

## ***Epea Pteroenta* (“Winged Words”)**

**Françoise Létoublon**

One of the most frequent Homeric formulas, *epea pteroenta* (“winged words”), today appears as a problem in semantics: how can one apply this particular adjective, whatever its “exact” meaning may be, to this particular noun other than metaphorically? If the phrase is a metaphor, what is its import, and in what domain does the characteristic semantic transfer actually take place? Finally, to what epoch can the expression be traced back and, if it stems from a tradition preceding the era in which the Homeric poems were composed, how could the transmission of that tradition have come about? I will not address here all of these complex problems, which also involve the overall understanding of Homeric epic—its formation and transmission, along with an enormous bibliography. But it does seem to me that the formulaic phrase itself deserves a fresh analysis, and it is perhaps worthwhile to begin with a history of its interpretations.

### *Historical survey*

The scholiasts<sup>1</sup> do not appear to have been troubled by the recurrence of this formula, and do not comment on this combination of noun and adjective that has so engaged modern commentators. According to the modern editor, only one occurrence seems to have caught the interest of the scholiasts: *Iliad* 8.101. ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα· τὰ μὲν πράγματα τάχιστα γέγονεν, ἢ δὲ τῶν λόγων σχολὴ ποιητική. I venture to translate as follows: “‘He spoke winged words.’ The things happened very quickly, but the time period assigned to the words is poetic in nature.”

What can be ascertained from this brief comment, probably the most ancient one we know? The contrast between *pragmata* (“things”) and *logôn*

---

<sup>1</sup> For reasons of space, I have sampled only those Iliadic scholia available in Erbse 1971.

(“words”), underlined by *men / de* (“on the one hand / on the other hand”), is quite clear. What is less clear is the relationship between the scholiasts’ terms and the Homeric lines in question: just what “things” and what “words” are being identified? The scholium reference is found opposite line 8.101, but that does not necessarily indicate that it comments uniquely on that particular second half-line (or hemistich). An examination of the context of this passage provides some illumination: the battle is raging, and the situation is critical from the Achaean perspective. Diomedes has seen that the aged Nestor is in danger. Having vainly issued a call to Odysseus, Diomedes decides to venture alone into the front lines in order to assist Nestor. He stops near Nestor’s chariot, and it is to him that Diomedes’ “winged words” are addressed; they begin at line 102 and come to a close at line 111 with another Homeric formula.<sup>2</sup> For us these things that unfold rapidly, the *pragmata*, recall the panorama of events that I have summarized above, the performance of the bard, and the words of Diomedes. But the “words” referred to by the scholium are the *epea* pronounced by Diomedes, from lines 102-11. The need for the scholiast’s explanation derives from the exorbitant time and space (10 hexameter verses) devoted by Diomedes to mere speaking, when the dramatic situation apparently calls for actions rather than words.<sup>3</sup> If this explanation is correct, one can see that the problem of the expression *epea pteroenta* does not in itself interest the scholiasts.

On the other hand, we find the following commentary on this formula by Eustathius<sup>4</sup> in reference to *Iliad* 1.201:

“Ὅτι πτερόεντες οἱ λόγοι διὰ τὸ ταχὺ καὶ διὰ τὴν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἄρμονίαν καὶ εὐσυνθεσίαν, καὶ ὅτι τέμνουσι τὸν ἀέρα καθὰ τὸ πτερόν [. . .] Ἔθος οὖν ἐντεῦθεν Ὅμηρῳ ἔπεα λέγειν πτερόεντα. τῶν τινες δὲ παλαιῶν σοφῶ μεθοδικῶ ἐκλαθομένῳ τῆς κατ’ αὐτὸν τέχνης τέλεον ἐπέσκωψαν εὐφυῶς, ὡς γεγόνασιν αὐτῷ οἱ λόγοι πτερόεντες ὡς οἶα πτερυζάμενοι ἐξ αὐτοῦ.

That the words are winged because of their swiftness, because of their internal harmony, and because of their fine arrangement [. . .] It is on the

---

<sup>2</sup> 8:112: “Ὡς ἔφατ’, οὐδ’ ἀπίθησε Γερήνιος ἱππότης Νέστωρ (“Thus he spoke, and Gerenian horseman Nestor did not disobey”).

