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OEDIPUS' FREUDIAN SLIPS: LANGUAGE, KINSHIP AND TYRANNY

ABSTRACT. Kucharski Janek, *Oedipus' Freudian slips: language, kinship and tyranny* (Freudowskie pomyłki Edypa: język, pokrewieństwo i tyrania).

This paper deals with the linguistic aspect of tragic irony in the *Oedipus Rex*. It begins with the observation that several ambiguous expressions in the play telegraph their double meaning through various kinds of linguistic slips. It is argued that these slips occur on three distinct levels: semantics, syntax and pragmatics. There follows an analysis of several examples under each of these three headings. The paper concludes with the observation that when it comes to the question of Oedipus' familial relationships and the legitimacy of his rule in Thebes, language itself fails the hero and defies his attempts at controlling it.

Keywords: Oedipus; incest; language; linguistics; tragic irony

“One writes about *Oedipus Rex* with trepidation” observed Elżbieta Wesołowska in the opening of her recent paper devoted to the hero's travels and travails (2021). I fully share her misgivings: hardly any stone is left unturned when it comes to this particular tragedy. Yet, the honorand's fascination with it has provided me with the modicum of confidence necessary for such an undertaking. I can only hope this little piece will somehow justify its modest existence on the large and abundantly rich canvas of Sophoclean and Oedipodean scholarship.

Oedipus Rex is not a play about the Oedipus complex; that much is certain at least since Jean-Pierre Vernant's seminal paper on this issue.¹ Nor is it a play exclusively about incest, although the protagonist's unnatural union is probably the most significant factor in its denouement. It is a play which takes the audience along with its eponymous hero on a dialectical journey between contradictions. A journey from blissful ignorance to dreadful knowledge. From absolute power to absolute helplessness. From riches to rags. A journey which in the end reveals

¹ Vernant – Vidal-Naquet 1988: 85–111 (under the revealing title: “Oedipus Without the Complex”).

the ultimate fragility of happiness and the terrifying uncertainty of life, and not necessarily one's hidden urges to sleep with one's own mother.

There is, however, one aspect of the *Oedipus Rex* which certainly can provide the psychoanalyst with much food for thought: the protagonist's discourse, riddled with ambiguities, *doubles entendres* and, yes, truly Freudian slips. Nevertheless, I will resist the temptation of dissecting these phenomena with the psychoanalytical apparatus, and instead focus on their linguistic side and their significance to the dialectic construction of Oedipus' persona. That Oedipus is indeed a dualistic character, built of contradictions, is not a new observation. It has been well established in yet another of Vernant's pioneering essays, which not unexpectedly also deals with the ironic duality of the hero's language.² The latter phenomenon, furthermore, has a very long history in scholarship, dating back even to the ancient grammarians, whose observations are preserved in the marginal scholia to the play. Modern classicists have significantly expanded on their legacy with entire studies devoted specifically to the question of tragic irony in the *Oedipus Rex* and, more generally, in the entire work of Sophocles.³

Tragic irony, that is, revealing an impending catastrophe through discourse which on the surface remains neutral or, in fact, communicates the contrary, is usually divided into two types: the conscious and the unconscious.⁴ The former is seen where a character in possession of superior knowledge toys with another who does not share this privilege, by deliberately using duplicitous, ironic language. Clytemnestra, the majestic and terrible queen of the *Agamemnon*, does precisely that in the celebrated carpet scene. The *Oedipus Rex*, however, makes surprisingly little use of this kind of tragic irony, even though one of its characters, Tiresias, is indeed in a position to indulge in it. Yet, he makes no attempt to toy with Oedipus, despite the latter's accusations and threats: his utterances may be cryptic (439), but they are not deceptive. Unconscious tragic irony, by contrast, is what the *Oedipus Rex* became a *locus classicus* of.⁵ Time and again, we find its characters, most frequently the protagonist himself, saying in good faith things which on the surface appear innocent and perfectly reasonable, yet in the ears of the audience acquire an entirely different and dreadful meaning. For example, Oedipus' address to his fellow citizens who are now burdened under the weight of the plague:

² Vernant – Vidal-Naquet 1988: 113–140.

³ Thirlwall 1833; Hug 1872; Pokorny 1884 (esp. 29–37); Haigh 1896: 174–179; Trautner 1907 (esp. 80–84); Stanford 1939 (esp. 163–173); Kirkwood 1994²: 247–287 (“a well-worn term,” at 247); Jouanna 2018: 411–426.

