Switchpoints: Half-lines in Vergil's *Aeneid* from an attention perspective

Victoria Fendel

Abstract

Vergil's *Aeneid* written in hexameters throughout contains in Mynors' *Oxford Classics Texts* edition 58 so-called half-lines. These are lines in which the hexameter otherwise adhered to in the poem is incomplete, that is, not the full six metrical feet long. It is shown that the 58 half-lines are metrically, syntactically, and pragmatically diverse but that the common denominator is that they appear at switchpoints, that is, points where the poem switches direction, either at the narratological level, for example, switching locations, or at the metatextual level, that is, switching modes of narrative. The half-lines signalling narratological switchpoints act as signposts and those signalling metatextual switchpoints act as guideposts. Both are used to direct the reader's attention. The metrical, syntactic, pragmatic, and functional diversity of the half-lines allows Vergil to tap into different grades of attention directing the reader consciously at switchpoints.

Keywords

Half-lines, attention, metatextual layer, signpost, guidepost

Introduction

Vergil's *Aeneid*, written in hexameters throughout, contains in Mynors' *Oxford Classics Texts* edition 58 so-called half-lines.[1] A half-line, such as verse 534, is a line that is not a full hexameter. A hexameter consists of six metrical feet, such as verse 533:

---

[1] Mynors 1969.

Italiam dixisse ducis de nomine gentem.

$-$ ⌣ ⌣ | $-$ $-$ | $-$ ⌣ ⌣ | $-$ $-$ | $-$ ⌣ ⌣ | $-$ $-$

hic cursus fuit,

$-$ $-$ | $-$ $-$ | $-$

'(There is a rumour) that (later) people have called (it, that is, the place called Hesperia by the Greeks) Italy, derived from their leader's name. This was our course, (when …)'[2]

Half-lines are however not as the name may suggest half of the line, that is, three full metrical feet. For example, verse 534 in Book One consists of 2.5 feet. Rather, they vary in metrical structure, syntactic structure and constellation, and pragmatic value.

Half-lines have been the topic of heated debate for a long time with opposing views being polar opposites.[3] At one extreme, Vergil's *Aeneid* is seen as unfinished and the half-lines as a symptom of that conclusion.[4] This is in line with Donatus' *Vita of Vergil* dating from the fourth century AD, especially.[5] At the other extreme, half-lines are considered a Vergilian stylistic invention that did not catch on, or caught on, yet not, in texts preserved to us, but is purposefully inserted. The present article sides with the latter view, considering half-lines a tool that Vergil possibly developed, yet in the absence of earlier Roman epics this cannot be confirmed, and a tool that is specifically necessary in the *Aeneid* which is a multi-layered poem.[6] There seems to be a layer for the author communicating his agenda, a narratological layer including personae, and a metatextual layer to communicate with the audience.[7] This article focusses on the metatextual layer and specifically on how Vergil uses half-lines to guide the reader's attention at key points in the epic.

---

[2] Verg. *Aen*. 1.533–534; All translations are my own.
[3] For example, Baldwin 1993 and Braund 2021 with further references.
[4] O'Hara (2010: esp. 99–100) specifically discusses half-lines, narrative inconsistencies, and the ending and length of Book Twelve along with the issue of *vitae*.
[5] Stok 2010; Stok 2017.
[6] The archaic remnants of epic poetry are fragmentary, that is, Livius Andronicus' translation of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (in Saturnian verses), Naevius' *Punic Wars* (in Saturnian verse), and Ennius' *Annals* (in dactylic hexameter).
[7] For example, Gasti 2010 and Lovatt 2020 with further references.

The *proemium* of the *Aeneid* provides a concise summary of the storyline and its structure:

> arma uirumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
> Italiam fato profugus Lauiniaque uenit
> litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
> ui superum, saeuae memorem Iunonis ob iram,
> multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
> inferretque deos Latio; genus unde Latinum
> Albanique patres atque altae moenia Romae.

