

Cutting Both Ways: culture, grammar, and usage in Lucian's dialogues on language

As is true of many writers grouped into the Second Sophistic, Lucian of Samosata devotes considerable attention to questions of usage, syntax, and style in Attic Greek. His relationship with this subject matter, however, is complicated by his Syrian heritage: Greek is not his native tongue, and he creates various surrogate *personae* whose accent, speech patterns, or tendency to "barbarize" he notes in his writings. Yet Lucian also lays claim to an inalienable Greek identity by his technical mastery of the rules of Attic and his ability to compose polished pieces of writing in that language (*Bis accusatus*). Moreover, he frequently asserts superiority in matters of Greek grammar and composition, whether offering precepts on the proper way to write history or relentlessly mocking an interlocutor's lapse in Attic vocabulary (*Pseudologista*). Thus, Lucian creates numerous opportunities to display his Greek pedigree, exhibiting a significant degree of cultural chauvinism in the process (Bompaire 1958). But Lucian never lets go of his Syrian heritage either, bringing it up several times (*Scytha*, *De dea Syria*, *Piscator*, *Bis accusatus*) and finding it a source of pride for at least one persona (Rochette 2010). The result of these two contradictory tendencies is that Lucian's authorial *persona* both expertly commands the Greek idiom and distances himself from it.

In this paper I argue that, by claiming the Greek language as his own while retaining a fundamentally non-Greek identity, Lucian demonstrates his qualifications to participate in the Atticist debate but portrays himself as not deeply invested in the exercise of prescribing rules for Attic Greek. This relaxed attitude towards Atticism appears most clearly in his dialogues that focus on the gate-keeping of the language, namely the *Pseudologista*, *Soloecista*, and *Lexiphanes*. In each work, rather than simply mock an interlocutor's deficiencies in the Attic idiom, Lucian's stand-in characters instead look to dismantle the other figures' assertions of their own linguistic

superiority: a criticism of improper usage is dismissed through attestation and etymology; a claim of having mastered the fine points of Attic grammar is belied through subtle and deliberately-inserted mistakes; and hyper-Atticism is shown to be even more opaque than the clumsiest vernacular. Furthermore, Lucian's *personae* attack their opponents for so-called errors that not only occur elsewhere in Lucian's own corpus, but even in the classical Attic works from which the Attic style of the Second Sophistic is drawn (Macleod 1956). Thus, in my view, his most explicit and forceful grammatical prescriptions are undercut by his own body of writings, meaning that both sides of these dialogues are in fact the target of Lucian's satire.

His stand-ins suggest an author of mixed Syrian and Greek affiliation; it is an attractive proposition to use this multi-ethnic dimension autobiographically in constructing a biography of the historical Lucian (Jones 1986), however the ambiguous location of Lucian's *personae* within the ethnic landscape is more informative when viewed as a literary device. By avoiding identifying as solely culturally Syrian or culturally Greek, Lucian's literary voice embraces cosmopolitanism, which lies at the heart of the Cynic tradition that heavily informs his writing (Branham 1989). This stance enables his speakers to know Attic not by being born Greek (Rochette 2010) but rather by mastering Attic authors. Similarly, by subtly turning his mockery back towards his own pedantic, prescriptivist *personae*, Lucian suggests that obsessing over the Attic debate on the rules of grammar is self-defeating. The true way to master Attic is to read closely the Attic literature itself. In his other works (*Adversus indoctum*, *Symposium*) Lucian shows his disdain for who have not read or do not engage with the actual texts of the Attic tradition (Johnson 2008). In these dialogues on language, therefore, he ironically illustrates how even - or indeed, especially - the most knowledgeable Atticists can be drawn into pointless grammatical debates that waste time better spent on debates of substance.

Works Cited

- Bompaire, J. 1958. *Lucien écrivain. Imitation et creation*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Branham, R.B. 1989. *Unruly Eloquence: Lucian and the Comedy of Traditions*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Johnson, W.A. 2008. *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, C.P. 1986. *Culture and Society in Lucian*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- MacLeod, M.D. 1956. "AN with the future in Lucian and the Solecist." *CQ* 50:102-11.
- Rochette, B. 2010. "La problématique des langues étrangères dans les opuscules de Lucien et la conscience linguistique des grecs," in F. Mestre and P. Gómez (eds.), *Lucian of Samosata: Greek Writer and Roman Citizen*, 217-33. Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona.