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An Ear for an Eye: the Visual Listening of Writing in Ancient Greece

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Abstract

In archaic Greece writing supplemented existing oral and semiotic practices, and reading involved interpreting meaning from non-alphabetic signs rather than decoding phonetic elements. In such an oral culture, reading written words was understood as visual listening, or "earsight" in which hearing spoken words was akin to visually perceiving them. A debated outcome of this perception is the Greek verb ἀκούω (literally 'to hear') to mean 'to read' as seen in expressions such as οἱ ἀκούοντες ('readers of a book') and the later idiomatic locution ἤκουσα Χ λέγοντος, meaning 'I have read X in a book'. The rise of multimodal reading practices today, like audiobooks, presents us with a similar problem showing limitations of a reading theory that exclusively focuses on the graphic substance of letters. Cognitive and neurocognitive research supports the intertwined roles of sight and hearing in language perception, confirming that semantic processing occurs independently of sensory modality. As well as raising questions about the way multimodal transformations influence the way we read today, this article also aims to problematize how individuals in the past created representations of what was to be read when writing was accessible through other preferred perceptual channels.

Keywords: ancient reading, *ἀκούω*, aural perception, reading as semiosis, multimodality

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An Ear for an Eye: the Visual Listening of Writing in Ancient Greece

1 Language and the interface between eyes and ears

It is a matter of contention among specialists whether the verb ἀκούω, meaning literally "to hear," can also mean "to read".[1] For instance, in defining the status of ancient readers in the Greek oral society, Svenbro mentions the use of this verb with the meaning of 'to read' and the nominal form οἱ ἀκούοντες 'readers of a book' (1993, 2021). However, Chantraine does not include the verb in his seminal article on Greek verbs of reading (Chantraine, 1950).

Employed consistently as a verb of aural perception, ἀκούω can refer both to intentional situations (listening) as well as unintentional ones (hearing), depending on the contextual disambiguation.[2] Luraghi and Sausa, in a recent cognitive-semantic account on this verb, also include an 'evidential function' that ἀκούω acquires when contrasted with the verb for direct visual perception ὁράω. In this case the former indicates the cognitive process of acquiring knowledge which occurs when an individual "has repeatedly learned [something] from indirect sources" (Luraghi & Sausa 2019, p. 172). The two scholars temper the verb's embodiment by admitting that rather than being tied to the Mind-as-Body metaphor, the mental-cognitive value is nothing more than pragmatic inference: the person listening to a propositional content acquires knowledge of it through hearing (cf. Sweetser, 1990, pp. 28-32). This insight, however valid and applicable to cases in which the verb ἀκούω cognitively refers to the process of acoustic engagement with written

1 I am grateful to the organizers of the conference 'From the Invention of Writing to the Emergence of Artificial Intelligence: Cultural Approaches to Information Technology' for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this paper last August. I am also deeply appreciative for the feedback provided by both the anonymous reviewers and the editors of the current issue of INTERFACE.

2 For this reason, ἀκούω can be synonymous with the verb κλύω indicating a controlled perceived activity. Cf. Luraghi & Sausa 2019, p. 153.

materials, still leaves unanswered the question of how reading was understood by a non-alphabetically oriented culture.

The problem of the visual-acoustic perception of writing is undoubtedly cultural, as it is linked to the introduction and use of this technology by different societies throughout time. By detaching language from the symbolic dimension of human body, writing has replaced oral temporality with external and spatial consistency (Bettini, 2000, p. 5; Harris, 1995). The transformation primarily concerned the reduction of *multimodality* –"the perceptual engagement in the exchange of information" (Granström et al., 2002, p. 1)– to the predominant sensory involvement of eyes and vision in the communicative experience, marking the shift from the mouth-ear sensory axis to the eye-hand one, significantly divorcing the different perceptual channels (McLuhan, 1964).

By the same token, the use of the alphabet marked a turning point in how individuals *perceive* their own language (Harris, 1980, p. 6). Metalinguistic awareness – the ability to manipulate and detect the individual components that make up words – is intrinsically determined by the formal characteristics of a given writing system, as "we introspect our language in terms laid down by our script" (Olson, 1994, p. 258). Put differently, the perception of language as composed of smaller fragments (phonemes) is affected by the formal characteristics of the alphabetic system, that, through the principle of phonetization, *graphically* records the discrete phonic elements of spoken language (Tolchinsky, 2003). In this framework, sounds of language are subservient to the visual and formal features of the graphic writing system in the awareness of the users who employ it (Olson, 2016; Homer, 2002, 2009).