> Apparatus: 1–24 *MγRVp*; 2 Lauiniaque *M¹Vp*, *Gell*. x 16. 6 (*cf*. <u>A. iv 236</u>), *Tib*.: Lauinaque *γRω*, *Macrob*. v 2. 8, *tegula Italicae inuenta* (*C.I.L.* ii 4967. 31), *probat Seru*. (*utrumque Gramm*.): Lauinia *M²*

> 'I sing from the wars and the man, who first from the shores of Troy came to Italy and the Lavinian shores as a refugee from fate, having been thrown about a lot on land and at sea through the power of the gods, due to the relentless hatred of savage Juno, having suffered a lot also in war, by the time that he founded the city and brought his gods to Latium where the Latian people, the Albanian fathers, and the walls of high Rome are from.'[8]

The *proemium*-initial phrase *arma virumque* 'the wars and the man' has been interpreted as a reference to Homer's *Iliad* (*arma*) and *Odyssey* (*virum*) and 'in an oversimplified but useful formulation, the first six books [sc. of the *Aeneid*] correspond roughly to the *Odyssey*, the last six to the *Iliad* (Servius ad *Aen*. 7.1; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 5.2.6).'[9] The *proemium* sets out the start and end points of Aeneas' journey (Troy in verse 1 and Rome in verse 7) and divides Aeneas' toils into two sections (*multum iactatus* referring to the journey books in verse 3 parallels *multa passus* referring to the Italic war books in verse 5). The *proemium* thus directs the reader already to think about narrative moves and turning points before even diving into the story. The *proemium* also makes the reader aware of the multiple intertwined layers of the poem, the authors' agenda, the narrative layer of Aeneas' movements, and the metatextual layer of directing the reader's attention carefully and purposefully. Vergil's

---

[8] Verg. *Aen*. 1.1–7.
[9] Keeline 2020: 603.

agenda of overcoming and/or outdoing Homer seems to have been known to contemporaries (for example, Propertius, poem 2.34.66 (ca. 50–15 BC, poet) *nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade* 'something greater than the *Iliad* is being born'). It seems that in order to achieve his agenda he built not only on the Homeric intertext but also on ancient criticism on Homer.[10]

The article addresses three research questions regarding the 58 half-lines of the *Oxford Classics Texts* edition of the *Aeneid*:

> (1) What are half-lines metrically, syntactically, and pragmatically speaking?
> (2) How do the half-lines tie in with their co-text and context?
> (3) Why does Vergil use half lines in the *Aeneid* for attention direction?

It will become apparent that the 58 half-lines are metrically, syntactically, and pragmatically diverse but that the common denominator is that they appear at switchpoints, that is, points where the poem switches direction, either at the narratological level, for example, switching locations, or at the metatextual level, that is, switching modes of narrative. The half-lines signalling narratological switchpoints act as signposts and those signalling metatextual switchpoints act as guideposts.[11] Both are used to direct the reader's attention. The metrical, syntactic, pragmatic, and functional diversity of the half-lines allows Vergil to tap into different grades of attention directing the reader consciously at switchpoints.

After this introductory section, the article falls into five sections. The methodology, Section Two, introduces the reader to the metrical, syntactic, and pragmatic feature values of interest. Section Three answers research question one, Section Four research question two, and Section Five research question three. Section Six brings together the results and draws conclusions.

---

[10] Keeline 2020: 603–604.
[11] Signposts indicate 'where the speaker is going' with a story, phrase, or sentence at the narratological level; guideposts indicate 'how you might interpret what the speaker is trying to get across' at the metatextual level; Davis and Maclagan 2020: 80.

Methodology

The dataset which this article examines is the 58 half-lines in Mynors' *Oxford Classical Texts* edition of Vergil's *Aeneid*.[12] Due to the discourse, fuelled by Donatus' *Vita* already in antiquity, that half-lines are a flaw in the *Aeneid* that Vergil would have corrected if he had lived longer, manuscripts vary significantly in what is considered a half-line and where additions are accepted as authentic. An example of a half-line is almost at the end of Creusa's ghost's speech to Aeneas who had gone back into burning Troy in order to find her:

> Dardanis et divae Veneris nurus;
>
> Apparatus: 'hunc u[ersum] quidam ita suppleuit et tua coniunx' DSeru.
>
> '(I will not see the noble seats of the Myrmidones or Dolopians or go to serve Greek wives) – (I), a Dardanian woman and the daughter-in-law of divine Venus.'
>
> Apparatus: 'someone completed this verse in this way: and your wife.'[13]

While Mynors accepts the line as a half-line, additions to fill the hexameter have been suggested in other manuscripts as the apparatus shows. The addition of *et tua coniunx* 'and as your wife' does not add to the information content as Creusa has been identified as Aeneas' wife earlier in the context. However, the addition would shift what the reader pays most attention to. Currently, this is Creusa's relationship with Venus, but with the addition it would be her relationship with Aeneas. By focussing attention on her relationship with Aeneas, the personal loss experienced by Aeneas, and their son Ascanius, would be brought to the fore. Creusa would be wife and mother in the first instance and Dardanian and daughter-in-law to a goddess only in the second instance.