⁴ Hug (1872: 83–84) offers a more complex classification (summarized in Stanford 1939: 163) which, however, still has no room for the phenomenon discussed in this paper.

⁵ Gifford 2001: 42; Stanford notes that the *OT* has twice as many ambiguous expressions as any other Sophoclean play (1939: 173; cf. Vernant 1988: 113); Kirkwood even notes that Sophoclean irony “might almost better be called Oedipodean” (1994²: 247); cf. Pokorny 1884: 29.

...εὖ γὰρ οἶδ' ὅτι
 νοσεῖτε πάντες· καὶ νοσοῦντες, ὡς ἐγὼ
 οὐκ ἔστιν ὑμῶν ὅστις ἐξ ἴσου νοσεῖ (59–61)

I am well aware that you all suffer from this disease. And although suffering, I am the one who suffers more than any of you.⁶

is a perfectly suitable hyperbole which one would expect to hear from any concerned leader. That said, in the light of the audience's superior knowledge, it becomes a sinister statement of Oedipus' true condition: of all Thebans, he is indeed the one suffering from the worst "disease."⁷

In and of itself, however, Oedipus' hyperbole neither says nor hints anything beyond its superficial meaning. Its irony depends entirely on the spectator's awareness of the true state of affairs. Without that, there is nothing to pin its sinister *double entendre* on. There are, however, several utterances in the *Oedipus Rex* which signal their ironic, disturbing signification even to one without the benefit of superior knowledge, as it is reflected in their equally disturbing linguistic aspect. One of the most salient examples is a statement not by Oedipus but the chorus (or rather the chorus leader) welcoming the Messenger from Corinth, who upon arrival asks for the king:

στέγαι μὲν αἶδε, καὶ τὸς ἔνδον, ὃ ξένε·
 γυνή δὲ μήτηρ θ' ἦδε τῶν κείνου τέκνων (927–8)

This is the house and he himself [i.e. Oedipus], stranger, is inside while this here is his wife and the mother of his children.

What makes this utterance very different from the previous one, is that its innocent meaning (reflected in the English translation) is linguistically far from unproblematic. Though grammatically correct, it presents the reader, and most importantly the spectator, with a very awkward word order, which, as a result, raises a red flag over it. The position of the deictic pronoun ἦδε, separating the predicate μήτηρ from its all-important qualification τῶν κείνου τέκνων, as well as the fact that the latter comes only after the caesura and therefore after a chilling pause between "mother" and "of his children" forces upon the audience the sinister sense "this is his wife and mother."⁸

⁶The translation takes the nominative pendens from the original (νοσοῦντες); this, however, is a very natural anacoluthon, which hardly raises a red flag over the entire utterance; cf. Kamerbeek 1967: 42; Dawe 1982: 92; Finglass 2018: 186.

⁷Hug 1872: 69; Pokorny 1884: 30; Trautner 1907: 80; Stanford 1939: 165.

⁸Pokorny 1884: 35; Jebb 1914³: 126; Stanford 1939: 171; Kirkwood 1994²: 253; Longo 1972: 250; Dawe 1982: 190; Manuwald 2012: 205; Finglass 2018: 453; March 2020: 258; cf. sch. ad loc.: κἀνταῦθα ἔθηκεν τὸ ἀμφίβολον ὃ τέρπει τὸν ἀκροατὴν; *contra*: Kamerbeek 1967: 185; cf. Bollack 1991: 3.606.

However, this type of irony, a truly Freudian slip, is somewhat uniquely placed in the mouth of the chorus. For by an overwhelming margin, the character most guilty of such disturbing blunders is none other than Oedipus himself.⁹ They are found to plague his discourse on several linguistic levels, beginning with the meanings of words (semantics), through their order (syntax), all the way to the conversational qualities of his utterances (pragmatics). This conveniently provides the argument in this paper with a suitable theoretical framework. It should be kept in mind, however, that what follows is not a systematic discussion of all of Oedipus' "Freudian slips." It is a brief overview of what I consider the most representative examples, in the hope of providing new ways of reopening a discussion long ago put to rest.

