line, in most of the lines there are definitions of two words. The definition of the first word goes on up to the caesura and is then followed by the second definition.

Let us see for example the words starting with *beta* from the beginning of the first unit.

- 304 Βάκηλος ὁ ἀνόητος. Βαλβις ἀφετηρία.
 305 Λιμός ὁ μέγας βούλιμος. Βούπαις νέος ἀφῆλιξ.
 306 Βοσὸρ ἐσθῆς τις κόκκινος. Βριμάζω τὸ βρυχῶμαι.
 307 Βέτων ὁ πάνυ εὐτελής. Βλῆτον εἶδος λαχάνου.
 308 Ὁ προβατώδης βέκηλος. Τὸ δὲ στριγᾶν βλεμαίνειν.
 309 Βριμαίνειν τὸ ὀργίζεσθαι. Βουκάπη βῶων φάτνη.

³ROOY, R. VAN: Teaching Greek Grammar in 11th-Century Constantinople. Michael Psellus on the Greek ‘Dialects’. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 109 (2016) 207–222.

⁴WESTERINK (n. 1) XV–XVI; 80: “recensio vulgata, quam iam pridem ediderat Boissonade, ipsa quoque Pselli iussu confecta est, qui (ut puto) scribae cuidam commisit munus totius lexicum in ordinem alphabeticum redigendi; plurimi versus tamen loco non suo relictis sunt, nonnulli omissi, pauci bis recepti, alii in fine suppleti post formulam perorandi (vss. 489–490). nec mirandum est, cum in vulgata recensione opus Constantino Monomacho inscribatur, editionem posteriorem Michaeli Ducae inscriptam textum veterem exhibere; nimirum Psellus, ut discipulo suo Michaeli opus ante conscriptum offerret, ad primum exemplar, quod etiam penes se habebat, revertit.”

⁵WESTERINK (n. 1) XVI; 80: “huius lexicum recensionem vetustiore secundum codices P^p P⁴ nunc primum edimus, in qua manifestum fit, ex quibus fontibus et quo ordine compilatum sit: vss. 271–394 e lexico integro (A–Ω) proveniunt, quod Synagogen Seguerianam cum Hesychio commiscebat; vss. 395–439 ex alio utrimque mutilo (Z–N), priori non dissimili, sed quod ordine alphabetico strictiore utebatur; cetera e vocabulario medicinali (aut uno aut pluribus) deprompsit: vss. 440–461 de alimentis, vss. 462–475 de partibus corporis, vss. 479–488 de morbis.”



These are rather rare words, so much so that sometimes even their exact meaning is uncertain. Their origin is also uncertain at times, or the connection between the original meaning and the given meaning (mostly taken from Hesychius), like in the case of the word βάκηλος. There are also definitions which point to the first or second part of a compound, for example the definition of βουκάπη. The entry might be a verb, a noun or an adjective, and the entries are not set in strict alphabetical order.

There are different types of one-line definitions in the poem. Line 376 recalls a situation common in didactic literature, with a verb in the imperative.

376 Τὰ τῶν ποδῶν εἰλήματα ὀνόμαζε ποδεῖα.

Line 392 is a definition: χελιδωνίς *the lower part of the entrance* (threshold).

392 Χελιδωνίς τὸ πάτημα τὸ κάτω τῆς εισόδου.

The third example is a series of remarks demonstrating Hippocrates' specific usage.

462 Σκύταν καλεῖ τὴν κεφαλὴν πολλὰκις Ἴπποκράτης·
 463 στροφέα δὲ γε σπόνδυλον φησὶ πού τὸν ὀδόντα·
 464 καὶ ἀετοῦς ὠνόμασε τὰς φλέβας τῶν κροτάφων·
 465 τὰς δ' ἀρτηρίας εἶρηκεν αὐτὸς οὗτος ἀόρτας·
 466 καὶ κέβλην μὲν τὴν κεφαλὴν, κύβιτον τὸν ἀγκῶνα,

In line 466 there is a Latin loanword (*cubitum*) from the *corpus Hippocraticum* and a regional variant or a word formed by syncope.