Therefore, since our familiarity with writing leads us to model the hearing of the spoken word on the sight of the written word, how might the word have been experienced and *read* by people who were unfamiliar with writing or for whom the written word was intended to be disseminated, at best, through reading aloud rather than through reproduction in print? In other terms, what would it mean "to read" in a world where one has never seen a word, and where the very idea of a word as a visi-

ble, graphic object does not exist?

This article will answer these questions by looking at the semantic range of ἀκούω and how it can be used to index the process of reading – i.e., how "to listen" can be used to mean "to read." Assuming that "the shape of what there is to read has its effects on reading" (Kress, 2003, p. 117; cf. also Kress, 2010) where words are spoken and heard unconstrained by the ear-eye dichotomy, reading becomes a process of listening. By considering the cognitive uses of this verb in classical Greece, the article challenges the tendency to treat reading solely as a process of sounding out writing through visually "perceiving the content of written or printed texts" (Have & Pedersen, 2020, p. 199). As we shall see, this standpoint is not only cognitively unreliable but also culturally invalid when applied to ancient Greek culture and its *ear-readers*.

2 Cognitive implications of language perception: can we read with the ears?

The 'etic'[3] division between sight and hearing in relation to the engagement with written media raises issues when it comes to cognition. In recent decades, the field of cognitive and neuroscientific research has provided an 'inside' picture of brain responses to auditory and visual stimuli and language perception, revealing the limitations of treating reading primarily as a process reliant on visual decoding of a written display.

From a cognitive-developmental perspective, learning to read in children is only made possible through the internal vocalization of the written text. The child's phonological skills – the ability to perceive the relationship between speech sounds and their written counterparts, as well as awareness of phonemes and the phonetic structures of language, such as syllables, onsets, and rhymes – are crucial for the development of reading abilities (Flack et al., 2018). These skills inevitably rely on

3 The pair 'etic'-'emic' was coined by the linguist and anthropologist Kenneth Lee Pike (1954) and indicates an approach of analysis elaborated according to the standpoint of the studied culture ('emic'), as opposed to a perspective belonging to the categories of the interpreter ('etic').

the vocalization of written characters. In other words, giving phonic life to the graphic sequence during the sound-to-meaning process is fundamental to understanding the mechanisms that regulate written speech and thus for learning to read: "written texts all have to be related somehow directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings" (Ong, 1982, p. 8).

One of the most well-known studies in language perception concerns the so-called 'McGurk effect', a phenomenon discovered in the 1970s. This effect illustrates the fluid and sense-based interplay between sight and hearing in language processing (McGurk & McDonald, 1976). It occurs when a video showing one phoneme is dubbed with the sound of another. As a result, the perceived phoneme often falls somewhere between the two. For example, when the syllable /ga/ is visually presented alongside the sound of /ba/, it is often perceived as a 'fused' combination like /da/. While this demonstrates the integration of sound and vision in language processing, more recent studies have shown that the effect varies across languages. It is particularly strong in languages with complex phonological systems, such as English and Spanish (Tona et al., 2015), and is more pronounced in conditions that challenge auditory perception, like noisy environments or when native speakers are exposed to a foreign language (Sekiyama, 1997). In contrast, the effect is less noticeable in languages such as Japanese and Chinese, where speakers rely less on visual cues, such as lip-reading, to process auditory information (Solarte, 2023).

Moreover, neuroimaging studies have found that despite the complexity of the human brain's response to language, the semantic representations evoked by listening and reading are almost identical: the semantic representation of language is independent of the sensory modality through which the information is received (Deniz et al., 2019, p. 7723): "good readers tend to be good listeners, and good listeners tend to be good readers" (Buchweitz et al., 2009, p. 111).