SEMANTICS

This section deals with the questionable word choices made by Oedipus himself, choices which under certain circumstances may accommodate the innocent, superficial meaning of a given utterance, but always at the cost of some violence imposed on the language, which in turn clearly betrays its more disturbing and not-so-well-hidden signification. A very good example is the protagonist's solemn assurance to proceed against the as-yet-unknown killer of Laius:

ὥστ' ἐνδίκως ὄψεσθε κάμῃ σύμμαχον,
 γῆι τῆιδε τιμωροῦντα τῶι θεῶι θ' ἅμα.
 ὑπὲρ γὰρ οὐχὶ τῶν ἀπωτέρω φίλων
 ἀλλ' αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ τοῦτ' ἀποσκεδῶ μύσος.
 ὅστις γὰρ ἦν ἐκείνον ὁ κτανὼν τάχ' ἄν
 κάμ' ἄν τοιαύτη χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν θέλοι. (135–140)

So, you will see me too as an ally, justly seeking vengeance (τιμωροῦντα) for this land and for the god as well. For I will cleanse this pollution not only for my friends above, but also on behalf of myself. Because the one who killed him [i.e. Laius] might also to harm (τιμωρεῖν) me by the same hand.

It is a well-established observation that this utterance contains several disturbing ironies. For example, the statement that while helping Laius, he will help himself, for the audience inevitably meant the opposite: he will

⁹Another exception might be Jocasta's brief summary of the Corinthian Messenger's tidings: πατέρα τὸν σὸν ἀγγέλλων | ὡς οὐκέτ' ὄντα Πόλυβον, ἀλλ' ὀλωλότα (955–6), where the somewhat oddly placed name Πόλυβον is suggestive of the sense "that your father is not Polybos" (Polybos as a predicate), instead of the intended "that your father Polybos is no more" (Polybos as an apposition); cf. Hug 1872: 78; Pokorny 1884: 36; Trautner 1907: 83; Stanford 1939: 72.

destroy himself. The participle τιμωροῦντα also admits a similar *Doppelsinn*: Oedipus ostensibly vows to take revenge on behalf of the land and god, failing to recognize that it is he who will be its object. But with the second instance of this verb, the infinitive (τιμωρεῖν), things appear more complicated. The consensus, going back to the scholiast, is that it also admits the sense “he might take vengeance on me too”, which foreshadows the terrible truth, as it is indeed Oedipus who will take revenge on himself.¹⁰ This consensus, however, is wrong, or at least inaccurate. The phrase κάμ' ἄν τοιαύτη χειρὶ τιμωρεῖν θέλοι does not merely *admit* the sinister sense: it is its proper and obvious meaning. The innocent signification by contrast requires one to assign the verb τιμωρεῖν an otherwise unattested sense:¹¹ when it takes the direct object in the accusative, it never means simply “to harm” (or “to kill”), but always “to harm in return,” that is, “to take revenge.” Why would the as-yet-undiscovered killer wish to take revenge on Oedipus? For what exactly? To understand these words according to Oedipus' intentions is not merely to play on the non-existent *Doppelsinn* of the verb τιμωρεῖν. It requires doing violence to its actual signification. In a truly Freudian manner Oedipus uses the wrong word, which inadvertently reveals the terrible truth.

Another such example comes later in the play. After his quarrel with Creon, whom he accused of treason, Oedipus, encouraged by his wife, decides to reveal to her the details of the alleged intrigue:

ἐρῶ· σὲ γὰρ τῶνδ' ἐς πλεόν, γύναι, σέβω·
Κρέοντος, οἷά μοι βεβουλευκῶς ἔχει. (700–701)

As I hold you in greater reverence (σέβω) than them, woman, I will tell you how Creon has conspired against me.

“Them” refers to the chorus, whose conciliatory attitude during the dispute with Creon irritated the worked-up Oedipus. Yet it is “showing reverence” (σέβειν) that is the real problem of this utterance, one which, for some reason, has escaped the attention of Sophoclean scholars. Only Patrick Finglass (2018: 389) felt the need to explain that σέβειν is not confined to divinities, but also takes a human object, as it does in the *Ajax* (Finglass' example): “and we shall learn to revere (σέβειν) the Atridae; for they are the rulers (ἄρχοντες), and I must yield” (667–668). But humans who are the objects of σέβειν always have a special claim to this kind of reverence. Among them are rulers and authorities,

¹⁰ See sch. ad loc.: ὁ λόγος καὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν αἰνίττεται τῷ θεάτρῳ, ὅτι αὐτὸς δράσας τὸν φόνον ὁ Οἰδίπους, καὶ αὐτὸν τιμωρήσεται; cf. Hug 1871: 72 (who speculates about “politische Rache” as the superficial sense); Pokorny 1884: 31; Trautner 1907: 81; Stanford 1939: 167.

