

# What's in a word?

## Dating Vrt'anēs K'ert'ol's *Յաղագս Պատկերամարտից*

Workshop on the *Treatise Concerning the Iconoclasts* by Vrt'anēs K'ert'ol (7th c.)  
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## 1 Question

Although Vrt'anēs K'ert'ol's authorship of *Յաղագս Պատկերամարտից* has been accepted by a number of eminent scholars (DER NERSESSIAN 1944–45; ALEXANDER 1955; MATHEWS 2008–2009), some doubt still remains particularly regarding the text's date, owing partly to the fact that his discussion of iconoclasm supposedly preempts similar works by decades (cf. e.g. SCHMIDT 1997).

The question thus arises whether it is possible to date the text under consideration on a linguistic basis alone, viz. disregarding its content and potential historical references and relying solely on phonological, morphological, syntactic, etc., evidence.

Three distinct types of dating, hierarchically ordered below, may be differentiated in this instance:

1. an absolute, numerical date; failing this
2. a relative date or period with reference to known, chronologically identifiable linguistic changes (*terminus post* or *ante quem*); and failing that
3. a vague date relating to linguistic changes less well understood or datable.

§2 will demonstrate that dating option (1) is almost always impossible; option (2) is a more likely candidate, but relies heavily on a detailed and fine-grained knowledge of linguistic developments. Option (3), therefore, is the only one open for the present purpose (for the most part).

CAVEAT – The below is study of select lexical items, phonological, morphological, and syntactic changes only; those that were seen to bear any relevance to the question of dating are treated here, whereas others remain unmentioned.

## 2 Theoretical Considerations

In the following, the concept of linguistic dating will be considered on its own in utmost brevity. Examples are taken from languages (and time periods) for which more data is available to elucidate the issues at hand.

## 2.1 Absolute Dating

Absolute dating, viz. to the year or decade, requires very specific circumstances. Morphological, syntactic, and even sound change does not occur over such short periods of time (and upon completion may further take time to manifest in the written language).

Absolute dating relying on linguistics alone, therefore, is only possible, even hypothetically, in a very limited set of instances and only on the basis of lexical items which arose and fell out of use in a short time span.<sup>1</sup> Amongst such terms might be counted, e.g. American English *speakeasy* or *palooka* (see the graphs below).<sup>2</sup>

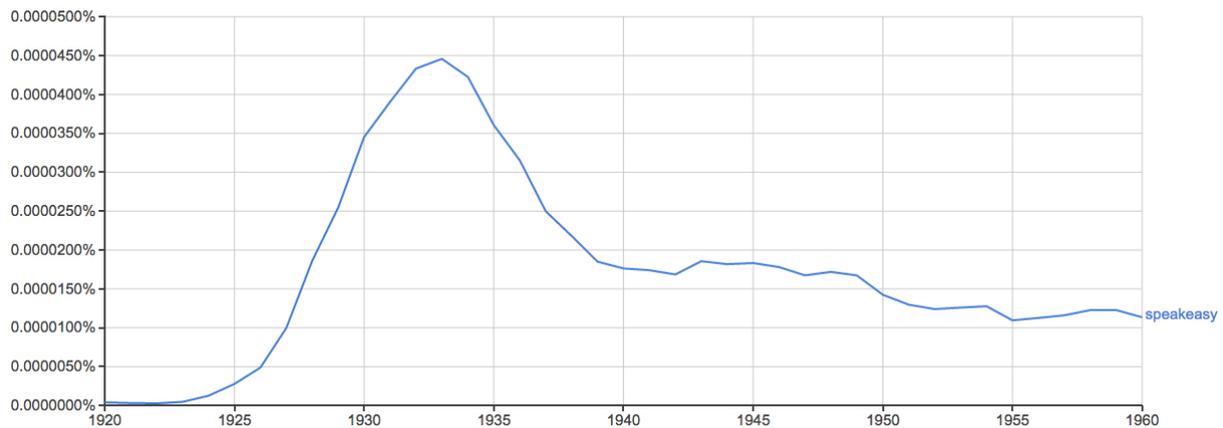


Figure 1: Usage of *speakeasy*: A shop or bar where alcoholic liquor is sold illegally (esp. during the American Prohibition of 1920–33).