Behavioral studies have shown that listening and reading comprehension are two closely-related skills. The reason for this lies in the fact

that higher-level cognitive processes of text comprehension are fundamentally invariant to the stimulus modality, whether acoustic or visual. (Vigneau et al., 2006; Price, 2012). In 2019 a group of neuroscientists conducted a new and more accurate investigation: using neuroimaging techniques, the brain activities of a group of volunteers who were given the task of reading and then listening to the same narrative stories were recorded. The experimental stimuli involved, for the auditory analysis, the administration to nine participants of a number of videos (about ten in total) in which a speaker, in a speech lasting about 15 minutes, addressed an audience by telling a story from a written text. The reading stimulus, on the other hand, consisted in having the same participants read the transcription of the story they had previously heard, and, in order to align this stimulus with the previous one, the words transcribed from the stories were placed in the centre of the screen, one by one and for a duration comparable to that of the same word in the spoken mode. Their results suggested that "sensory regions process unimodal information related to low-level processing of spoken or written language, whereas high-level regions process modality invariant semantic information" (Deniz et al., 2019, p. 7734). This means that the early sensory processing of a word differs depending on whether it is heard or seen in writing: more specifically, the auditory cortex is activated during the primary processing of speech and the decoding of acoustic features in speech, such as prosody, while the primary visual cortex and the fusiform gyrus are activated during the processing of visual input to meaning. After these sensory regions handle unimodal information related to low-level processing of spoken or written language, however, semantic information is processed *independently* of the specific stimulus.

The cognitive perspective problematizes the perception of written language, revealing the inextricable interdependence of multiple sensory levels in its processing. Further, it broadens the understanding of reading activity, not just as the decoding of 'visual media of display' (cf. Elleström, 2021, pp. 33-38) but as an inferential comprehension process (cf. van Kleeck, 2008).[4] This entails "the construction of a representa-

4 Moreover, the ability to automatically process linguistic elements does not necessarily ensure an understanding of their deeper meaning.

tion of the text one is reading" (van den Broek et al., 2005, p. 109) and occurs regardless of the stimulus with which the receiver experiences the message. Therefore, the question "is it possible to read with the ears?" is particularly salient in an Ancient Greek context, where the graphic medium was just one of many forms of communication, and not necessarily the most culturally privileged one.

3 Audiobooks and reading as *semiosis*

The increasing prominence of multimodal forms in contemporary and digital texts highlights the limitations of a reading theory that focuses exclusively on the graphic substance of letters.

Nowadays the growing consumption of digital audiobooks – audio recordings of printed books (Have & Pedersen, 2016) read aloud by professional narrators or the authors themselves – raises intriguing questions about the nature of reading and the modal aspects of giving meaning to a written content.[5] The multisensory experience guaranteed by this new and appealing way of engaging with printed books confronts us with a question: when we are listening to an audiobook, are we then reading the book or are we listening to it? (Have & Pedersen 2021, pp. 198-214). As a matter of fact, the remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 45) of printed content through the voice does not oppose the previous technical medium of display (the printed book). Rather, it offers new affordances dependent on the new 'sensory' shape of what is being read. The negative lens through which audiobooks are often perceived – as a superficial and distracted reading – is not a problem of the remediation itself, but of the cultural perception of what reading is meant to be. At the root of this is a cultural bias, which some have labeled as 'scriptism', i.e., the tendency to consider and interpret language exclusively on the basis of its graphic and alphabetic counterpart (Harris, 1986; cf. also Saussy, 2016, pp. 57-86) which, consequently, confines reading to a set of instructions for telling readers how to get from the letter to the sound (Kress, 2003, p. 119). But, as well as raising questions about

5 The same questions also apply to tactile engagement with text through Braille writing.

how multimodal transformations influence the way we read today, this perspective also problematizes the ways in which individuals in the past created representations of what was to be read, when writing had different 'shapes' and was accessible through other preferred perceptual channels.

In archaic Greece, where orality and writing were closely intertwined, writing tended to be integrated "within pre-existing semiotic systems not as a means of breaking out of them but rather as a supplement to current practices" (Fassberg, 2023, p. 8). In this context, the history of reading begins well before it becomes confined to decoding the phonetic structure of alphabetic elements. Instead, it emerges as a process of extracting meanings from message-bearers, non-alphabetic signs.