The opening sentence of the first part calls our attention to the fundamental role of grammar in learning.

1 Μελέτω σοι γραμματικῆς καὶ τῆς ὀρθογραφίας·
 2 πρῶτος αὕτη θεμέλιος καὶ βάσις μαθημάτων.

The meaning and the relation of the two terms in the first line is rather ambiguous. The most likely interpretation seems to be that γραμματικὴ is the art of proper composition using regularly formed words on the basis of set grammatical rules, in other words ὀρθογραφία or *ars recte scribendi*, and not a systematic grammar or a theoretical work like *Techné* by Dionysius Thrax, but not a simple orthography in the narrow sense of the word either. We must consider the following, though: firstly, Byzantine authors often use words of similar meaning next to each other, and the more or less set phrases often tempt us to over-interpret them. Secondly, Psellus' work is written in verse, where the metre often calls for solutions that seem to mean more than they actually do.

The following lines illustrate my first remark.

3 Οὐκ ἔστι δὲ μονότροπος οὐδὲ κοινὴ καὶ μία,
 4 ἀλλ' ἔχει γλώσσας καὶ φωνὰς καὶ πέντε διαλέκτους,
 5 Αἰολικὴν, Ἴωνικὴν, Ἀτθίδαια καὶ Δωρίδαια
 6 καὶ τὴν συνήθη καὶ κοινὴν καὶ κατημαξευμένην·

We may wonder what the words γλώσσα and φωναί mean in the fourth line. Are they technical terms? If so, what do they mean? How do they relate to the dialects? Judging by another place in the poem (183–186) it seems almost certain that γλώσσα near the word διάλεκτος is a grammatical term referring to a regional subdialect, while the word φωνή next to it is a synonym of γλώσσα.



In the political verse the penultimate syllable of the line is always stressed, mostly paroxytonic. There are several ways to meet this requirement, for example finishing the line with a feminine noun ending in *-ία* or with inflected verbs. One of Psellus' frequently employed ways to end the line is using a *participium perfectum Medio-Passivi*, which often occurs here as well.⁶

The word *κατημαξευμένη* in the sixth line of the poem is not used pejoratively. It is a synonym of *κοινή*, and the two words often occur next to each other. The assumption that *κατημαξευμένη* is a technical term is supported by the fact that the phonological peculiarity discussed in Psellus' poem as a secret knowledge (114–162) does not appear in its spelling. He uses the term in two of his other didactic poems as well.⁷

The title of the poem refers to the form, first mentioning the political verse by name, then in a metaphorical reference.⁸ Writing the poem in metre served to help the easy memorization of the text, and setting the lexicon in verse and putting the words in alphabetical order had the same purpose. But what was it that helped the memorization of the first part besides the lines that are easy to remember? In other words, does Psellus' poem have a structure? What makes up the inner framework of the poem? What connects the different parts? What makes the *whole* poem easy to memorise?

After reading the text it is obvious that there is neither a logical framework nor an inner structure to speak of. An external organizing element might have been a text that it comments on, for example a school grammar written in prose, though there are parts in the poem, like those on dialectology, which are unusual in such texts. At any rate, the poem cannot be considered a coherent interpretation of a *single* grammar.

It is perhaps not too far-fetched to assume that this poem is a collection of Psellus' glosses to a manual written in prose, which he set in verse for school use. So it is not a systematic descriptive grammar, but a text that raises grammatical and poetical questions Psellus found interesting, complete with his comments.