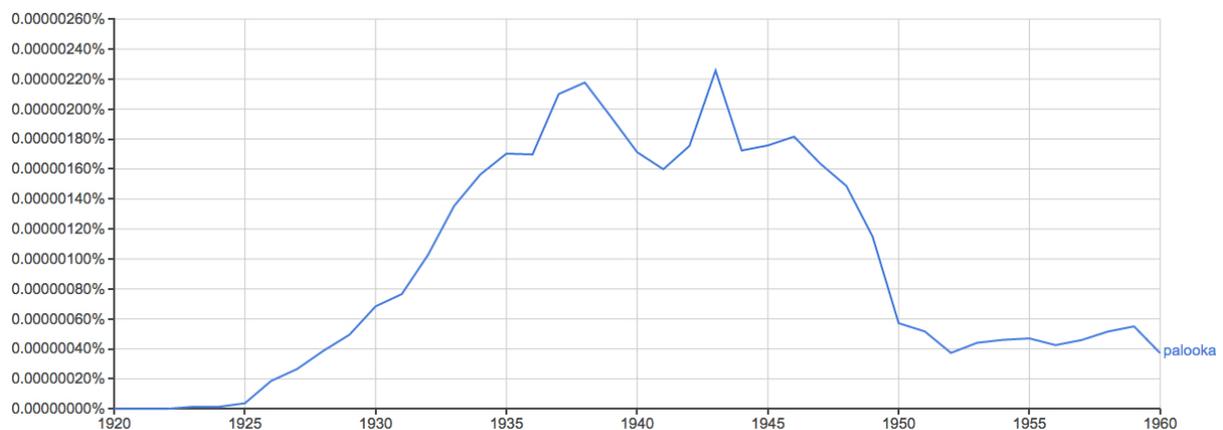


Figure 2: Usage of *palooka*: A stupid, clumsy, or uncouth person; an inferior or mediocre boxer (based on an American comic strip from the 1930s).

It is evident, however, even from such simplified data that even such restricted terms do not ‘die off’ completely or immediately, esp. when used in different contexts (e.g. period fiction).<sup>3</sup> An attempt at

<sup>1</sup>This ought not to be confused with the concept of ‘glottochronology’, as advanced by SWADESH (1955) and others.

<sup>2</sup>The graphs show the relative frequency of occurrence of the words stated over the specified period of time; they are based on the corpus of texts digitised by Google, and represent only an approximation of reality.

<sup>3</sup>In more formal terms, this may also be thought of as an instance of KURYŁOWICZ (1949)’s fourth law of analogy, according to which the co-existence of an old, non-analogical form and a new, derived, analogical form entails the latter taking on the original meaning, whilst the former acquires a new, more specific meaning; cp. e.g. English *brothers* (analogical) vs *brethren*. Words are thus frequently repurposed.

dating texts on this basis, then, can only be probabilistic, and runs the risk of missing the mark by wide margins. Conversely, the first occurrence of a lexical item in a text need not (and in fact is unlikely to) represent the first usage of the item overall (cf. ALINEI 2004:4). Given the nature of linguistic corpora of historical languages (size, genres, sociolinguistics, etc.), such ‘trend words’ are unlikely to help in dating texts.

An absolute dating is therefore out of the question.

## 2.2 Relative Dating or Periodisation

As the above graphs have shown already, the determination of a *terminus post quem* is possible. Such *termini* can often be linked to extralinguistic events. The advent of neologisms or collocations like *internet*, *mobile phone* or *cell phone*, for example, presupposes the existence of the concepts signified. Accordingly, texts containing these tokens will have a *terminus post quem* of approx. 1975.

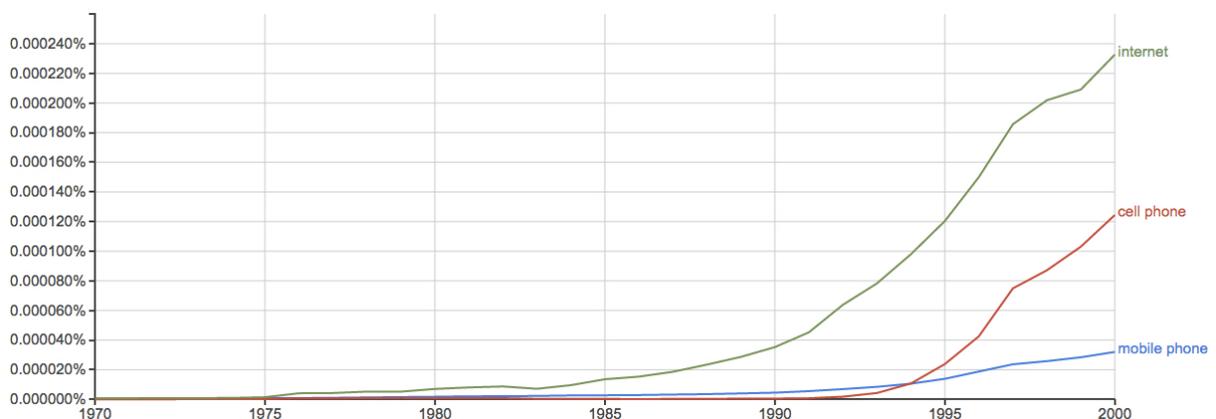


Figure 3: Usage of the terms *internet*, *mobile phone*, and *cell phone* in American English.