In the Homeric poems, writing appears in forms such as scratches, marks, and engravings, like Odysseus' scar, which functions as an *epigraphē* for the reader, Eurykleia. Saussy describes this process as follows: 'unlike an illiterate observer, someone who might notice the scar but draw no conclusions from it, she is able to recognize the letter for what it is' (Saussy, 1996, p. 302, cf. also Pucci, 1987, p. 90). This and other occasions where writing is involved in the special sense that Saussy identifies, represent episodes of reading (cf. also Pucci, 1987, pp. 50-55, 191-236). It is no coincidence, moreover, that in the recognition scenes in the *Odyssey*, the verb used to index "the disembedding process required when individuals display those signs recognized and/or concealed in the inner space of the wits" (Steiner, 1994, p. 29) is ἀναγιγνώσκω, which will later become the current verb in Greek to mean 'to read'. In the Homeric poems, the object of recognition – i.e., the reading process (ἀναγιγνώσκω) – is *sēma*, 'sign': a set of external representations which, if correctly disentangled by the receiver, correspondingly match meaningfully with the overall reality (Nagy, 1993, 1990, p. 203). The continuity between non-alphabetic and alphabetic signs reflects the broader continuity between orality and writing in ancient Greece, whereby writing supplements the *sēma* and acquires its inferential communicative effect.

When alphabetic letters appeared in accounts of inscribed *sēmata*, they "were perceived as an appropriate addition to the existing message-bearers" (Steiner, 1994, p. 5). A notable example is the phenomenon of 'speaking objects', recently studied by Fassberg. Wine-drinking cups, statues, marble objects, dated between the eighth and seventh centuries BC, bear inscriptions such as 'I am the kylix of Korax', 'Mantiklos dedicated me', 'I am the remembrance of Glaucus'. The *raison d'être* of these personified objects lies in the early Greek conception of writing as a token for enacting communication at a distance and for transforming the 'reader' into an object (Fassberg, 2023).

This analysis, though by no means exhaustive, underscores the limitations of current categories of observation of reading (and writing). It would be more useful to understand reading as "the general human urge and capacity for deriving meanings from (culturally) shaped materials which are thought to be the bearers of meaning" (Kress, 2003, p. 119). This perspective also draws attention to the materiality of the means for making the representations that are to be read. This includes the discourse on acoustic reading in antiquity that we are exploring.

4 Ancient *ear-readers*

To return to the question of *akouō* in the context of written engagement in ancient Greece: in what sense are readers vocal distributors of reading for their own ears? What if, for an ancient text user, there was no distinction between the sensory experiences of sight and hearing?

Scholars have long debated the 'connotative' uses of the verb, often reducing interpretations to a simplistic listening-seeing divide. Svenbro (1993) solves all logical issues in his analysis, arguing that the reader, reduced to their vocal function, simultaneously becomes a listener to the text that the voice transposes into sound. According to his analysis, the reader's voice becomes inseparable from the medium that carries the inscription, blurring the distinction between the reader and its audience. In this context, the reader's status is no different from that of

the other listeners who hear the inscription being read aloud: "les 'auditeurs' du texte ne lisent absolument rien. Ils écoutent simplement une lecture, qui s'addresse à eux" (Svenbro, 2021, p. 18). In an oral society where the written is inseparable from the spoken, the reader is necessarily also a listener, just as their listeners are simultaneously readers of the text conveyed through the voice. Furthermore, various linguistic explanations have been proposed to account for the verb's usage, for instance "pressing examples where metaphor or figurative vividness of speech may rather explain the usage" (Hendrickson, 1929, p. 191), or the argument that it represents a form of catachresis, in which words are employed in their 'improper' sense due to the lack of more precise alternatives.

These rhetorical-linguistic justifications seek to rationalize what may seem 'conceptually' anomalous to our perspective. In order to understand the semantic usage of this verb in referring to the engagement with a written document, "the task is to conceive of technologies and their affordances within a social frame" (Saussy, 2016, p. 84) and move beyond the lens of observation that belong to our hypergraphic culture.

