The X-Position
‘Disjunctive’ ΔΙΑ in Aristophanic Cumpounding

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“The Greeks great interest in the significance of words and enjoyment in revealing unexpected connections among them made them much more enthusiastic punsters than we are” (Henderson 1987: 167).

In this presentation I present a semantic description of verbal compounds prefixed with ΔΙΑ in Aristophanes’ comedies, where the prefix is often used to emphasize the obscene interpretation of such compound verbs. One can find stray remarks on the added obscene value of verbal compounds prefixed with ΔΙΑ in comparison with their simplex counterparts in the commentaries by Dover, Henderson, Sommerstein and others. Consider, for example, the following comment by Henderson on the Salaminian women at Lysistrata 59f. ἄλλα ‘ἐκείναί γ’ οἶδ’ ὅτι ὑπ’ τῶν κελήτων διαβεβήκασι’ ὦρθριαι ‘I know that they came early, mounted on their yachts’: “The obscenity here is emphasized by the use for the normal βεβήκασιν of διαβεβήκασιν, to mount or bestride with the legs apart” (Henderson 1991: 165 - italics mine). Other commentators are less tempted by the possibility of such obscene interpretations. Compare, for instance, von Wilamowitz’ sober-minded comment on the use of διαλέγω with reference to the would-be escapee at Lysistrata 720 τὴν μὲν γε πρώτην διαλέγουσαν τὴν ὑπὴν κατέλαβον ‘I caught the first one picking open the/her hole’: “es ist ‘auseinandersetzen’; sie erweitert also das Loch, indem sie die Steinbrocken herausliest, die es verstopfen’ (von Wilamowitz 1927, ad loc.). Von Wilamowitz’ comment coaxed the following remark from Henderson (1991: 169 - italics his): “he serves only to leach all the humor from the joke (and there must be a joke here”. Being an enthousiastic punster and cunning linguist, I believe that there still quite a few jokes to be uncovered in Aristophanes’ comedies, verbal compounds prefixed with ΔΙΑ being just one of a series of case studies that I hope to present in due time. In this particular case, I focus on what I have somehat irreverantly termed ‘disjunctive’ ΔΙΑ (and as such it is also quite literally an Auseinandersetzung with von Wilamowitz’
bone-dry lack of *humor* - the original meaning of which is, after all, ‘liquid, fluid’). I will show that the ‘disjunctive’ sense is not just apparent in cases such as διαβάινω or διαλέγω (quoted above), but also latently lurking in cases of ‘intensive’ ΔΙΑ. An example of the latter is the cookery metaphor for cunnilingus at *Ecclesiazusae* 847: τὰ τῶν γυναικῶν διακαθαίρει τρύβλια ‘he cleans out the women’s bowls’ (‘he’ being Smoeus, “the notorious cunnilingctor” from the mouth of Henderson 1991: 143). A careful analysis of the verbal compounds prefixed with ΔΙΑ reveals that there are more cases of obscene wordplay than even Henderson’s *Maculate Muse* could have imagined, and some quite unexpectedly so. It also suggests that even if the Greeks were more enthousiastic punsters than we are, we can at least aspire to approach them as closely as possible.

References