To support this claim my first example is: "Learn the inflexion of the masculine, feminine and neuter nouns on the basis of the paradigms."⁹ The second one: "Figures have twenty-four types, *parabolé*, *hyperbolé* and *antónomasia*, the rest being clear and well known for everybody."¹⁰ These two sentences have been translated from the poem (31–32; 177–179). Standing separately within the text they do not in any way connect to the parts preceding and following them – the

⁶ [...] || και κατημαξευμένην, 39 [...] || τὰς διωνομασμένας, 67 [...] || ὡς παρατεταμένος, 70 [...] || ὡς μὴ πεπληρωμένος, 84 [...] || σὺν τῷ παρακειμένῳ, 102 [...] || τὰ μέσα κεκλημένα; 114 [...] || ὡς ἀπειλωμένη, 117 [...] || καὶ καθωμιλημένη, 118 [...] || καὶ πολλοῖς κεκρυμμένην, 122 [...] || ἐπικῶς εἰρημένα, 131 [...] || δασείας ἐπηγμένης, 150 [...] || τῶν ἀπρηθμημένων, 155 [...] || ἐνὶ τῶν εἰρημένων, 168 [...] || τισὶ συμπεπλασμένον, 197 [...] || τῶν προσυγγεγραμμένων, 203 [...] || ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ὑφειμένη, 280 [...] || ἐγκατεστεγασμένον.

⁷Psell. *poem*. 2. 6–7: δηλοῦμεν τὴν ἐξήγησιν πᾶσάν σοι τῶν ἁισμάτων / ἐν ἀλουστάταις λέξεσι καὶ κατημαξευμένας. Psell. *poem*. 54. 132–135: Ἄπλῳ μὲν λόγῳ καὶ κοινῷ καὶ κατημαξευμένῳ / ὄργανον τὸ ψαλτήριον δεκάχορδον σημαίνει, / ὅτινι χρώμενοι τὸ πρὶν οἱ μελωδοὶ πρὸς μέλος / ἐν τούτῳ τὰ ψαλλόμενα καλλίστως ἐμελῶδου.

⁸Τοῦ αὐτοῦ Ψελλοῦ Σύνοψις διὰ στίχων σαφῶν καὶ πολιτικῶν περὶ πασῶν τῶν ἐπιστημῶν γενομένη πρὸς τὸν εὐσεβέστατον βασιλέα κύριν Μιχαὴλ τὸν Δούκαν ἐκ προστάξεως τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ καὶ βασιλέως, ὥστε διὰ τῆς εὐκολίας καὶ ἡδύτητος ἐνεχθῆναι τοῦτον εἰς τὴν μάθησιν τῶν ἐπιστημῶν.

⁹Τῶν ὀνομάτων μάθε μοι καὶ κλίσεις καὶ κανόνας, / ἀρρενικῶν καὶ θηλυκῶν, πρὸς δὲ τῶν οὐδετέρων.

¹⁰Τέσσαρες πρὸς τοῖς εἴκοσι τῶν ποιήσεων τρόποι / παραβολή, ὑπερβολή καὶ ἀντωνομασία, / ἄλλοι τε προφανέστατοι καὶ γνώριμοι τοῖς πᾶσι.



three *tropoi* are not elaborated, neither are the ‘well known’ figures. The part on metrical feet (92–100) is not an integral part of the text either. It is preceded by a part on the missing forms in the inflexions of the verbs, i.e. on a morphological question, and is followed by a phonological question concerning the classification of plosives.

A possible explanation for connecting parts that do not belong together is that certain words could have been cues for Psellus’ memory or mental lexicon to evoke set phrases and other content. The cue might have been working like a *clavis* in the *ars predicandi* of mediaeval Latin, the keyword that helped the memory of preachers. In the second example τίθημι is such a keyword. In the previous part he discusses the non-existent forms of the verb τίθημι through six lines, during which he uses the word τίθημι itself three times (86, 89, 90). In the first line of the part including the metrical feet (92) the adjective σύνθετος meaning *compound* occurs in the phrase *compound foot* (πόδας τοὺς συνθέτους), which in itself or in combination with other words is also a technical term used in prosody and grammar, while in the part following the list of metrical feet the verb form τίθησι occurs four times as the predicate (101, 105, 106, 107). Should this example fail to convince, there are several other examples of this phenomenon in the poem.