In antiquity, there were not only forms of delegated writing but also practices of delegated reading, where a professional reader – often a slave – known as *anagnōstēs*, would read private and public texts aloud (Allan, 1980, pp. 247-50, Harris 1989). Iconographic evidence shows scenes where written texts are handled either by individuals engaged in the act of reading or in 'two-person' or 'group' settings, where a single reader addresses a performance intended for multiple listeners (Immerwahr, 1964, pp. 17-48; 1973, pp. 143-7; Ford, 2003, pp. 24-30 and Nieddu, 1982, pp. 252-61)[6]. Similar to interpreting a musical score, the text needed to be aurally enacted or animated. Further, this kind of reading aloud was not confined to private documents but extended to publicly displayed writings. In fact, the primary way epigraphic texts were engaged with was through oral reading, so that reading an epigraph resolved itself into a collective and communitarian performance,

6 Individual reading scenes can be found in ARV^2 231, 83; ARV^2 923, 28. For two-person scenes see ARV^2 624, 75. For group scenes see CVA 21, 2 tab. 93, 3-4 and CVA 6, 3 tab. 86, 3.

especially since the inscribed monuments-documents were located at the points of greatest urban affluence (Giordano, 2023; Liddel, 2003, pp. 80-3). The collective readership of documents issued by the city also made it possible to overcome the *impasse* of illiteracy, which was never an obstacle to the spread of writing and its use. The reading voice of delegates or variously literate individuals reinforced the perception of vocal 'service' that reading aloud also provided to those who were unable to perform this task, but who, as hearers of the text, became indeed 'ear-readers'. The path was from writing to orality: through the traditional oral vehicle, writing found itself filling the space between the voice of the reader and the ears of those listening to the text. Silent reading, on the other hand, although not ruled out in antiquity, required special circumstances to be realized. (Knox, 1968, Cavallo & Chartier, 1995). A silent, or certainly private, engagement with a written text can be inferred from the specification 'πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν' ('to myself') with the verb ἀναγιγνώσκω ('I read'), in the famous passage from Aristophanes' *Frogs* in which Dionysus reads the *Andromeda* to himself on the ship (vv. 1033-1045), and other scattered literary evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries also indicate a similar practice.[7] In conclusion, the picture underscores "bewildering varied relationships" that the ancient society had with the spoken word (Thomas, 1992, p. 62). In this context, the multimodal perception of the graphic medium overcomes the binary monolithic classifications of literate/illiterate and oral/written based on the scholarly efficiency on the written word typical of our literate perspective (Johnson, 2000).

5 *Akouō* as a reading verb: some occurrences

On the understanding the instances of this verb and its derivatives with the idiomatic connotation of 'to read', scholars' opinions disagree. It is difficult, sometimes impossible, to determine whether the verb refers to the practice – also widespread – of listening to someone else read aloud, or to a more personal vocal engagement with the text. In some of the

7 Knox cites two texts from the 5th century that seem to demonstrate the practice of silent reading, see Eur. *Hipp*. 856-86; Ar. *Eq*. 115 ff. Cf. Knox, 1968, pp. 421-35 and Svenbro, 1993, pp. 164-6.

earliest examples, the verb is used in a way that blends both hearing and reading, creating interpretive challenges, as in Herodotus' *Histories*.

> (1) ἐνθαῦτα ὁ Κροῖσος ἕκαστα ἀναπτύσσων ἐπώρα τῶν συγγραμμάτων, τῶν μὲν δὴ οὐδὲν προσίετό μιν: ὁ δὲ ὡς τὸ ἐκ Δελφῶν ἤκουσε, αὐτίκα προσεύχετό
>
> Croesus then unfolded and examined all the writings. Some of them in no way satisfied him. But when he read the Delphian message, he acknowledged it with worship.
>
> (Herodotus, I 48)

> (2) ὁ Κῦρος παραλαβὼν τὸν λαγὸν ἀνέσχισε: εὑρὼν δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ τὸ βυβλίον ἐνεὸν λαβὼν ἐπελέγετο, τὰ δὲ γράμματα ἔλεγε τάδε […] ἀκούσας ταῦτα ὁ Κῦρος ἐφρόντιζε.
>
> Cyrus took the hare and slit it and read the writing which was in it; the writing was as follows […] when Cyrus read this, he deliberated.
>
> (Herodotus, I 124)