¹¹ Thus Longo 1972: 68; Finglass 2018: 205; cf. however Bollack's discussion on its inadequacy (1991: 2.76–78) see also Dawe 1982: 104 (“strange word”).

which is precisely what the *Ajax* example shows us.¹² There are also those on the other spectrum of power, helpless and dependent on others, and therefore enjoying special protection from the gods: suppliants and strangers.¹³ But wives were not among such people: never in the classical texts are they seen to be the object of σέβας.¹⁴ True, they too deserved respect, but one which was expressed differently: in terms of αἰδώς and its numerous cognates.¹⁵ Although, as noted by Douglas Cairns, these two notions do largely overlap, there is one significant difference in their usage: whereas every person deserving σέβας can also be said to deserve αἰδώς, the reverse does not hold. One may show respect (αἰδεῖσθαι, αἰσχύνεσθαι) to one's wife, but one does not revere (σέβειν) her. One did, however, owe precisely such reverence to yet another very important category of people: one's parents. Time and again, we are reminded of this obligation in the work of the Athenian tragedians.¹⁶ Thus, by showing his wife the kind of respect she was not entitled to, Oedipus unconsciously treats her as his mother.

SYNTAX

This section deals with Oedipus' slips in which he does not necessarily use the wrong terms or force an unattested meaning on them, but those where the problem lies on the level of putting them together into meaningful utterances. The chilling words of the chorus with which it greets the Corinthian Messenger clearly belong to this category. Although they do not break any syntactical rules, their ordering in the sentence is nevertheless contrary to the intentions of the speaker. Now it is time to scrutinize similar blunders coming from Oedipus himself.

In an attempt to justify his involvement in the search for the as-yet-unknown killer of Laius, Oedipus enumerates the things he has in common with his royal predecessor, which inevitably leads him to the treacherous grounds of familial relationships:

...νῦν ἐπεὶ κυρῶ τ' ἐγὼ
 ἔχων μὲν ἀρχάς, ὡς ἐκεῖνος εἶχε πρῖν,
 ἔχων δὲ λέκτρα καὶ γυναῖχ' ὁμόσπορον,
 κοινῶν τε παίδων κοίν' ἄν, εἰ κείνῳι γένος
 μὴ ἴδυστύχησεν, ἦν ἂν ἐκπεφυκότα---
 νῦν δ' ἐς τὸ κείνου κρατ' ἐνήλαθ' ἡ τύχη·

(258–263)

¹² Cf. *S. Ant.* 304; *E. Hel.* 726; *IA* 633; *F* 337.2 *Kn* (*Dictys*); Clytemnestra is the object of σέβας as a ruler and not a wife: see. *A. Ag.* 258 (κράτος); *E. El.* 994.

¹³ Suppliants: *A. Eum.* 92–93, 151, 270–271; Strangers: *A. Eum.* 270–271; *S. Phil.* 1163.

¹⁴ In *E. Hipp.* 335 Phaedra ostensibly displays σέβας to the hand of the Nurse, but that as respect for an oath, and not for her servant.

¹⁵ E.g. [*Dem.*] 59.22 (αἰσχυνόμενος τὴν γυναῖκα ἦν εἶχε); on women and αἰδώς see Cairns 1993: 120–125; 305–307.

¹⁶ E.g. *A. Supp.* 708; *Cho.* 912; *Eum.* 270–71, 543; *S. OC* 1377.

Now since I happen to have the same power he [sc. Laius] had before, to have the same bed and the wife of the same seed (ὁμόσπορον), and since a share in shared children,¹⁷ if only his line had not been unfortunate, would have come to exist – now fortune has leaped on his head.

