Evidence for the semantic extension Agent > Instrument?
Two case-studies in Ancient Greek

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Agent nouns usually show synchronic patterns of polysemy cross-linguistically. Word formation patterns for Agent nouns frequently serve for the formation of Instruments and Locatives, too, among other possibilities. Until recently, it had been assumed that this polysemy was due to a semantic extension due to metaphor or metonymy (see Luján forthc., with further references). However, recent research has shown that this supposed semantic extention is not so well documented as it was believed. Instead, other mechanisms such as borrowing, homonymization or ellipsis appear to be responsible of what synchronically seem to be cases of polysemy, as shown by Luschützky & Rainer (forthc.).

In this paper I will review the evidence available for the analysis of the meaning and function of two productive suffixes in Ancient Greek, -τηρ and -της/-τᾱς. The type of evidence that we can rely on to investigate whether there has been a semantic extension from Agent to other meanings is different in each case, which is quite interesting from a methodological point of view.

The suffix -τηρ has well-known cognates in other Indo-European languages. Especially important for the analysis of the Greek data is Vedic, in which there are two types of -*tar* nouns. These can be distinguished by the different accentuation pattern that they show (accent on the suffix vs. accent on the root) and their different syntactic behaviour (complement in Genetive vs. complement in Accusative). Tichy (1995) has reviewed all these Vedic nouns in -*tar* and has found that they are only Agents. As opposed to that, Greek -τηρ nouns can also be Instruments, Means, and Locatives. A detailed analysis of the attested history of this suffix in Old Greek shows that it has gone through various consecutive phases:

(i)   -τηρ frequent for Agents and extremely rare for Instruments (Mycenaean);
(ii)   Increase of Instruments in -τηρ;
(iii)   -τηρ productive for Instruments but not used for Agents (Ionian-Attic dialect).

Given this data, the question that arises is: should we assume that the polysemy Agent-Instrument already existed in Proto-Indo-European (or at least in Graeco-Indo-Iranian)? If this was so, it would follow that (a) the polysemy Agent-Instrument was given up in Vedic in favour of the agentive reading, and (b) the polysemy Agent-Instrument was almost totally given up in Greek in favour of Agents, too, but then it gained ground again and, later, in the Ionian-Attic dialect it was the instrument reading of the suffix that prevailed. Otherwise, we would have to assume that the polysemy did not exist in pre-Greek but, as suggested by the Greek data itself, it gradually developped in Greek until -τηρ was given up as a productive pattern for the formation of Agent nouns in Ionian-Attic and was replaced by the suffix -της in that function.

The kind of evidence that we can deal with for -της/-τᾱς (dialectal variants) is of a different nature. This suffix lacks direct cognates in other Indo-European languages and it must be explained as a development inside Greek itself (Chantraine 1933: 310). Agent nouns in -της/-τᾱς are already attested in the first documents of the Greek language (Mycenaean tablets and Homer). Only later, words built by means of this suffix will begin to show other meanings.

I will review the extant evidence in order to try to determine whether polysemy of the Greek suffix should be explained as due to a semantic extension or it came about by means of other mechanisms. The focus will be especially on those nouns in -της naming objects, such as ἐμβάτης 'a kind of half-boot of felt' (cp. ἐμβαίνω 'step in, enter upon'), ἐπενδύτης 'garment worn over another' (cp. ἐπενδύω 'put on over'), ὑποδύτης 'undergarment' (cp. ὑποδύω 'put on under') or ἐλεφαντιστής 'shield of elephant-hide' (cp. ἐλέφας 'elephant').

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