These two occurrences in Herodotus are too vague to really provide evidence for this connotative use (Chantraine, 1950, p. 119). In the first example, it is said that Croesus examined (ἀναπτύσσω) the contents of the written documents that came to him from the various sanctuaries by envoys, until he read (literally 'listened to') the one from Delphi. It remains ambiguous whether the act of ἀκούειν (hearing/reading) implies that the King was reading the document aloud himself, or merely hearing it read by someone else. In the latter case, it might be likely that the king asked the envoys (known as Pythioi) to read aloud the contents of the oracle, which would reflect an acoustic reading of the written text by a delegate. The graphic and reading context in which ἀκούω is used, besides being accompanied by written documents (σύγγραμμα) and anticipated by a verb of visual perception (ἐπόραω), is also intriguingly foreshadowed by another verb: ἀναπτύσσω. It literally refers to the pro-

cess of unfolding the scroll in which the books were written in order to inspect and read their contents and is used as a reading verb in tragedy, where the current verb for reading (ἀναγιγνώσκω) is absent (Nieddu 2004, p. 59).8 The verb (together with the compound διαπτύσσω) also metaphorically embodies the idea of "I open, I spread out, I disclose" applying both to the unfolding of a writing tablet and to the inspection of animal or human organs during the search for prophetic signs (Steiner, 1997, pp. 106-109). In the second occurrence (2), Cyrus is said to have torn a hare in order to read the written document it contained inside. It is remarkable that the prophetic image of reading the animal's entrails returns in association with ἀκούω in this second occurrence, but without the δια/ἀναπτύσσω often associated with such contexts. Here, ἀκούω is anticipated by the reading verb ἐπιλέγομαι, whose relation to vocal performance is guaranteed by the simple verb λέγω 'to say, to speak' (Fournier, 1946, Chantraine, 1950, pp. 212-122, Nieddu 2004, p. 67). It would be somewhat unconvincing to suggest that Cyrus personally read (ἐπελέγετο) some documents while having others read to him. Most translations, indeed, consistently render the phrase as "when Cyrus read this" (e.g., Powell, 1949; Hendrickson, 1929, p. 188) and this idiomatic rendering fits the majority of ancient occurrences of the verb.

All in all, the reading context in both examples is highlighted by several key elements: the verb ἀναπτύσσω, which refers to the act of unrolling a scroll to read it; the verb ἐπιλέγομαι; and written materials such as books or συγγράμματα. In both instances, ἀκούω is preceded by technical verbs of decoding written signs – ἐποράω (1) and ἐπιλέγομαι (2) – shifting the focus from the technical act of deciphering or visually perceiving the text to the cognitive process of understanding and learning its content through ἀκούω, which also has the meaning of 'to learn' (Luraghi & Sausa, 2019, p. 172). Chantraine (1950, p. 119) speaks of 'use abusif' of the verb, dependent on the oral reading habits of documents and from the fact that the reader listens to his own vocal reading.

Some Platonic occurrences are no less uncertain about the use of ἀκούω to indicate the reading of a text.

8 See LSJ *s.v.* ἀναπτύσσω. Cf. also Eu. fr. 60 s. A.; Aesch. fr. 281a.

(3) εἰπεῖν ἂν οἶμαι ὅτι μαίνεται ἄνθρωπος, καὶ ἐκ βιβλίου ποθὲν ἀκούσας ἢ περιτυχὼν φαρμακίοις ἰατρὸς οἴεται γεγονέναι, οὐδὲν ἐπαΐων τῆς τέχνης.

They would say, I fancy, that the man was crazy and, because he had read something in a book or had stumbled upon some medicines, imagined that he was a physician when he really had no knowledge of the art.

(Plato, *Phaedrus*, 268c)

(4) νῦν μὲν οὕτως οὐκ ἔχω εἰπεῖν: δῆλον δὲ ὅτι τινῶν ἀκήκοα, ἤ που Σαπφοῦς τῆς καλῆς ἢ Ἀνακρέοντος τοῦ σοφοῦ ἢ καὶ συγγραφέων τινῶν.

'I cannot say, just at this moment; but I certainly must have read something, either from the lovely Sappho or the wise Anacreon, or perhaps from some prose writers.'

(Plato, *Phaedrus*, 235c)

(5) ἐπιθυμοῦντας ἀκοῦσαι τῶν τοῦ Ζήνωνος γραμμάτων.

Because (they) wanted to read Zeno's writings.

(Plato, *Parmenides*, 127c)

(6) ταῦτα γὰρ ἀκήκοάς που καὶ σὺ τὰ ποιήματα: ὅδε μὲν γὰρ οἶμαι διακορὴς αὐτῶν ἐστι. (*Leg.* 629 b).

No doubt you also have read these poems; while he is, I imagine, surfeited with them.

