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ἴσκει in the *Odyssey*

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1. Liddell/Scott/Jones 1968: 837 differentiates between ἴσχω A as the iterative of εἶμι ‘go’ and ἴσχω B ‘imitate’; the latter occurs five times in Homer, twelve times in Apollonius Rhodius, and once each in Simonides, Theocritus, and Lycophron.

Three of the five Homeric occurrences contain the participle ἴσκοντ-. Always verse-internal, it twice requires an initial digamma. In the *Odyssey* it means ‘making (to be) like, imitating’ and its object is in the dative:

Od. 4.279 πάντων Ἀργείων φωνὴν ἴσκουσ’ ἀλόχοισιν
‘Imitating the wives of all the Greeks in voice’

In the *Iliad* it means ‘finding similar to’:

Il. 11.799 αἶ κέ σε τῷ (Ϝ)ἴσκοντες ἀπόσχονται πολέμοιο
Il. 16.41 αἶ κ’ ἐμὲ σοὶ (Ϝ)ἴσκοντες ἀπόσχονται πολέμοιο¹
‘If, taking you for him (me for you), they will hold off from war’

These meanings are more frequently expressed in Homer by εἶσχω (fourteen occurrences). Both ἴσχω and εἶσχω continue the root **meik-* ‘resemble’² of εἰκών ‘likeness, image’, εἶκελος ‘similar’ and εἰκάζω ‘*make to resemble’ > ‘portray; compare; conjecture’. The only difference between ἴσχω < **rik-skō* and εἶσχω < **re-rik-skō*, then, is the initial **re-*; on its nature see the appendix.

All other occurrences of ἴσχω are verse-initial; here the assumption of an initial digamma is possible, but gratuitous. Around 500 BC Simonides’ epigram LXIX (142 D., on the tomb of a dog) attests a semantic development to ‘think or consider (to be); judge that; deem; fancy’:

ἦ σεῦ καὶ φθιμένας λεύκ’ ὅστέα τῷδ’ ἐνὶ τύμβῳ
ἴσχω ἔτι τρομέειν θῆρας, ἄγρωσσα Λυκάς.
‘Although you are dead, oh huntress Lukas, I think the beasts are still
trembling at your white bones in this tomb’.

¹ Both occurrences of the Iliadic verse have a *varia lectio* εἶσκοντες, but εἶσχω is otherwise always trisyllabic.

² Cf. Lith. *pervėikslas* ‘example’, Pokorny 1959 I: 1129. Rix 2001: 670 fn. 4 derives εἶσχω ‘resemble; seem; befit’ from **meik-* ‘enter’ (Pokorny 1959 I: 1131).

By the third century BC a different semantic development had taken place: now verse-initial ἴσκει follows speeches and means ‘said’. It is found in Alexandrian epic: Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 2.240

... ἄκοιτιν” Ἰσκεν Ἀγηγορίδης· ἀδινὸν δ’ ἔλε κῆδος ἕκαστον
 ‘(So) spoke the son of Agenor, and dense care seized each one’ (and eleven times elsewhere), bucolic: Theocritus, *Idylls* 22.167

... πάντες” Ἰσκον τοιάδε πολλά, τὰ δ’ εἰς ὑγρὸν ὄχετο κῦμα
 ‘Such things I told...’, and tragedy: Lycophron, *Alexandra* 573–4

τροφὴν δ’ ἀμεμφῆ πᾶσι τριπτύχους κόρας ἴσκων παρέξειν
 ‘Saying that his three daughters were going to provide impeccable food for all’.

This usage is said to be based on that of ἴσκει in the *Odyssey*, where it occurs twice verse-initially following speeches. But both of these passages have posed problems since Alexandrian times.

2. In *Odyssey* 19.203 the author comments on Odysseus’ skill at spinning plausible tales about himself to Penelope:

ἴσκει ψεύδεα πολλά λέγων ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα·
 ‘He knew that he was telling many lies similar to truths’

– or so I have always understood this verse. To my surprise I seem to be only the second person to have done so; usually ἴσκει is translated as either ‘said, told’ or as ‘imitated, feigned’. Both interpretations go back to the Alexandrian scholia, themselves summarizing earlier scholarship.

One ancient opinion held that ἴσκει already meant ‘said’ here as in Alexandrian verse. But here a *verbum dicendi* is already present in λέγων. Nonetheless the rendering ‘told’ is found in Butcher/Lang 1879: 317, Ameis/Hentze 1911: 15 (“rekapitulierend, wie ἦ ῥα, φῆ”), and Schadewaldt 1958: 251. Since this meaning is not inherited,³ it would have to be the result of one of the already pre-Homeric misunderstandings or re-interpretations of obsolete words of the type studied in detail by M. Leumann 1950.

