FROM THE POWER OF WORDS TO THE POWER OF RHETORIC: NONSENSE, PSEUDO-NONSENSE WORDS, AND ARTIFICIALLY CONSTRUCTED COMPOUNDS IN GREEK ORAL CHARMS

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Meaningless words, archaisms, glosses, neologisms as well as artificially constructed compounds often appear in charms. More specifically, the category of meaningless words (*abracadabra, voces magicae, onomata Barbara, nonsense words, gibberish*) has been considered as the most distinctive characteristic of verbal magic, and, as such, it has always constituted one of the most popular objects of study. Researchers have attempted to interpret the function of non-signification, lack of meaning and referentiality in the inherent power of the sound of these words, in the special intonation of their performance, but also, in their implicative weight, namely in their connection to another type of referentiality, that of the so-called *traditional referentiality*, which connects these words to a wider context, whose power they evoke. However, most approaches to the special register of charms, with very few exceptions, have been based on texts of anterior periods, as well as on texts belonging to the written tradition of the genre. What happens, however, in the case of oral tradition, in the case, that is, of those charms that presuppose and require an oral performance and transmission? What is the frequency of occurrence of such words, what are the special characteristics of the register used in charms and in what ways does it differ from that of everyday speech? Furthermore, on the basis of which particular rules and criteria are these words formed and what function or purpose do they serve? These are the issues that the present study proposes to address, based on the examination of oral Greek charms, shifting its focus of attention from the alleged power of sound to the power of a rhetoric which accounts for the formation and explains the function of the specific register of oral charms.

Key words: oral charms, oral/written tradition, nonsense words, pseudo words, artificially constructed compounds, sound patterns, power of words, rhetoric

The use of incomprehensible or nonsensical words and expressions of unknown meaning and origin constitutes an intercultural, diachronic characteristic of verbal magic. In his treatise *De occulta philosophia*, Agrippa comments on the use of such words saying: "[…] we must of necessity confess may do more by

the secret of the chiefest Philosophy in a magick work […] whilest the mind being astonished at the obscurity of them, and deeply intent, firmly believing that something Divine is under it, doth reverently pronounce these words, and names, although not understood, to the glory of God" (*De occulta philosophia* III, 26, Tyson 2004: 548). According to Mauss-Hubert ([1902] 2002: 35–36) "Les incantations sont faites dans un langage spécial qui est le langage des dieux, des esprits, de la magie. […] La magie […] recherche l'archaïsme, les termes étranges, incompréhensibles. Dès sa naissance [...] on la trouve marmonnant son *abracadabra*". Having studied the Trobriand charms, Malinowski also concludes: "a considerable proportion of the words found in magic do not belong to ordinary speech, but are archaisms, mythical names and strange compounds, formed according unusual linguistic rules" (Malinowski 1922: 432). The presence of such words comes as no surprise. On the contrary, it is to be expected, since magic is of diverse origin and history. It is thus only natural that it is characterised by words which do not conform to the morphological and syntactic rules of every day language (Malinowski 1965: 218).

The lack of meaning or signification should be considered to be an inherent characteristic of magic speech for an additional reason; that relating to the specific significance of sound, intonation and rhythm, since as regards magic "l'intonation peut avoir plus d'importance que le mot" (Mauss-Hubert [1902] 2002: 36). Moreover, according to Foley (1980: 86) the effectiveness of charms is incumbent upon their oral performance and sound patterns. The articulation of these sounds often takes the form of, almost, incomprehensible syllables of non-definable origin. Each of these features activates the inherent power of charms with the latter's ultimate source of power resting on their very articulation. Although Foley's claim can be considered somewhat exaggerated, nobody can deny that "echoic series of phrases, nonsense syllables and near-nonsense syllables, abracadabra words, foreign words, macaronicisms, nonce words, unclear archaisms, tautological expressions, magic names (*voces magicæ*, or, in the singular *vox magica*), holy names (*nomines sacrorum*, or, in the singular *nomen sacrum*), synonyms, epithets, attributes, euphemisms and other forms of extended naming can, by realizing significant sound patterns, be significant" (Roper 2003: 10).