A more classical example, and indeed one from phonology, is the Nikandrē inscription:

Νικάνδρη μάνέθεκεν (ε)κηβόλοι ιοχεαίρηι Κόρη Δεινοδίκηο τῶ Νησιό ...

Linguistic data alone can reveal the following:

- composed after loss of Greek digamma (< PIE \*w) and further after Attic \* $\tilde{\alpha}$  > η [æ̃]
- composed before raising of [æ̃] to [ē] and thus graphemic coalescence of \* $\tilde{\epsilon}$  and  $\tilde{\epsilon}$  < \* $\tilde{a}$  in <η>

Even if archaeological data were unavailable, then, it would be possible to date this inscription relative to other texts on linguistic grounds alone. As precise a date as 650 BCE (based on archaeological evidence), however, could not be offered.

Is it possible, then, to use lexical or phonological, or indeed any other linguistic data to approximate a date of Vrt'anēs' text?

## 3 Vrt'anēs' text

The below is based solely on the text in question, sc. *Βαηρααυ Νηαυκεραυδωρησηγ*. Sections are ordered from least to most promising.

### 3.1 Phonology

Given the tendency of literary and epigraphic sources to be conservative or archaising in their orthography once a standard language (or indeed language standard) has been introduced (cf. e.g. HORROCKS 1997:3 on Classical Greek), little help is to be expected from this point. There are extremely few phonological changes that might find graphemic expression during the time of Classical Armenian (at most up to *approx.* 1100 CE; cf. JENSEN 1959; MEILLET 1936).

The monophthongisation of *աւ* to *օ* does not happen until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and does not occur in this text. Other features, e.g. the rendition of original *յ* as *՛* or the arising confusion between the voiceless uvular fricative [χ] <*խ*> and the velarized alveolar lateral approximant [ɮ] <*ղ*>, are difficult to date in the first place, and also do not occur here.

### 3.2 Morphology

In other texts, morphological features, particularly nominal composition, have often been helpful in dating texts at least approximately; this is possible in Armenian as a result of the often strict adherence and *verbum pro verbo* translation of Greek originals in the so-called “Hellenising” or “Hellenophile” school (cf. MURADYAN 2012).

Even in texts of this kind, however, style and date ought not to be confused (THOMSON 2014:310) and recent scholarship has pointed out numerous issues with the received, four-layered stratification of the *Յունաբան Դպրոց* (cf. LAFONTAINE AND COULIE 1983; COULIE 1994-5; MEYER fthc. 2014). Yet, loan translations, viz. calques, of period-specific Greek terminology may serve to set a *terminus post quem*. The text in question, by virtue of being an original composition, does not pertain to the “Hellenising” school, nor does it make extensive use of its terminology.

The only morphological observation worth making regards the co-occurrence of *երկիրպագանեն* “worship” and *երկրպագանեն* (e.g. §25). The latter is not noted in NBHL and seems to occur otherwise only in Movsēs Dasxuranc’i (*fl.* 10<sup>th</sup> c. ?). The existence of *պագանեն* and *երկրպագեն*, however, do not lend particular strength to this form (error / colloquialism / contraction?), nor can any chronological information be gained from it.

Similarly, the form *գուշակմամբ* “prophecy, etc.” (§10) is first attested in Vrt’anēs (and then later in Movsēs Xorenac’i and others), but presents no additional information; in fact, the abstract suffix *-ումն* suggests an early, classical formation, since this suffix was no longer productive.

Even where a direct Greek equivalent exists, this need not help the dating effort: *բերանսեալ* “be quiet, close one’s mouth” (§46) is likely modelled on Gk. *στομόω*, which occurs already in Herodotus and thus provides no helpful *terminus post quem*.

