

---

# Rosetta

Lowe, C. (2015); 'The Use of Colloquial Language in the Portrayal of the Gods in Plautus' *Amphitryon* (341 – 632)'

Rosetta **17.5**: 27 – 39

<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue17.5/Lowe.pdf>

---

# The Use of Colloquial Language in the Portrayal of Gods in Plautus' *Amphitryon* (341 – 632)

Christy Lowe

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

In Plautus' play *The Amphitryon*, the Theban general Amphitryon and his slave Sosia are away on a military expedition to fight the Teloboians.<sup>1</sup> Jupiter is secretly in love with Amphitryon's wife, so while Amphitryon and Sosia are away, Jupiter pretends to be Amphitryon and his son Mercury pretends to be the slave Sosia, and they visit Alcumena so that Jupiter can have his romance with Alcumena. Alcumena is pregnant with twins – one is Amphitryon's and one is Jupiter's. The problem starts when the real Amphitryon and the real Sosia come home, and Mercury has to figure out a way to keep them away from the house before Jupiter is ready to leave. So Mercury appears to Sosia, dressed up as Sosia, and tells Sosia that he should go away because he, that is, Mercury, is the real Sosia. Mercury threatens physical violence if Sosia does not make himself scarce. By the end of the conversation, Mercury has confused Sosia so much that Sosia is not sure if he is the real Sosia, or perhaps maybe there are actually two Sosias. Further confusion occurs when Alcumena cannot figure out why Amphitryon has returned even though he had just told her he was going away. Finally Sosia tries to explain to Amphitryon that some other Sosia has tried to beat him up, which is not received kindly by his master, who simply asks him 'where have you been drinking?'

The focus of my research is the use and frequency of colloquial items among the characters in the plays of Plautus. In this particular paper, I will explore the difference in the frequency of use of colloquial items specifically between mortals and gods in Plautus' play *The Amphitryon*. While the larger body of my research includes several full plays and concerns all major character types, for this paper I have chosen a

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr Benedict Lowe and Dr Magdalena Öhrman for their vital and repeated help in developing my research skills, resulting in my ability to even write this article in the first place. I would also like to thank Christine Lowe for proofreading the paper.

smaller yet representative section which focuses specifically on the differences between gods and mortals. I have chosen *The Amphitryon* for this paper because this play provides a unique opportunity to observe the difference in Plautus' portrayal of gods and mortals - in particular when Mercury changes between the guise of god and slave. I have chosen to look at lines 341 – 632 because they offer a variety of situations, characters, and metres, as well as both the dialogues between characters and their monologues. An obvious starting point to observe this variety is line 341 where we see the first exchange between Mercury and Sosia, because until this point there has not been any direct interaction between characters. The section I have chosen ends at line 632 to include the exchange between Sosia and his master Amphitryo. I have also chosen to stop at line 632 because by this point there have been selections from all the major characters in a variety of situations. I have identified 251 colloquial items in these lines based on the list of colloquial items in J.B. Hofmann's work *Lateinische Umgangssprache*, still considered to be the authority on identifying colloquial Latin.<sup>2</sup> The work lists items denoting a heightened emotional and subjective state, such as exclamations and interjections, ellipses, parentheses, and other shortened or interrupted sentences, as well as oaths, curses, and insults, threats, greetings, farewells, and question and answer words. Also included are items which ingratiate one to another or show affection.<sup>3</sup>

After isolating the colloquial items in each line, I then investigated what types of characters use more or fewer of these forms, and in which situations. I examined the items scene by scene according to context, looked at how colloquial items may be more or less frequent according to the metre used. In addition, I also compared the usage between males and females, slaves versus free, and most interestingly, god versus mortal.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Chahoud 2010: 45.

<sup>3</sup> For the fullest discussion of colloquial terms, cf. Hofmann (1926). Chahoud and Dickey (2010) is also recommended, particularly Chahoud's chapter (42-64), which includes a useful summary and discussion of Hofmann (47 -50).

<sup>4</sup> The occurrences of colloquial items per character in each shared line are much lower per line because each speaker only has part of the line – sometimes as little as one word. Due to the difficulty in determining exactly which percentage each character has of each shared line, I have opted to keep the data for the shared lines separate from the data of full lines to keep the numbers perfectly clear. Only in the comparison of forms based on metre in section B was it feasible to combine both full and shared lines.