The appearance, of course, of unknown words of dubious or indiscernible semantic content is not solely restricted to the genre of charms, but is also an integral part of poetry.[1] The "grammar" of poetry, just like that of magic, is based, among other things, on the special rhythmic quality of speech as well as on the use of a type of language which differs considerably from ordinary, every day speech, whose conventions it often seeks to defy, even violate, the arbitrary relation of the linguistic sign, that is between the signifier and the

signified. It is, of course, obvious that under no circumstances can we interpret the presence of non-signifying speech in charms as a conscious poetic device (Welsh 1978: 145). Magic is directed towards a concrete goal in an effort to achieve something very specific depending each time on the particularity of the circumstances. The non-verbal (acts, use of objects, gestures) and the oral performative components are combined to create the context within which the desired goal can be achieved (Chickering 1971: 83). All acts, which are carried out, or the words that are spoken constitute the means, the vehicle through which the goal of charms is habitually achieved. The charm as such, in other words, is by nature performative and it is this performative aspect of charms that determines a certain rhetorical strategy (Weston 1985: 176; Sherzer 1990: 241) within which is also included the use of nonsense words.[2]

The most fundamental approach to hitherto nonsense words has been based on texts of anterior historical periods (ancient Greek or Latin), an approach mainly connected with the written tradition of the genre. What happens, however, in the case of oral charms used in relatively recent traditional cultures? How frequent is the use of such words, but, also, which are those special linguistic features that deviate from the norm of every day speech? Could the study of the oral tradition of charms help towards a holistic understanding of the special linguistic repertoire of verbal magic? These are the topics that the present study will attempt to address through the examination of charms from the Modern Greek oral tradition.

NONSENSE, PSEUDO-NONSENSE WORDS AND ARTIFICIALLY CONSTRUCTED COMPOUNDS IN ORAL CHARMS

In magic texts there is a co-existence of intelligible and unintelligible speech, of speech which is intelligibly structured as well as of speech which is structureless, non-signifying and almost inarticulate (Tambiah 1968: 177–178). The most characteristic cases of speech devoid of signification appear in the form of sounds without any intrinsic secular, 'normal', meaning (Versnel 2002: 107), that is linguistic formations and grammatologically uncategorized semantics of protean words of no fixed meaning (Χριστίδης 1997: 55–56).[3] Such incomprehensible words or syllables are commonly known as *voces magicae* (Kotansky 1991: 110–112), *abracadabra* (Poznanskij 1917: 71–72; Bächtold-Stäubli 1926: 113–114; Dieterich 1891: Nelson 1946: 326–336), *meaningless words* (Malinowski 1965: 214), *nomina Barbara* (Audollent 1967: lxx – lxxiv; Versnel 2002: 109), *gibberish* (Grendon 1909: 124–127; Gager 1992: 9), *nosense words* (Stewart 1987; Pulleyblank 1989: 52–65). They are usually words belonging to

a different linguistic register from that spoken by the performers, which bears no relation to the morphological system of the language in which they appear and thus cannot be properly categorized either grammatically or syntactically (Χριστίδης 1997: 56). They are occasionally connected to certain codified systems of mystical theurgical theory as well as with an alleged interconnection among letters, planets, angelic and divine entities, but their deciphering requires a familiarity with the system which they are part of (Versnel 2002: 115; Struck 2002: 389). It is possible, so to speak, that originally they did possess a certain meaning, which, however, became either corrupt or got lost during their inter-cultural and diachronic route through time, space and history.[4] What happens, though, in field of oral tradition? How frequent is the appearance of this type of words and which are their particular characteristics?

