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TALKING ABOUT LAMENT IN ANCIENT GREEK DRAMA
Historical Metapragmatics and Language Ideology in Sophocles' *Ajax*

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Abstract – In this paper, after a theoretical introduction, I will first reconstruct ancient Greek notions of female speech, in particular that of lament. This reconstruction will show that female speech was considered to be genuinely more emotional and less controlled than, and thus inferior to, male speech, and that, accordingly, lament was considered to be a genuinely feminine speech act. I will then discuss the tragedy *Ajax* by Sophocles (performed probably around 455 BC in Athens) as critically engaging with and challenging these notions of female speech by pointing out their ideological character. This play does indeed present Ajax as a character who very much adheres to the notion of lament being a genuinely feminine, and thus inferior, speech act. However, instead of confirming this notion, Sophocles deconstructs it by juxtaposing Ajax's metalinguistic utterances with the linguistic behavior of a female character, his slave Tecmessa. In order to show how Sophocles does that, I will make use of the sociolinguistic concept of 'language ideology'. The challenge presented by the *Ajax* to the traditional notion of lament being genuinely feminine will then be contextualized within both the genre of tragedy and the ancient Greek discourse on language.

Keywords: Historical Metapragmatics; Language Ideology; Criticism of Ideology; Ancient Greek Tragedy; Sophocles.

1. Introduction

1.1 Historical metapragmatics

Pragmatics is notoriously hard to define; two strands, however, can be quite clearly identified: A 'broad' and a 'narrow' understanding (see e.g. Taavitsainen, Jucker 2010, pp. 4f.). The 'narrow' understanding, often called 'Anglo-American', starts with the premise that the meaning of a particular utterance (what it 'does' in its communicative context) cannot be sufficiently understood when only looking at the dimension of syntax and semantics; consistently, it concentrates on phenomena like speech acts, implicature,

presupposition, and deixis. The 'broad' strand, often called 'European', goes beyond this focus – but in doing so necessarily becomes fuzzier – by understanding pragmatics as a 'general functional (i.e. cognitive, social and cultural) perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in the form of behaviour' (Verschueren 1999, p. 7). In spite of the unavoidable fuzziness this choice entails (for criticism, see e.g. Hübler, Bublitz 2007, pp. 5f.; Huang 2014, p. 4), I will make use of this 'broad' notion in the present paper.

With the emergence of pragmatics as a linguistic discipline, a related subfield has emerged, that of metapragmatics. As the prefix 'meta-' indicates, metapragmatics is 'beyond', but also 'about' pragmatics (cf. Caffi 2006, p. 83; Hübler and Bublitz 2007, p. 1). Generally speaking, the concept of metapragmatics is based on the fact that people, when they speak, show awareness of the pragmatic dimension of language (cf. Verschueren 1999, pp. 188-199, and Verschueren 2004 on the concept of 'metapragmatic awareness'). They are able to do so at three different levels (see Caffi 2006): firstly, they can discuss pragmatics as a discipline, as I have done in the previous paragraph; secondly, pragmatic phenomena themselves can become the focus of attention, e.g. if speakers discuss how to use language correctly or appropriately; thirdly, speakers always 'manage' the current discourse, either by implicit means (e.g. the choice of a particular register or particular prosodic features, i.e. by 'contextualization cues' in the sense of Cook-Gumperz, Gumperz 1976) or by explicit means, namely metapragmatic utterances like 'I'll be brief', 'Say it again, please' or 'That was not funny' (see Bublitz, Hübler 2007). In this paper, I will focus on the second level of metapragmatics, the discussion of language use.

I will discuss ancient Greek notions of a particular form of speech, *viz.* female speech, or more precisely, lament, a social phenomenon characteristic of the time. I want to clarify that I want to read the *Ajax* as a self-contained discussion on gendered language use and not to extract data documenting authentic language use: my focus is on the historical *meta*pragmatics of gendered speech.