---

[13] Verg. *Aen.* 2.787.

To examine the interplay between form and function of the items in the half-line, the half-lines are annotated for their metrical and morpho-syntactic characteristics. To further investigate the function of the half-lines with regard to directing the audience's attention, the half-lines are annotated for their pragmatic characteristics.

The 58 half-lines are annotated for their metrical shape, that is, how much of a full hexameter they fill. A Latin hexameter has three commonly appearing caesurae (marked as ||), that is, after the third half foot, after the fifth half foot, and after the seventh half foot:

> ui superum, saeuae memorem Iunonis ob iram,
>
> – ˇ ˇ | – || – | – || ˇ ˇ | – || – | – ˇ ˇ | – –
>
> 'by the power of the gods, due to the never-ending wrath of savage Iuno,'[14]

In this example, the caesura after third metrical half foot would be after *vi superum*, the one after the fifth one would be after *saevae*, and the one after the seventh half foot would be after *memorem*. All three caesurae are possible in this example which is why they are marked but usually they do not cooccur in the same verse.

The 58 half-lines are also annotated morpho-syntactically for the part(s)-of-speech that appear in the half-line and for the syntactic function of the items in the half-line. Not all half-lines are complete sentences by themselves but often half-lines constitute the end of a sentence that had begun before, like Vergil's *Aeneid* 2.787 above. This ties in with Vergil's tendency to finish sentences in the middle of a line.[15]

The 58 half-lines are moreover annotated pragmatically for deictic function, that is, do they function as devices pointing ahead to a key piece of information or do they point backwards to a key piece of information (cataphoric versus anaphoric), as in Vergil's *Aeneid* 4.503, and focus, that is, do they constitute a focus point, either contrastive or intensive at the end of a climax, as in Vergil's *Aeneid* 4.361?

---

[14] Verg. *Aen*. 1.4.
[15] Braund 2021: 39.

> ergo iussa parat.
>
> 'She (sc. Anna) thus prepared that which had been ordered (sc. by Dido).'[16]

The verse in Vergil's *Aeneid* 4.503 appears immediately after Dido's conversation with her sister Anna in which she subtly orders her to prepare her (Dido's) funeral. The scene switches afterwards to the funeral preparations.

> Italiam non sponte sequor
>
> 'I (sc. Aeneas) am not heading for Italy voluntarily.'[17]

The verse in Vergil *Aeneid* 4.361 appears at the very end of Aeneas' pleading speech to Dido. He explains his reasons for leaving and his last resort is to emphasise that it is not out of his own free will that he is leaving but due to plans that are made by the gods and out of his command. The scene switches to Dido, who is hostile towards his decision (*aversa*, 4.362) and after a moment of silence starts attacking him vociferously.

Half-lines are either deictic or focal as they either attract attention to themselves or direct attention to another piece of information (see further Section Five).[18] The 58 half-lines are finally annotated for the contexts between the switch, for example, between speech and narrative or between protagonists (from a narratological perspective).[19]

Metre, syntax, and pragmatics of half-lines

Table 1 provides a numeric overview of the metrical and syntactic characteristics of the 58 half-lines in relation to their pragmatic characteristics.

---

[16] Verg. *Aen*. 4.503.
[17] Verg. *Aen*. 4.361.
[18] Talmy 2007.
[19] See similarly Braund 2021: 35–36.