<sup>3</sup> I owe this interpretation of the *Iliad* 8.101 scholium to A. M. Chanet, whom I thank for her assistance.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Van der Valk 1971 *s.v.*

basis of this passage [concerning the Sirens’ song] that Homer is accustomed to speaking of “winged words.” Certain of the ancients, without understanding the deep wisdom of his art, made a mockery of them, explaining that his words became winged as if they had actually been provided with wings.

Who are the ancients to whom he alludes? In any case it certainly appears that Eustathius sees herein a metaphor (*hôs hoia*, “like those”), and that he interprets *pteron*, the root of *pteroenta*, as *pterux*.<sup>5</sup> Eustathius’ interpretation, “winged words” and therefore “rapid like birds,” accords well with the development of the Greek language, since the expression still exists in this sense in modern Greek, a fact that does not prevent an implicit reference to Homer: the formula frozen in the Homeric era was perhaps not understood by the bards who employed it.

Although the history of modern interpretations starts somewhat earlier,<sup>6</sup> I will commence my study<sup>7</sup> with Milman Parry and, following the principle of ring-composition favored by the ancients, will revisit his work in my conclusion, since despite the abundant bibliography on the question I do not believe that his investigation of and observations on this formula have received sufficient attention. The use of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG) will permit us to enter into a somewhat more detailed analysis of the Homeric formula than could Parry.

It was in an article on traditional metaphors in Homer (1933a), that Parry initially demonstrated an interest in this particular phrase, which corresponded perfectly to his definition of the formula as given in earlier works and especially in his French theses (1928a, b). His point of departure is the error committed by Aristotle in understanding metaphors as poetic tropes common in Homeric epic. If metaphors even exist for Parry, they are frozen metaphors, like those familiar from medieval English poetry (371-72): “The metaphors which lie in the fixed epithet are of the same sort, and there is no need of going so fully into the background of their thought in the

---

<sup>5</sup> See LSJ: s.v. πτέρον (“feather”), πτέρυξ (“wing”).

<sup>6</sup> For the “moderns,” I have found nothing before Wackernagel 1860, which duly begins and ends with a precise study of our formula—with some interesting detours—and mentions the “contrary” formula *apteros muthos* (“wingless word”). In spite of its title, Peabody 1975 (*The Winged Word*) does not concern itself with this formula, but pursues a more general perspective.

<sup>7</sup> I was drawn to the study of this formula during the course of a more general investigation of the Homeric idiom, and by encountering Martin’s very stimulating work (1989): my reading of his analysis of *epos* initiated a return to *epea pteroenta*.

diction.” Further, he writes (372-73):

Homer, to simplify his verse-making, has a system of verses which expresses the idea such and such a person said, answered, asked, and so on, giving also the tone of voice when the poet wishes, or some other detail. One special line of this type which is needed is that in which the character who is to speak has been the subject of the last verses so that the use of his name in the line would be clumsy. The one verse that will do this is *καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα* [“and speaking, he addressed him/her with winged words”], or, when the tone of voice is to be given, *καί ῥ’ ὀλοφυρόμενος ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα* [“and grieving, he addressed him/her with winged words”], and so on. Homer has this one line for this one frequent need, and its use always brings in *ἔπεα πτερόεντα*.

He thus concluded that Homeric metaphors made up part of the stock of formulas inherited from a long poetic tradition. Moreover, one can discover parallels for other such frozen metaphors in the Homeric tradition by consulting Indo-Iranian poetry or other Indo-European traditions,<sup>8</sup> correspondences that prove the accuracy of his original intuition, based as it was solely on the internal analysis of formulaic style.

In the same year Parry published in the *Transactions of the American Philological Association* another article (1933b) in which he revisits *epea pteroenta*, on this occasion in order to illustrate “whole formulaic lines” in Greek and South Slavic poetry; the example *καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα* occurs herein (380-83). Parry makes many observations that seem significant to me. In order to begin a conversation, if both the speaker and the interlocutor are known, one finds in Greek the line *καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα* (49 occurrences), which is paralleled in South Slavic epic. If the speaker is known, but not the interlocutor, one employs, for instance, *αἶψα δ’ ἄρ’ Εὐμαίων ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα* [“and so immediately he addressed Eumaios with winged words”], or *αἶψα δ’ ἄρ’ Ἀθηναίην ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα* [“and so immediately he addressed Athena with winged words”]; and if the names of the two characters must both be specified, the bard turns to yet another formula.

