The Grammar of Discourse Referents in Homer
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While many areas of Homeric grammar (especially phonology and morphology) have been explored in substantial detail, the study of Homeric syntax and discourse has arisen but recently, and has been rather unsystematic in its coverage (much attention has been devoted to the syntax of “second position” clitics, after Hale 1987’s work on Indo-Iranian; see Taylor 1990, Goldstein 2010; for a study of discourse particles, see Bakker 2007).

In particular, the topic of referent realization in Homeric discourse remains largely untouched (apart from general observations concerning the article and particle usage, see Chantraine 1953:159; Bakker 1997:108-11). This lacuna is, in a way, paradoxical, since many of the most well explored areas of formulaic technique (Parry’s noun-epithet formulas) precisely serve to introduce (or re-introduce) new referents to the discourse, and are mostly employed in larger constructions that serve to manage the transition from one referent to another. This can readily be seen in the following lines:

(1) τὸν δ’ ἄρ’ ὑπόδρα ἰδὼν προσέφη πόδας ὑκύς Ἀχιλλεύς (ll. 1.148)
(2) τὸν δὲ ἰδὼν φύτηρ ποδάρκης δίος Ἀχιλλεύς (ll. 16.5)

Here, an old referent is realized pronominally at the left edge of the line, and the new(er) referent is introduced with a full NP (the noun-epithet formula) in post-verbal position at the right edge of the line. These highly formulaic constructions serve to achieve a discourse transition. In fact, referential management is one of the most strictly regulated areas of Homeric technique (this may have to do with easing the cognitive load at scene boundaries, see Chafe 1980:40-7).

The aim of this paper is to outline this area of Homeric grammar (namely, how Homer introduces, maintains, and re-introduces referents in the discourse), and to highlight some interesting features thereof. In the process, this paper discusses a number of constructions that are used for specific discourse purposes.

One such construction involves “right dislocation,” and is used to re-introduce a
previously active referent, while setting it up as the main topic for the new section of the text:

(3) αὐτὰρ δὲ μακρὸν ἄμειν ἀναξ ἄνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων· (Il. 3.81)
(4) αὐτὰρ δὲ ἐν μεγάρῳ ὑπελείπετο δίος Ὀδυσσεύς (Od. 7.230)

Structures of this kind can accommodate noun-epithet formulas of varying sizes, and are normally used to mark narrative breaks, such as changes of scene or episode.

Also noteworthy is the extensive usage of ellipsis within highly formulaic type-scenes. Here, Homer uses long blocks of ellipsis (which are otherwise rare in the text), where both the subject and the object can be realized as zeroes. This is especially striking in some battle scenes, where even the change of subject does not warrant a pronominal realization:

(5) πρῶτος δὲ ἀναξ ἄνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων
ἀρχὸν Ἀλιζώνων Ὀδίον μέγαν ἔκβαλε δίφρον·
πρῶτω γὰρ στρεφθέντι μεταφρένω ἐν δόρι πῆξεν
ὑμὼν μεσσηγύς, διὰ δὲ στήθεσφιν ἐλασσε,
δούπησεν δὲ πεσών, ἀράβῃσε δὲ τεῦχε' ἐπ' αὐτῷ, (Il. 5.38-42)

See here how the change in subject between ἐλασσε ‘(Agamemnon) pushed’ and δούπησεν ‘(Odios) made a sound’, is not signaled by any overt means (the usage of δὲ alone is not enough to signal a change of subject). Arguably, the familiarity of the audience with similar battle scenes allowed for the implicitness of the narrative.

By comparing these two strategies, one can already make a generalization that means of cohesion (i.e. overt realization of referents or other linkage devices – like discourse particles, conjunctions, adverbs, or lexical repetition) are stronger at the transitions between scenes than they are within scenes. Within scenes, and especially within type-scenes, high levels of coherence (in our case, the fact that the audience is very familiar with this kind of battle scenes) make cohesion unnecessary. This is a classic principle of Text Linguistics (see de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981, Martin 2001).

In surveying this rich area of Homeric grammar, this paper also aims to show how the realization of referents can guide us in identifying narrative units in the poems (scenes, episodes etc.), and can even help us to clarify the interpretation of ambiguous passages the text.
References