Words and texts of this kind do survive and are also used in Modern Greek charms. Characteristic instances of vox magicae are:[5] "Σαταρέτα, πιτινέτα κένους φίτου πας άσκους άκους κι μαύρους" [Satareta, pitineta, kenous fitou pas askous akous ki mavrous] (Λουκόπουλος 1917: 99–100); "Αριπού, αρεποτάνα, ο επεράρατος" [Aripou, arepotana, o epararotos] (Οικονομίδης 1956: 25); "Άσαρε, Ασαρού, Αχθανού, Σαρανάρχου, Αρουντή" [Asare, Asarou, Achthanou, Saranarchou, Arountī] (Μαντζουράνης 1915: 616); "Σάτωρ Αρετω, Τένετ, Ωτερα, Ρωτάς" [Satōr Aretō, Tenet Ōtera Rōtas] (Δημητρίου 1983: 521); "έλε, ήλι, άγρα, πίθι" [ele, īli, agra, pithi] (Καραχάλιου -Χαβιάρα 1993: 199); "Ιλ ελ γρι πιδ" [Il el gri pid] (Ρήγας 1968: 163).

It is relatively easy to identify in the above charms surviving – either intact or corrupt – variations of well-known nonsense words, such as "ασκιον κατασκιον" [askion, kataskion] of the Ephesia grammata or the classic palindrome "Sator, Tenet, Obera, Rotas" or secret mystical names of deities like "El, Eli, Eloi".[6] Surely, a more careful, in depth research in the domain of the ancient magic material could shed some light on the origin of these words and reveal their intrinsic relations, survivals, fusions, but also mutations and corruptions. However, the percentage of this type of words that is used is relatively restricted to the oral tradition of charms. In most cases the modern Greek charms which contain such words require a written tradition and performance, one that informs the oral performance and which functions supportively as regards their survival. The interrelations, as well as the mutual feedback between the oral and the written tradition, as systems of communication and transmission of information, require an additional explanation of the notion of non-signification. This happens mainly in those cases when we have the written tradition getting feedback from the oral one, when the latter is informed by a high-status, privileged register, a register which is not usually comprehensible to the carriers of the oral tradition. Quite often, texts of the ecclesiastic, scholarly tradition

are classified under the rubric of non-signification and are more vulnerable to a variety of modifications of every sort.

Here, I would like to make reference to a characteristic, corrupt excerpt of a hymn (sung on 14th September on the occasion of commemorating the Exaltation of the Holy Cross) from the Greek Orthodox tradition that has been used as charm against snakebite. The original text "Ανέθηκε Μωϋσής, επί στήλης άκος, φθοροποιού λυτήριον […]" [Anethīke Moysīs, epi stīlīs akos, phthoropoiou lytīrion …] ("Moses placed a snake effigy on a piece of wood as treatment for the bites of snakes […]") assumed the form – during the transference process to the oral tradition – of an almost incomprensible text, such as "Ανέθηκεν αι Μωυσής τσαι αι πιστίλλης το 'κουσε, θωρούν ποιεί λυτήριον" [anethīken ai Moysīs tsai ai pistillīs to kouse, thoroun poiei lytīrion] (Διαμανταράς 1912–13: 504–05). The performer modified some of the words of the scholarly text adapting them accordingly, so as to resemble acoustically every day, common speech, e.g. the word "akos" ("treatment" or "medicine") to "tokouse" ("he heard it"), and the word "phthoropoiou" ("destructive") to "thoroun" ("they see, they gaze") and "poioun" ("they do"). In another variation of the same text the phrase "Ανεθηκε Μωϋσής" [Anethīke Moysīs] has been transformed into *"Ανέβηκε Μωσής* […]" [Anevīke o Mosīs] ("Moses went up") (Σκουβαράς 1967: 91), while in a third variation the word "akos" has been transformed into "oikos" ("house") (Σκουβαράς 1967: 104).