In 1935 George M. Calhoun reacted, citing and criticizing Parry. Dismissing the idea of traditional oral poetry and ardently defending the

---

<sup>8</sup> See the articles conveniently collected in Schmitt 1968.

“art” of Homer,<sup>9</sup> he sought to justify the uses of ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα through their affective meaning. In 1937 a posthumous article by Parry responded to Calhoun and reasserted the conclusions of his earlier essays (414): “Thus Homer could not have used at a 112 such a verse as τὸν δ’ αὖ Τηλέμαχος πεπνυμένος ἀντίον ἡύδα [‘and in reply prudent Telemachus addressed him’] as can be seen by reading from verse 113. The name of Telemachus is given in this verse, and it serves as the grammatical subject of all of the following sentences in such a way that the second use of the name at 122 would break the style badly.” He went on to argue (416) that “it is for purely grammatical reasons that we have ἔπος τ’ ἔφατ’ ἔκ τ’ ὀνόμαζε [‘he/she spoke a word and called him/her by name’] and not ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα.” According to Parry, there is thus no need to locate in *pteroenta* or *onomazde* (“called by name”) a particular meaning that would restrict the utility of the involved formulas.<sup>10</sup>

An article by A. K. Thomson, published in 1936, had the virtue of introducing into the debate another formula, *apteros muthos* (“wingless word”), apparently the opposite of the phrase under discussion. Following Wackernagel,<sup>11</sup> he opted for an interpretation of the frozen metaphor linked not to birds’ flight but rather to the practice of archery. It was then Frederick Combellack, earlier a student of Calhoun, who resumed the debate, utilizing the ancient commentaries and referring to various parallel formulas (1950). Citing correspondences between Calhoun and J. A. Scott as well as the last conversation he himself had with his mentor (in which Calhoun seemed much less sure of his position), Combellack acknowledged the importance of Parry’s argumentation.

Despite these perspectives, semantic analysis of the formula was not undertaken in a truly interesting and scientific manner before Marcello Durante (1958), who began from the image of the word as a path in Callimachos’ *Aitia*, necessarily referring to the innovative work of Becker (1937). Durante observed that in other contexts in Homer the word *pteroeis* (“winged”) is always employed in reference to an arrow, citing a Vedic

---

<sup>9</sup> Note Calhoun’s title: “The Art of Formula in Homer.”

<sup>10</sup> I observe in passing that Parry adopts the conventional translation of “winged words” without ever considering its meaning.

<sup>11</sup> Who translated the phrase into German as *befiederte Worte*.

parallel. Numerous examples of complementarity between word and arrow<sup>12</sup> were adduced to support his conclusion that *epea pteroenta* are words that fly straight to the target, that are suited to the situation.

In 1968 Joachim Latacz took up the problem, using Durante's contributions as a point of departure and neatly contrasting the sense of *pteroeis* as applied to words like arrows (*gefiedert*, "feathered") to that sense appropriate to birds (*geflügelt*, "winged"), but also equally clearly recognizing Parry's insights on the formal function of the formula.<sup>13</sup> Detailed study of the formula *apteros muthos* (and after Homer of *apteros phatis*), which he analyzes by comparing it to other formulas designating characters' silence, allows Latacz to conclude that its fundamental meaning is not in the domain of intellect, but rather in that of psychology.<sup>14</sup>

Next one should mention R. D'Avino (1982),<sup>15</sup> for whom formularity of usage does not imply an absence of meaning. She observes, very judiciously in my opinion, that the *epea* constitute a collective unit, not

---

<sup>12</sup> For example, ἄλιον τὸν μῦθον (*Il.* 5.715) / ἄλιον βέλος (15.575). Pindar opposes πτερόεντα ὀιστόν, χαμαιπετέων λόγων (*Ol.* 9.11), χαμαιπετέες...ἔπος (*Pyth.* 6.37), etc.

