



HAL
open science

Oracular Language or Apollo Loxias

Françoise Letoublon

► **To cite this version:**

Françoise Letoublon. Oracular Language or Apollo Loxias. Georgios K. Giannakis. Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics, 2014. hal-01965618

HAL Id: hal-01965618

<https://hal.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/hal-01965618>

Submitted on 26 Dec 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Oracular language or Apollo Loxias
Françoise Letoublon

The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals but indicates.
(Heraclitus, fr. 105(93))

Many works have been devoted to Greek oracles, fewer ones to their language as a look at the bibliography will show. Therefore it is very interesting to address the oracular domain from a linguistic point of view.

Though the texts of oracles kept in Greek literature cannot be taken as authentic testimonies, at least they give a view on how people had considered them in Antiquity, and their frequent occurrence in historiography and literature allows a linguistic analysis.

The first feature that clearly appears is that the oracles do not speak by themselves: the oracle is for human beings a way of entering a conversation with the gods, who generally answer the questions posed through the seer's voice. Thus the form of the question draws stereotypical forms of answers. Most of the time, the question is not a general one, but a practical alternative, like "Must I do this or rather that?", be it for an individual or a collective person, a city suffering from plague or any calamity, for instance. The form of language met is thus a dialogue, and the catalogues of collected oracles resemble more or less the manuals for learning foreign languages that contain several types of questions and answers about quotidian life.

The answers given by the god have been kept through local or familial traditions. They never give a clear-cut answer to the question asked, but seem to provide an enigma, speaking in metaphors and using poetical devices (periphrases or traditional formulas, for instance). As Heraclitus said, the god does not speak but *sêmeinei*, which means to give signs (*sêmata*, σήματα). In the case of the Apollinian oracles, those "signs" are transcribed as words, be it by the Pythian priestess or by specialized interpreters, so that the god seems to speak the same Greek language as the consultants. The most archaic forms of signs may have been fortuitous events interpreted as sent by the gods: in *Iliad* 2.328-9 the *drakôn* killing and eating eight newborn birds and their mother means, as the seer Kalchas explains, that the Achaeans have to fight the Trojans during nine years, and the city will be taken within the tenth one; in the *Odyssey* 17.541-5, Telemakhos' sneeze is a sign, clear for the participants at the scene, and particularly for Penelope, that the vow expressed in the former verses will meet success. More usually however, people were seeking those signs through special activities (journeys to oracular sites, rituals of consultations etc.). Anyhow, the nature of the signs implies opacity, ambiguity: the sign is a transposition of meaning into another field than direct expression, and thus waits for an explanation, be it by a professional interpreter as Calchas or by any person interested in it, like Penelope.

From a single quick dialogue the oracular moment may evolve to a durable conversation, for instance when the consultant does not understand the first answer of the god or does not obey his instructions. Thus in Herodotus, we meet several instances of linguistic exchanges for a more or less long period, until, for instance, the evil announced in the first answer eventually leads to the foretold loss for the miserable city or individual who misunderstood the veiled language of oracles: in book 5, Herodotus first uses indirect discourse for a suite of oracles touching the city of Corinth (5.79-80; the myths of Thebe and Aigina lead in 82 to building the statues of Damia and Auxesia), and then goes to direct discourse for the report of a first oracle given to Eetion (whose name means 'eagle') on Labda's pregnancy (5.92; her name also is significant, meaning 'lame'); this oracle is not taken into account, so that a second one is given to the Corinthians: we can note that the same words κύει "is pregnant" and τέξει "will give birth" occur in both of them: oracular language speaks more or less the same formulaic

language as the epics, it uses the same kind of verse (hexameter), the same vocabulary, and the same habit of repeating the same words at the same place in the verse. Later, the tale goes on with the oracle received by Kypselos, whose name recalls the wooden box he was kept in as a baby. The story eventually closes with Melissa's oracle on the foreigner's deposit (τοῦ ξείνου τὴν παρακαταθήκην). The kind of semantical play with the signs attested in those oracles appears through the episode of the *sêma* given in gesture by Thrasybulos: cutting outstanding ears, in the same context, which is intended to mean that the strongest men must be killed to guarantee safety.

