

Verbs of perception in Ancient Greek

Silvia Luraghi, University of Pavia

The construction of the verb *akoúō* ‘hear’ has traditionally been a puzzling issue for Ancient Greek descriptive grammars. This verb may take either an accusative or a genitive second argument, but why exactly one of the two cases is chosen is not always clear: while animate NPs consistently occur in the genitive, inanimates can occur in either case. Reference to the partitive meaning of the genitive (Chantraine 1953) to explain variation does not seem to account for the data, and describing the alternation in terms of high (accusative) vs. low (genitive) affectedness is not compelling in light of occurrences such as (1), in which an accusative and a genitive NP are coordinated.

- (1)

<i>mukēthmoû</i>	<i>t'</i>	<i>ēkousa</i>	<i>boôn</i>	<i>aulizomenáōn</i>
lowing.GEN	PTC	hear.AOR.ISG	cow.GEN.PL	lodge.PTCP.PRS.M/P.GEN.PL
<i>oiôn</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>blēkhēn</i>		
sheep.GEN.PL	PTC	bleating.ACC		

'I heard the lowing of the cattle lying (in the courtyard) and the bleating of the sheep.' (Hom. *Odyssey* 12.265-266)

Crucially, the issue is usually approached in the framework of case variation, and *akoúō* is compared with other verbs that display the genitive/accusative alternation, rather than with other verbs of perception. In my paper, I draw on data ranging from Homer to Classical Greek authors of 5th century BCE, and show that better insights can be gained by approaching the construction of *akoúō* from the perspective of typological work on perception verbs (e.g. Viberg 1984, Evans/Wilkins 2000). Once one considers the groups of ‘experiencer based’ (in terms of Viberg 1984) perception verbs, i.e. verbs with a subject experiencer and a stimulus second argument such as ‘hear’, some common patterns emerge that single out different perception modalities. Verbs of smelling, touching and tasting (*osmáō*, *osphraínomai* ‘smell’, *háptomai*, *psaiúō* ‘touch, feel by touching’, *geúomai* ‘taste’, cf. Viti 2017) consistently take genitive stimuli (possible accusative objects only occur in Late Greek), while verbs that indicate sight (*dérkomai*, *horáō*, *eídon*, *blépō*) take accusative stimuli. Verbs that admit variation besides *akoúō* are other verbs of hearing, e.g. *klúō* and *aiō*. This distribution singles out verbs of sight (never taking the genitive), and is consistent with cross-linguistic data underlying Viberg’s (1984:136) Modality hierarchy in (2).

- (2) The modality hierarchy: sight > hearing > touch >

taste	}	smell
		taste

In this respect, the puzzling distribution of cases with verbs of hearing reflects the in-between position of this perception modality and points to a fluctuation in its construal. Further comparison with other types of experiential predicates also reveals a split. Genitive stimuli are typical of verbs of bodily sensation, e.g. *peináō* ‘be hungry’, *dipsáō* ‘be thirsty’ and verbs of satiation (possible dative stimuli with this last group of verbs are beyond the scope of this paper), while accusative stimuli consistently occur with verbs of mental activity, e.g. *noéō*, *oíomai*, *phronéō* ‘think’. Of special interest is the verb *oída* ‘know’, etymologically connected with *eídon* ‘see’, which increasingly features accusative stimuli, with genitive stimuli virtually limited to occurrences in which the verb indicates a skill rather than knowledge in Homeric Greek. Hence different cases featured by verbs surveyed here point toward a distinction between cognition and bodily sensations that underlies the hierarchy of perceptual modalities, and connects sight directly with cognition, while hearing has connections with both other experiential fields. Data from texts of different time stages indicate a strengthening of the distinction in diachrony. These findings are in accordance with findings from genetically unrelated languages that have been described in typological research on perception verbs.

References

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