I chose the *Ajax* because, among extant tragedies, it is the most complete demonstration of the ideological character of classical Greek notions about female speech. I reached this conclusion by scanning the extant tragedies for utterances made by characters about female language use and by looking at how these utterances are embedded in the context of the play in which they were found. By applying the sociolinguistic concept of 'language ideology', I checked whether the overall picture the play presents confirms or deconstructs the characters' attitudes.

In this paper, I will proceed in the following way: I will first reconstruct classical Greek notions of female speech, in particular lament (subsection 1.2);

after presenting the concept of language ideology (subsection 1.3), I will read the *Ajax* as critically engaging with and challenging these very notions, and thus as opening up a meta-discourse on the topic of female speech (section 2); I will then contextualize my reading within both the genre of ancient Greek tragedy and the intellectual environment of classical Greece (section 3).

1.2 Female speech and classical Athens

Let us start by trying to reconstruct classical Greek notions of female speech. Male Greeks in classical Athens had a clear picture of female speech: if one peruses the relevant sources from the fifth and fourth century BC – mainly drama and rhetoric, but also philosophical dialogue – one will repeatedly find that one trait was regarded as central to female speech – its emotionalism. Women were considered to be less controlled, focused, and intelligent than men, and so was their speech; accordingly, lament was considered to be a paradigmatically feminine speech act. It is important to remark that the understanding of female speech as emotional was not a neutral assessment: Being rational and reasonable was considered an ideal, and female speech was thus considered inferior. Consistently with this perception, men who were considered to lament excessively were often accused of effeminacy; the following examples (taken from Dover 1974, pp. 98-101) illustrate these points:

- In Xenophon's dialogue *Symposium* (ch. 2,9), after having seen a clever girl juggler, Socrates remarks the following: 'In many other things, gentlemen, as well as in what this girl does, it is clear that female nature is no worse than man's, but lacks in understanding and in strength.'. The message is clear: Although a woman can be taught demanding tasks (mind, however, that Socrates is talking about juggling), her intelligence remains inferior.
- In Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* (vv. 1ff.), the heroine, who has summoned the Athenian women to share her plan to end the Peloponnesian War with them, complains that they would have come in great numbers if a feast had taken place; now, however, only one woman has joined her, while all the other women are sitting idly at home.
- In Euripides' tragedy *Andromache* (vv. 93-95), the heroine states that women are always fond of lamentation and are, by nature, prone to always talking about their misfortunes.
- In the tragedy *Medea* by the same author (v. 909), the character Jason says that women tend towards unrestricted anger.
- In Sophocles' tragedy *Trachinian Women* (vv. 1071-1075), Heracles, terribly wounded, states that he becomes 'female' by being forced to 'weep like a girl'.

- In a speech against Demosthenes (2,179), the rhetor Aeschines accuses his rival of having an 'unmanly and womanish temper' due to lacking the capability to quell his anger.
- In Euripides' tragedy *Heracles* (v. 1412), king Theseus admonishes Heracles not to lament his fate so that no one may see him 'being womanish' (lit., and more starkly, 'being female').

While it is, of course, true that one needs to be aware of the particular nature of these sources – the fictional character of drama and philosophical dialogue and the rhetorical character of speeches – they yield such a homogenous picture of the inferiority of female speech due to its emotionalism that this perception should be considered the *communis opinio* of the Athenian citizens.[1] This is even more probable since both drama and rhetoric were agonistic genres that needed to win the approval of their audience, as did philosophical dialogues, albeit maybe less directly.

1.3 Language ideology

Critically engaging with *communes opiniones* about language means pointing out that they do not provide as precise a picture of the linguistic reality as they are taken to do by the people who hold them. Such communally held beliefs about language that, to a certain extent, distort the reality they are held to represent – and thus act back on that very reality – are called language ideologies (on language ideology, see e.g. Kroskrity 2000; Coupland, Jaworski 2004; for a bibliography, see Irvine 2012). In order to pinpoint the ideological character of a belief about language, the sociolinguists Gal and Irvine (1995, 2000) developed a catalogue of three criteria: Iconization, recursivity, and erasure:

- 'Iconization' involves considering a certain linguistic form or style a transparent depiction of a certain social group or its members (i.e. when such a feature is supposed to have not an indexical, but an iconic relationship to the group in question).
- 'Recursivity' consists in transposing a difference from its original area into another area of social interaction (i.e. when a linguistic characteristic distinguishing one group from another serves for internal differentiation *within* a group).
- 'Erasure' means that 'data' is ignored that does not fit the picture and contradicts the simplifying dichotomies supposedly structuring reality.