<sup>13</sup> 1968:29: "Aber auch die Funktion der Einleitungsformel ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα macht Durantes Erklärung unwahrscheinlich: nach Durante müssten ja die durch diese Formel eingeleiteten 125 Reden allesamt 'situationsangemessen' oder 'ihr Ziel treffend' sein. Diese Auffassung ist ebenso subjektiv und der epischen Formelsprache unangemessen, wie es seinerzeit die Versuche waren, πτερόεντα als ein die Eigenart der folgenden Rede im voraus charakterisierendes Attribut zu verstehen (zurückgewiesen von M. Parry, *CPh* 32, 1937, 59-63). Wenn die Formel 125 Reden verschiedensten Inhalts und verschiedenster Länge einleitet, also immer passt, so kann das nur bedeuten, das zwischen ihr und dem Inhalt oder der Eigenart der folgenden Rede keine innere, sondern nur eine funktionale Beziehung bestand: die Formel war neutral."

<sup>14</sup> 1968:38: "Gewisse Parallelen im Formalen (gleiche Personenkonstellation) und Inhaltlichen (Schockwirkung) konnten also den Dichter bestimmen, den einmal geprägten Ausdruck auch in diesen Fällen wieder zu verwenden. Seine Aussagekraft freilich lässt im gleichen Masse nach, in dem die Situation und damit auch die Gefühle der schweigenden Person sich ändern." Further (1968:47): "Hat demnach schliesslich der Dichter der Odyssee-Stellen in der Tat zu πτερόεις den Gegensatz ἄπτερος in der Bedeutung 'unausgesprochen' gebildet (worauf nun alles hindeutet), dann hat er auch ἔπεα πτερόεντα als '(laut) ausgesprochene Worte' verstanden. Die eingangs vorgelegte Deutung von ἔπεα πτερόεντα wäre damit am Ende als richtig erwiesen."

<sup>15</sup> On this point I am indebted to Paola Ceccarelli and Sabina Crippa, who analyzed this article in detail and with great finesse in the context of my seminar at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes.

certainly indicating “words” as such, but more likely a distinct message. The same plural collective designates the epic verses; it recalls the origin of the sacred province of poets and seers. She also contrasts *epea pteroenta* with *apteros muthos*: the word without *pteron* is a silent voice, one that does not pass into oral expression, in response to an action.

It is surprising that the monumental commentary of G. S. Kirk (1985, 1990) appears content with ancient opinion, as transmitted by Eustathius, on this point, and does not refer to any of the studies devoted to the “winged words” formula by the various scholars mentioned above, not even those of Parry with which he is quite familiar.<sup>16</sup> Here is in effect everything he says in relation to the initial instance of the phrase (at *Iliad* 1.201): “This is the first occurrence in the poem of a very common formula verse (14x *Il.*, 15x *Od.*) and its even commoner component ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα (55x *Il.*, 60x *Od.*). Words are ‘winged’ because they fly through the air rapidly, like birds.”

In his turn Richard Martin (1989:26-37) studies the formula in the context of the contrast he seeks to establish between *epos* and *muthos* in Homer. I have borrowed a part of the historical survey from his presentation, without necessarily adopting his conclusions on the opposition and the meaning of speech-acts in this case.

From a different point of view, J. M. Foley (1990:129-37) analyzes very precisely this sample of Homeric phraseology, *epea pteroenta*, according great importance to the metrical word-position of each element and of the formula as a whole in the context of the larger phrases it partially constitutes.<sup>17</sup> My results seem to dovetail with his findings.

### *Formularity and conditions of usage*

In the wake of these scholars’ contributions there does not remain a great deal to do, except perhaps to study in detail, with the aid of the *TLG*, the way in which the Homeric epics and hymns combine the formula *epea pteroenta* with various partnering phrases, under very exacting conditions of usage.

The great majority of instances of this formula combine with the verb *prosêuda* (“he/she spoke to,” 113 occurrences) or its variant *prosêudôn*

---

<sup>16</sup> See Kirk 1985:espec. 17-37.

<sup>17</sup> See espec. the table and commentaries (135-37).