A. Frequency of use of colloquial items by scene

1. Act I scene I, lines 341 – 454: Sosia the Slave and Mercury arguing (excluding Sosia's aside at lines 441 – 449<sup>5</sup>).

Colloquial items in full lines:

Character	number of items:	number of full lines:	items per line <sup>6</sup> :
Sosia (slave)	46	40	1.15
Mercury (god as slave)	22	32	.68

Colloquial items in shared lines:

Character	number of items:	number of shared lines:	items per line:
Sosia (slave)	20	33	.60
Mercury (god as slave)	23	33	.69

Metre:<sup>7</sup> trochaic septenarii (lively metre, excited talk,<sup>8</sup> accompanied by music.<sup>9</sup> Ictus and accent coincide so frequently, it seems natural and without effort.<sup>10</sup> Used for popular songs at Rome, like those sung by soldiers.<sup>11</sup>)

Mercury is pretending to be a slave – in fact, pretending to be Sosia the slave himself, and Sosia begins to question his own identity, because Mercury is so

---

<sup>5</sup> Sosia's lines at 441-449 are examined in section 2 for the purpose of showing the difference between the nature of Sosia's language when speaking in dialogue with Mercury and when speaking in an aside.

<sup>6</sup> Due to the great variety in the number of lines any character may have in a play or section, I divided the number of colloquial items used by each character by the number of lines a character has, so that when a character with many lines is compared to a character with far fewer, the numbers are comparable.

<sup>7</sup> I give a description of each metre upon its first appearance in my article; for later appearances of the same metre, please refer to the initial appearance of that metre for information.

<sup>8</sup> Lindsay 1922: 282.

<sup>9</sup> Anderson 1993: 121.

<sup>10</sup> Lindsay 1922: 282.

<sup>11</sup> Lindsay 1922: 284.

convincing. Sosia has more colloquial items in his full lines, but Mercury matches and surpasses him in the shared lines, and heaps on the verbal abuse and threats of physical violence. It seems that when the characters are feisty and arguing there is an abundance of colloquial items. This may be due to the fact that neither Sosia nor Mercury feel they have any reason to be subservient here – Mercury because he is a god, and Sosia because he is fighting for his very identity. Mercury has nothing to lose, yet for Sosia, everything is at stake.

2. Act I scene ii, lines 441 – 449: Sosia’s aside (all full lines).

Character	number of items:	number of lines:	items per line:
Sosia (slave)	10	9	1.11

Metre: trochaic septenarii

Sosia is talking frankly with the audience<sup>12</sup> about his confusion and disbelief at this person who looks and sounds just like him. His honesty leaves no room for mincing words, so he is averaging one or more items per line. It is common for Plautine characters to use their monologues or asides to plead for sympathy from the audience.<sup>13</sup>

3. Act I scene ii, lines 455 – 462: Sosia on his own, addressing the gods, all full lines.

Character	number of items	number of lines:	items per line:
Sosia (slave)	4	8	.5

Metre: trochaic septenarii

Sosia is now actually addressing the gods: ‘di immortales, opsecro vostram fidem (455).’ He is not even sure if he is himself anymore, so he is begging the gods to confirm his very identity. There is less than half the previous number of colloquial items, no doubt out of reverence for the gods but also the desire to humble himself

---

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Moore (1998: 8) notes that most, if not all, of Plautine monologues and asides are actually addressing the audience.

<sup>13</sup> Moore 1998: 30.

and make himself clearly subservient to them. He is not speaking so boldly now, in his desperate state.

4. Act I scene ii, lines 463 – 495: Mercury’s speech, directly addressing the audience, all full lines.

Character	number of items	number of lines:	items per line:
Mercury (god)	9	36	.25

Metre: iambic senarii (unaccompanied,<sup>14</sup> spoken, quiet talk,<sup>15</sup> meant to reflect the everyday Roman conversation.<sup>16</sup>)

Mercury brags about keeping Sosia away from the house so that Jupiter can be with Alcumena, and also explaining to the audience not to be worried because everything is planned so that all will turn out all right for Alcumena in the end, and that having Jupiter as a lover will not bring any shame upon her. Here we have by far the lowest number of colloquial items from any speaker in this section. Mercury is ‘playing himself,’ at this point, and perhaps the relative lack of colloquial items in some way indicates loftier speech which would befit a god. Before Mercury met Sosia, he says that he will not only take on Sosia’s appearance, but also all the mannerisms that befit a slave. Now that Mercury is speaking as himself, we see a clear drop in the number of colloquialisms. Note also the change of metre which lends itself to unaccompanied, quieter spoken language. In his *Early Latin Verse*, Lindsay says that these *senarii* reflect the rhythm of the speech of an educated Roman<sup>17</sup>, as opposed to the speech of the uneducated lower classes. As noted by Timothy Moore, the gods in the *Amphitryon* tend to speak clearly and unaccompanied in these *senarii*, while when the mortals have their dialogues, they have the distraction of musical accompaniment, to suit the confusion of their mortal state.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Anderson 1993: 121.