[1] It very much fits the picture that barbarians were considered to be prone to lament as well, as is shown e.g. by the profuse lament of the male Persian chorus in Aeschylus' tragedy *The Persians* – barbarians were, like women, opposed to male, Greek 'normality' (cf. Hall 1989; I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion).

In order to exemplify these quite abstract criteria, I will consider an instance where Gal and Irvine saw them at work: In a Senegalese village, inhabited by Wolof people; they write:

> **1.** There [in the Wolof village, *S.H.*] an ideology of language represented linguistic differences as manifestations of social rank. Of the many social categories on the Wolof scene, the ideology picked out two, 'nobles' and 'griots' (praise-singers), as typifying high and low rank where talk is concerned. Supposedly possessing very different temperaments and prototypical levels of affectivity, nobles and griots were contrasted on multiple cultural dimensions, including styles of speaking. Nobles were expected to speak in a laconic, controlled style that was congruent with their flat, restrained emotionality; griots were expected to show volatile, even frenetic affect, and it was appropriate for them to speak fast, with high pitch and great expressivity. Thus, categories of people were linked iconically to their styles of speech [...] [iconization]. The noble style and the griot style were [...] reproduced recursively whenever two interlocutors engaged in establishing rank differences between each other [...] [recursivity]. Although differences within the griot and noble ranks were important [...], the ideology itself tended to deny such differences and to ignore the existence of other social categories [erasure]. Thus, we argue, the linguistic differentiation was a central part of a much larger ideological system that organized rank and motivated the reproduction of the linguistic differences. (Gal, Irvine 1995, pp. 975f.)

The criteria outlined above are of great importance for the discussion presented in section 2. There I will show how Sophocles presents a character (Ajax) who very much adheres to traditional notions of female speech, but also that his presentation in the play does not confirm his attitude. Rather, Sophocles shows Ajax's attitude to be marked by the three mechanisms of iconization, recursivity, and erasure, thus deconstructing Ajax's stance and showing to the audience its ideological character.

1.4 The plot of the Ajax

Before making this point, it is necessary to briefly sketch out the plot of the *Ajax*: The tragedy is set in the Greek camp before Troy, after the death of the Greeks' greatest warrior, Achilles. On the occasion of Achilles' burial, funeral games had been held with his armor as the prize, and this had been given not to the Greek hero Ajax, who proclaimed that he alone deserved it, but instead to Odysseus. This caused great resentment in Ajax who, the night after the games, underwent a fit of mad anger, took his sword, went out to the camp and strived to kill as many Greeks as possible – a goal he would have achieved, had not the goddess Athena intervened by clouding his perception and making him attack and slaughter the Greeks' cattle instead, making him think that they were his enemies. Later, back in his hut, Ajax comes to his senses and realizes

what he has done. He reacts to his failure with the desire to commit suicide. Up to this point, the story does not unfold 'on stage', but is narrated by people other than Ajax in flashbacks, while he remains in his hut. The most important narrator is Ajax's slave and concubine Tecmessa, who is also the mother of his young son. After her report to the chorus about the events of the night, Ajax steps out of his hut, still in a suicidal mood. His plan to commit suicide is then challenged by Tecmessa, but he holds on to it; after a discussion with her, he reenters his hut, obviously in order to carry out his plan. Surprisingly, however, he comes back alive and announces that he has changed his mind, but this announcement then turns out to have been insincere, and Ajax does commit suicide. The second half of the play presents a quarrel between Ajax's half-brother Teucer and the leaders of the Greek army who have forbidden the burial of Ajax's corpse because of his attack against the Greeks. A resolution of this conflict is then brought about by Odysseus, who succeeds in securing Ajax's burial, with which the play ends.