Yet again, this statement is riddled with unconscious irony, such as the remark “if only his line had not been unfortunate”, which on the surface refers to Laius’ assumed lack of progeny, but in fact aptly describes the desperately unfortunate condition of his only child.¹⁸ However, it is Oedipus’ language that suffers the most in the course of his entire argument. First, the adjective ὁμόσπορος, which in itself may constitute a semantic lapse on the part of Oedipus: it usually signifies blood ties (including those between parents and children), and not a wife common to two men who “sow” (σπείρειν) her, as demanded by the context here; it occurs in a similar sense again, but that is also in *Oedipus Rex*, and never outside this play.¹⁹ Thus, it seems to constitute another dreadful slip: while attempting to describe Jocasta as a wife common to himself and Laius, the speaker unwittingly points to the blood ties he shares with her. Worse is yet to come, as Oedipus engages in clumsy, counterfactual ruminations about the thing in common (κοιν[ά]) he and Laius would have had through common (κοινῶν), that is, children born of the same wife. Here language fails him completely as he attempts to frame this otherwise convoluted train of thought into a discursive form.²⁰ The parenthetical remark about Laius’ “unfortunate line” (γένος... ἐδυστύχησεν) already suspends the expected development of the argument, as is evident from the repeated particle ἄν. Even more confusing is the triple alliteration κοινῶν... κοίν’... κεινῶι, all in a single line, which not only creates a jarring acoustic effect, but also formally complicates an already complicated idea, which shifts freely and confusingly from the abstract (κοινά) to the concrete (κοινῶν).²¹ Most importantly, however, it is at this point, and with this barely intelligible remark about shared children, that Oedipus loses track of his entire argument, which in turn leads to an anacoluthon.²² It begins with two subordinate clauses (ἐπεὶ κυρῶ ἔχων... κοίν’ ἄν ἦν), but fails to reach the main verb, and instead is cut off by a completely new phrase: “now fortune has

¹⁷I borrow this phrase from Finglass’ excellent translation (2018: 255).

¹⁸Pokorny 1884: 32; Jebb 1914³: 36; Stanford 1939: 169; Longo 1972: 99–100; Dawe 1982: 121; Finglass 2018: 256.

¹⁹Hug 1872: 72–74; Kamerbeek 1967: 76; Longo 1972: 98; Finglass 2018: 256; hardly the most natural meaning, as suggested by Stanford 1939: 168.

²⁰This is no simple ambiguity as Stanford (1939: 168) and Kirkwood (1994²: 252) seem to suggest.

²¹Bollack 1991: 2.172–173; cf. Longo 1972: 98 (who also believes the polyptoton κοινῶν... κοινά intensifies the idea: *communitas communium liberorum*).

²²Longo 1972: 100; Dawe 1982: 120–121; Finglass 2018: 255–256; cf. Jebb 1914³: 46–47; Kamerbeek 1967: 76; Manuwald 2012: 105; for a history of interpreting this passage, see Bollack 1991: 2.167–171.

leaped on his head.” Language itself recoils against Oedipus as he goes deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole of his family matters. And as aptly noted by Finglass, “the syntax that [he] employs is almost as complicated as the familial relationship that he falls so tragically short of expressing” (2018: 255).

If there is anything else in the tragedy of Oedipus remotely comparable to the enormity of his kinship issues it is certainly the closely related question of his power and its legitimacy. Throughout the first half of the play, it even becomes a secondary story arc: along with the main quest for the unknown killer of Laius, Oedipus also seeks to expose a plot against himself as the ruler of Thebes, a plot which, according to him, has been masterminded by his brother-in-law (and uncle) Creon:

εἰ τῆσδέ γ' ἀρχῆς οὐνεχ', ἦν ἐμοὶ πόλις
 δωρητόν, οὐκ αἰτητόν, εἰσεχειρίσειν,
 ταύτης Κρέων ὁ πιστός, οὐξ ἀρχῆς φίλος,
 λάθραι μ' ὑπελθὼν ἐκβαλεῖν ἱμεῖρεται

(383–7)

If because of this power, which the city handed over to me not solicited, but freely, Creon, the friend so faithful first, surreptitiously desires to cast me out of it.

At this point, Oedipus is of course still under the false impression that he acquired his sovereignty over Thebes as an outsider, on account of his wit and his deeds, and nothing more - a self-made man, to use the anachronistic (and essentially false) phrase gaining currency in some contemporary circles. All this would amount to little more than what Arnold Hug has described as *Ironie des Gegenteils*: what the hero says is simply the reverse of the true state of affairs.²³ Oedipus' true legitimacy lies in the fact that he is indeed a Theban and the rightful successor to Laius as his son, the flesh of his flesh. But there is more to this passage than the hero unconsciously stating the opposite of what is really going on. It is precisely at this moment that he stumbles in expressing his thought. The beginning of his tirade makes his sovereignty the reason for Creon's alleged scheming, though by the end it slips into becoming the object of the intrigue.²⁴ Just as before with his ruminations about family relationships, Oedipus loses track of his argument here precisely at the moment he treads on the thin ice of his sovereignty's legitimacy. Once again, language itself fails him at this crucial juncture. In the end, therefore the logic of Oedipus' argument is seen to run in circles, being just as convoluted as the justification for his rule in Thebes.