### 3.3 Lexicon

The occurrence of the form *լաժուարդ* “lapis lazuli; ultramarine” (§62) as opposed to later attested forms (*լաջվարդ* vel sim.) is unlikely to be of help: even if DER NERSESSIAN (1944–45) *ad loc.* were correct and the form, derived from Middle Persian (cp. HAB 256–7), showed “une influence arabe”, it was likely a ‘Wanderwort’ or ‘Kulturwort’. Accordingly, requiring the Arab invasion (or a related datable event) to have taken place prior to its occurrence is unnecessary (and indeed unfounded).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>BAILEY (1979:36b) offers an etymology of the word that doesn’t require an Arabic backing; whether this derivation is necessarily correct shall remain open here.

### 3.4 Morphosyntax

Overall, changes and variation in morphosyntax are the most likely candidates to allow for more text-based linguistic dating. Rather than on absolutes, however, it is tendencies that must be relied upon, specifically those of contemporary colloquial syntax interfering with the perceived, likely conservative standard.

“The most important thing I would consider to be the investigation of linguistic trends, much advanced in recent times through the study of translations, notably the so-called “Hellenophile” texts. But I do not think that the problem of equating style of translation with date has yet been fully resolved. [...] It would be advantageous for the dating of texts [...] to have a clearer idea of syntactic variations across time.” (THOMSON 2014:310–11)

Whilst this “clearer idea” has not yet fully materialised, at least some indications concerning Vrt‘anēs’ text can be made, specifically in the morphosyntax of the periphrastic perfect. The Classical Armenian pattern expected for the periphrastic perfect is as follows:

- intransitive: ptcp. + form of *բմ* in subject-agreement  
Mk. 4:29 – *Հասեալ են հունձք* “harvest time has come”
- passive: ptcp. + form of *բմ* in subject-agreement (where subject = patient)  
Lk. 10:20 – *անուանք ձեր գրեալ են յերկինս* “your names have been written in heaven”
- transitive: ptcp. + subject in genitive + object in accusative (optional *դ-*) + optional fossilised form *է*  
Mt. 8:18 – *տեսալ Յիսուսի ժողովուրդս բազումս* “Jesus saw the great multitudes”

This pattern covers the vast majority of instances; the erosion of this system (likely influenced by Parthian split-ergative alignment; cf. MEYER fthc. 2015) has already set on in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, however, and by the 8<sup>th</sup> century (and at the very latest by Middle Armenian times), the classical tripartite system has been ousted by a nominative-accusative system (cf. VOGT 1937:63–8; WEITENBERG 1986:14-15). Non-conformity to the expected alignment pattern, and divergence from previous differing alignments are therefore of interest. The following four passages exemplify two such aberrations (tr. CM & TMvL):

§3 *եւ բերեն վկայութիւն ի Հնոց կտակարանաց, զոր վասն հեթանոսաց կրապաշտութեան էր ասացեալ, ...*

“And they offer testimony from the Old Testament, which was enunciated concerning the idolatry of the heathen, ...”

§20 *... եւ մեք զնոյն նկարեմք, զոր ի Գիրսն գրեալ է, ...*

“... and we paint the same as that which is written in the scriptures”

§60 *եթէ կամիրք Քրիստոսի Աստուծոյ ծառայել եւ սիրել զպատուիրանս նորա, զնոյն գիրս, զորոց անուանս ի սմա գրեալ է, յուզեցէք ...*

“If you intend to serve Christ God and to love his commandments, study the books of those whose names are written here ...”

§38 *Զի թէ ընթերցեալ էք եւ ոչ գիտէք, ...*

“If you, having read (that), still do not know, ...”

As underlined above, in §§3, 20, and 60 are found accusatives as the patient of a passive construction, suggesting confusion as to the proper usage of the periphrastic perfect. It could, of course, be objected that the *nota accusativi* *դ-* does not denote accusative case marking so much as appurtenance of the relative pronoun *որ* to the preceding accusative object (viz. “they offer testimony ... the one which”). This argument fails, however, in §60, since *անողանս* is clearly marked accusative.

The occurrence of an inflected form of the copula in §38 with the transitive perfect similarly suggests influence of contemporary colloquial Armenian on the otherwise grammatically conservative language of Vrt’anēs; such constructions are not commonly found in 5<sup>th</sup>-century texts.

## 4 Conclusions

Few conclusions can be drawn. It is evident that no absolute, nor in fact a relative dating of Vrt’anēs’ text on purely linguistic grounds can be provided. Only minor aberrations in the syntax of the periphrastic perfect suggest that on a spectrum reaching from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Vrt’anēs ought to be located on the later end.

The inability to date texts on the basis of linguistic data, as pointed out by THOMSON above, can only be remedied if closer and more fine-grained studies of morphosyntactic developments are undertaken.

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