2. Language ideology and the *Ajax*

In the following section, I want to argue that, in the *Ajax*, Sophocles points out the ideological character of the popular notion of lament being a genuinely feminine speech act, and that the way he does so can be understood in light of the criteria established by Gal and Irvine (1995, 2000). In order to do so, I will discuss all the meta-linguistic utterances of the character Ajax (texts 2, 3, and 4), the first of which can be found in Tecmessa's report, to the chorus, of an exchange with Ajax when he was leaving his hut during the night (translations are adapted from Lloyd-Jones 2014):

> **2.** Since you have a share in it, you shall learn everything that happened. At dead of night, when the evening lamps no longer burned, he took his two-edged sword and made as though to start out, for no reason. And I objected, saying, 'What are you doing, Ajax? Why are you starting on this expedition unbidden, when you have not been summoned by messengers nor heard any trumpet? Why, now all the army is asleep!' But the words he spoke to me were few and hackneyed: 'Woman, silence makes a woman beautiful.' Hearing this, I ceased, and he sped off alone. (vv. 284-294)

This text allows two conclusions. Firstly, Ajax's answer that 'silence makes a woman beautiful' makes it clear that he considers female speech inferior; secondly, by calling this statement *hackneyed*, Tecmessa shows that she perceives this attitude not as Ajax's idiosyncrasy, but as a conventional opinion. In which sense, however, should this conventionality be understood? Is his opinion conventional only in the fictional world of the drama, or should the spectators here see an allusion to their own attitudes? That is not yet clear.

The first utterance by Ajax specifically concerning lament is reported when Tecmessa tells the chorus what happened after his nightly expedition: As he returned to the hut and realized what he had done, he, Tecmessa says, started lamenting in an unprecedented fashion, in a way inconsistent with what he had been saying about lament all along.[2]

> **3.** And he at once lamented with dreadful lament-cries, such as I had never before heard from him. For he always used to teach that such weeping was the mark of a cowardly and spiritless man; but he would groan like a bellowing bull, with no sound of high-pitched wailings. (vv. 317-322)

After Tecmessa has completed her report, Ajax steps out of his hut, and in the course of the ensuing conversation, he makes it clear that he firmly intends to kill himself. Tecmessa, however, tries to persuade him to stay alive, but at the end of their exchange, he clearly states that he is still determined to commit suicide and rudely tells her to take away their child (who has been brought out onto the stage) and not to complain:

> **4.** Come, now speedily take the boy, and bar the doors, and make no weeping in front of the hut; surely women are something prone to lamentation! (vv. 578-580)

It is therefore twice that we hear things Ajax said or says regarding lament. In the past, Tecmessa says in text 3, he habitually attributed it to a 'cowardly and spiritless man', while, in text 4, he calls it a typically feminine speech act.[3] In spite of his talking about lamenting men in text 3 and lamenting women in text 4, these two passages show a consistent attitude towards it, for the attribution reported in text 3 is made in *feminine* terms: Ajax called the lament-cries he despised *kokymata* (v. 321), derived from the verb *kokyo*, which is almost exclusively used for female lament and is, as here, often accompanied by *oxys*, 'shrill' (see McClure 1999, pp. 42f.). This shows that, for Ajax, the 'cowardly and spiritless' character of a lamenting man as expressed in text 3 consisted in that man's behaving like a woman, since women, as he says in text 4, are 'prone to lamentation'. Ajax's attitude as revealed by text 3 and 4 taken together is not idiosyncratic, but entirely consistent with the *communis opinio* as reconstructed above. Not only does Ajax consider lament genuinely feminine (text 4); he also regularly exploited this notion, in the past, to disparage other men by charging them with effeminacy (text 3). This shows how the conventional character of Ajax's negative attitude to female speech as expressed in text 2 should be understood: it is indeed conventional not only in

[2] The extraordinary character of this behavior is underscored by the *figura etymologica* in 'And he at once lamented with dreadful lament-cries' (I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion).