(“they spoke to,” 8 occs.), and in a single case *metêuda* (“he/she spoke among”).<sup>18</sup> Two other predicates involving verbs of speaking are also encountered, with lesser frequency: *agoreuon* (“they spoke,” 4 occs.) and *agoreuen* (“he/she spoke,” 6 occs.). Notice that the second hemistich is of precisely the same structure as a whole, but that the formula *epea pteroenta* undergoes a significant variation because the verb begins with a vowel: ἔπεα πτερόεντ’ ἀγόρευον/-εν· (with elision).

In fact, a large percentage of the instances of ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα, the formulaic second hemistich, is preceded by a first hemistich itself formulaically frozen: καί μιν φωνήσας (“and speaking to him/her”).<sup>19</sup> To these 28 examples we may add another 10 in which the difference between the feminine (*phônêsas* < *phônêsas*) and the masculine inflection (*phônêsas*) is imperceptible except by reference to context, though of course it is orthographically cued by a mark of elision (·).<sup>20</sup> In six additional Odyssean occurrences, the minimal variant *prosêudôn* affects the second half-line.<sup>21</sup> We encounter as well three instances in which another pronoun is substituted for *min* (“him/her”) in the first hemistich.<sup>22</sup> Here again one discovers the possibility of the feminine participle with elision of the final vowel.<sup>23</sup>

It becomes apparent that the first formulaic hemistich does not recur except with the second hemistich in the form ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα / προσηύδων, and never with the verb *agoreuon/-en*. The small total number of instances of this formula may diminish the force of this

<sup>18</sup> *Il.* 8.496: τῷ ὄ γ’ ἐρεισάμενος ἔπεα Τρώεσσι μετηύδα· (“Leaning on this [spear] he spoke words to the Trojans”).

<sup>19</sup> See Parry 1933a. *Il.* 2.7, 4.369, 8.101, 10.163, 13.750, 14.138, 16.6, 17.74, 20.331, 23.601, 23.625, 24.517; *Od.* 1.122, 5.172, 8.346, 8.407, 13.58, 13.227, 13.253, 14.114, 15.259, 16.180, 18.104, 20.198, 22.410, 24.372, 24.399; *Hymn to Hermes* 435.

<sup>20</sup> *Il.* 15.35, 15.89; *Od.* 2.269, 5.117, 7.236, 8.442, 8.460, 13.290, 23.34; *Hymn to Demeter* 320. E.g., *Il.* 15.34-35: “Ὡς φάτο, ῥίγησεν δὲ βοῶπις πότνια Ἥρη, / καί μιν φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα·

<sup>21</sup> *Od.* 4.550, 10.482, 11.56, 11.209, 11.396, 12.296. Could it be that these examples testify to the *Odyssey*’s idiosyncratic taste for formulaic variants?

<sup>22</sup> *Il.* 4.284, 4.337, 10.191: καί σφεας φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα.

<sup>23</sup> *Il.* 15.145: καί σφεας φωνήσας ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα.

observation, but the fact that other initial hemistichs recur with one or the other form of the second hemistich appears to lend it some importance: in my opinion, the phenomenon can be linked to the difference in meaning between the two verbs.<sup>24</sup>

Various more or less formulaic structures can be recognized as such through their first hemistichs. I will try to categorize these usages by grouping together those that seem to bear a formulaic resemblance:

- a. with some qualification (adjective or participle) in apposition to the subject of the verb:<sup>25</sup>

καί ῥ’ ὄλοφυρόμενος (“and so, grieving,” *Il.* 5.871, 11.815; *Od.* 16.22)

καί ῥ’ ὄλοφυρομένη (*Il.* 18.72; *Od.* 11.472, 17.40; *Hymn to Demeter* 247)

καί μ’ ὄλοφυρομένη (*Od.* 11.154)

καί μ’ ὄλοφυρόμενος (*Od.* 10.265, 11.616)

καί μ’ ὄλοφυρόμενοι (*Od.* 10.418)

ἄγχοῦ δ’ ἰστάμενος (“and standing nearby,” *Il.* 4.203, 13.462, 14.356, 16.537; *Od.* 4.25, 17.349,<sup>26</sup> 17.552, 22.100)