<sup>15</sup> Lindsay 1922: 282.

<sup>16</sup> Lindsay 1922: 274.

<sup>17</sup> Lindsay 1922: 268.

<sup>18</sup> Moore 2006.

5. Act I scene iii, lines 499 – 550: Alcumena (matron), Jupiter (god pretending to be the military general Amphitryō so he can be with his wife Alcumena romantically) and Mercury (god pretending to be Amphitryō’s slave).

Colloquial items in full lines:

Character	number of items:	number of lines:	items per line:
Alcumena (matron)	4	7	.57
Jupiter (as general)	14	24	.58
Mercury (as slave)	8	9	.88

Colloquial items in shared lines:

Character	number of items:	number of lines:	items per line:
Alcumena (matron)	4	8	.5
Jupiter (as general)	5	11	.45
Mercury (as slave)	1	3	.33

Metre: trochaic septenarii.

Alcumena and her lover Jupiter, as the fake Amphitryō, are clearly using fewer colloquial items per line. The reasons for Jupiter doing this may be twofold: firstly, from what we saw with Mercury, there seems to be a pattern that suggests that gods are not as colloquial as the mortals. Secondly, he may be speaking more sweetly to Alcumena out of respect, for he does love her. This is similar to how we saw Sosia becoming more soft-spoken out of respect when addressing the gods in lines 455 – 462. This may seem ironic, because Alcumena is not a god but Jupiter is, but Jupiter does love her, so it is not so strange that he would speak to her with admiration and respect. It is because of Jupiter that Alcumena is in this trouble in the first place, so no doubt he wants to assuage the situation for her. This love and respect for Alcumena may be the very key – for Jupiter does not spare any colloquialisms when he first addresses Mercury. Jupiter emits an utter barrage of colloquialisms at Mercury starting at line 518. So god or not, Jupiter is quite ready to hand out the colloquialisms when some abuse or domination is required. But Jupiter’s speech to Alcumena is clearly more refined. He tells her to take it easy and take care of herself

because she is pregnant, another reason why he would be speaking sweetly and respectfully to her. Mercury is cynical and calls Jupiter an 'expert flatterer' (506), suggesting that Jupiter is simply trying to avoid trouble. But the care that Jupiter takes later on in the play (1131-1143) to ensure that Alcumena is absolved of any guilt suggests that Jupiter is genuinely concerned for Alcumena's well-being. Alcumena may be using fewer colloquial items because of her subservient position as woman and wife, and also out of love for Jupiter, the fake Amphitryo.

Furthermore, classical sources tell us that matrons held on to traditional language and allowed in fewer innovations of popular speech.<sup>19</sup> Finally, in the mouth of Mercury in the guise of the slave, we clearly see a greater amount of colloquial items than the two free characters. Mercury is a god but we must remember in this scene he is playing the slave. In his asides he echoes the traditional sarcastic comments of the clever slave, even bragging to us how he is going to go curry favour with his 'master' Jupiter, who is master not only in their little game of disguise but also in reality in the world of the gods. A slave in a submissive role tends to have fewer colloquial items, however when the slave is threatening another or has the courage to defend themselves, the colloquial items seem to increase.

6. Act II scene I, lines 551 – 632: Amphitryo and Sosia.

Colloquial items in full lines:

Character:	number of items:	number of lines:	items per line:
Amphitryo (general)	27	30	.9
Sosia (slave)	21	32	.65

Colloquial items in shared lines:

Character:	number of items:	number of lines:	items per line:
Amphitryo (general)	17	27	.629
Sosia (slave)	15	27	.55

---

<sup>19</sup> Cic. *De Orat.* 3.45



Metres: Lines 551 – 573: Bacchiacs (a lyric meter used in songs, often in soliloquies or for the effect of ‘gravitas’;<sup>20</sup> line 572, we have two cola reiziana (usually combined with iambs or anapaests, to mark the end of a passage or diversify a song);<sup>21</sup> at line 574 we have anapestic dimeter catalectic, which can have a ‘mocking’ feeling, with a frequent clash of ictus and accent;<sup>22</sup> lines 575 – 585b we have a mix of trochaics; 586 – 632 we go back to trochaic septenarii.