²³Curiously enough, Hug does not mention this passage, while Stanford sees in it only conscious irony on the part of Oedipus, as he calls Creon his “friend so faithful” (1939: 170); cf. Longo 1972: 128; Finglass 2018: 293; March 2020: 207.

²⁴Kamerbeek 1967: 98; Longo 1972: 128; Bollack's polemical reading (1991: 241–242) is even more convoluted than the passage itself.

PRAGMATICS

Under this heading, I present Oedipus' utterances which in and of themselves are correct, both on the level of word choice and word order, though they stand out nonetheless, as they somehow violate one of the conversational maxims described by Paul Grice. These are: the category of Quantity (make your contribution into the conversation as informative as is required), Quality (do not say what you believe is false), Relevance (say what is relevant) and Manner (avoid obscurity and ambiguity).²⁵ Based on this admittedly jejune summary, one might conclude right away that throughout the entire play Oedipus is repeatedly flouting the maxim of Manner. This is no doubt true, but with an important proviso: the "conversation" thus violated takes place between him and the audience, for it is only the audience, with its superior knowledge, that is able to detect the ambiguities in Oedipus' words. In this section, however, I look at his verbal exchanges with other characters in the play. For even on this level, the hero is seen to violate Grice's maxims, which in turn renders his contributions to the conversations he is having quite unsuitable, even though in and of themselves they are perfectly correct.

An example revealing in its simplicity is a well-known slip on the part of Oedipus during his first and friendly conversation with Creon. At the former's behest, the latter reports the eyewitness account of Laius' death:

ληιστὰς ἔφασκε συντυχόντας οὐ μιᾷ
 ῥώμῃ κτανεῖν νιν, ἀλλὰ σὺν πλήθει χερῶν. (122–123)

He stated that robbers whom he came across killed him – not by the force of one, but with a multitude of hands.

To which Oedipus replies with a somewhat puzzling question:

πῶς οὖν ὁ ληιστῆς, εἴ τι μὴ ξὺν ἀργύρῳ
 ἐπράσσειτ' ἐνθένδ', ἐς τόδ' ἄν τόλμης ἔβη; (124–125)

How could a robber come to such audacity? Unless he was paid from here to do his deed.

The problem with this response is the use of the singular "robber," even though Creon uses the plural.²⁶ The irony lies in the fact that Oedipus unwittingly speaks the truth: the killer (not necessarily a highwayman) was only one indeed, while the sole survivor of his attack deliberately provided false information about the number of the attackers. This simple summary, however, may strike one as

²⁵ Grice 1989: 26–31.

²⁶ Hug 1972: 79 (only noted); Stanford 1939: 166; Finglass 2018: 202.

a case of overzealous nitpicking, which is not helped by the fact that the English translation of Oedipus' words dampens the glaring irrelevance of the original text. To ask "how could a robber..." could be considered a general question that would not necessarily contradict the particularities of Creon's second-hand account, nor would it violate any of the Gricean maxims.²⁷ But the use of the indefinite article "a," on which this generalizing meaning hinges, is only an interpretation,²⁸ one not necessarily warranted by the Greek text.²⁹ In fact, Oedipus uses the singular despite Creon's emphatic statement to the contrary,³⁰ which depends not only on his use of the plural form "robbers" but also on an expanded and somewhat redundant periphrasis: "not by the force of one, but with a multitude of hands." In this context, therefore, his question may very well be interpreted as "how could one robber..." And as such, it is bound to violate the maxim of relevance and thus raise a red flag over its otherwise ironic content.

Another case of a conversational slip on the part of Oedipus, this time one hardly acknowledged in the Sophoclean scholarship, comes from the hero's own account of the fateful events at the crossroads where he unknowingly killed his father:

...κάξ ὁδοῦ μ' ὁ θ' ἠγέμων
αὐτὸς θ' ὁ πρέσβυς πρὸς βίαν ἤλαυνέτην.
κἀγὼ τὸν ἐκτρέποντα, τὸν τροχηλάτην,
παίω δι' ὀργῆς· καὶ μ' ὁ πρέσβυς, ὡς ὀρᾷ... (804–7)

And the leader along with the old man himself both tried to drive me off the road. And I strike with anger the driver who tried to push me off. And the old man, as he saw...