Other ancient scholars are said to have understood ἴσκει as ὁμοίου ‘made like, imitated’ or εἴκαζε ‘portrayed, represented’ as in the above passages with ἴσκοντ-, and they have been followed by Liddell/Scott/

³ The derivation from the root 2. *sek^h- ‘say’ of ἔννεπε, ἐνισπεσ, ἔσπετε and Latin *insece, inquit* (Pokorny 1959 I: 897–8, Rix 2001: 526–7), as urged most recently by Van der Valk 1949: 116 Fn. 7, is inadmissible, since IE labiovelars appear as κ in Greek only beside υ, as in βουκόλος, κύκλος, ὑγίης, and οὐκί.

Jones 1968: 837 and Monro 1901: 158; but the object is not in the dative, and ‘he imitated lies’ just makes no sense here.

The problems with both ancient interpretations were summarized by West 1966: 163: “if ἴσκει is meant in the proper sense ‘assimilate’, then ὁμοῖα is superfluous; if it bears the secondary sense ‘speak’, then λέγειν is superfluous”. So ἴσκει must mean something different from both.

Various modern suggestions must also be rejected. Russo 1992: 87 takes the scholiasts’ εἵκαζε in its later meaning (first found in Herodotus) of ‘conjecture; guess’; but ‘he conjectured lies’ is no more satisfactory.

Fernández-Galiano’s translation ‘he invented lies’ (1992: 225) does for once give good sense. However this is not in itself a recommendation: since the meaning ‘invent, make up’ is found for this verb nowhere else, there is no justification for presuming it here. P. Thieme’s methodological warning of “the mistake of complicating the vocabulary in order to simplify the sense” (1957: 55 = 1984: 726), i.e. the danger of multiple *ad hoc* translations which only serve to disguise the real difficulties of interpretation, holds for Homer as well as for the Rgveda.

Stanford’s translation “He made his many falsehoods seem like truth” (1948: 324) ignores both the transmitted verb-forms while verbalizing the adjective ‘similar’ into a factitive. Even more distant from the text is Fagles 1996: 397: “Falsehoods all, but he gave his falsehoods all the ring of truth”.

Unaware that ἴσκει was controversial, due to its radical zero-grade and lack of augment I naïvely understood it as an iterative of οἶδα. Later I came across Hesiod, *Theogony* 27–8:

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,
ἴδμεν δ’ εὖτ’ ἐθέλωμεν ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.
‘We know how to tell many lies similar to truths; we also know how,
when we want, to voice the truth’,

which seemed to confirm my interpretation. But with time I saw that this crucial parallel is not mentioned in any discussion of ἴσκει. Its importance was seen only by I. Sellschopp in her effort to show that Hesiod’s works are earlier than the *Odyssey* (1934: 43).⁴ Hesiod’s ἴδμεν is indeed more coherently composed and deployed than Homer’s ἴσκει: λέγειν is not superfluous, but simply its object. And

⁴ Her outdated opinion that ἴσκει originally meant ‘said’ (see the previous footnote) does not affect her argument, which Edwards 1971: 166–8, 187–9 rejects without offering an alternative interpretation for the Odyssean parallel.

ἴδμεν itself is bound closely into its context by anaphora and antithetic δέ. Finally, ἴδμεν is a non-obvious modification of ἴσκει, while ἴσκει is easily understood as an iterative of ἴδμεν. Admittedly it would be the only known iterative to be built on a perfect stem, though they were occasionally formed to aorists.⁵ But such artificial nonce-creations are after all typical of the *Kunstsprache*.

I know of only one predecessor for the above translation, Lattimore 1965: 287: “He knew how to say many false things that were like true sayings”. But although he interprets ἴσκει here⁶ in my opinion correctly, Lattimore does not adequately render its syntax. The contrast in object-constructions of verbs of perception between infinitive and participle⁷ means that in contrast to Hesiod’s ἴδμεν ... λέγειν ‘we know how to tell lies similar to truths’, Odyssean ἴσκει ... λέγων means ‘he knew *that he was telling* lies ...’. That is, Odysseus is here being characterized as a deliberate liar.

