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The Speeches in Thucydides

No critical assessment of Thucydides can avoid the challenge of understanding his use of speeches. Through reported speeches, Thucydides shows his readers how the forces of war were set in motion, and offers some of the most complex and nuanced statements about the nature of war to be found in his work. What relationship do the speeches bear to what was actually said? To what degree are they free invention by Thucydides? Our response to these questions is crucial to our understanding of the authorial stance of Thucydides.

In 1.22, Thucydides states that he went to great lengths to be as accurate as possible in his account of both words and deeds. While scholars have generally accepted that Thucydides has reported the deeds of the war with care and accuracy, they have not given such credence to his report of spoken words. His speeches are generally regarded as "plausible fiction" composed decades after the speeches were given. But if we find the speeches to be "plausible fiction," is this not also the sense in which we must understand Thucydides' work as a whole?

Using evidence not previously given due consideration, this paper reassess the manner in which spoken words were recorded by Thucydides' contemporaries, and the manner in which they must have been recorded by Thucydides as well. From his statement at 1.1.1, it is commonly understood that Thucydides began writing his history as soon as the war began in 431. Rather than composing a narrative of events while the war was in progress, as most suppose, it is more likely that Thucydides was chiefly concerned with gathering notes on contemporary speeches. Fascination with the power of rhetoric is well attested among Thucydides' peers, as Cleon emphasizes in the speech reported in Thucydides 3.37-40. Aristophanes *Knights* 1375-83 bears witness to the habits of members of the assembly who love to gather after a speech to discuss and dissect it. In *Wasps* 530-77, Aristophanes depicts notes being taken on a speech *as it is being spoken*. Such note-taking was evidently a frequent practice during forensic, deliberative, and sophistic speeches and debates. Such notes are the likely origin of many of the reported conversations of Socrates (see Plato, *Theaetetus* 143a-c).

The use of transcripts of speeches, jotted down while speeches were delivered, fundamentally transforms our notion of the speeches in Thucydides. They are no longer just "plausible fiction," but partake of a level of documentary accuracy that closely parallels the widely-accepted accuracy of Thucydides' narrative of events. Questions will remain about sources, in some cases, and the degree of editorial "polish" that Thucydides may have introduced. But no longer do we need to voice such deep doubts about Thucydides' candor when he lays claim to a high standard of fidelity to actual words.