There are also a few words, less vulnerable to modifications – though not always so – namely, well-known, standardized expressions (*archaisms*) taken from the ecclesiastic ritual tradition of the Greek Orthodox church or from sacred biblical and liturgical texts. These words often appear in popular modern Greek charms as both introductory and concluding formulas, such as: "Εν αρχή ήν ο λόγος και ο λόγος ην προς τον Θεόν και Θεός ην ο λόγος" ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God") (Πομπός 1910–11: 465), "Στώμεν καλώς, στώμεν μετά φόβου θεού" ("Let us stand well, let us stand with fear of God") (Παπαχριστοδούλου 1962: 74–75). Ecclesiastic archaisms of the previous type are, perhaps, devoid of meaning in the collective unconscious of carriers of the popular tradition, but even if we assume that they are semantically transparent, their function is not in fact based on their meaning. The effectiveness of these data is based on their "implicative weight" (Olsan 1992: 118) and on the concept of 'traditional referentiality' (Foley 1991: 7), that is, on the fact that they evoke a much wider context than the text itself, as well as the power of the system to which they belong and which they represent.

The performance, by memory, of texts belonging to the oral tradition seems to create certain issues as regards the appearance and preservation of words and texts without clear and fixed semantic content. The incomprehensible words are subjected to multiple modification procedures and new words that have

been adapted to the morphological linguistic system of the performers are created. It is characteristic that modifications and changes occur even in the case of words belonging to the oral tradition, are of a dialectic nature or belong to a prior linguistic period and are thus no longer in use (*glottai*).[7] A characteristic example of word corruption and modification belonging to this category is the word "ορνικοί" [ornikoi], a word that we encounter in charms performed for the warding off of rats, meaning "solitary, isolated, secluded or stray": "Ποντικοί ορνικοί" ("Stray Rats", Πάγκαλος 1983: 392), "Ποντικοί ορνικοί, θηλυκοί κι αρσενικοί" ("Stray Rats both female and male", Βαρδάκης 1921–25: 557). In another variation, the word "orniki" becomes "porniki" ("related to lechery") (Μαυρακάκης 1983: 213), while in yet another variation, the word "porniki" becomes, with the addition of the emphatic "poli" (=multi), "polypornoi" (Μαυρακάκης 1983: 213).

A characteristic example of the tendency displayed by oral speech to avoid non-signification is the case of the *pseudo-nonsense* words.[8] These are words which stand between-betwixt signification/"sense" and non signification/ "nonsense". At a surface level, when they are examined regardless of the context in which they appear, they are seemingly non-signifying. Their meaning and referentiality, however, clearly becomes manifest, through their relation and interconnectedness to other words in the text, which constitute the base of their formation. Words of this category, usually encountered in Modern Greek charms, are formed either by having a part of them cut off or through substitution of the first phoneme of the base-word to which they are related.

Characteristic examples of the apocope method are the following words which appear in italics and are virtually untranslatable: "προσκυνώ σας και *αρία* και τη Δέσποινα Μαρία" [proskynō sas kai *aria* kai tī Despoina Maria] ("I bow to you and to *aria* and to our mistress Maria", Φραγκάκι 1949: 58); "Ελα, ερίνα μου, Κατερίνα μου" [Ela, *erina* mou, Katerina mou] ("Come my *erina*, my Katerina", Κανακάρης 1960: 135); "Ψωροφύτη, φύτη, φύτη […] λιάρη, λιάρη, κατρουλιάρη […]" [*Psorofytī*, fytī, fytī, *katrouliarī*, liarī, liarī] ("*psorofytīs*" =a type of skin disease, "*katrouliarīs*" = he who passes water on himself, Φραγκάκι 1978: 81); "βάσκα βάσκα βασκανία" [vaska vaksa *vaskania*] ("*vaskania*"= evil eye, Τσουμελέας 1912–13: 289).

Characteristic examples of words deriving by substitution of the first letter of the base-word are: "Σιλιγούδια, *μιλιγούδια*" [Siligoudia, *miligoudia*] ("siligoudi" = type of serpent, lizard, Δημητρίου 1983: 507); "η ζήλα, η *μίλα*" [zila, *mila*] ("zila" = jealousy, envy, Κυπριανός 1968: 178), "Σταφυλίτη *μαφυλίτη*" [Stafyliti, *mafyliti*] ("stafylitis" = uvulitis, a disease of the throat, Κυπριανός 1968: 187, 200]; "τσίγκρα *μίγκρα*" [tsiknra *minkra*] ("tsinkra" = gummy, gummy-eyed, Πάγκαλος 1970: 441).

