

Deborah Beck, *Speech Presentation in Homeric Epic*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. Pp. x, 256. ISBN 9780292738805. \$55.00.

**Reviewed by Luuk Huitink, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg
(luuk.huitink@skph.uni-heidelberg.de)**

[Preview](#)

I apologize to the author and the publisher for the lateness of this review.

This book presents an account of the full range of techniques used to represent speech in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*,¹ including not only direct and indirect speech, but also free indirect speech and the summary form she calls speech mention, and aims to elucidate the factors which inform a choice from among these forms on particular occasions. It attempts to show that the various modes of speech representation form a coherent system, with each of the modes fulfilling a specific function in Homeric discourse. In this way, the book seeks to correct and supplement a number of widespread observations about represented speech in the epics made in narratological studies, which are perhaps best exemplified by Richardson in his influential work on the Homeric narrator: 1) direct speech is the default choice; 2) indirect speech is used to report orders; 3) indirect speech is used when characters quoted in direct speech report the words of other characters.² To counter this picture, Beck mainly draws on recent work in general linguistics, which demonstrates the inherent creativity of speech representation and highlights the choices speakers face in selecting the mode that is most effective for achieving their present communicative purposes.

Given the recent advances in studies on speech representation in general linguistics,³ a more linguistic treatment of Homeric epic, a genre to which speech representation is so vital, was overdue. And overall, Beck's argument is persuasive. However, the book ultimately derives its value more from the many astute detailed observations it contains, which often go beyond discussion of form alone, than from conceptual acumen. Beck's decision to avoid 'detailed discussion of theoretical background' (p. 4) unfortunately means that she describes the effects of specific speech-representation modes in terms which are at times rather dull. A major bonus, however, for which every scholar of Homer should be grateful, is that the book is accompanied by a free, searchable online database of all instances of speech representation in the epics ([DeborahBeck home](#)), which allows the user to call up all indirect speeches, opening and closing formulas, or the gender of speakers and addressees, to name but a few functions. The book itself, meanwhile, is beautifully produced and contains only very minor infelicities.⁴

The book consists of an Introduction, Conclusion and six chapters; the first four are devoted to individual speech-representation modes (direct speech, free indirect speech, indirect speech and speech mention), while the last two discuss the combination of these modes in selected longer passages of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, respectively, with due attention to the differences between the two epics. Throughout, two main principles guide Beck's work. First, she starts each of the chapters on the individual speech-representation modes with an analysis of how characters (quoted in direct speech) use each mode, *before* turning to a discussion of the ways in which the main narrators of the epics employ the same mode. Beck's sound

assumption here is that, if characters and narrator employ the modes for representing speech differently, then both have made informed choices—there is thus no such thing as a 'default' choice: the fact that the main narrators use direct speech so often is due to their special interest in expressive conversational exchanges and their emphasis on detailed, vivid narration (see especially pp. 187-8).⁵ Secondly, in order to counter the widespread assumption that indirect speech is preferentially used for orders, Beck has investigated for each instance of speech representation what speech act type is represented ('assertives', 'directives', 'expressives' and 'interrogatives') and also what subtype ('directives', for instance, are subdivided into 'order', 'plea', 'request', etc.). Beck's commitment to this part of her programme is certainly admirable, and she succeeds in showing that existing preconceptions are often false. (For instance, the proportion of assertives and directives reported in direct speech is about the same.) However, one cannot help but wonder if the effort required by the reader to become acquainted with all subtypes (as many as 41) ultimately pays off: the data for each type are so small as to become statistically insignificant. Furthermore, the absence of tables and graphs is exhausting (and, frankly, a little suspect), because the reader is too often confronted with impenetrable prose instead (e.g. p. 82, on indirect speech used by characters: 'Half of the speeches whose speech act type is not clear present an identifiable subtype that can be a subtype of more than one large speech act type, such as rebuke, which can be either an emotive or a directive'). Nonetheless, Beck's painstaking investigation into the kinds of speech acts uttered by characters in the epics will be useful for a variety of scholarly purposes, especially as all types and subtypes are catalogued in the online database.⁶

A look at Chapter 1, on direct speech, may reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the argument. Beck rightly takes the view that faithfulness to an 'original utterance' is not the reason for selecting direct speech. Instead, she argues, 'vividness' or 'expressiveness' is the decisive criterion; one argument in favour of this analysis is that 'emotive' speech act types are markedly more often represented in direct speech than in other types. Throughout, Beck emphasizes the 'highlighting' or 'emphasizing' function of direct speech. However, these terms do not receive much explanation, and one feels that the actual observations made about the use of direct speech are not entirely consistent with an interpretation of direct speech as merely 'vivid'. Fine observations include: 1) In his νόστος story at *Od.* 4.351-592, Menelaus mainly uses direct speech to represent his own questions and answers: he shows his own conversational style to be highly collaborative and so gives an implicit hint to his listener Telemachus on how one may go about extracting useful information from other people; 2) Odysseus, in *Od.* 9-12, only once quotes his companions directly, while in the Cyclops episode, every speech is quoted directly; Beck concludes that this procedure de-emphasizes the role of the companions and that the contrast 'emphasizes the Cyclops episode even more strongly' (p. 36); 3) when characters report lies ('deceptive speech'), they use direct speech to do so; 4) characters often reinforce their orders by quoting an authoritative character directly: an example is Odysseus' quotation at *Il.* 2.322-30 of something Calchas said on an earlier occasion, which is intended to persuade the Greeks to stay in Troy. In making such observations, Beck touches upon, but does not expound, important characteristics of direct speech, which is more versatile than the catch-all term 'vividness' suggests: 1) direct speech as 'role playing' with an exemplifying function; 2) direct speech as a marker of reduced narrative pace; 3) direct speech as a distancing device; 4) direct speech as a way of putting authoritative witnesses onto the 'stage'. A more adventurous (sociolinguistic and pragmatic) conceptual view of the role of direct speech in discourse would have bolstered Beck's theoretical reflections and would have made her observations more incisive.