[3] Note that he uses, in a quasi-scientific way, the neuter ('*something* prone to lamentation').

the fictional world of the play, but also the spectators should see Ajax's notion of female speech as *their own* conventional attitude.

Ajax's conventional attitude towards female speech, however, does not go unchallenged in the play. Rather, Sophocles shows Tecmessa, the woman, behaving very differently when trying to dissuade Ajax from his plan to commit suicide: She does not lament but rather argues rationally. For Ajax feels utterly humiliated by the failure of his attack which, he supposes, would have enabled him to reclaim his honor as a hero, hence suicide is the only remaining option in the present situation. *Vis-à-vis* this concept of heroism, however, Tecmessa tenaciously holds on to an alternative opinion. For she argues that Ajax – precisely by committing suicide and thus letting down his son, Tecmessa, and his parents, hence the people close to him – would lose his honor and not live up to the standards of a hero. She makes this point with skilful rhetoric and great 'emotional intelligence' (Hesk 2003, pp. 66f.), as can be seen, for example, in the following exchange: first, Ajax sums up his stance:

> **5.** When a man has no relief from troubles, it is shameful for him to desire long life. What pleasure comes from day following day, bringing us near to and taking us back from death? I would not set any value upon a man who is warmed by false hopes. The noble man must live with honour or be honourably dead; you have heard all I have to say. (vv. 473-480)

Then Tecmessa closes her response with the following statement:

> **6.** Come, show regard for your father, whom you are deserting in bitter old age, and for your mother, heiress of many years, who often prays to the gods that you may return home alive.
> ...
> Think of me also; a man should remember, should some pleasure come his way; for it is always one kindness that begets another, and if a man allows the memory of a kindness to slip away, he can no longer be accounted noble. (vv. 506-524)

Ajax's stance is that his 'nobility' compels him to commit suicide; Tecmessa, however, says that it is precisely his nobility that should prevent him from doing so; Ajax says that the 'pleasure' he could still have in his current situation is worthless; Tecmessa, however, bases her model of heroism on the social reciprocity of pleasure; Ajax says that 'shame' at his current situation makes life unbearable for him; Tecmessa, however, points out that it would be shameful to let his people down[4] – so Tecmessa takes up and counters Ajax's

[4] This point can only be appreciated when looking at the Greek text: Ajax says it is shameful (*aischron*) for a man to desire long life when he has no relief from trouble; when Tecmessa asks Ajax to 'show respect' (*aidesai*) for his parents, the word she uses has the same root as Ajax's 'shameful' and expresses the Greek concept of '*aidos*': The respect for one's social obligations as well as one's reaction if one has been unable to fulfill them (cf. Cairns 1993).

reasoning point for point,[5] thus not begging him directly to take her perspective into account; she rather argues from *his* perspective that it would be shameful for *him* to let her down. Thus, the picture Ajax draws of women as naturally weepy in text 4 is not congruent with what the play shows;[6] however, Ajax does not listen to Tecmessa and ignores the power of her arguments.

Now, when one now keeps in mind what has just been said, it becomes clear that Ajax's attitude towards lament exemplifies the three semiotic processes identified by Gal and Irvine (1995, 2000): He called lament a genuinely feminine speech act (text 4: iconization); he denied lamenting men their masculinity based on this iconic understanding, thus transposing the difference between controlled men and weepy women into the 'intra-masculine' area (text 3: recursivity); the action of the play, however, shows a much more nuanced picture, which makes it clear that Ajax's attitude is not based on a neutral assessment of reality, but on ignoring unconsciously (to the extent that it is possible to state this of a theatrical character) possible counterevidence provided by Tecmessa's behavior (texts 5 and 6), whose powerful argumentation he ignores (erasure). The play thus proves the ideological character of his understanding of lament as a genuinely feminine speech act: it enables its audience to see this understanding as the ideologeme it is. In this way, the play critically engages with the popular notion of lament being a genuinely feminine speech act and suggests to its audience that reality – *their* reality – may be more complicated than they might be used to thinking it is.