Table 1: Half-lines in Vergil's *Aeneid* (numeric overview) with percentages calculated by column

Pragmatics	Metre (metrical versus non-metrical)		Syntax (arguments versus adjuncts)	
	Metrical	Non-metrical	Argument	Adjunct
Deixis (cataphoric vs. anaphoric)	13 25%	1 20%	13 25%	1 20%
Focus (climax)	40 74%	4 80%	40 75%	4 80%
Total	53	5	53	5

There is a strong preference for metrical half-lines, that is, those that fill three, five, or seven metrical half feet and are thus ending where caesurae frequently appear in Latin hexameters. 91% of half-lines are metrical. There is also a strong preference for half-lines to contain arguments, the necessary building blocks of a sentence including subjects, objects, and predicates, rather than adjuncts, the non-compulsory building blocks of sentences including adverbial and circumstantial phrases, only. 91% of half-lines contain arguments.[20] It must be noted that while the numerical counts are seemingly the same for the categories and sub-categories of metre and syntax, the actual passages that make up the counts differ, that is, the same five passages are not non-metrical and contain adjuncts only.

Two patterns are visible on closer inspection: Firstly, of the 15 deictic half-lines, nine contain a full sentence (60%), which contrasts with the ratio for full sentences in half-lines in the whole sample (19 of the 58, or 33%). All except for one of the deictic half-lines (Vergil, *Aeneid*, 1.534) appear immediately before or after a speech section. Secondly, the ration of half-lines filling three, five, and seven metrical half feet is almost equal in the dataset (29%, 33%, and 29% respectively). However, there are five non-metrical half-lines (9% of the sample). These are shown in Vergil's *Aeneid* 5.815,

---

[20] Braund's (2021: 34) claim that 'only one [half-line] is syntactically incomplete' cannot be replicated. Half-lines frequently contain only part of a sentence and half-lines that constitute sentences of their own are the minority in the data sample.

6.835, 9.721, 2.468, and 2.787, with their critical apparatus information, if any, and their syntactic and pragmatic annotations:

> unum pro multis dabitur caput.
>
> no apparatus
>
> 'One life is given/sacrificed for many.'[21]
>
> Syntax: Full sentence
>
> Pragmatics: Intensive focus (truism to reflect back)
>
> proice tela manu, sanguis meus!
>
> no apparatus
>
> 'Throw the weapon with your hand, my blood!'[22]
>
> Syntax: Full sentence
>
> Pragmatics: Intensive focus (*parce* in 6.834 to *proice*)
>
> bellatorque animo deus incidit.
>
> Apparatus: animos M^1c^1
>
> 'And the warrior god influenced their spirit.'[23]
>
> Syntax: Full sentence
>
> Pragmatics: Intensive focus (*conveniunt*, *copia* in 9.720 to *deus*, *incidit*)
>
> telorum interea cessat genus.
>
> no apparatus
>
> '(Neither stones nor any) kind of weapons stopped (flying) in the meantime.'[24]
>
> Syntax: Arguments (due to *nec saxa nec ullum* appearing at the end of 2.467)
>
> Pragmatics: Contrastive focus (*genus telorum* vs. *Pyrrhus* in 2.469)

---

[21] Verg. *Aen.* 5.815.
[22] Verg. *Aen.* 6.835.
[23] Verg. *Aen.* 9.721.
[24] Verg. *Aen.* 2.468.

Dardanis et divae Veneris nurus;

Apparatus: 'hunc u[ersum] quidam ita suppleuit et tua coniunx' DSeru.

'(I), a Dardanian woman and the daughter-in-law of divine Venus'

Apparatus: 'someone completed this verse in this way: and your wife'[25]

Syntax: Apposition to the subject (*ego* appears in 2.785 and *ibo* at the very end of 2.786)

Pragmatics: Anaphoric

Vergil's *Aeneid* 5.815, 6.835, and 9.721 constitute sentences of their own syntactically and have intensive focus, forming the culmination of a climax, pragmatically. Vergil's *Aeneid* 2.468 differs slightly in that the beginning of the sentence, that is, the first half of the subject, is on the previous line syntactically and in that the passages conveys contrastive focus pragmatically. Vergil's *Aeneid* 2.787 is at first sight the odd one out as it does not constitute a full sentence but serves as an apposition to the subject explicitly mentioned two verses earlier syntactically and in that it is deictic, that is, anaphorically pointing towards the subject. However, one could assume that the copular verb *esse* has been dropped, which happens frequently in the *Aeneid*, and that the verse thus constitutes a sentence of its own. One could then assume that rather than functioning as an apposition, it is in fact Creusa's main focus, the characteristic she is proudest of. In the preceding verses, she states that she will never see the Myrmidones' or Dolopians' seats nor serve any Greek wife as a slave, both of which would likely have happened had she been caught alive in Troy. In *Aeneid* 2.787, Creusa emphasises her status which will never change.