Similar remarks can be made on the other chapters, but this review is too short to discuss all the interesting, detailed observations Beck makes. Scholars interested in Homeric speech

representation and Homeric narrative in general will have to consult the book in any case. I end by commenting on Chapter 2, on free indirect speech, in which the marriage between theory and practice seems to me to be particularly problematic. Beck defines free indirect speech as any clause that is not directly subordinated to a verb of speaking. On the one hand, she argues, this syntax resembles direct speech, which is also not subordinated. On the other hand, however, the syntax often leaves it unclear whether the text belongs to the main speaker or the narrator, and hence if there is speech representation at all. This contradiction—free indirect speech resembles both direct speech and narrator text—, which is admittedly also present in much other work on free indirect speech, is not resolved by Beck, so that a clear assessment of the nature of free indirect speech in Homer is still lacking. Moreover, although Beck argues enthusiastically for its existence, her definition of free indirect speech is not always convincing. For example, one consequence of her definition is that an ordinary phenomenon of Homeric syntax, the shifting from subordinate to main clauses, is suddenly imbued with great significance:

φῆ δ' οὐδὲν τεκέειν, ἢ δ' αὐτὴ γείνατο πολλούς (*Il.* 24.608)

According to Beck, the second clause is in free indirect speech and this 'form vividly foregrounds Niobe as she brags about her fertility' (p. 63). However, I must admit that I find it difficult to see anything but an ordinary indirect speech; given Homeric usage, nothing out of the ordinary happens here. Beck is perhaps on more solid ground in her discussion of *Il.* 9.590-5 (an interesting and neglected passage) and of *Od.* 8.266-367, the famous song of Demodocus. She argues that, on the one hand, these longer examples contain many features which otherwise occur in direct speech; they are, in her words, 'expressive'. On the other hand, she continues, they blur the boundaries between the reported and reporting speaker; this may be true, but contradicts the earlier conclusion that these speeches somehow stand out from the rest of the narrative. It is also not quite clear what the intended effect of this blurring might be.⁷ In any case, it must be admitted that one is not forced to accept an interpretation in terms of free indirect speech, and more discussion of the linguistic characteristics by which free indirect speech might be recognized is necessary in order to prove that it is a separate speech-representation mode purposefully used by Homer. But such is the nature of a thought-provoking book: we are left wanting more, and Beck has, among other things, begun to show the way for future research.

Notes:

- ^{1.} Beck actually prefers the term 'presented speech' over 'represented' or 'reported speech', following, among others, Semino, E. and M. Short (2004). *Corpus Stylistics: Speech, Writing and Thought Presentation in a Corpus of English Writing*. London; New York: Routledge. By using 'presented speech' scholars aim to suppress the connotations of reproduction and repetition which attach to the 're-' prefix: reported speech is a much more flexible phenomenon. However, the term is still unfortunate, in that it is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of linguistic representation.
- ^{2.} Richardson, S. (1990). *The Homeric Narrator* Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, esp. pp. 71-4, 77-8.
- ^{3.} Beck knows and cites the most important literature; the most striking omission I found is Marnette, S. (2005). *Speech and Thought Presentation in French*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, an influential treatment which deals, among other things, with the interesting *comparandum* of mediaeval French narrative poetry.

4. The reference to *Od.* 333 on p. 28 should probably be to 351; for 'women and men speakers' on p. 134 read 'female and male speakers'.
5. Although there is nothing wrong with the ancient principle Ὅμηρον ἐξ Ὀμήρου σαφηνίζειν, one wonders whether inclusion of Hesiod and the Homeric hymns would have clarified the point; these works are now only briefly mentioned on p. 188. See, however, Beck's own insightful article 'Direct and Indirect Speech in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter', *TAPhA* 131 (2001): 53-74.
6. One immediately thinks of the kind of research exemplified in Scodel, R. *Epic Facework: self-presentation and social interaction in Homer*. Swansea: Classical Press of Wales 2008.
7. Strangely absent from Beck's bibliography is an article which also discusses Demodocus' song in terms of the 'blurring' of narrative levels: De Jong, I. J. F. (2009). 'Metalepsis in Ancient Greek Literature' in: Grethlein, J. and A. Rengakos (eds). *Narratology and Interpretation: the content of narrative form in ancient literature*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 87-115. Beck could have profited from de Jong's forceful conclusion.