Counterfactual conditionals ("if X had happened/was happening, Y would have happened/be happening") in early Greek hexameter poetry are formed differently from those in Classical Greek, showing divergence in the verbal mood used. In early Greek, the majority of counterfactuals show the secondary indicative in the protasis and apodosis, but a sizeable minority show the optative instead, something which does not occur in the later language.

Traditional analyses account for the variation on the basis of the time reference (past or present) of the conditional, but this does not stand up to the distribution of the moods or to specific examples from the corpus. Modern analysis thinks of verbal mood in terms of the perspective of the speaker, and this avenue is more successful, although incomplete.

I consider all examples of counterfactual conditionals in the early Greek poetic corpus (c. 120), and consider the possible factors which motivate the use of verbal mood in each case. I argue that verbal mood is motivated by the epistemic stance of the speaker (character or narrator) making the counterfactual. Epistemic stance is envisioned as a continuum, from negative (out of line with world view) to positive (in line with world view), with counterfactuals sitting on a sliding scale. Strong emotional reactions of any kind seem to influence epistemic stance, although real-world likelihood and probability are not as significant the literature supposes. The most significant determiner for epistemic stance, I claim, is rhetorical purpose, and several examples in the corpus demonstrate this very well. Moreover, I further suggest that what unites uses of the optative across the corpus is the concept of what is “invisible”. Such a concept of invisibility incorporates both those situations rejected by epistemic judgement, and those counterfactual to the present, which clashes with what is empirically visible. My conclusion, therefore is that verbal mood is determined by a speaker's epistemic stance, but with the additional suggestion that uses of the optative are united by what is epistemically hidden from the speaker.

The issue of early Greek counterfactuals speaks especially to the typological link between the past and the unreal, and about the status of “irrealis” in Greek. Processes of grammaticalization can also be evidenced in the corpus and the difficult interface between diachrony and synchrony in such a corpus is a methodological challenge.

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