In sum, the 58 half-lines are metrically and syntactically diverse and not constrained to one or the other pattern, for example, all of them fill five metrical half feet or all of them constitute a full sentence. Rather, there seems to be preference for half-lines that are metrical and for half-lines that contain arguments but half-lines that are non-metrical appear and function well in their context and half-lines that contain adjuncts only are possible too. The 58 half-lines fall pragmatically into at least two broad sub-categories, those that draw attention to themselves (focal ones) and those that direct

---

[25] Verg. *Aen.* 2.787.

attention to something outside of themselves (deictic ones). These pragmatic functions do not correlate one-to-one with any metrical or syntactic characteristics.

Co-textual (and contextual) integration of half-lines

The 58 half-lines are not distributed evenly across the poem thus making it likely that they were purposefully set where needed. The *Aeneid* is divided into twelve books in Mynors' edition. The mean book length is 825 verses. The shortest book is Book Four at 705 verses and the longest book is Book Twelve at 952 verses.[26] Accumulations of half-lines appear in Books Two (10 half-lines), Three (7 half-lines), and Five (7 half-lines). Half-lines fall in line with Vergil's preference to finish sentences mid-verse, that is, drawing on enjambements regularly, thus making it likely that they were part of Vergil's style, in the sense of his idiosyncratic choices and approach.[27]

All 58 half-lines appear at switchpoints in the poem. As stated earlier, switchpoints are points where the poem switches direction, either at the narratological level, for example, switching locations, protagonists, timeframes, or topics, or at the metatextual level, that is, switching modes of narrative between representing events, situational descriptions, and speeches. Section Three showed that pragmatically speaking the 58 half-lines fall into two broad groups, those that are deictic, that is, direct attention to a piece of information outside of themselves, and those that are focal, that is, draw attention to themselves. Table 2 maps the two types of switchpoints onto the two broad pragmatic categories:

---

[26] The division into books is a Hellenistic invention that had gained momentum by Roman times (see Bitto 2019), such that the book division is relevant in Vergil but anachronistic in the Homeric intertext.

[27] Biber and Conrad 2009: chapter one.

Table 2: Half-lines as switchpoints in Vergil's *Aeneid* (numeric overview) with percentages calculated per column

	Deictic	Non-deictic
[narratological/textual level] Switching focus (locations, protagonists, timeframes; turning point in a speech)	6 (MODESWITCH_2) 43%	26 (MODESWITCH_3) 59%
[metatextual level] Switching between modes of narrative (description, event, speech)	8 (MODESWITCH_1) 57%	(MODESWITCH_4) 41%
Total	14	44

Table 2 provides numeric counts and percentages by column along with the label applied to each combination of pragmatic and switchpoint categories in the data sample. Vergil's *Aeneid* 2.339–348, 9.166–171, 2.65–70, and 8.467–870 illustrate each type of switchpoint with the relevant half-lines presented in their co-text:[28]

> addunt se socios Rhipeus et maximus armis
> Epytus, oblati per lunam, Hypanisque Dymasque
> et lateri adglomerant nostro, iuuenisque Coroebus
> Mygdonides—illis ad Troiam forte diebus
> uenerat insano Cassandrae incensus amore
> et gener auxilium Priamo Phrygibusque ferebat,
> infelix qui non sponsae praecepta furentis
> **audierit!**
> quos ubi confertos ardere in proelia uidi,
> incipio super his: (…)

> 'Rhipeus and Egypts, most mighty in battle, were made visible through the moonlight, and Hypanis and Dymas joined themselves to my side as allies, along with young Coroebus, son of Mygdon. – He had come to Troy at that time by chance being driven by his mad love for Cassandra and he helped as a son-in-law to Priam and to the Phrygians, unlucky one as **he did** not **listen** to the prophecy of his frenzied bride! – When I saw these having come together and burning for battle, I began with these words: (…)'[29]

---

[28] For the concept, see Crystal 2008: 119.
[29] Verg. *Aen*. 2.339–348.

In *Aeneid* 2.339–348, verse 346 falls pragmatically in the non-deictic category and marks a switch from an excursus, about Coroebus' reasons for being in Troy, back to the main storyline (MODESWITCH_4).