In this scene, Sosia is trying to convince Amphitryo that there are two Sosias, and Amphitryo is wholly unconvinced. We can see that the real Amphitryo can more than hold his own against his slave Sosia. Amphitryo as master is in complete dominion over Sosia and so can speak as he likes. He needs to show no reverence or respect, nor does he have anything to lose by speaking his mind ‘ubi bibisti?’ (575). On the one hand, it might seem strange that the master takes on what seems to be a slave-like use of frequent colloquialisms. However it has been said that the slave of Roman Comedy does not represent a true slave, but rather is a vehicle through which a free man can play out his fantasies of wild, irreverent behaviour.<sup>23</sup> Plautus’s colloquial language – even the language of his slaves – has been said by scholars to represent the everyday talk of the educated Roman,<sup>24</sup> Cicero himself often praised the language of Plautus<sup>25</sup> and said it was exactly how he, an educated Roman, spoke in his casual conversations among his close friends.<sup>26</sup> So on the one hand Amphitryo’s excess of colloquialisms here may reflect his dominance over his conversational companion, but also a certain level of intimacy with him as well.

## B. By metre

<u>Metre</u>	<u>items per full line</u>	<u>items per full<sup>27</sup> shared line</u>
--------------	----------------------------	--

---

<sup>20</sup> Lindsay 1922: 289 – 290.

<sup>21</sup> Lindsay 1922: 279.

<sup>22</sup> Lindsay 1922: 302.

<sup>23</sup> McCarthy 2000: 21.

<sup>24</sup> Lindsay 1907: 2. Cf. Duckworth 1971: 331.

<sup>25</sup> Cic. *De Orat.* 3.45

<sup>26</sup> Cic. *Orat.* 20

<sup>27</sup> In these calculations for metre, all characters are included so these are whole, but shared, lines.

Trochaic Septenarii	.72	1.06
Bacchiacs	.86	1.25
Trochaics (mix)	.5	1.0
Iambic Senarii	.25	(no shared lines in senarii in this particular section)

The use of colloquial items seems to increase with the metres using musical accompaniment, and to decrease when the spoken, unaccompanied iambic Senarius is used.

#### C. By gender

<u>Gender</u>	<u>items per full line</u>	<u>items per (partial) shared lines</u>
Female	.57	.5
Male	.82	.59

Alcumena uses fewer colloquialisms than the men in general, probably for the same reasons we mentioned above – her position as a woman and wife, and possibly the tendency to keep traditional language in favour of new innovations.

#### D. Slave vs. free

<u>Status</u>	<u>items per full line</u>	<u>items per (partial) shared line</u>
Slave	.85	.61
Free	.55	.56

It is tempting to think that perhaps the level of education could account for the greater amount of colloquial items in the mouth of a slave than in that of a free man. However the slaves of Plautus are literary characters, not actual historical figures. Actual historical slaves would have ranged from illiterate farm workers to highly skilled grammarians that taught the Romans' own children Greek. Slaves have more

lines than any other type of character in Plautus, presumably because they were the most popular. Secondly, educated Romans, such as Cicero, Varro, and Pliny the Younger have praised the language of Plautus<sup>28</sup> and remarked that their own personal conversations and correspondences between them and family and friends sound like Plautus or Terence, without the metre. So I believe the greater number of colloquialisms in the mouth of slaves actually points to the idea mentioned earlier – namely that the slave is the embodiment of the fantasies of the free man.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the slave tends to use more colloquialisms may point to the fact that a free man would like the freedom to do that also in more contexts, but that he feels, for one reason or another, obliged to watch how he speaks to some degree.

#### E. Divine vs. mortal<sup>30</sup>

Im/mortal status	items per full line:	items per shared line:
God	.25	(no shared lines in this section)
Mortal	.81	.59

Clearly the inclusion of colloquial language was seen to be more of a trait of mortals rather than gods, so Plautus portrayed them thus.

