

In handbooks on Greek phonology and morphology (cf. Kühner-Blass 1966), metathesis of vowels and consonants within the single phoneme (κρα– / καρ–) is regularly treated together with metathesis of phoneme quantities (-ηος / -εως), the latter being considered as a matter of metrics as well as of phonology. In case of metathesis of quantities, the first of the affected phonemes undergoes what looks like shortening, while the second appears to be lengthened. At the same time, similar to what happens in case of epic shortening, the shortened phoneme itself is not subject to elision or crasis. Metathesis is found in the written documents in Ionic and Attic Greek.

This paper aims to show that the orthographic representation of the phonological adaptation known as “metathesis of phoneme quantities” is misleading. Herodian’s qualification of the phenomenon as “transposition of the time-unit” (II, 381, 625) suggests an effect in terms of meter, but the visible accentuation of the “adapted” forms disregards the segmental quantity of the resulting word-final long syllable (Allen 1973). In musical realization, the two phonemes involved in metathesis, together do not equal a long phoneme (♩) at word-end, but rather *half* a long phoneme (♩) (West 1992). If we are to assume that the metathesis is due to the “glide” of the final, more “consonantalized”, part of a diphthong as the first of the two phonemes involved (Allen 1968, 1973; Devine & Stephens 1994), we must also assume a lot of analogy for metathesis involving *open long* syllables in the first phoneme. My explanation of the phonological phenomenon will not require such analogy.

The metrical realization of the phonemes undergoing metathesis suggests that the transposition of quantities has hardly any effect on prosody. At word-end in an open syllable, as in *Il.* 1.1, it has the same phonological effect as original -α(ο): the original elision is replaced with shortened synizesis. At other positions within the word, sandhi is not exceptional; nor is replacement with a diphthong (ου, ευ).

In this paper I suggest that “metathesis of quantities” is best compared to the intervocalic aspirate –h-. Though only crediting such an aspirate to a single word in Attic Greek, Tryphon and Seleucus explicitly mention the pronunciation *without* the “expected” word-internal aspirate of words featuring metathesis. The result of metathesis of -ηα as -εα also shows that the phonological adaptation lies in the treatment of the onset of the second phoneme (ε²α), in combination with shortening of the first. The same consonantalized sound that saves the vowel preceding elision (-ε’) protects the shortened first phoneme from sandhi.

This explanation confirms two remarks by Dionysius of Halicarnassus: (i) his comment on the quantity of syllables due to the number of consonants *preceding* the vowel (*Comp.* 15), and (ii) his regard for the *psygma* (“inhalation”, *Comp.* 20), an audible phenomenon separating vowels, also in hiatus. Confirmation of Dionysius’ insights will further the analysis of, among other issues, the absence of crasis when the augment precedes a long vowel (εω-) and Ionic orthography of metathesis’ result as -εος.

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