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A TERMINOLOGICAL PUZZLE IN ARISTOTLE'S *ARS RHETORICA*, III 2, 1404b37–1405a2

Brief summary

There is a perplexing sentence in *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2, which seems to imply that technical terms *synōnyma* and, by analogy, *homōnyma* are used differently in different contexts, i.e. in the *Rhetoric* these terms pertain to words, but in the *Categories* they designate things. Thus, it creates the impression that Aristotle has changed his mind with respect to the meaning of these terms. The interpretation, which is offered by the majority of translators and commentators, appears to embrace this conclusion. It is reinforced by the entry on *synōnymos* in the *Greek-English Lexicon*. The aim of the article is to explain the perplexing sentence in such a way that it is compatible with the definitions of *synōnyma* and *homōnyma* given in the *Categories*.

Keywords: *homōnymiai*, *synōnymiai*, *synōnyma*, *homōnyma*, *Rhetoric*, *Categories*.

Terminological precision and coherence has always been considered to be a virtue. The sentence at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2 presents a terminological puzzle. It is a challenge to interpret this sentence in such a way that the virtue of precision and coherence survives intact in Aristotle. In this article, I will attempt to provide an interpretation of the sentence at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2, according to which this sentence is compatible with Aristotle's terminology in the *Categories*. I will contrast my interpretation with the standard interpretation and address certain problems, which must be circumvented, if my interpretation is to hold as a plausible reading.

I

Let us look at the perplexing sentence at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2:

τῶν δ' ὀνομάτων τῷ μὲν σοφιστῇ ὁμωνυμῖαι χρήσιμοι (παρὰ ταύτας
γὰρ κακουργεῖ), τῷ ποιητῇ δὲ συνωνυμῖαι, λέγω δὲ κύρια τε καὶ

συνώνυμα οἷον τὸ πορεύεσθαι καὶ τὸ βαδίζειν· ταῦτα γὰρ ἀμφότερα
καὶ κύρια καὶ συνώνυμα ἀλλήλοις.

The standard interpretation, which is exhibited by the majority of translations and commentaries (e.g. Cope 1877, Vol. 3, 19; Freese 1926, 355; Kennedy 2008, 200; Rapp 2002, 839–840), is manifest, for example, in the following translation:

The kind of words useful to a sophist are homonyms (by means of these he does his dirty work), to a poet synonyms. By words that are both in their prevailing meaning and synonymous I mean, for example, go and walk; for when used in their prevailing sense these are synonymous with each other.

(Kennedy 2008, 200)

The standard interpretation embraces the following points:

- (1) There are two kinds of words – *homōnymiai* and *synōnymiai*.
- (2) The words *go* and *walk* are *kyria* and *synōnyma* with each other.
- (3) Being a *synōnymon* is a property of words. (From (2))
- (4) *Synōnymiai* are *synōnyma*. (From (1) and (3))
- (5) *Homōnymiai* are *homōnyma*. (By analogy to (4))
- (6) Being a *homōnymon* is a property of words. (By analogy to (3))

According to the standard interpretation, *synōnyma* and also, by analogy, *homōnyma* (a term which is not mentioned in the passage, but which suggests itself due to mentioning of *homōnymiai*) are understood as pertaining to words, *synōnymiai* (synonyms) and *homōnymiai* (homonyms) respectively. What is perplexing is that the conception of *synōnyma* and *homōnyma* as pertaining to words appears to contradict Aristotle's definitions of *synōnyma* and *homōnyma* in the *Categories* (see *Cat.* 1, 1a6–8 and 1, 1a1–3), where *synōnyma* and *homōnyma* are things. Thus, the passage at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2 implies that Aristotle has changed his mind with respect to the meaning of *synōnyma* and *homōnyma*.

This assumption appears to coincide with, and is reinforced by, the information that we find in the *Greek-English Lexicon* entry on συνώνυμος:

in the Logic of Arist. συνώνυμα are **things** having the same name and the same nature and definition, *Cat.* 1a6 [...] *in Rhet.* τὰ ζ. are synonyms, **words** having different forms but the same sense, as πορεύεσθαι and βαδίζειν, *Arist. Rh.* 1405a1 [...] (my boldface – L. R.)