These words are addressed to Jocasta, to whom Oedipus, now full of dreadful suspicions, confides his account of what has transpired at the crossroads. He is not yet absolutely certain that the man whom he killed was indeed Laius (and still far from recognizing in him his own father), but he already begins to piece together his own experiences with the information provided to him by his wife (and mother). Among other things, Jocasta tells him about Laius' appearance at the time of his ill-fated journey:

²⁷ "Oedipus says 'the brigand' in the singular (...), but he is almost certainly using the term in a collective sense and is thinking of brigands in general" (March 2020: 177); cf. Finglass 2018: 202 ("generic singular").

²⁸ E.g. Grene (2013): "How could a robber...;" Taplin (2015): "how could any bandit...;" March (2020): "how could any brigand...".

²⁹ See e.g. Jebb (1914³): "How... should the robber,;" Lloyd-Jones (1994): "how could the robber,;" idem in Finglass 2018: 202; cf. Moorhouse 1982: 1, 145 on the double signification of ὁ ληιστής (generic and specific).

³⁰ Stanford 1939: 166 ("has emphasized the plural"); cf. Finglass 2018: 202 ("Creon's insistence on the plurality").

μέλας, χνοάζων ἄρτι λευκανθὲς κάρα.
μορφῆς δὲ τῆς σῆς οὐκ ἀπεστάται πολὺ. (742–3)

He was black-haired, his head just recently sprinkling with white. His physique did not differ much from yours.

The information sinks in, as is evident from Oedipus' reaction to it (743–744). In the man in his prime, as described by Jocasta, he begins to recognize the victim of his quarrel at the crossroads. And yet, in spite of this, a moment later he insists on referring to him as *πρέσβυς*. Attempts have been made to save Oedipus from his own words here. In his commentary, Roger Dawe points out that the term *πρέσβυς* could denote a person senior in rank – as opposed to his servants – and not necessarily age; Odone Longo even assumes that this particular meaning is the primary one.³¹ But this is certainly wrong. Out of all the occurrences of the term *πρέσβυς* in Greek tragedy, in only three cases is it used in the sense of rank and not age: all three are in relation to the Aeschylean Agamemnon.³² Everywhere else it denotes an old person. And in this particular sense, it is also found in rather disturbing conversational contexts or collocations: as referring to one's elderly father.³³ *πρέσβυς* is how adult children address their fathers, and how the fathers of adult children are spoken of. Thus, the curious conversational slip on the part of Oedipus in which, once again, he is seen to violate the relevance maxim by insisting on calling Laius a *πρέσβυς* may be seen to flag a terrible truth. The hero unwittingly speaks of him as he would have spoken of his (now) elderly father.

Now, let us turn to a different conversational maxim subject to similar manhandling in the discourse of Oedipus, namely, that of Manner (avoid ambiguity and obscurity). As already noted, this principle is repeatedly violated in the “conversation” between the hero and the audience. But here I look at an example which occurs on the level of Oedipus' dialogue with another character, once again Jocasta. And once again, what he says concerns the fateful encounter at the crossroads:

κτείνω δὲ τοὺς ζῦμπαντας. εἰ δὲ τῷ ξένῳ
τούτῳ προσήκει Λαίῳ τι συγγενές,
τίς τοῦδε γ' ἀνδρὸς νῦν ἂν ἀθλιώτερος,
τίς ἐχθροδαίμων μᾶλλον ἂν γένοιτ' ἀνήρ (813–16)

I kill them all. But if that stranger has some kinship bond with Laius, who would be more unfortunate than this very man? Which man would have become more hateful to the gods?

³¹ Longo 1972: 224; Dawe 1982: 174; Bollack 1991: 2.492 takes the meaning “vieil homme,” but argues that it is used to contrast Laius with his companion.

³² A. *Ag.* 184–185, 205, 530.

³³ A. *Suppl.* 602; S. *Phil.* 665; E. *Alc.* 707, 711; *HF* 584, 1404, 1418; *Phoe.* 376; *Ba.* 1211, 1350; *IA* 1155, 1228.

