

‘THE CUSTOMARY MEANINGS OF WORDS WERE
CHANGED’ – OR WERE THEY? A NOTE ON
THUCYDIDES 3.82.4

καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαίῳσει. τόλμα μὲν γὰρ ἀλόγιστος ἀνδρεία φιλέταιρος ἐνομίσθη, μέλλησις δὲ προμηθῆς δειλία εὐπρεπής, τὸ δὲ σῶφρον τοῦ ἀνάνδρου πρόσχημα, καὶ τὸ πρὸς ἅπαν ξυνετόν ἐπὶ πᾶν ἀργόν.

All editors and translators that I know of render the first part of this passage along the lines of ‘They changed the usual meanings of words’. Thus Weil and Romilly talk of ‘le sens usuel des mots’,¹ Stahl of ‘usitatam vocabulorum significationem’,² Bloomfield of ‘the accustomed acceptation of names’;³ the most popular modern English translation gives ‘words... had to change their usual meanings’;⁴ and the best-known modern commentary the phrase in my title – ‘the customary meanings of words were changed’.⁵ The passage is widely quoted, not only by ancient historians but also by sociologists and philosophers; and one suspects the excitement of this translation to be at least a part-cause of the passage’s fame. Comparisons are made with modern propaganda, Orwell’s 1984, and so on. But this translation must be wrong; unfortunately for generations of believers, though fortunately for the reputation of Thucydides, who would otherwise be saddled with a nonsensical piece of writing.

One obvious reason why the translation must be wrong is that it destroys the whole point of what follows. The point is that things came to be viewed under unusual descriptions, in particular that certain ‘bad’ descriptions – that is, descriptions which in themselves implied moral blame or some other kind of reprobation – were replaced by ‘good’, and vice versa. To clear our minds by a non-Thucydidean example: the phenomenon that might be neutrally described as ‘pulling someone’s chair away just before he sits down’ might be normally called ‘a stupid and dangerous prank’; but a takeover by young children (or progressive educationalists) might oust this description in favour of ‘an amusing piece of creative self-expression’. Similarly, behaviour originally and (before the stasis) usually described as ‘irrational daring’ was now described as ‘courage for the sake of the Party’; ‘prudent delay’ as ‘specious cowardice’. Clearly unless the words *retained* their usual meanings this alteration of descriptions would have no point. Those who used the new descriptions wished precisely to cash in on the *usual* meanings of ‘courage for the sake of the Party’, ‘specious cowardice’, etc. in order to justify behaviour hitherto regarded as odious or discourage behaviour hitherto regarded as admirable.

If the meanings of the words really were changed, Thucydides would be asking us to believe that the words *τόλμα ἀλόγιστος* came to be equivalent to the words *ἀνδρεία φιλέταιρος*. That becomes still more obviously absurd as the sentence proceeds; nobody will believe that even the worst stasis can make *ξυνετόν* actually *mean* *ἀργόν*. In fact he is not talking about the meanings of words at all. The verb governing all these terms is *ἐνομίσθη*: and though frequently translated (e.g. by Gomme) ‘called’,⁶

¹ Edition of 1967 (Paris), ad loc.

² Edition of 1876–85 (Leipzig), ad loc.

³ Edition of 1842 (London), ad loc.

⁴ Rex Warner in his Penguin Classics translation (1976), p. 242.

⁵ A. W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford, 1956), ii. 384.

⁶ *ibid.* Cf. Aristophanes’ *Clouds* 847, and Lysias 10. 17, where the meaning seems to be something like ‘accept as normal’, in a context where it may be *descriptions* of things (not things themselves) which are thus accepted.

it means 'considered' or 'taken to be'. Its subject must here be some act or non-linguistic phenomenon, not a name or term or description. Nothing here is to be put into inverted commas: "'Irrational daring" came to mean "courage for the sake of the Party"' would be quite wrong; yet, if translators are serious about 'the meanings of words being changed', that is how they ought to translate. A change in the meaning of a word is quite different, and a familiar enough idea to us: as for instance *εὐήθης* in Greek or the old English 'silly' changed their meaning from (roughly) 'simple-minded' or 'honest' to the modern 'silly' or 'naïve'. Such changes take time, and have nothing to do with what Thucydides is talking about here.

If the meanings of words did not change, what is Thucydides telling us did change? Not just the phenomena which the words described, though no doubt that is also true: no doubt there were more cases of *τόλμα* and less of *μέλλησις* during the stasis, if only because of the force of the new descriptions. What changed was men's *use of* the available descriptions: they abandoned the usual ones and adopted others, because they wanted to make different value-judgements about the phenomena described. Thus in our example we would write, 'A stupid and dangerous prank was considered (viewed, seen as) an amusing piece of creative self-expression'. All Thucydides' alternative descriptions are at least plausible: that is, there are aspects or *species* of phenomena normally called *τόλμα ἀλόγιστος* and *μέλλησις* which could reasonably be called *ἀνδρεία* and *δειλία εὐπρεπής*. It is *not* that the revolutionary describers are trying to force any verbal equivalence (trying to make *τόλμα* mean *ἀνδρεία*), any more than those berated by the prophet Isaiah, in the text (quoted by Bloomfield)⁷ 'Woe unto them that speak good of evil and evil of good', were trying to make 'good' mean 'evil' and vice versa.