In favor of the latter meaning of *synōnyma*, the dictionary gives reference to *Rh.* 1405a1, which is a locus in the passage that I am discussing here. It should be noted that there is one slight but important difference between the standard interpretation and the entry. According to the standard interpretation, the words *go* and *walk* are synonymous with each other, but in the entry these words are synonyms. The standard interpretation takes *synōnyma* to be a property of *synōnymiai*, whereas the entry treats *synōnyma* (in *Rh.* 1405a1) as identical to *synōnymiai*.

The *Greek-English Lexicon* entry on ὁμώνυμος does not contain a double meaning. It is stated that *homōnyma* are things:

*in the Logic of Arist., τὰ ὁ. are **things** having the same name but different natures and definitions, **things** denoted by equivocal or ambiguous words, Cat. 1a1 [...] (my boldface – L. R.)*

The explanation of the meaning of *homōnyma* in Aristotle is based on the reference to the *Categories* suggesting that this is the core meaning of *homōnyma*. Had Aristotle mentioned *homōnyma* in the puzzling passage at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2, the entry probably would have contained the other meaning of *homōnyma* as equivocal or ambiguous words.

II

Let us focus on the case of *synōnyma*. The *Categories* contain the following definition:

συνώνυμα δὲ λέγεται ὧν τὸ τε ὄνομα κοινὸν καὶ ὁ κατὰ τοῦνομα λόγος τῆς οὐσίας ὁ αὐτός, οἷον ζῶον ὃ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ ὁ βοῦς.

When things have the name in common and the definition of being which corresponds to the name is the same, they are called synonymous. Thus, for example, both a man and an ox are animals.

(*Cat.* 1, 1a6–8, trans. Ackrill 1963)

The example Aristotle gives here – that a man and an ox are synonymous **things** – seems to conflict with the example in the fragment of the *Rhetoric*, where it is said that *go* and *walk* are *synōnyma*, if *synōnyma* are taken to be synonymous **words**. How are we supposed to understand the statement that *go* and *walk* are synonymous?

One might immediately point out that the apparent conflict provides evidence for the hypothesis that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle has decided to change or perhaps slipped into changing the meaning of *synōnyma*, so that now they are words, not things. And a similar change in meaning has happened to *homōnyma*.

Let us consider again the statement at 1405a1 that *go* and *walk* are synonymous. It is worth looking at the Greek phrase, as the phrase involves ambiguity: συνώνυμα οἷον τὸ πορεύεσθαι καὶ τὸ βαδίζειν. The Greek words τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν are ambiguous – they may refer to things or to words, since neuter article τό can serve various tasks: 1) when τό is added to infinitive or to any phrase, we get a neuter noun, which as any other noun refers to a thing; 2) the neuter article τό can serve the same function that quotation marks serve in English, and in that case, the phrase beginning with τό refers to a word. Thus, although τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν can be taken to refer to words, *go* and *walk*, they need not be taken as such; they can be taken as referring to things themselves, to going and walking. In that case, the statement at 1405a1 is that going and walking are synonymous things. This accords well with Aristotle's example of *synōnyma* in *Cat.* 1, 1a3, where a man and an ox are synonymous things. Hence, no change seems to be in meaning of *synōnyma*, and the assumption that there has been a change may not be true.

III

However, there is a serious obstacle to my interpretation. It is the occurrence of κύρια in the clause at 1404b39–1405a2: λέγω δὲ κύρια τε καὶ συνώνυμα οἷον τὸ πορεύεσθαι καὶ τὸ βαδίζειν· ταῦτα γὰρ ἀμφότερα καὶ κύρια καὶ συνώνυμα ἀλλήλοις.

At an earlier passage, κύρια is tied with names and verbs (τῶν δ' ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων σαφῆ μὲν ποιεῖ τὰ κύρια, 1404b6), and thus, here the phrase κύρια ὀνόματα also suggests itself. The whole context is about names, and it is very similar to the discussion about names in the *Poetics* (see, for instance: *Poet.* 21, 1457b1 ἅπαν δὲ ὄνομα ἐστὶν ἢ κύριον ἢ γλῶττα ἢ μεταφορὰ). If κύρια are ὀνόματα, then it appears that συνώνυμα are also ὀνόματα. If κύρια were not mentioned at 1404b39–1405a2, we could easily read the sentence in such a way that τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν are synonymous things, not words. But the

fact of the matter is that, besides being *synōnyma*, τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν are also κύρια (ὀνόματα).

