

One of the most common formulaic phrases in Homer's "epics" -- his ἔπεα -- includes the word for "words" themselves, which are described as "winged": ἔπεα πτερόεντ(α). The epithet's original semantic force may be elicited from its clear etymological association with the root πτερ- ("wing" or "feather"). Some prefer the metaphor of a "winged" bird escaping through the "barrier of the teeth" of the speaker, like a bird escaping from a cage, and flying swiftly to the receptive ears of the hearer; others prefer the metaphor of a feathered arrow, held stable and true by the fletching at its base, which enables it to fly speedily and accurately to its target. But this difference is relatively minor; the metaphors, after all, overlap, a feather being a component of a wing, and both portraying words that fly from the lips of the speaker to the ears of the hearer.

The real problem arises when we confront the formula ἄπτερος . . . μῦθος, which upon first glance would reasonably appear to mean the opposite of ἔπεα πτερόεντα, i.e., a "wingless" or "featherless" word (with alpha-privative), and this is the way interpreters and translators have usually rendered the phrase: i.e., the word was "without a wing." Contextually, however, the epithet ἄπτερος seems to mean the same thing as πτερόεις: in each of the four passages in which the formula occurs the words have flown quickly from speaker to hearer, who appears to understand them perfectly and then proceeds to obey them. Simply put, as exegetes we are in the embarrassing position of having two etymologically *opposite* epithets -- ἄπτερος and πτερόεις -- appear to mean contextually *the same thing*.

Dozens of proposals have been offered since antiquity to resolve this difficulty. I propose to re-examine a solution offered very tentatively and only in passing by F. Weck in 1884 and later fleshed out in somewhat more detail by J.B. Hainsworth in 1968: namely that some sort of deformation of the epithet ἔπεα πτερόεντ(α) occurred during the oral and/or written transmission of the epics. I think we can make some advances on their proposals in view of the greater familiarity we have gained over the past generation with the world's many oral traditions and how they have been passed down through the ages. I propose that the traditional epithet πτερόεντα, which once must have been vivid and powerful, indeed marvelous in its novelty, eventually lost much of its original semantic force and began to serve a largely formal function. I envision some bard along the way who, when inspired to formulate a new phrase for speaking, this time with μῦθος instead of ἔπος, did not stop to analyze precisely and accurately into its component parts the traditional formula ἔπεα πτερόεντα, which had flowed so effortlessly countless times through the mouths of his bardic predecessors. Rather, he simply and casually recomposed ("metanalyzed") the formula ἔπεα πτερόεντα (προσηύδα, etc.) as ἔπε' ἄπτερόεντα (προσηύδα, etc.) on the analogy of the many other similar formulas familiar to him (e.g., ἔπε' ἀθανάτοισι μετηύδα). Given ἄπτερόεις the derivation of ἄπτερος within the epic *Kunstsprache* was simple, indeed predictable, on the analogy of Homeric φαιδιμῶεις - φαίδιμος, φοινῆεις - φοινός, τελήεις - τέλειος, μεσήεις - μέσος, etc.

The metanalysis of ἔπεα πτερόεντα made no difference to the semantics of the epithet, or to the formula in which it was embedded. The outcome of the metanalysis, the epithet ἄπτερος, is semantically indistinguishable from its progenitor, the epithet πτερόεις, and the two should probably be rendered alike in our modern translations. The incomprehensible distinction often made between "winged words" and "wingless speech" is a figment of our philological imaginations.