ἄγχοῦ δ’ ἰσταμένη (*Il.* 4.92, 5.123, 18.169, 22.215)

ἄγχοῦ δ’ ἰστάμεναι (*Hymn to Demeter* 112)

ἄγχι παρισταμένη (*Od.* 10.377)

καί οἱ ἐπευχόμενος (“and uttering [words] of triumph to him,” *Il.* 16.829, 21.121)

καί οἱ ἐπευχομένη (*Il.* 21.409)

ἦ δ’ ἄρ’ ἐπευχομένη (*Il.* 21.427<sup>27</sup>)

---

<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the use of *agoreuô* is not necessarily linked to a plural addressee; indeed, a singular pronoun seems more common.

<sup>25</sup> On *phônêsas* / *phônêsas*’, see above. Cf. also *Il.* 8.496, cited above with *metêuda*. I have not retained those variants attested only a single time in which the first hemistich does not seem to have a formulaic character.

<sup>26</sup> In this example the second hemistich is ἔπεα πτερόεντ’ ἀγόρευε.

<sup>27</sup> See the preceding note.

ὅς μιν ἀμειβόμενος (“who, making answer to him/her,” *Il.* 7.356)  
 καί μιν ἀμειβόμενος (*Il.* 15.48, 23.557)  
 οἱ δ’ ἀπαμειβόμενοι (*Od.* 9.409<sup>28</sup>)

πολλὰ λισσόμενος (“and entreating strongly,” *Il.* 21.368)  
 καί μιν λισσόμενος (*Od.* 22.343, 22.366; *Hymn to Aphrodite* 184)

τούς ὃ γ’ ἐποτρύνων (“for, urging them,” *Il.* 13.94, 13.480,  
 17.219)  
 καί μιν ἐποτρύνων (*Od.* 15.208)

δεινὰ δ’ ὁμοκλήσας (“and shouting terribly,” *Il.* 16.706, 20.448)

καί μιν δάκρυ χέουσ’ (“and weeping tears for him,” *Il.* 22.81)

στάς ἐν Ἀχαιοῖσιν (“and standing among the Achaeans,” *Il.*  
 22.377)  
 στάς δ’ ἄρ’ ἐν Ἀργείοις (*Il.* 23.535<sup>29</sup>)

καί μιν ὑπόδρα ἰδὼν (“and looking darkly at him,” *Od.* 17.459,  
 18.388)

καί μιν νεικείων (“and insulting him,” *Od.* 18.9)

b. with reference to an addressee (most often a proper noun):

αὐτίκ’ Ἀθηναίην (“immediately to Athena,” *Il.* 4.69, 5.713, 21.419)  
 αἶψα δ’ Ἀθηναίην (*Il.* 8.351, 19.341)

αἶψα δὲ Τυδεΐδην (“and immediately to Tydeus’ son,” *Il.* 5.242)

αὐτίκ’ Ὀϊλιάδην (“immediately to Oiliades,” *Il.* 12.365)

ἀλλ’ Ἀσκληπιάδην (“but to Asklepiades,” *Il.* 14.2)

---

<sup>28</sup> See the two preceding notes.

<sup>29</sup> See the three preceding notes for both of these examples.

ἶριον δὲ προτέρην (“and first to Iris,” *Il.* 15.157)

αὐτίκα μητέρα ἦν (“immediately to his mother,” *Il.* 19.20)

ἦκα πρὸς ἀλλήλους (“softly to one another,” *Il.* 3.155)  
πολλὰ πρὸς ἀλλήλους (*Il.* 24.142)

ἦ ῥα καὶ Ἀντίνοον (“and to Antinoos,” *Od.* 17.396)

αἶψα δ’ ἄρ’ Εὐμαιον (“and immediately to Eumaios,” *Od.* 17.543)

αἶψα δὲ Τηλέμαχον (*Od.* 17.591, 19.3, 22.150, 23.112)

αἶψα δ’ Ὀδυσσῆα (*Od.* 24.494)