#### F. Mercury as slave vs. Mercury as god

Character	items per full line:	items per shared line:
Mercury as slave	.73	.66
Mercury as god	.25	(no shared lines in this section)

In keeping with the above pattern that mortals use more colloquial speech than gods, we can see that Mercury's colloquial speech also increased when he took the guise

<sup>28</sup> Cic. *De Orat.* 3.45; Quint. *Inst.* X.99-100 (Quintilian quotes Varro); Plin. *Ep.* 1.16.6.

<sup>29</sup> McCarthy 2000: 21.

<sup>30</sup> I have categorised Mercury and Jupiter as mortals when they are pretending to be such.

of the slave. Above I mentioned that Mercury said he would be taking on more than just Sosia's appearance – he would be assuming all his mannerisms as well. That his language changes between the personas of slave and god is further confirmed in lines 986 – 987 in Mercury's final comment on what he must do to act like a slave. Mercury is changing his clothes and getting ready to play a drunken Sosia, and says, 'Why should I, a god, not be allowed to threaten people if they don't get out of my way just as much as some paltry slave in comedies?' He then proceeds to hurl verbal abuse against Amphitryo, who is utterly shocked when he hears Mercury (whom he thinks is his slave Sosia), calling him a fool, an idiot (1026-1028), and threatening physical abuse (1034). Mercury, in the guise of the slave Sosia, is therefore inverting the roles; we would expect such abuse and threats to come from master to slave, or from slave to master, but not from slave to master. This type of inversion is part of the Saturnalian atmosphere which Plautus uses to give his characters license to misbehave, to the delight of the audience.<sup>31</sup>

#### G. Jupiter's Amphitryo versus the real Amphitryo

Character	items per full line:	items per shared line:
Jupiter (as Amphitryo)	.58	.45
Amphitryo	.9	.65

We can see here, comparing the fake Amphitryo (Jupiter) with the real Amphitryo, that the god was more sparing in his colloquialisms. Even though Jupiter showed he was quite capable of good Roman colloquial speech, as in his familiar abuse of Mercury, he nonetheless still kept his language more dignified overall. This is in keeping with the pattern we have identified that suggests that gods are less colloquial than mortals.

## Conclusion

---

<sup>31</sup>Moore 1998: 22.

In the course of this analysis, several patterns have emerged concerning the frequency of the use of colloquial items by the characters. First of all, the scenes that are more colloquial in nature were written in metres that were accompanied by music, and the scenes which are less colloquial are in metres which were spoken without music. Secondly, the characters who are in a dominating role use more colloquial items than characters who are subservient. This is dictated not only by character type (slave vs. free) but also by scene: depending on context, a slave may become more dominating, and a master more subservient; nonetheless the pattern still persists, on both the large scale (the play) and smaller scale (the scene). Next, it is evident that high emotional states, such as desperation or fear, can lead to a greater frequency of colloquial items. Furthermore, we see that gender plays a role in that the lines spoken by a female character average fewer lines than the male characters. However the final pattern we see in this section is the most striking. In Plautus' *Amphitryon*, we have a special opportunity to see how the author chose to differentiate between the *portrayal* of mortal and divine characters: instead of comparing any god to any mortal, we get to see how Plautus had the *same character* play mortal in one scene, and play divine in another. By comparing the changes between mortal and divine, it is clear that Plautus deliberately puts more colloquial words in the mouths of mortals, and fewer in the mouths of the gods.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, W.S. 1993 *Barbarian Play: Plautus' Roman Comedy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Dickey, E. and Chahoud, A. 2010. *Colloquial and Literary Latin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Duckworth, G.E. 1952. *The Nature of Roman Comedy: A Study in Popular Entertainment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hofmann, J. B. 1926. *Lateinische Umgangssprache*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung.
- Lindsay, W.M. 1922. *Early Latin Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lindsay, W.M. 1907. *Syntax of Plautus*. Oxford: James Parker and co.
- Lindsay, W.M. 1905. *T. Macci Plauti Comoediae: Tomus I*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCarthy, K. 2000. *Slaves, Masters and the Art of Authority in Plautine Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Moore, T.J. 1998. *The Theater of Plautus: Playing to the Audience*. Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Moore, T.J. 2006. Abstract: 'Facing the Music: Musical Accompaniment and the Performance of Roman Comedy,'  
<http://homepage.usask.ca/~jrp638/abstracts/moore.html> (accessed March 2015).