> conlucent ignes, noctem custodia ducit
> insomnem ludo.
> Haec super e uallo prospectant Troes et armis
> alta tenent, nec non trepidi formidine portas
> explorant pontisque et propugnacula iungunt,
> tela gerunt. (…)

> 'The fires were burning, the guards (sc. 14 selected Rutulians, cf. l. 161) were spending the sleepless night with games. The Trojans were watching this from the palisades and held the heights in arms, and they checked very fearfully the gates and built bulwarks and carried their weapons.'[30]

In *Aeneid* 9.166–171, verse 167 falls pragmatically in the non-deictic category and marks a switch of scene, that is, from the Rutulian camp to the Trojan camp (MODESWITCH_3).

> accipe nunc Danaum insidias et crimine ab uno
> disce omnis.
> namque ut conspectu in medio turbatus, inermis
> constitit atque oculis Phrygia agmina circumspexit,
> 'heu, quae nunc tellus,' inquit, 'quae me aequora possunt
> accipere? (…)

> 'Hear now the Danaean's plots and learn everything from this one crime! For when he stood unarmed while being confused in the centre of attention and looked at the Phrygian ranks closely, he said: What land, what see can still welcome me now? (…)'[31]

In *Aeneid* 2.65–70, verse 66 falls pragmatically in the deictic (specifically cataphoric) category and marks a switch from Sinon's narrative of events to the climax of the events, that is, the treachery deployed to make Troy fall (MODESWITCH_2).

> congressi iungunt dextras mediisque residunt
> aedibus et licito tandem sermone fruuntur.
> rex prior haec:
> 'maxime Teucrorum ductor, (…)

---

[30] Verg. *Aen*. 9.166–171.
[31] Verg. *Aen*. 2.65–70.

'Having come together, they shook hands and sat down in the middle of the buildings and finally had a serious conversation. The king (spoke) thus to begin with: Greatest leader of the Teucrians, (…),'[32]

In *Aeneid* 8.467–470, verse 469 falls pragmatically in the deictic (specifically cataphoric) category and marks the switch from the description of the situation to the speech section (MODESWITCH_1).

The switches at the narratological level, for example, switching locations, protagonists, timeframes, or topics, signpost 'where the speaker is going with this story or phrase or sentence.'[33] The switches at the metatextual level, that is, switching modes of narrative between representing events, situational descriptions, and speeches guide the reader as to 'how you might interpret what the speaker is trying to get across.'[34] Thus, the half-lines signalling narratological switchpoints are signposts and those signalling metatextual switchpoints are guideposts. Guideposts have scope over stretches of the poem in this way whereas signposts indicate a specific local shift.[35] Guideposts further discourse cohesion locally in the co-text whereas signposts further discourse coherence globally.[36] Thus, conversely to the view often voiced that half-lines are somewhat abrupt and impede the flow of the verses, they in fact function as consciously set devices to improve said flow.[37]

Attention-directing function of half-lines

Vergil's authorial voice(s) in the *Aeneid* has been discussed at length in the past.[38] Recent in-depth studies highlight Vergil's independence from the regime that was coming into power and his artistic freedom.[39] Grethlein furthermore argues that the modern three-layered model of author, narrator, and character is an anachronism

---

[32] Verg. *Aen*. 8.467–470.
[33] Davis and Maclagan 2020: 80.
[34] Davis and Maclagan 2020: 80.
[35] Davis and Maclagan 2020: 67.
[36] Jackson 2016: 16–17.
[37] For similar on asyndetic structures, see Fendel 2025.
[38] For example, Schade 2018 for a recent summary.
[39] Thomas 2001: 26; Weeda 2015: chapter five; vs. Stahl 2016.

when applied to ancient writing.[40] In a socio-cultural setting that was still more focussed on the spoken word '[w]hen somebody recites or reads out a text, they either slip into the role of the author or into the role of a character.'[41] This bipartite division maps onto the signpost and guidepost functions identified, that is, signposts are available to characters and guideposts are available to the narrator.[42]

Signposts and guideposts are used to direct the reader's attention. Attention is a basic human capacity enabling us to focus, remain focussed while ignoring distractors, and monitor ongoing activities in order to shift focus when needed.[43] What attracts attention is those things that are 'neither so familiar that they are boring, nor so novel that they cannot be coded and assimilated.'[44] Generally, 'organisms will pay least attention to and learn most slowly about those stimuli that are followed by a correctly predicted event, while incorrectly predicted and hence surprising events are learned about more readily.'[45] Attention is gradable, that is, we are thinking about more or less rather than all or none.[46] Vergil's half-lines are such surprising features. In the context of a hexametrical poem, the expectation is a constant hexameter. By interrupting this regular pattern, Vergil draws the reader's attention to the lines in question. However, as noticed, Vergil's half-lines are not uniform. The metrical, syntactic, pragmatic, and functional diversity of the half-lines allows Vergil to tap into different grades of attention directing the reader consciously at switchpoints.