It is remarkable that translators are content to render the rest of the passage more or less correctly, if inconsistently with their idea of 'changing the meaning of words'. As we have seen, the idea of verbal equivalence becomes more and more hard to sustain as the passage continues; and even the most doctrinaire quietly drop it after the first two or three phrases. What makes this inconsistency possible seems to be an unconsciously naïve idea of meaning, which surfaces in one translation: '...ability to understand a question from all sides *meant that* one was totally unfitted for action' (my italics).⁸ This sense of 'mean' (roughly equivalent to 'be a sign of') is clearly far removed from verbal equivalence, but it may be that the inconsistency takes advantage of a possible confusion between or conflation of the two.

If generations of Thucydidean scholars have been thus confused and inconsistent, might not Thucydides himself have been? At least their translations would then be correct, even if their failure to note the confusion would remain suspicious. The question turns on the natural meaning of the first sentence, and in particular of *τὴν εἰωθυῖαν... ὀνομάτων*. Liddell and Scott must surely be in the grip of the same disease when they give (under *ἀξίωσις*) 'the established meaning of words' (though they also give a barely consistent, indeed barely intelligible, translation of the whole phrase, 'they changed the significance of the [*sic*] names in relation to things'): for *ἀξίωσις* is not paralleled in this sense. *ἀξίωσις* means here, as elsewhere (e.g. in 2. 88. 2, of Phormio's sailors), 'evaluation': that is, the setting of a value on something. As we have seen, it was precisely the accustomed evaluation that changed, via the change of descriptions. *τὴν εἰωθυῖαν... ἐς τὰ ἔργα* most naturally means in Greek, as it certainly must mean in this particular context, 'the accustomed evaluations given by words to things'; not 'the accustomed values of the words', where *τῶν ὀνομάτων* is

⁷ Isaiah 5.20.

⁸ Rex Warner, *ibid.*

taken as an objective genitive (i.e. where the words have, rather than bestow, value). Even 'they changed the accustomed evaluations given by words' is not free from ambiguity; it might be thought that certain words emitted accustomed evaluations, which men then changed without changing the words – the same mistake as before. Better is 'They changed their accustomed verbal evaluations of things'.

At least one scholar has attempted a kind of intermediary position on this question. Drawing a distinction between the words as 'denoting objects or persons' on the one hand and as 'used to assign values to the objects denoted'⁹ on the other, Hogan restricts the term 'meaning' to the former; and claims that the meanings of the words did not change, but that their 'estimations' (as he calls the latter) did: 'Thucydides is saying that in *stasis* men changed the customary evaluative power of words':¹⁰ he 'notes... the perversion of the customary estimations of value-laden words'.¹¹ But this will not do, for reasons already given: it is just because ἀλόγιστος and φιλέταιρος retained their usual 'estimations' or implications of value that men came to use different descriptions.

Two other points usually missed:

(1) The prefix of ἀντήλλαξαν must imply not just a (any) change but the idea of exchanging a thing of one kind for a thing of another. What are the two kinds? Thucydides has, I think, two sets of categories in mind which are in fact coextensive. First, they exchanged the usual (εἰωθυῖαν) evaluations or descriptions for unusual ones; but also, or thereby, in doing this, they exchanged 'good' descriptions for 'bad' ones and vice versa.

(2) δικαιώσει does not mean, as Gomme suggests, they 'claimed the right' to impose new interpretations on old words; the idea in 'claimed the right' is a spin-off from the *idée fixe* that the words changed their meanings.¹² It means surely 'in passing judgement' or 'in making a moral assessment'. That is, they judged (say) a certain kind of wild daring to be good, hence exchanged the usual 'bad' description, τόλμα ἀλόγιστος, for the unusual 'good' description ἀνδρεία φιλέταιρος. Liddell and Scott grant this with one hand only to take it away with the other: 'judgement of what is right, ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιώσει, altered at their will and pleasure'. 'At their will and pleasure' is not at all synonymous with 'judgement of what is right'.

We may translate along the lines of: 'Further, they exchanged their usual verbal evaluations of deeds for new ones, in the light of what they now thought justified; thus irrational daring was considered courage for the sake of the Party; prudent delay, specious cowardice...'

The main point has importance outside the confines of Thucydidean scholarship. As Thucydides knew well, politicians and other wicked men are greatly assisted, not by enforced and arbitrary changes in the meanings of words (something no one would be persuaded by), but by more or less plausible redescriptions of phenomena within the existing vocabulary. We might write of the USSR 'Political dissidents were considered mentally ill'; or of some liberal societies 'To cause disorder and hurt people in the streets was regarded as a justifiable protest in the name of Liberty'. The cure is not to protect the dictionary, but to encourage people to be more conscious and critical in their use and acceptance of various descriptions.

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⁹ John T. Hogan, p. 139 of 'The ἀξίωσις of words at Thucydides 3. 82. 4', *GRBS* 21 (1980), 139–50.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 143.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 146.

¹² Gomme, *ibid.* p. 374.