3. The other Odyssean occurrence of ἴσκει also follows a speech, namely the suitors’ collective recrimination (μνηστῆρες ... νεΐκειον) after Odysseus abruptly slaughters Antinoos. The poet comments asyndetically (*Odyssey* 22.31–3):

ἴσκεν ἕκαστος ἀνήρ, ἐπεὶ ἦ φάσαν οὐκ ἐθέλοντα
ἀνδρα κατακτεῖναι

Here the same two Alexandrian interpretations of ἴσκειν have found their modern champions. The meaning ‘spoke’ found in many of the best translations⁸ would be due to a pre-Homeric metanalysis, Leumann-style. The asyndeton is reminiscent of the frequent expressions for *inquit* in Homer: ἦ, φῆ, and ὡς φάτο. Still the usage diverges for no reason from normal Homeric diction which would have fit perfectly well, such as ἐνθ’ ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες ἐπευφήμησαν Ἀχαιοί (*Il.* 1.22) or ὡς ἔφαθ’, οἱ δ’ ὄμωξαν ἀολλέες (*Il.* 23.12).

Even more frequent is ‘conjectured, guessed; imagined’,⁹ once again presuming a development from ‘make like’ to ‘guess’ parallel to that of εικάζω in Herodotus. Problematic is the lack of an adverbial

⁵ E.g. δόσκει, εἶπεσκε, σπείσασκε: Schwyzer 1939: 708, Risch 1974: 276.

⁶ Whereas at *Od.* 22.31 he renders ἴσκειν as ‘spoke’ (1965: 322).

⁷ Schwyzer/Debrunner 1950: 395–6; Smyth 1920: 476.

⁸ Butcher/Lang 1879: 360, Ameis/Hentze 1911: 101, Schadewaldt 1958: 284, Lattimore 1965: 322 (“Each spoke at random”).

⁹ So Liddell/Scott/Jones 1968: 837, Monro 1901: 220, Stanford 1948: 373, Russo 1992: 225–6, Fagles 1996: 440 (“Each persuading himself”).

‘so, likewise’¹⁰ or of an object: ‘what had happened’ or ‘the reason for the shooting’.

Nor does a translation ‘each man knew (it)’ (from **uid-*, as above) make sense. One sympathizes with Aristarchus’ athetesis of this passage.

One possibility remains which has never been considered in this context: the original meaning of ἴσκοντ- ‘making like, imitating’: ‘Each man imitated (him/this)’, i.e. the others all did the same. The ellipsis of the object (here it would be in the dative) would still be problematic, but the possibility of a translation with a meaning found elsewhere as well is sound philologic practice.

4. In this case not two, but three verbs ἴσκω must be differentiated in Homer: one from εἶμι ‘go’, one from an earlier ρίσκω ‘imitate’, and one *hapax legomenon* artificially formed to ἴδμεν ‘know’, from IE **uid-* ‘glance at’.

*Appendix: the first syllable of εἶσκω < *FE-FIK-SKΩ*

The usual view that ἐ-, *FE- is a reduplication¹¹ is problematic for two reasons. First, *e*-reduplication in Greek is limited to the perfect and aorist, the few seeming presents being obviously remodeled from those stense-stems, e.g. τετραίνω to τέτρηνα and κέκλωμαι ‘command’ (Apollonius Rhodius) to Homeric ἐκέκλετο.¹² Even if *FE-FI- is presumed to have been dissimilated from an earlier *FI-FI-,¹³ another difficulty remains: nowhere else in Greek are reduplicated and non-reduplicated presents built from the same root.¹⁴

For these reasons the first syllable may instead continue the local particle 1.**ue-* ‘away’ (cf. perhaps Mycenaean pejorative *we-*, see Dunkel 2014 II: 839). A semantic parallel is offered by ἄπ-εικάζω ‘copy; compare; conjecture, imagine’; after all one copies ‘from’ or ‘off’ something. Other seeming reduplications which actually continue obsolete particles are seen in κέκλυτε ‘listen here’ and ἐκέκλετο ‘ordered’ with near-deictic **ke* (missing in Dunkel 2014 II: 401) and

¹⁰ Monro 1901: 220 explicitly calls ἴσκειν for οὕτως ἴσκειν an idiomatic usage (though it never recurs).

¹¹ E.g. Liddell/Scott/Jones 1968: 837; Schwyzer 1939: 708; Frisk 1960: 530, 737; Risch 1974: 276.

¹² Schwyzer 1939: 648.

¹³ Due to cacophony according to Schulze 1910: 185 = 1966: 305; accepted by Schwyzer 1939: 289.

¹⁴ Against Epirotic γνώσκω = γιγνώσκω see Forssman 1968: 14–20.

πρᾶύσκω ‘tell, declare, show’ with the zero-grade of ἐπί (Dunkel 2014 II: 247).

In this case ἴσκω and ἔϊσκω would continue a simplex and its preverb-compound, respectively.

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