The majority, however, of the special vocabulary that we encounter in charms contains artificially constructed compounds. The basic difference be-

tween pseudo-nonsense words and those compounds lies in the fact that the latter category includes words, which in most cases are semantically transparent, even if they are examined out of their context. These words are usually formed on the basis of another word in the text to which is added another, semantically transparent word, which functions as first compound: "Μέρμηγκα, *πρωτομέρμηγκα*" [Mermīnka, *prōtomermīnka*] ("Oh Ant, *First / Chief ant*", Πάγκαλος 1983: 380); "Μέρμηγκα, *βασιλομέρμηγκα*" [Mermīnka, *vasilomermīnka*] ("Ant, *great / royal ant*", Κορρές 1966: 121); "Κούνουπα, *τρικούνουπα*" [Kounoupa, *trikounoupa*] ("Mosquito, and *thrice mosquito*", Βρόντης 1955: 159); "Ἔχτορα, *δισέχτορα*" [Echtora, *disechtora*] ("Jaundice, and *jaundice twice*", Ἡμελλος 1962: 182–83); "Ἄγγελε, *τρισάγγελε*" [Angele, *trisangele*] ("Angel, and *Angel thrice*", Φραγκάκι 1949: 47); "αἵμα και *τριζαίμα*" [aima kai *trisaima*] ("blood and *blood thrice*", Κουκουλές 1908: 144); "Ἄγιε Γιώργη *δισάγιε, δισάγιε* και *τρισάγιε*" [Agie Giorgī *disagie, disagie kai trisagie*] ("Saint George, *twice saint and saint thrice*", Κουκουλές 1926–28: 496).

Words such as nonsense, pseudo-nonsense and neologisms appear also in other genres of oral literature. The presence of these words in those genres is mainly connected to the mnemonic function of rhythm (Abrahams 1968: 51; Sherzer 1990: 240).[9] The inclusion of oral charms in the category of oral literature in combination with their specific performing context and the tradition of the genre can, in fact, partially justify the appearance of these words in question. For instance, the fact that the text is usually whispered in a low voice, so as not to be clearly heard, consequently leads to the modification of those unheard words in subsequent performances, a modification usually based on the criterion of *melopoeia* (Skorupski 1986: 146; Webster 1952: 99). It is worth mentioning that all word categories (nonsense, pseudo-non-sense, made up as well as commonly used ones) undergo this procedure. Also, the fact that the text is neither heard nor subject to any kind of censorship in combination with a belief in the magic power of speech, allows not only the preservation of these words, but also the appearance of incomprehensible texts, such as the one mentioned above, for the treatment of snakebites without loss to their effectiveness. In Modern Greek charms, there are quite a few such examples of modification cases, which clearly emerge when one compares their variations (Passalis 2000: 298–300). We can therefore come up with a satisfactory as well as reasonable explanation of the way in which these words have been created.

THE RHETORIC OF SOUNDS

Which exactly is, however, the function of the non-signifying sounds or of the pseudo nonsense words and neologisms? If we accept the view that the words

belonging to the above categories are created solely according to the criterion of *melopoeia*, then we should explain and illustrate the function of rhythm and sound patterns in charms. Could we possible talk about a social, psycho-biological function of sound and rhythm? Traditional and primitive cultures, as is well-known, are particularly sensitive to the rhythm of music and songs (Izutsu 1956: 134). The shamans-healers reach a very special state of consciousness by means of rhythm. It often happens that this rhythm repeats which is supposed to cause changes in the central nervous system.[10] While listening to these rhythms the participants often display specific psychosomatic responses ranging from the expression of ordinary emotion to ecstasy. Commenting on the Indian mantras, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1966: 249–250) maintains that the mantra formula specializes in its own special way in making available a different type of power expression through a re-patterning of the nervous system and the glands. It is true, indeed, that rhythm and music may have a certain psychosomatic effect both on their performer and their listener.[11] In the case of charms, however, the words in most cases are not heard (Passalis 2011:16). In most such cases, the healer is distinct from the person afflicted, a fact that prevents us from speaking of any rhythmic effect on the sufferer for the effect is visible only on the performer. What is, then, the function of rhythm in charms?