3. Beyond the *Ajax*

The comprehensiveness with which the *Ajax* demonstrates the ideological character of the popular understanding of lament is quite unique. There are, however, clues that suggest a certain receptivity on the part of the Athenian public to challenges to the popular understanding of lament.

The first point to note in this context is that Sophocles was a very successful poet, who won first place in the tragic competition eighteen or even twenty-four times (see Bergk 1879, p. 298). The placement of the *Ajax* in the tragic competition cannot be reconstructed; yet, it is certain that Sophocles earned with the trilogy of which it was a part either the first or the second place, for the ancient biography tells us he never earned the third place (*Life of Sophocles*, ll. 33f.). The *Ajax* must thus have been quite well received as well,

[5] About Tecmessa's opposing her alternative concept to Ajax's, see e.g. Easterling (1984); the concept of dialogic syntax can help us appreciate the single steps Tecmessa takes to do so by taking up words previously used by Ajax in order to oppose her stance to his (on dialogic syntax, see Du Bois 2014; on the notion of 'stance', see Englebretson 2007).

[6] Cf. Hesk (2003, p. 55): '[T]his play helps its audience to see that [Ajax's] ''ever-repeated'' view that women should keep quiet [cf. text 2 above] is misplaced.'

which suggests, given the analysis above, that the Athenians may have accepted their notions being challenged on the subject of female speech, that they may have been open to the idea that this could be an issue ripe for discussion.[7]

The second point is that lament plays an important role in several other tragedies;[8] while there are, as said above, no comprehensive demonstrations of the ideological character of the notion of lament being genuinely feminine as in the *Ajax*, these tragedies sometimes challenge the notion of the inferiority of this mode of female speech by displaying how women use their lament as a speech act in the full sense of the word in order to act on their own, thereby sometimes even challenging male domination to which they are subjected. This is shown by the following two examples[9] (more could be offered):[10]

In Sophocles' tragedy *Electra* (performed around 413 BC), Orestes, the son of the murdered king Agamemnon, in disguise, returns from exile, where he has grown up, in order to avenge his father. After a brief appearance in the beginning, Orestes vanishes for several hundred verses. In the meantime, the entire focus is on his sister Electra, who has been living all the years since her father was killed under one roof with his murderers. She has spent these years endlessly lamenting her and her father's fate and thinks, since she has been deliberately left uninformed by her brother about his return, that her situation will never change. The sole focus on Electra, lasting for several hundred verses, allows Sophocles to present the power of her lament: not only does she succeed in persuading the chorus and her sister, who call on her to stop lamenting. By means of her lament, she also puts considerable stress on her mother Clytaemestra, the murderer of Agamemnon, and, without knowing about Orestes' plans, secures the ritual framework for the revenge on her father's murderers by calling down the Furies on them; even after she has met Orestes, it is her lament that makes him give up his disguise and let her participate in the execution of the revenge, where it is her again who, in a prayer to Apollo to support the imminent killings, secures the religious framework (see Nooter 2012, p. 120; cf., on the power of Electra's lament, Kitzinger 1991). Therefore, her lament that the audience follows for a major part of the play is all but in vain; rather, as said before, it is a speech act in its own right.

In Euripides' tragedy *Hecuba* (performed around 423 BC), the spirit of Achilles demands the Trojan princess Polyxena be sacrificed at his grave, otherwise he would not release the Greek navy from Troy. After the announcement of his demand, Polyxena accepts it. In her lament-speech with

[7] On classical tragedy as a 'questioning' genre, see e.g. Goldhill (2000).

[8] On tragic lament, see e.g. Foley (2001, pp. 19-56).

[9] For texts and translations, see Lloyd-Jones (2014: Sophocles) and Kovacs (1995: Euripides).