“This very man” is, of course, Oedipus himself (the deictic pronoun was most likely accompanied by the speaker’s gesture pointing to himself), while the “stranger” is none other than Laius.³⁴ As already noted, by now Oedipus already suspects it, as is evident from his exclamation: “Aiai! It is now manifest!” (754), which follows Jocasta’s description of her late husband and of his entourage. Despite that, in this utterance he stops short from identifying him explicitly and instead has recourse to a very awkward choice of words. The translation “some kinship bond” (συγγενές τι) once again fails to do full justice to Oedipus’ twisted train of thought, as it suggests that he is simply untruthful.³⁵ After all, a person who has some kinship bond with Laius is certainly not Laius himself. But the ancient Greek, with its use of the dative along with συγγενές, is “making it verbally possible to identify the ξένος with Laius,” as was acutely observed by Richard Jebb (1914³: 111). Oedipus is not simply lying, he is burying the identity of Laius beneath an obscure periphrasis. Perhaps, as suggested by Bernd Manuwald, he is now consciously shrinking from the terrible truth³⁶ (although not yet as terrible as it will become soon afterwards). Whatever the case, his utterance, although grammatically correct, constitutes a clear violation of the maxim of Manner.

CONCLUSION

The most illuminating interpretation of Oedipus’ irony, one which goes beyond the standard opposition of being and seeming usually deployed to explain it, has been suggested by Vernant. According to him, Oedipus himself is “double,” his very existence is marked by a “duality.” He is a stranger, but at the same time, a Theban; a self-made ruler, but at the same time, a hereditary monarch. He enjoys godlike tyranny, only to end up as a blind beggar, perhaps even a *pharmakos*,³⁷ a deformed scapegoat, whose abortive expulsion even further underscores his total helplessness. This ontological duality is negotiated precisely through Oedipus’ language. His “own speech,” Vernant goes on to say, is sent “back at him, deformed or twisted around, like an echo to some of his

³⁴Although, as is frequently pointed out, the term ξένος is also applied to Oedipus himself (219, 220), which in turn would give the entire passage yet another double meaning: “if the ξένος (i.e. Oedipus) has some kin relation to Laius, who would be more unfortunate than this very man;” cf. Dawe 1982: 175–176; March 2020: 245.

³⁵ “[H]e refers not to identity but to kin-relationship, which he intends as a euphemism” Fin-glass 2018: 419; cf. Kamerbeek 1967: 166.

³⁶“Ödipus scheut sich, das Schreckliche, das er befürchtet, direkt auszusprechen” Manuwald 2012: 185.

³⁷Vernant 1988: 125–140; cf. also Girard 1986: 25–38 (and 1977: 68–85, 93–99); Pucci 1990; Foley 1993; contra: Drew Griffith 1993.

words.” Yet this brilliant observation is backed only with traditionally understood Sophoclean irony, the unintended *doubles entendres* of Oedipus words.³⁸ This essay, however, provides the necessary linguistic grounds to prop up Vernant’s conclusion. When it comes to matters of kinship and authority, Oedipus not only speaks in double meanings: his language becomes quite literally deformed and twisted. It recoils against his attempts to control it. And through these ominous expressions, it becomes “his true accuser,” to use an Aeschylean turn of phrase.³⁹

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³⁸ 1988: 429–430 (n. 13); Vernant (following closely Stanford 1939) does mention OT 124, 136 and 928, but he never detects any linguistic problems with them, and limits himself to pointing out their ambiguity.

³⁹ A. *Sept.* 438; cf. Dem. 19.210 (δοῦλος τῶν ῥημάτων).

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LES LAPSUS REVELATEURS D'ŒDIPE : LANGAGE, PARENTE ET TYRANNIE

R e s u m é

Cet article traite de l'ironie tragique dans l'Œdipe Roi et plus précisément de son aspect linguistique. L'argument part du constat que les ambiguïtés de plusieurs expressions sont dévoilées dans cette tragédie à travers divers lapsus de langue. Ces lapsus apparaissent à trois niveaux linguistiques différents : celui de la sémantique, de la syntaxe et finalement de la pragmatique ; cette division, par conséquent, fournit le cadre dans lequel les passages pertinents de la tragédie sont analysés. L'enquête porte à la conclusion que, là où il s'agit de la parenté d'Œdipe et de la légitimité de son pouvoir, l'équivoque de ses propos n'est pas une chose cachée qui serait réservée au spectateur doté d'une connaissance fine du mythe. Au contraire, elle se manifeste nettement par les fautes de langue et de communication, et grâce à cela nous donne l'impression que c'est bien la langue elle-même qui défie le héros quand il aborde l'énormité de ses relations familiales et de son patrimoine royal.