Given their function in an epic that is multi-layered and interacting constantly with a well-known intertext,[47] the half-lines may have been a necessary innovation. They help Vergil guide the reader and set Vergil apart from the intertext. Keeline calls this 'Vergil's literary project.'[48] It may be that Vergil's half-lines are an innovation that did not make it from the innovator stage to the early adopter stage if we apply Rogers'

---

[40] Grethlein 2023: 65.
[41] Grethlein 2023: 69.
[42] Reinhardt 2006: 203 finds traces of similar metatextual comments in Propertius poems.
[43] Divjak 2019: 164; Mishra 2015: 25.
[44] Pierrehumbert 2006: 525.
[45] Divjak 2019: 182.
[46] Talmy 2007: 266; Hutchinson 2017 on Homer.
[47] See Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, book 5 (fourth–fifth century AD), catalogue of Vergil's borrowings from Homer; Donatus, *Life of Vergil* 46 (fourth century AD) *verum intellecturos facilius esse Herculi clavam quam Homero versum subripere* 'it is easier to steal the club of Hercules than a line from Homer'.
[48] Keeline 2020: 603.

Diffusion of Innovations theory.[49] That means that while the innovation idea was there and as the below shows had been developed into a sophisticated and very useful tool, the innovator failed to convince his surroundings to adopt (and further develop) the innovation. This may be for a range of reasons and does not indicate that Donatus' account of Vergil's premature death is to be taken at face value. Vergil's half-lines may for instances have been too genre-specific or too complicated to implement without a personal preference to end sentences mid-verse. It may even be the case that only preservation bias masks them as Vergilian outliers.[50]

Summary and conclusion

The 58 half-lines in Mynors' *Oxford Classics Texts* edition of Vergil's *Aeneid* were examined as to their metrical, syntactic, and pragmatic properties (Section Three), along with their appearance at switchpoints (Section Four). There seems to be preference for half-lines that are metrical, that is, where the hexameter cuts off at the point where a caesura could appear, and for half-lines that contain arguments. However, half-lines that are non-metrical appear and function well in their context and half-lines that contain adjuncts only are possible too. The 58 half-lines fall pragmatically into two broad sub-categories, those that draw attention to themselves (focal ones) and those that direct attention to something outside of themselves (deictic ones). The common denominator is that they appear at switchpoints, that is, points where the poem switches direction, either at the narratological level, for example, switching locations, or at the metatextual level, that is, switching modes of narrative.

The half-lines signalling narratological switchpoints are signposts, that is, indications of where the story is going, and those signalling metatextual switchpoints are guideposts, that is, indications of how what is said should be taken. Guideposts have scope over stretches of the poem in this way whereas signposts indicate a specific local shift. Grethlein's two-partite division between author and character, to replace the traditional author-narrator-character division which he argues is anachronistic,

---

[49] Roger 2003.
[50] Hoffmann 2005: chapter eight.

maps onto the signpost and guidepost functions identified, that is, signposts are available to characters and guideposts are available to the narrator.[51]

Signposts and guideposts are used to direct the reader's attention. Attention is a basic human capacity enabling us to focus, remain focussed while ignoring distractors, and monitor ongoing activities to shift focus when needed. We pay most attention to what is at the edge of our learning envelope and thus retains surprise value. The metrical, syntactic, pragmatic, and functional diversity of the half-lines allows Vergil to tap into different grades of attention directing the reader consciously at switchpoints. Furthermore, the half-lines help set Vergil apart from the Homeric intertext. It may be that Vergil's half-lines are an innovation that did not make it from the innovator stage to the early adopter stage, not because of premature death but because half-lines were too genre-specific a device, too personal a choice, or attestation bias is masking the truth.