[10] E.g. the tragedy *Trojan Women* by Euripides, where the captive women's lament stirs up sympathy on the Greek side, and where this lament is likely to have had a particular effect on the external audience (Suter 2003).

which she announces her decision, she claims the heroic character of her intention, and that is exactly what happens (on Polyxena's lament, see Dué 2006, pp. 121-124): after she has been slaughtered on the altar, the Greeks hasten to burn her corpse in a way adequate to a hero and acknowledge her heroic status, while there is no mention of the glory of Achilles anymore, although his spirit had demanded she be sacrificed to him precisely with regard to his heroic glory – the Greeks simply pray to him to release the Greek navy from Troy.[11] While male heroism becomes dubious, female heroism is enhanced by the means of lament. Something similar can be said of Polyxena's mother Hecuba: when pleading before Agamemnon against the Thracian king Polymestor, her son's murderer, lament is one of the strategies she successfully employs, thereby securing her revenge on him. The fact that Polymestor, after having been blinded, unsuccessfully appeals before Agamemnon to his martial ties to the Greeks and fiercely condemns the 'female race' (vv. 1132-1182) makes it clear that, with Hecuba, a woman – in her role as mother – has succeeded against the arrogance of the man Polymestor, and one of the means that secured her victory is her use of lament before Agamemnon.[12]

Taking a step back from lament, we can contextualize these challenges to traditional notions of language within the broader framework of ancient Greek intellectual discourse. Beginning with the pre-Socratic philosophers Xenophanes (6th-5th century BC) and Democritus (5th-4th century BC), there is an awareness in Greek thought of the conventional nature of language (see Heinimann 1945, pp. 51f.), i.e. the fact that names do not have an inherent meaning, but are assigned to objects by convention. This thought was expanded on in the fifth century by the powerful intellectual movement called the Sophistic, which stressed, in many areas, the dichotomy between 'nature' and 'custom' (see Kerferd, Flashar 1998, pp. 13-19) and influenced the famous discussion in the Platonic dialogue *Cratylus* (first half of the 4th century BC) on whether words have an inherent meaning or are arbitrarily, by convention, *given* a meaning. The discussions in the *Ajax* and elsewhere in tragedy suggest that, in the fifth century, this question was perceived not only with regard to semantics, but to pragmatics as well – is lament really genuinely feminine, hence an expression of women's 'temperamental essence' (Gal, Irvine 1995,

[11] The demand of Achilles' spirit is mentioned several times before the sacrifice; in these places, it is always described with clearly heroic connotations: He is said to demand Polyxena's sacrifice as a 'gift of honour' (vv. 41; 94f.; 115), or is himself called 'worthy of honour' (v. 309); in the prayer before the sacrifice, however, the sacrificer calls Polyxena's blood an 'appeasing libation' to make Achilles release the Greek navy (vv. 534-541), whereas the character of a gift of honour is not mentioned anymore: Achilles' spirit appears there as a demon to be propitiated, not as a hero who, although dead, demands the recognition of his heroic status.

[12] It very much fits the picture that Hecuba's end, which is prophesied at the end of the tragedy, can also be read as a heroization of Hecuba *as a mother* (see Dué 2006, pp. 131-135).

p. 976), or could this just be an ideologeme conventionally imposed on women – and men?

4. Conclusions

This paper presents an exercise in 'historical metapragmatics' by showing how a particular tragedy, the *Ajax* by Sophocles, critically engages with generally held notions that considered lament to be a genuinely feminine, and thus inferior, speech act due to women being inherently more emotional and less rational than men. Sophocles challenges these traditional notions by presenting Ajax as adhering to them, but then juxtaposing his behavior to that of his female slave Tecmessa. For this presentation allows the recipients to recognize in Ajax's stance towards lament three processes – iconization, recursivity, and erasure – that characterize a conception of language as ideological. As has been shown, this challenge can be contextualized within the broader framework both of the genre of tragedy and of the contemporary intellectual discourse on language. The former sometimes questioned – or, more precisely, enabled its viewers to question – the notion of the inferiority of female speech. The latter was characterized by growing awareness of the conventional nature of language, which, this reading suggests, was perceived not only with regard to semantics, but to pragmatics as well. This reading of the *Ajax* thus enriches our picture of the discourse on language use in classical Athens.

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