Finally, we wish to return to the criterion of function, noted by Parry but without comment on the reasons for and the effects of this dimension.<sup>30</sup> All the usages of *epea pteroenta* / *epea pteroent’* — without any exceptions — introduce the direct discourse of a character in the epic. For Parry this seems simply to have been part of the compositional habit of bards, of the “formulaic tradition” of Homeric epic. To my mind, just as the analysis of formulaicity does not preclude research into ancient “meaning” (certainly fossilized but also latent in the formula), so one must also raise the question of how so focused a usage can be justified. Another Homeric formula, ἔπος τ’ ἔφατ’ ἔκ τ’ ὀνόμαζε(ν) (“spoke a word and called [him/her] by name”),<sup>31</sup> performs the same function in 40 instances, but presents a single exception (*Od.* 17.215-16):

τοὺς δὲ ἰδὼν νείκεσσεν, ἔπος τ’ ἔφατ’ ἔκ τ’ ὀνόμαζεν  
ἔκπαγλον καὶ ἀεικές.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Foley 1999:221-24.

<sup>31</sup> On this formula, often preceded by another (ἔν τ’ ἄρα οἱ φῦ χειρὶ, “she clung to his hand”), see Kirk 1990:comm. ad *Il.* 6.253, the first occurrence of the formulaic line ἔν τ’ ἄρα οἱ φῦ χειρὶ ἔπος τ’ ἔφατ’ ἔκ τ’ ὀνόμαζε. See also Foley 1999:223-24 on the category of the “emotional speaker.”

<sup>32</sup> In my opinion this exception can be explained by two phenomena: the speech in question is qualified, whereas ordinarily the textual quotation occurs without

Looking at them, he insulted them, and spoke a word and called them by name, [a word] violent and unseemly.

It seems to me that this compositional law can be properly explained as one of the characteristics of Homeric orality, preserved in the written text by the power of the tradition and by the fact that the punctuation has been long established by textual convention. In an oral epic one has a compelling need for signals of direct discourse, in principle both before and after the reported speech, so that the audience will be aware that the narrating bard is assuming the voice of his characters. And these signals must be clear, perceptible even by a less than attentive audience: they must therefore be regular enough to play the role that iconic marks of quotation (“...”) play for us in the written text. This function of signaling direct discourse suffices to explain the very neatly formulaic character of the second hemistich, ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα. Pragmatic necessities (that is, indications of speaker or respondent providing a prior context, as Parry noted;<sup>33</sup> and indications of tone or the various circumstances involved, as he also observed) allow us to account for the greater diversity of the opening hemistich. Following direct discourse, the signals for closure—equivalent to closing quotation marks in the typographical tradition—at times include *epos*,<sup>34</sup> but other formulas are used more often, most frequently with a verb of speaking in the aorist tense.<sup>35</sup>

The “meaning” on which the most recent studies of “winged words” concur is assuredly not any more vivid in this formula at the instant that the bards employ it as a signal for the direct discourse that they are about to reperform before their audience. But in contrast to “wingless word”—which designates a speech that remains silent, a “word” that does not gain expression by “passing the barrier of the teeth” (to have recourse to another

---

qualification, and it is reported in the form of indirect discourse (*neikessen*, “he insulted”).

<sup>33</sup> Today one can employ the linguistic notion of “anaphoric reference” to explain that if the subject of the preceding phrase is the same as the person making the speech, his or her name is not repeated. On the connection between the Homeric question and the theory of oral composition, see particularly Foley 1988:espec. 1-35.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., *Od.* 8.141: μάλα τοῦτο ἔπος κατὰ μοῖραν ἔειπες.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., *Il.* 8.112 cited above.

frequent formula in the epic<sup>36</sup>)—one appreciates how direct discourse, orally expressed and understood as being reported by the bard just as it was spoken in “reality,” could adopt as its most frequent signal the metaphor of the arrow that shoots off into the air, follows its trajectory without deviating from its route, and indeed produces an effect, for good or for ill, on the addressee.<sup>37</sup>

*Université Stendhal*  
(Trans. by J. M. Foley)