This semantics of oracular signs is linked to the rôle of time in the oracles: the oracle usually regards future, not the very remote future, but rather the days soon to come, the time of a pregnancy for instance as Herodotus, quoted above, shows. Lamé Labda could not find a husband because of her disability, thus her father gave her to Eetion. This one, as an eagle, gives birth to a evil-omened child, who escapes death through the pity felt by those who ought to kill him, and later becomes a tyrant. His offspring will provoke the fall of the city foretold by the oracles. At the very time an individual or even a collectivity receives a prophecy, it is not possible to understand it, but it reveals itself as true afterwards, once the events prove its truthfulness. It is a way of saying that history has a meaning for the gods or a superior intelligence able to see more than one generation in advance, while human beings are limited to their poor and limited understanding of their own lifespan, at the best.

Among linguistic features of oracular language, we may also note the lexical fields most generally covered: animal and vegetal life provide many foundation oracles, and mankind is thus transposed into animals or plants, in a genre that resembles fable. Many enigmas found in oracles have a sexual substratum, as the oracle given to Aegeus, king of Athens without an offspring: "Loose not the wine-skin's jutting neck, great chief of the people, Until thou shalt have come once more to the city of Athens." (Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 3). The wine-skin comes from quotidian life objects, as the 'pots' and 'oven' spoken for Arkesilaos of Kyrene, or the famous 'wooden wall' uttered for Themistokles and the Athenians in the crisis of Xerxes' invasion, understood as wooden 'ships' by the astute Athenian statesman.

Oracular language, when expressed in the articulated form of hexametric poetry, is thus strongly linked to archaic Greek poetics and especially to epics. The formulaic style it uses might testify to the long lasting oral tradition, until 'recent' times, if the Pythian priestess' vaticinations, when thought 'possessed' by Apollo, symbolizes this tradition. The riddle of the oracles may sometimes seem to be well understood by their addressee in the span of their generation, though they may have a deeper hidden meaning: in the founding myth of Rhegium in South Italy told by several historians (see particularly Diodorus of Sicily 8.23.2 and Dionysius Halicarnensis *Exc.* 19.2) the oracle given to the Chalcidians tells them to found a city where "The female weds the male", and they understood it seeing on the banks of river Apsia "a grape-vine entwined about a wild fig-tree" (feminine ἄμπελον/ masculine ἐρπεῖς): the nature and the plants give a metaphoric living image, people take it as the *sêma* indicated. Later, it may have another meaning, about the mixing of populations in the new city to be found.

In Antiquity, the god Apollo, who possessed the best-known oracles in the Greek world, frequently received the epiklesis 'Loxias', which means 'oblique', well-deserved for the language he used. He neither reveals nor conceals, but gives signs.

References

- Bonnechère, P. 2007. "Divination", in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, D. Ogden, ed. 145-159.
- Crahay, R. 1956. *La littérature oraculaire chez Hérodote*. Liège-Paris.
- Crahay, Roland 1974. "La bouche de la vérité", *Divination et rationalité*, Jean-Pierre Vernant ed., 201-219.
- Flower, M. A. 2008. *The Seer in Ancient Greece*, Berkeley-Los Angeles.
- Fontenrose, J. 1959. *Python. A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins*. Berkeley-Los Angeles.
- Fontenrose, J. 1978. *The Delphic Oracle. Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London.
- Fontenrose, J. 1988. *Didyma. Apollo's Oracle, Cult, and Companions*. Berkeley-Los Angeles-London.
- Morgan, C. 1990. *Athletes and Oracles. The transformation of Olympia and Delphi in the eighth century BC*. Cambridge.
- Ogden, D. 2007. *A Companion to Greek Religion*, Malden MA.
- Parke, H. W. and Wormell, D. E. W. 1956. *The Delphic Oracle I: The History*, Oxford.
- Parke, H. W. and Wormell, D. E. W. 1956. *The Delphic Oracle II: The Oracular Responses*, Oxford.
- Ustinova, Y. 2009. *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind. Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*, Oxford.
- Vernant, J.-P., ed. 1974. *Divination et rationalité*. Paris.