- 33 Τί μὲν ὀρθοτονοῦμενον ἐν μέρεσι τοῦ λόγου,
 34 τί δ’ ἐστὶν ἐγκλινόμενον, ἀκριβέστερον μάθε.
 35 τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἄνθρωποι τινὲς ὀρθότονον τυγχάνει,
 36 εἰ δ’ εἴησιν ἄνθρωποι τινες τὸν τόνον ἀνασύρας,
 37 ἐγκλίνας οὕτως εἴρηκας, τὸν τόνον μεταστήσας.
 38 πρόθεσις οὐκ ἐγκλίνεται, οὐ μετοχή, οὐκ ἄρθρον.
 39 Ἐγκλίσεις πέντε γίνωσκε τὰς διωνομασμένας,
 40 ὀριστικὴν, προστακτικὴν, εὐκτικὴν καὶ πρὸς ταῦταις
 41 τὴν ὑποτακτικὴν φωνὴν καὶ τὴν ἀπαρεμφάτων.
 42 τί δ’ ἐστὶν ἀπαρέμφατον καὶ πόθεν ὠνομάσθη;
 43 οὐ παρεμφαίνει βούλησιν τὸ τύπτειν καὶ τὸ τύψαι,
 44 ἐγκλίσεις γὰρ ἢ βούλησις τεχνικῶς ὠνομάσθη.
 45 Τῶν πέντε γὰρ ἐγκλίσεων τρεῖς εἰσι διαθέσεις
 46 αἱ γνώριμοι, ἐνέργεια καὶ πάθος καὶ μεσότης.

In the first part of the lines (33–38) ἐγκλίσεις means ‘clitic’, in the second (39–46) it is ‘mood of verb’. There is no logical connection between the two grammatical categories, they are only connected by the identical Greek term. The connection with the next part is similarly the word μεσότης in the last line of the quoted part (46), which in the first case means ‘the middle voice of the verb’, the one between the active and the passive voice of the verb, while in the second case (52–57) it refers to the participle, the *participium* between the verb and the noun, showing the attributes of both grammatical categories.

Should the connecting of smaller parts with keywords seem too simple or too bold an idea, on a larger scale the two longer parts on conjugation are clearly separated by a rather long digression on poetics. The introduction to metrical feet (92–100) fits perfectly into this digression. And so does the medial character of voiced consonants (101–116; 140–165). And so does the demonstration of phonological changes occurring through elision on examples from Homer (117–139). Then so does the resolution of bold metaphors (166–174). Then mentioning figures of speech (177–179). Then references to the dialectal forms poets used (181–188). Then to word formation *per analogiam* (189–193). Then to the literary critic who judges the authenticity of poetical works (194–201). And then to the observation of *usage* in various genres (202–208).



It is still confusing though, that while there is an inner reference to the third and fifth part (μέρος) of the grammar in the poetical digression (181; 189), it remains unclear what the first, second and fourth parts are.

Whether or not Psellus' poem is grammar, orthography or poetics, its aim is to teach the reader about the literary language (ἡ κοινή [διάλεκτος]), to make them read the works of canonised poets and the imitation of these poets in political verse or *Zwölfsilber*. The word ὀρθογραφία is a reference to the written quality of literature, to the text itself. Grammar is the establishing and acquisition of the normative usage and the observation of the rules crystallised in written texts. It is *Koiné*, the language of Greek prose that should be used in Byzantine poetry instead of the language of the poems written in different dialectal variations.

Before discussing *Koiné* let us make it clear that the Greek word διάλεκτος has very little to do with dialectology or the word *dialect* in the modern sense. The main aim of what has been said so far is to demonstrate what preliminary knowledge was needed in Byzantium for reading poets using dialectal variations. In most Greek manuals dialectal forms were not discussed, this field of knowledge was only required for the reading of poetry.

They also noted the fact that in the language of Homer there could be found forms from various *dialectoi*, so they considered the Homeric language to be a mixture. *Koiné* was considered to be a different kind of mixture, an intersection, so to say, of different Greek *dialectoi*. Its most characteristic feature is that it was used not by poets but by writers of prose. There existed ordinary, accepted words which occurred in every *dialectos* without variation. Even among the rare words (σπάνια ὀνόματα) Psellus only mentions ones that are from canonised poets, and only in the sense that the poets used them in.