Thus, we are faced with a dilemma: 1) either τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν are also synonymous words, or 2) τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν are ambiguous in one and the same sentence, referring both to things themselves, i.e. to going and walking, and to words, i.e. to *go* and *walk*. If we choose the first horn of the dilemma, then we have to conclude that Aristotle does not use *synōnyma* uniformly and he is fluctuating between *synōnyma* as pertaining to words and *synōnyma* as things. That would, in turn, suggest that the assumption that there has been a change of Aristotle's mind is true. If we choose the second horn of the dilemma, then we have to conclude that the clause at 1404b39–1405a2 is elliptical. It contains two distinct propositions, one about words and the other about things: 1) τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν are κύρια ὀνόματα, and 2) τὸ πορεύεσθαι and τὸ βαδίζειν are συνώνυμα [πράγματα], i.e. synonymous things (not συνώνυμα ὀνόματα). Since the first horn of the dilemma leads to the conclusion that there has been a change of Aristotle's mind, I opt for the second.

IV

Now, the troubles with the sentence at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2 are not over yet. The source of trouble lies at the beginning of the sentence, where we can read that *homōnymiai* and *synōnymiai* are words (τῶν δ' ὀνομάτων τῷ μὲν σοφιστῇ ὁμωνυμῖαι χρήσιμοι [...], τῷ ποιητῇ δὲ συνωνυμῖαι, 1404b37–39). At this point, our opponent can say that this is again an evidence of a change of Aristotle's mind with respect to the meaning of *synōnyma* and also of *homōnyma*, since the terms *synōnymiai* and *synōnyma*, on the one hand, and *homōnymiai* and *homōnyma*, on the other, seem to be interchangeable.

According to my interpretation, the statement that *homōnymiai* and *synōnymiai* are words is no evidence for a change of Aristotle's mind; on the contrary, this is evidence for stability. I claim that Aristotle reserves different terms for different ideas, namely, *synōnymiai* and *homōnymiai* are words (i.e. synonyms and homonyms), whereas *synōnyma* and *homōnyma* are things (i.e. synonymous things and homonymous things).

The evidence for the fact that Aristotle can be interpreted as drawing distinctions between *synōnymiai* (synonyms) vs. *synōnyma* (synonymous

things), and between *homōnymiai* (homonyms) vs. *homōnyma* (homonymous things) can be found in Porphyry's (Πορφύριος, c. 234 – c. 305 AD) commentary on the *Categories*. There is a discussion of *homōnyma*, and a distinction between *homōnyma* and *homōnymia* is clearly made. Let us first look at Aristotle's definition of *homōnyma* in the *Categories*:

Ὁμώνυμα λέγεται ὧν ὄνομα μόνον κοινόν, ὁ δὲ κατὰ τοῦνομα λόγος τῆς οὐσίας ἕτερος, οἷον ζῶον ὃ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ τὸ γεγραμμένον·

When things have only a name in common and the definition of being which corresponds to the name is different, they are called homonymous. Thus, for example, both a man and a picture are animals.

(*Cat.* 1, 1a1–3, trans. Ackrill 1963)

In Porphyry's commentary on the *Categories* we are told that *homōnymia* is a word, whereas *homōnyma* are things (ὁμωνυμία μὲν φωνή, ὁμώνυμα δὲ τὰ πράγματα, *In Cat.* 61.14). Porphyry also says that *homōnymia* is dependent on *homōnyma*, since

[...] what produces [homōnymia] in words is not the character of the expression itself, but rather things are found to be different and in no way have anything in common yet acquire one and the same expression as their name.

(*In Cat.* 61.17–19, transl. by Strange, my changes in brackets – L. R.)

It is the things, *homōnyma*, that bring about *homōnymia* in words. However, Porphyry does not quite explain how one gets from things to words. Since *homōnymos* means *having the same name*, not *being the same name* (this point is taken from Barnes 1971, 71–72), *homōnymia* should be a property of things that have only a name in common, not a name that refers to different things (i.e. an equivocal word).

