The interjections were in need of a comprehensive and linguistically grounded study, and this book is a significant step in the right direction, even if parts of it are highly speculative. Biraud’s study treats all words that might be classed as interjections, in all of the complete plays of the three tragedians and Aristophanes (she occasionally includes examples from fragments and from other authors, mostly Plato). In her attempt to refine existing definitions, Biraud takes two seemingly opposite approaches: in some cases, she seeks to bring the disparate uses identified for a single interjection in dictionaries together under one header; in other cases, when no such unifying principle can be found, she tries to show that we are in fact dealing with different interjections, represented by the same written form, but with distinct pronunciations. Biraud admits that the latter approach, which amounts to multiplying the number of interjections, may inspire ‘une certaine inquiétude’ (15) in her readers, and I must admit that I was not always able to shake that feeling (are we really to believe, for example, that there were four distinct ways of pronouncing θε, corresponding, one-to-one, to four different emotional states?). But even if one is not willing to go along with all of Biraud’s phonological hypotheses, her descriptions do deserve careful consideration.

Perhaps most importantly, the book provides an innovative (and to my mind successful) theoretical framework for studying interjections. This is where the ‘pragmatique’ of the title comes in: Biraud incorporates insights from modern linguistics, specifically speech act theory and conversation analysis, to show that certain interjections tend to occur together with certain speech act types, and that they have a certain illocutionary force of their own. (A quibble here: it would have been good for Biraud to consistently cite the linguistics literature she bases her framework on: though Searle is mentioned in passing, one looks in vain for the names of Grice or Sacks, or, better still, more recent works; this might have also prevented confusion about the the term ‘association préférentielle [entre actes de langage]’, which I assume is a translation of ‘preference organisation’, but is not employed by Biraud in a way that I have seen conversation analysts use it).

Biraud’s introduction carefully navigates the pitfalls and complexities involved with defining and delimiting a word class as complex as the interjection (Biraud shows herself keenly aware of the limitations of such an enterprise). Chapter 1, which I found the most enlightening of the book, shows that there are real differences between the uses of ἅγγι, ὴθ, and φερέ. Chapter 2 presents a unified description of the interjection ἐὰ, and proceeds to distinguish between the four different pronunciations/uses of θε mentioned above. Chapter 3 continues this phonological exercise, identifying different pronunciations and corresponding functions of ιου, ἄ/ἄ, ἵ, ω, and others. Chapter 4 deals with with interjections used to catch the attention of humans or animals. For scholars working on tragedy, chapter 5 will be most interesting, as it treats interjections expressing pain, sorrow, and the like (Biraud sees a link between the quality of the vowel used in these interjections — ἀ, ε/ν, or ο/ω — and their meaning: I remain sceptical). Chapter 6, which repeats much from previous chapters, divides the interjections by the illocutionary force they express, following the traditional five-way typology of speech acts: expressives, directives, promissives, declaratives, and assertives.
(treated separately in chapter 7). That interjections can express the last three of these types at all may be thought surprising, but this proves a very fruitful way of looking at such interjections as εὐοĩ (declarative, according to Biraud) and εἴεν (assertive). The book ends with a series of indexes: of Greek terminology used by grammarians and scholiasts in their descriptions of interjections (ancient scholarship is well-represented throughout the book), of all the interjections with their pronunciation and function (a useful compendium), and of French equivalents for Greek interjections (the book is very much aimed at a francophone audience; the bibliography, too, is overwhelmingly weighted towards French material).

All in all, though some may find parts of it rather quirky, this book has many useful things to say, both about individual interjections and about the ways in which these difficult words may be analysed.

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