Another passage in the poem also proves that the *dialectos* Psellus calls *koiné* is not *Koiné* in the modern sense, but the language of the Attic authors, without the visible phonetic characteristics considered to be typically Attic, for example the use of *xi* or *tau* instead of *sigma* (18).

26 Τῶν μέτρων μέντοι φρόντιζε, τῶν τομῶν καταφρόνει·
 27 ἠρώιζε, ἰάμβιζε, ἐλεγεία μοι γράφε,
 28 μάθε τὴν Ἀνακρέοντος ἠδυεπὴ κιθάραν
 29 καὶ τὴν Θηβαίαν μάλιστα τοῦ μελωδοῦ Πινδάρου,
 30 τὴν δὲ βουκόλου σύριγγα τοῦ Θεοκρίτου μέθεε.

In the quotation, in which he does *not* mention Attic poets, the last word is controversial. The following are not suggestions for emendation, but the presentation of interpretations by copyists and the publisher, with a few comments.

1. The word μέθεε occurs in two manuscripts, μάθηε in one, μάθεε in seven; the latter form does not exist. (It cannot be μαθέεε or μαθέε – *metri causa*.)
2. μέθεε is the *lectio difficilior*; but in Psellus this form occurs only here, while for obvious reasons μάθεε: 23, μάθανε: 7, μαθεῖν: 10 and so forth.
3. The meaning of line 30 depends on the interpretation of the word *tomé* ('section') in line 26. According to Psellus' didactic poem on rhetoric, it could be a certain kind of word order that should be avoided.¹¹

¹¹Psell. *poem.* 8. 1086–1094 Westerink; also see WESTERINK (n. 1) 546 s.v. (τομή *caesura*) and Psell. *poem.* 7. 77–79; 7. 236–237 Westerink.



4. The significance of the choice between μέθεζ/μάθε is not to be underrated. It does matter what Psellus, the respected author thinks of a poet studied at school, a poet whose estimation or reemergence in the Byzantine novel is also important.
5. Another argument for μάθε is the editing based on keywords and the fact that the authors Anacreon, Pindar and Theocritus were read as representative poets of the *dialectoi* in Byzantium.¹²

To sum up: In Psellus' poem *Koiné* is not like the other Greek *dialectoi*. According to the Byzantine way of thinking the most important difference is that while you can be Doric and can live in a Doric city, for example in Syracuse, you cannot be a *Koinos*. Where you belong, if you use *Koiné*, is not a *polis*, but Greek literature. The Byzantine concept of *Koiné* does not include *topos*, *ethnos* or *charaktér*, i.e. place, tribe and characteristic feature. The latter would be impossible as the distinctive features of the other *dialectoi* are relative to *Koiné*, which is an independent and special way of speech, or rather, *writing*, and differs from the usage of the Greek poets. *Koiné* cannot be inserted into the family tree that branches from Deucalion with a tribe and a mythological ancestor to give it a name. Byzantine authors and Psellus among them were unaware of the modern linguistic notion that a dialect can be diastratic or diachronic. This poem tells us nothing about the contemporary spoken Greek language or about dialects in the modern sense. In the part on phonology only the consonants are discussed with *school-bookish* questions like "which sound is stronger, *pi* or *beta*?", while the pronunciation of vowels or diphthongs is not even mentioned.

Psellus' didactic poem will not help beginners to learn the Greek language. The introduction is only useful for those who already speak (or read in) the language or are native speakers. At the same time, the questions he raises give us some insight into the lowest grade of the reception of dialectal Greek poetry, into primary education, which can take us closer to the discovery of the internal values of Byzantine literature. Take, for example, the various manifestations of wordplay used by Byzantine grammarians and writers of didactic poems inspired by peculiar poetical phrases, like the gem ἴδε τὴν συμφωνίαν (165).

¹²Cf. Psell. *poem*. 68. 40–43 Westerink.