(Plato, *Laws*, 629b)

As the occurrences show, Platonic uses demonstrate the consistent use of the verb ἀκούω with genitives[9] indicating textual objects (e.g.,

9 The most frequent constructions with verbs of aural perception are those with Accusative or Genitive. The mechanism governing the distribution between genitive and accusative was identified by Chantraine, (1953) in animacy: the accusative occurs when the verb is constructed with an inanimate object, while the genitive is used for both inanimate and animate objects. Cf. also Luraghi & Sausa, 2019, p. 155.

ποιήματα, βιβλίον) or, by metonymy, authors (e.g. Homer, Sappho, Anacreon).[10] Moreover, in the fictitious setting of Plato's *Parmenides*, Zeno was present, and his book was actually read aloud.[11] Yet, whether the reading is vocalized and heard by another or done personally does not affect the actual engagement with written materials. The phrase 'I have heard in a book' meaning that one has read a work, should not be considered odd. As seen, the distinction between the visual and acoustic channels in the perception of a written text appears more as a cultural preoccupation than a historically valid reality.

In a Platonic occurrence, however, the verb ἀκούω is more markedly separated from the dimension of sight.

> (7) καὶ εἰ μὴ ἑώρακας, ἀκήκοας γοῦν ἄλλων τε πολλῶν καὶ Ὁμήρου: καὶ Ὀδυσσείας γὰρ καὶ Ἰλιάδος ἀκήκοας.
>
> And if you have not seen them (i.e., questions of justice or injustice), at you have certainly heard of them from many people, especially Homer. For you have heard the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*?
> (Plato, *Alcibiades* I 112b)

In this example (7), as Hendrickson pointed out (1929, p. 189) the words should be rendered as 'for you certainly have read the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*'. In this case, the opposition between the verb of visual perception (ὁράω) and the verb of aural perception (ἀκούω) is set in the text. The overlap between the perceptual and cognitive domains underlies the meaning extension and the value of reading is inferred from the perceptual event of receiving the oral reading of Homeric text.

Two later occurrences of the verb, dating from the 2nd century BC, provide further insights and demonstrate that the connotative use of ἀκούω to indicate that someone has read certain statements in an author's work consolidates over time. Polybius writes in the *Histories* (12.27.1) that

10 Cf. also Xen, *Mem*. 2.6.11.

11 The close proximity of the verb *anagignōskō* in the same passage is significant (see *Prm.* 127c5 and 7). As mentioned, the verb is commonly used with the meaning of 'to read', and in most cases from the classical period it means 'to read aloud'.

nature endowed man with sight and hearing (ἀκοῆς καὶ ὁράσεως) to procure news and information. Of the two, sight is the more accurate, because the eyes are more reliable witnesses than the ears (ὀφθαλμοὶ γὰρ τῶν ὤτων ἀκριβέστεροι μάρτυρες). The historian Timaeus, preferred to rely *on hearing* to reconstruct historical facts, that is, using the one of the two senses that would be less reliable. At this point Polybius says something that might seem surprising:

> τῶν μὲν γὰρ διὰ τῆς ὁράσεως εἰς τέλος ἀπέστη, τῶν δὲ διὰ τῆς ἀκοῆς ἀντεποιήσατο. καὶ ταύτης διμεροῦς οὔσης τινός, τοῦ μὲν διὰ τῶν ὑπομνημάτων *** τὸ δὲ περὶ τὰς ἀνακρίσεις ῥᾳθύμως ἀνεστράφη, καθάπερ ἐν τοῖς ἀνώτερον ἡμῖν δεδήλωται.
>
> Now the knowledge derived from hearing being of two sorts, Timaeus diligently pursued the one, the reading of books, as I have above pointed out, but was very remiss in his use of the other, the interrogation of living witnesses.[12]