Answers on the subject have been provided by scholars specializing in the study of verbal magic. According to Weston (1985: 185–86), rhythmic organization facilitates the performer's entry to some kind of healing state, while increasing faith in his power and abilities so that with an increased amount of power, he/she is enabled to bring about changes in the natural world (cf. Nelson 1984: 58). The repetitive sounds elevate the performer into a state of spiritual uplift, at the same time creating the proper conditions for the accumulation of the energy required.[12] Sound is thus transformed into an 'instrumental' tool to be used for the modification of extra-textual reality (Sebeok 1974: 41). Malinowski (1965: 216, 219), emphasizes that the production of power emanates from the specific way in which the magic speech (sing-song) is delivered and that the sound in magic is a type of *verbal missile* replete with magic power (Malinowski 1965: 248). This is a view in accordance with Wittgenstein's view that the use of signs in magic is non referential, which means that their effectiveness does not depend on their referring to something external, but, rather, on the very sounds themselves as material objects (Wittgenstein 1990: 18, 61).

However, we cannot account for the non-referentiality of all words, particularly those used in charms that are both performed and transmitted orally, since the presence of purely non-signifying words there is surely limited. Let us take, for instance, the case of the above-mentioned pseudo-nonsense words that are created trough cutting up parts of the base word. The base-word on

which their formation is based is in all cases connected to the recipient's name, that is, with that factor which magic speech seeks to affect in order to elicit the desirable effect. The pseudo-nonsense word, which is created through cutting up part of the original word may have a flattering, imploring, or, in certain cases, even disapproving character, depending on the communicative strategy that is endorsed each time. We could thus claim that their formation is placed within the context of a magic speech rhetoric which seeks to control and prevail over its recipient.

Exactly the same happens in the case of pseudo-nonsense words which are formed through substitution of the initial phoneme of the base-word for the prefix /m/. Is, one might wonder, the choice of this particular prefix /m/ accidental or do we really have to do with a kind of phonemic symbolism? The use of the prefix /m/ in the Greek language expresses the user's disapproval of the content of the base-word (*DSMG*, s.v. μ-). In the case of charms, this disapproval is again part of a rhetoric that aims at handling and controlling the targeted recipient as well as confirming the power of the performer over him so as to force him into obeying his desire.

The addition of a prefix or of an additional word to the word base shows this procedure even more clearly when the added item is semantically transparent as it usually happens in the case of artificially constructed compounds/neologisms. A first compounds, such as *king*, *first*, *numericals* etc., which are added to the word base, which, in turn, is almost always connected with the rhetorical recipient of charms, show that the formation in question constitutes part of the rhetorical strategy of charms.

Another, equally characteristic, case of made up words through rhetorical strategies is the so-called homeopathic compounds, that is, words, usually compound ones, the first part of which bears the name of the disease. In these cases, the formation of made up words is based on the magic thought principle, according to which sameness can provoke sameness (similia similibus evocantur), and, more specifically, sameness can treat sameness (similia similibus curantur). For instance, in the case of charms used for the treatment of a disease called "ανεμικό" [anemiko] (Ρούσιας 1912–13: 49) the compound words used in the charm include in their first part the word "άνεμος" [anemos] ("air"), such as "ανεμοτσέκουρο" [anemotsekouro] ("ax of the air"), "ανεμόγιδες" [anemogides] ("goats of the air"), "ανεμόγαλα" [anemogala] ("milk of the air"), "ανεμοβούνι" [anemovouni] ("mountain of the air"), while in those charms used for the treatment of the inflammation of an animal's chest (Παπαχριστοδούλου 1962: 93) we encounter words such as "πυρόβουνον" [pyrovounon] ("inflamed mountain"), "πυρόμαντρα" [pyromantra] ("inflamed stockyard"), "πυρόαιγες" [pyroaiges] ("inflamed goats"), "πυρόγαλαν" [pyrogalan] ("inflamed milk") etc. Regardless of any