Bibliography

Baldwin, B. (1993) 'Half-lines in Virgil: Old and new ideas', *Symbolae Osloenses*, 68 (1), 144–151.

Biber, D. and Conrad, S. (2009) *Register, Genre, and Style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bitto, G. (2019) 'Alexandrian book division and its reception in Greek and Roman epic', in Reitz, C. and Finkmann, S. (eds) *Structures of Epic Poetry*. Berlin; Boston: Mouton De Gruyter, 133–164.

Braund, S. (2021) 'Virgil's Incomplete Lines: A Challenge for Translators', in Oberhelman, S., Abbamonte, G. and Baker, P. (eds) *Habent Sua Fata Libelli: Studies in Book History, the Classical Tradition, and Humanism in Honor of Craig Kallendorf*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 34–55.

Crystal, D. (2008) *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell.

Davis, B. and Maclagan, M. (2020) 'Signposts, Guideposts, and Stalls: Pragmatic and Discourse Markers in Dementia Discourse', in Stickle, T. (ed) *Learning from the Talk of Persons with Dementia: A Practical Guide to Interaction and Interactional Research*. Cham: Springer, 63–83.

---

[51] Grethlein 2023.

Divjak, D. (2019) *Frequency in Language: Memory, Attention and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fendel, V. (2025) 'Crossing thresholds: the lexicalization and performance of memory in early imperial funerary inscriptions from Sicily', *Lexis, Words about, 1*.

Gasti, H. (2010) 'Narrative self-consciousness in Virgil's Aeneid 3', *Dictynna. Revue de Poétique Latine*, 7.

Grethlein, J. (2023) *Ancient Greek Texts and Modern Narrative Theory: Towards a Critical Dialogue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hoffmann, S. (2005) *Grammaticalization and English Complex Prepositions: A Corpus-Based Study*. Florence, US: Taylor & Francis.

Hutchinson, G. (2017) 'Repetition, range, and attention: The Iliad', in Tsagalis, C. and Markantonatos, A. (eds) *The Winnowing Oar – New Perspectives in Homeric Studies*. Berlin; Boston: Mouton De Gruyter, 145–170.

Jackson, R. (2016) *The Pragmatics of Repetition, Emphasis, and Intensification*. Salford: PhD, University of Salford.

Keeline, T. (2020) 'Vergil and Homer', in Pache, C.O. (ed) *The Cambridge Guide to Homer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 603–605.

Lovatt, H. (2020) 'Metalepsis, Grief, and Narrative in Aeneid 2', in Matzner, S. and Trimble, G. (eds) *Metalepsis: Ancient Texts, New Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 167–193.

Mishra, R.K. (2015) *Interaction between Attention and Language Systems in Humans: A Cognitive Science Perspective*. New Delhi: Springer.

Mynors, R. (1969) *Opera*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

O'Hara, J. (2010) 'The Unfinished Aeneid?', in Farrell, J. and Putnam, M. (eds) *A Companion to Vergil's Aeneid and Its Tradition*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 96–106.

Pierrehumbert, J. (2006) 'The next toolkit', *Journal of Phonetics*, 34, 516–530.

Reinhardt, T. (2006) 'Propertius and Rhetoric', in Günther, H.-C. (ed) *Brill's Companion to Propertius*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 199–216.

Rogers, E. (2003) *Diffusion of Innovations*. Riverside: Free Press.

Schade, G. (2018) 'Virgil's Non-linear Narrative and His Aeneids's Two Voices', *Commentationes*, Eos CV 2018, 7–41.

Stahl, H.-P. (2016), *Poetry Underpinning Power. Vergil's Aeneid: The Epic For Emperor Augustus. A Recovery Study*. Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales.

Stok, F. (2010) 'The Life of Vergil before Donatus', in Farrell, J. and Putnam, M. (eds) *A Companion to Vergil's Aeneid and Its Tradition*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 107–120.

Stok, F. (2017) 'The Vita Donati in the middle ages', in Powell, A. and Hardie, P. (eds) *The Ancient Lives of Vergil: Literary and Historical Studies*, Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 133–152.

Talmy, L. (2007) 'Attention phenomena', in Cuyckens, H. and Geeraerts, D. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 264–293.

Thomas, R. (2001) *Virgil and the Augustan Reception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weeda, L. (2015), *Vergil´s Political Commentary: In the Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid*. Berlin; Boston: Mouton De Gruyter.