A plausible explanation of the way one gets from things to words could be the following. Aristotle needed a term to describe the other side of the coin: if there are things such that they have the same name, one should be able to say that there is also the name such that it is had by the things. It is reasonable to speculate that, in order to avoid confusion, Aristotle has reserved *homōnyma* for things, and *homōnymiai* for words. Thus, although *homōnymia* primarily characterizes the property exhibited by *homōnyma*, by an extension of meaning, *homōnymia* designates the word itself which *homōnyma* have in common. Thereby it is

understandable why Porphyry can say that *homōnymia* is a word, but *homōnyma* are things.

The same reasoning applies to *synōnymia* and *synōnyma*. Thus, we can say that *synōnyma* have *synōnymia* as a property and as a word, i.e. *synōnyma* exhibit the property of *synōnymia*, and, in turn, *synōnymia* is the word, which is shared by *synōnyma*, viz. *synōnymia* is a name that refers to things with similar natures and definitions.

V

Let us revisit the fragment at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2 in light of the considerations drawn from the previous investigation. The interpretation that we can now offer is this:

- (1) There are two kinds of words – *homōnymiai* and *synōnymiai*.
- (2) *Go* and *walk* are *kyria* and *synōnyma* with each other.
- (3) *Synōnyma* are things. (According to *Cat.* 1, 1a6–8)
- (4) *Kyria* are words. (According to *Rh.* 1404b6)
- (5) As words, *go* and *walk* are *kyria*. (From (2) and (4))
- (6) As things, *go* and *walk* are *synōnyma*. (From (2) and (3))
- (7) *Homōnyma* are things. (According to *Cat.* 1, 1a1–3)
- (8) *Homōnymia* is shared by *homōnyma*. (According to Porph. *In Cat.* 61.17–19)
- (9) *Synōnymia* is shared by *synōnyma*. (By analogy to (8))

In line with this interpretation, we can offer a slightly but crucially different translation of *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2:

The kind of words useful to a sophist are homonyms (by means of these he does his dirty work), to a poet synonyms. I mean, for example, go and walk are both words in their prevailing meaning and synonymous things, for both of them are words in their prevailing meaning and things that are synonymous with each other.

Hence, I propose a different interpretation of the passage at *Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2, according to which this passage is not in conflict with the definitions of *synōnyma* and of *homōnyma* in the *Categories*. My interpretation has the advantage of preserving terminological precision and coherence in Aristotle.

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TERMINOLOĢISKA MĪKLA ARISTOTEĻA DARBĀ
RĒTORIKA, III 2, 1404B37–1405A 2

KOPSAVILKUMS

Aristoteļa darbā *Rētorika* (*Rh.* III 2, 1404b37–1405a2) atrodams mulsinošs teikums, kas šķietami paredz, ka visai tehniskie termini – *synōnyma* un pēc analogijas arī *homōnyma* – tiek atšķirīgi lietoti dažādos kontekstos, proti, darbā *Rētorika* šie termini attiecas uz vārdiem, bet darbā *Katēgorijas* tie apzīmē lietas. Rodas iespaids, ka darbā *Rētorika* Aristotelis ir mainījis šo terminu nozīmi. Standarta interpretācija, t. i., interpretācija, ko piedāvā lielākā tulkotāju un komentētāju daļa, ietver šādu secinājumu, kas šķiet vēl neapstrīdamāks, ielūkojoties grieķu–angļu leksikonā (*Greek-English Lexicon*) šķirklī par *synōnymos*. Raksta mērķis ir izskaidrot Aristoteļa darbā *Rētorika* atrodamo mulsinošo teikumu tā, ka tas ir savienojams ar *synōnyma* un *homōnyma* definīciju, kas sniegta darbā *Katēgorijas*. Standarta interpretācijas vietā autore piedāvā atšķirīgu

mulšinošā teikuma interpretāciju saskaņā ar izpētes gaitā sasniegtajiem apsvērumiem: pastāv divu veidu vārdi – *homōnymiai* un *synōnymiai*; *iet* un *staigāt* ir *kyria* un *synōnyma*; *synōnyma* ir lietas; *kyria* ir vārdi; ja *iet* un *staigāt* tiek saprasti kā vārdi, tie ir *kyria*; bet, ja *iet* un *staigāt* tiek saprasti kā lietas, tie ir *synōnyma*; *homōnyma* ir lietas; *homōnyma* līdzdala *homōnymia*; *synōnyma* līdzdala *synōnymia*.