Polybius' argument is both coherent and consistently reinforced throughout his discourse. In fact, according to him, research is conducted through hearing, specifically by reading the memoirs of others: just as Timaeus, who, relying on written records and books, had accessed these texts in the libraries of the cities where he resided (12. 27.1-4). If listening to the text is reading it, the readers are then literally 'the listeners' of the text. Indeed, in the opening of his work, Polybius refers to the reading public of his text with the expression 'τοῖς ἀκούουσι' (literally the listeners): τὸ μὲν οὖν ἐξαριθμεῖσθαι τὰ κατὰ μέρος ὑπὲρ τῶν προειρημένων πράξεων οὐδὲν οὔθ' ἡμῖν ἀναγκαῖον οὔτε *τοῖς ἀκούουσι* χρήσιμον (Pol. 1. 13.6), 'Now to recount all these events in detail is neither incumbent on me nor would it be useful to my readers'.[13] The interchangeability in sensory experience produced by the relationship with the written text – as ἀκούω demonstrates in Polybius' occurrences – is indisputable and recurs throughout the centuries, reinforcing this idiomatic use in Greek prose. Yet, as noted by Schenkeveld (1992, pp.

12 Trans. William Patron, 1925.

13 For ἀκροατής 'reader' cf. also Plb 9.1.2;

134-136), the use of ἀκούω with this extended meaning strengthens in Hellenistic period. The idiomatic Greek locution 'ἤκουσα X λέγοντος', meaning 'I have read in a book that'[14] also leaves traces in Latin periphrases such as 'audio X dicentem', which admits the same interpretation. This locution can be interpreted on three levels, depending on the context: first, the hearer literally hears X speak; second, the hearer listens to a public reading of a text written by X, performed by a third person; and third, the hearer himself is reading, or hears a slave or delegate reading X's text on his behalf. The validity of the third possibility is supported by the fact that in the contexts where this locution appears in the late Hellenistic period, X is no longer alive at the time the listener reads or hears his words (Schenkeveld, 1992, p. 130). The interpretation depends on the pragmatic context, but this does not alter the core meaning of the verb and its possible connotative translation. It is likely that the regularity of this fixed expression stems from the classical uses of the verb ἀκούω [15]. Moreover, as is well known, Greek knows other verbal possibilities for 'to read'. The most common verb at that time is ἀναγιγνώσκω, which, however, never competes with ἀκούω and its idiomatic locutions to convey the idea of 'I have read something in a book'.

In conclusion, this particular use of ἀκούω from Herodotus onwards – primarily indicating a concrete aural perception – reflects the understanding of reading as a multisensory process of making meanings from written sings, regardless of the perceptual modalities with which the user experiences them. This usage emphasizes the oral nature of reading in antiquity, where texts were frequently read aloud or heard, linking auditory perception to the cognitive act of reading.

14 See, *Inter alia*, Greg. Nyss. *In Eccles*. v. 396.20. Greg. Naz. *Or.* 18, xxxv 992.49 PGM; Luc. *JTr* 20, Ael. *Nat. Anim*. 7.7. Cf. Schenkeveld, 1992.

15 For ἀκρόασις 'reading' cf. Th. 1.21-22; ἀκροᾶσθαι 'to read' cf. Strab. 1.2.3.

6 Conclusion

Let's imagine a face-to-face society in which the written word is, in most cases, mediated through the oral channel by a reader who vocally disseminates its content to a listening community. As seen, this was the case of Ancient Greek society, where the privileged mode of reading written texts was the voiced one, and the reading of a written document could result in a collective listening. Hence, in a context where writing was more frequently conveyed by concrete aural perception, reading written words was understood as "a species of vision – a kind of seeing with the ear, or 'earsight' – in which to hear spoken words is akin to looking at them" (Ingold, 2007, p. 9; cf. also 2000; 2022). If writing is not disembodied, reading becomes a process of listening. The 'eye for an ear' that, according to Mcluhan (1962), the phonetic alphabet brought about in literate cultures by producing the intensification and extension of sight over the other senses, is replaced, in antiquity, by the 'ear for an eye' and the lack of a break between visual and auditory experience.

To conclude, beyond the debate about the vocal reading that *akouō* might have implied in specific cases, its use may be the result of a *multimodal* and *embodied* understanding of writing based on the interchangeable perceptual senses with which ancient culture experienced it. The obsessive reliance on alphabetic script characteristic of modern hypergraphic societies has altered the users' perception of language and the way they read it, producing a bias of sensory divorce between sight and hearing. The image of the reader-listener of himself and vocal 'dispenser' of the written text to other hearers – outlined in the previous paragraphs – reflects a cultural model that challenges us to rethink and revise our contemporary notion of reading, highlighting its limitations when applied to both past and present societies.

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