aesthetic value (vividness of description, rhythmical repetitiveness) that the use of such words can endow a given text with, their function is clearly rhetorical. They are selected on a similar basis as certain material objects depending on the specific result they are intent on achieving. Their aim is to affect their target object (disease or something else) through such tactics as those pertaining to sympathetic magic.

CONCLUSIONS

Charms display a double nature both "magical", which serves the purpose for which they are used, but also rhetorical, one that pertains to the method they use to achieve their goal. The focus on their effectiveness and on the ability of speech to intervene and modify extra-textual reality through unnatural means leads us to endow sound and rhythm with an inherent magic power. The manner, however, in which this intervention is attempted and achieved has a lot to do with the organization of speech and relates to rhetoric as well as to the special performative context, the tradition and the actual performance of oral charms. In contradistinction to the written tradition, which endorses the presence of stable texts, the oral tradition is inherently characterized by polymorphous diversity and allows for transformations in the form and sound of those words which are not included in the charm performer's linguistic repertoire. The fact that the text is not publicly heard, as well as the fact that its performance and transmission are secret and totally uncensored, allow for the emergence of new words, and, occasionally, also for the emergence of incomprehensible speech without posing any threat to the genre's effectiveness (Passalis 2011: 15–16).

This process of layered modifications, however, is not accidental, but constitutes part of a wider rhetoric strategy, which is not exclusively related to an inherent secret power of words. To decipher this rhetoric, which, in realistic terms, is an integral part of the communicative function of language itself (cf. Burke 1969: 41), what is required is knowledge of those cultural and symbolic relations which include, among other things, an interrelation among oral magic and treatment, oral and written tradition, the role of the supernatural in human life as well as the peformers' faith in the power of speech. The raw material of this rhetoric is sound, which constitutes a material form that can be symbolically moulded and transformed as is also the case with plenty of other features of the performative context of charms. In other words, speech becomes a means, a material object of a different substance, sound itself, which like the other means that are used in performative acts, is phonologically and morphologically shaped and is used either in combination with specific acts

or on its own, so that the performer can affect the object of desire. It is thus rhetorically organized so that it can subsequently reorganize, on an individual basis, the disrupted order by restoring it to its former orderly status.

NOTES

[1] In some cases, as a matter of fact, poetry greatly surpasses the boundaries of magic speech. A characteristically example, which is based on the conscious creation of new words through arbitrary, non sense (non-signifying) combinations, is the literary movement of *lettrisme* (*lettrism, letrismo, poesia sonora*), which first appeared in the mid-twentieth century in France. For a detailed approach to the poetics of charms along with an extensive bibliography on the subject, see Passalis 2000: 272–274.

[2] According to Graf (1991: 192) the function of non-signifying words is "to please the god [...] to claim a special relationship with the god, based on revealed knowledge". Knowledge of these words constitutes, on the one hand, proof of the power and the social status that the person performing the magic enjoys (Versnel 2002: 142), but on the other hand, it also constitutes a means of influence over the very power that the performer addresses "to answer the practitioner's request or demand" (Swartz 2002: 307). See also Borsje 2011: 129–130.

[3] The first testimony in Greek antiquity on the use of such words concern the Ephesia grammata (*ασκιον κατασκιον, λιξ, τετραξ, δαμναμενευς, αισιον/ αισια* [askion, kataskion, lix, tetrax, damnameneus, aision/aisia], Preisendanz 1962: 515–20; Audollent 1967: XCV, LXIX; Kotansky 1991: 111). Characteristically similar words in Latin are: *Abracadabra, Sator, Tenet, Obera, Rotas, Hax, Pax, Adimax* (Dieterich 1891; Grendon 1909: 113).