### References

- Becker 1937 O. Becker. *Das Bild des Weges und verwandte Vorstellungen im frühgriechischen Denken.* Hermes Einzelschriften, 4. Wiesbaden: Steiner.
- Calhoun 1935 George M. Calhoun. “The Art of Formula in Homer: EΠEΑ ΠTEΠOENTA.” *Classical Philology*, 30:215-27.
- Combella 1950 Frederick Combella. “Words that Die.” *Classical Journal*, 46:21-26.
- D’Avino 1982 R. D’Avino. “Messaggio verbale e tradizione orale. Hom. ἔπεα πτερόεντα.” *Helikon*, 20-21:87-117.
- Durante 1958 M. Durante. “EΠEΑ ΠTEΠOENTA. La parola come ‘cammino’ in immagini greche e vediche.” *Rendiconti dell’Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, 13:3-14; trans. into German as “*Epea pteroenta*. Die Rede als ‘Weg’ in griechischen und vedischen Bildern,” in Schmitt 1968:242-60.
- Erbse 1971 H. Erbse. *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem (Scholia vetera)*. vol. 2. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Foley 1988 John Miles Foley. *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press. Rpt. 1992.

---

<sup>36</sup> ... πολὺν σε ἔπος φύγεν ἕρκος ὀδόντων (*Il.* 4.350, 14.83 with the vocative *Atreïdê* (“son of Atreus”); *Od.* 1.64, 5.22, 19.492, 23.70 with *teknon emon* (“my child”); *Od.* 3.230 with *Têlemache* (“Telemachos”); *Od.* 21.168 with *Lêôdes*).

<sup>37</sup> On “wounding” words, see Perpillou 1986.

- Foley 1990 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Traditional Oral Epic: The Odyssey, Beowulf, and the Serbo-Croatian Return Song*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press. Rpt. 1993.
- Foley 1999 \_\_\_\_\_ . *Homer's Traditional Art*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Kirk 1985 G. S. Kirk, ed. *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume I: books 1-4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirk 1990 \_\_\_\_\_ , ed. *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume II: books 5-8*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Latacz 1968 Joachim Latacz. "ἄπτερος μῦθος - ἄπτερος φάτις: ungeflügelte Worte?" *Glotta*, 46:27-47.
- LSJ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, rev. Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Martin 1989 Richard P. Martin. *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Parry 1928a Milman Parry. *L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère: Essai sur un problème de style homérique*. Paris: Société Editrice "Les Belles Lettres"; English trans. in Parry 1971:1-190.
- Parry 1928b \_\_\_\_\_ . *Les Formules et la métrique d'Homère*. Paris: Société Editrice "Les Belles Lettres"; English trans. in Parry 1971:191-239.
- Parry 1933a \_\_\_\_\_ . "The Traditional Metaphor in Homer." *Classical Philology*, 28:30-43; rpt. in Parry 1971:365-75.
- Parry 1933b \_\_\_\_\_ . "Whole Formulaic Verses in Greek and Southslavic Heroic Song." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 64:179-97; rpt. in Parry 1971:376-90.
- Parry 1937 \_\_\_\_\_ . "About Winged Words." *Classical Philology*, 32:59-63; rpt. in Parry 1971:414-18.
- Parry 1971 \_\_\_\_\_ . *The Making of Homeric Verse*. Ed. by Adam

- Parry. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Rpt. 1987.
- Peabody 1975                      Berkley Peabody. *The Winged Word*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Perpillou 1986                    J. L. Perpillou. “De ‘couper’ à ‘insulter’.” In *O-o-pe-ro-si: Festschrift für Ernst Risch zum 75. Geburtstag*. Ed. by A. M. Etter. Berlin: De Gruyter. pp. 72-84.
- Schmitt 1968                      R. Schmitt. *Indogermanische Dichtersprache*. Wege der Forschung, 165. Darmstadt: Beck.
- Thomson 1936                    A. K. Thomson. “Winged Words.” *Classical Quarterly*, 30:1-3.
- TLG                                    *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. University of California-Irvine.
- Van der Valk 1971                M. Van der Valk. *Eustathii Archiepiskopi Thessalonicensis Commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes*. vol. 1. Leiden: Brill.
- Wackernagel 1860                Wilhelm Wackernagel. *EPEA PTEROENTA: Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Mythologie*. Basel: Schweig-hauser'sche Universitäts Buchdruckerei.