[4] A data base, which will include digitized charms of different cultures and eras and which will contribute significantly towards deciphering these words, is currently being compiled by the University of Amsterdam and the Meertens Institute under the supervision of Jacqueline Borsje. Its completion could greatly facilitate the diachronic, intercultural and comparative study of charms by shedding light on the origin of gibberish, nonsensical words as well as by revealing mutations, corruptions and adaptations in their new context (Borsje 2011).

[5] The English transliteration of Greek words in the present study is based on the UNESCO Greek Transliteration Table.

[6] See also note 3.

[7] The fact of the presence of these words (γλῶτται= glosses) has already been pointed since Greek antiquity (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1475 b) and has also engaged scholars in the field of magic speech (Versnel 2002: 108 note 10). See for this kind of words in Greek demotic songs Τσοπανάκης 1983: 361–363 and Πετρόπουλος 1960.

[8] Equally satisfactory for this word category is also the term "semi-words" proposed to me by Jonathan Roper in a conversation I had with him on the subject.

[9] A characteristic genre of oral literature in which the appearance of nonsense is promi-

nent is the category of nursery rhymes. The melodic speech that is encountered in nursery rhymes often displays protean, non-signifying or nonsense words, which do not differ much from those used in charms. Typical examples of rhythmic non-signifying speech are the so called counting-out rhymes which are used to draw role lots in games: "Ἄ-στρα- νταμ/ πίκι-πίκι-ραμ/πούρι-πούρι-ραμ/ α-στρα-νταμ" [A-stra-ntam-piki-piki ram-pouri ram-astra-ntam] (Κυριακίδης 1965: 80), "Α-μπε-μπα-μπλον-του-κι-σα μπλον-μπλιν-μπλον" [A- mpe-mpa-mplon-to- ki-sa-mpon-mplin-mplon]. It is also in this category, however, that we observe a link with verbal magic, since its source of origin are earlier ritual worship songs or earlier charms that were used in prior periods and whose original function is no longer valid (Sébillot 1913: 48; Κουκουλές 1948: 10; Πολίτης 1975: 171). Meaning making as regards these words is not necessary, since the nonsense syllables display a discernible rhythmic organization that facilitates the draw of a participant who is called to assume a particular role in the game.

[10] In other cases these changes are brought about through specific breathing techniques or through the reciting of mantras (Weston 1985: 186 note 12). A close similarity to the mantras is displayed by the *Dharanis* of Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as by the *dhikr* pnenomenon of mystical Sufism. These sounds facilitate concentration and meditation (Tambiah 1968: 206 note 7).

[11] A characteristic example of close connection between rhythm and activity can be detected in the so-called work/labour songs, that is, songs which usually accompany rhythmic work. They either accelerate or relax the rhythm of work and ultimately relieve and synchronize the movements of all those participating in it collectively. In fact, the relationship between these songs and the work they accompany is so close, that they are considered to be of vital importance for its successful completion, to the point that it is believed to be impossible to complete the work successfully without their being performed. They were consequently endowed with a magic power and these songs came to be classified as charms (Κυριακίδης 1965: 52).

[12] Marcel Jousse's theory as regards the way in which sound and the accumulation of energy are interrelated is quite representative. According to him the organism itself constitutes an accumulator of energy whose incessant ignitions/explosions activate hundreds of thousands of gestures and movements that are expressed in every day behaviour. This vital energy (*energie vitale*) is produced in the form of consecutive, rhythmic waves (Jousse 1924: 666). What ensues from such energy is these rhythmic patterns, which are an instinctive and spontaneous expression of vital rhythm (*le rythme vital*, op. cit.). Although it ascribes the origin of literature to biological operations, mainly as regards primeval forms of poetic expression, this approach does reveal the important role of rhythm. Critical towards this theory is Finnegan (1977: 91), who claims that it is difficult to accept such a simplistic interpretation, since the issue of rhythm is not only biological in nature, but, also, cultural.

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Issue 2

Contents