

**Sunt lacrimae rerum: An exploration in meaning**

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**Abstract:**

The half-line at *Aeneid* 2.462, *sunt lacrimae rerum*, although one of the most quoted and controversial utterances in Vergil's poem, has received little scrutiny from the point of view of linguistic semantics and pragmatics. This paper explores the interpretive options in these terms, and argues that their semantic and referential indeterminacy is both intentional and poetically productive, lending it an implicational richness most readers find attractive.

**Keywords:** semantics | Aenid | Vergil | sunt lacrimae rerum

**Article:**

In an evocative passage in *Aeneid* Book 1, Aeneas and his friend Achates come upon Juno's great temple at Carthage (450-65):

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hoc primum in luco noua res oblata timorem
lenit, hic primum Aeneas sperare salutem
ausus et adflictis melius confidere rebus.
namque sub ingenti lustrat dum singula templo
reginam opperiens, dum quae fortuna sit urbi
artificumque manus inter se operumque laborem
miratur, uidet Iliacas ex ordine pughas
bellaque iam fama totum uulgata per orbem,
Atridas Priamumque et saeuum ambobus Achillem.
constitit et lacrimans "quis iam locus," inquit, "Achate,
quae regio in terris nostri non plena laboris?"
en Priamus. sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi,
sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.
solue metus; feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem."
sic ait atque animum pictura pascit inani
multa gemens, largoque umectat flumine vultum.
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In this grove he first found something new to assuage his fear; here Aeneas first dared to hope for safety
and to have more confidence in his wrecked fortunes.
For while he surveys the artworks beneath the huge temple
as he waits for the queen, and while he wonders
what the fortune of the city is and admires the artists' skill
and the products of their hard work, he sees the Trojan War
set out in order -- the war now famous through the world
-- and the sons of Atreus, and Priam, and Achilles,
cruel to both. He stops, weeping/and says, "What place now,
Achates, what country in the world isn't full of our suffering?
Look, Priam! Even here he has his reward of praise,
sunt lacrimae rerum and mortal things touch the heart.
Let go of your fears; this fame will bring you some safety."
So he spoke, and he feasted his soul on the vain pictures,
groaning much, and wet his face with a free flow of tears.

Much has been written about this passage -- some may think too much1 -- and especially about
line 462. This overabundance of opinion2 makes me hesitant to say more about it, just as it may
make my audience reluctant to read another attempt at a new or definitive interpretation. But this
essay is not such an attempt. Although many have tried to pin down what sunt lacrimae rerum
means, little has been said about how it means whatever it does, and in this case the means of
communication are as interesting as the content. I propose to look carefully at the passage in the
light of recent work in lexical semantics and pragmatics, in the belief that these disciplines can
not only help us understand what this Vergilian conundrum means (or might mean), but also
provide insight into Vergil's poetic art.

I should point out at the beginning an interpretive assumption I make throughout, namely that
sunt lacrimae rerum is perceptibly and intentionally ambiguous (in the non-technical sense of
that term). By this I mean that a competent reader is likely to become aware at some level that
determining the meaning of the phrase is difficult because it is susceptible to multiple
interpretations, and is thus likely to linger at least momentarily over the words. Given the
openness and oddness of the locution,3 I think it probable that Vergil intended some ambiguity.
Evidence for this lies in the fact that no commentator seems able to pass over the phrase in
silence,4 as well as in the many translations and interpretations offered for the words. I list some
here, with similar interpretations grouped together:

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2 I will not attempt a full summary; overviews can be found in Pagilaro (1948); Feder (1954); Stanley (1965); Negri
   (1988).
3 Testimony to the line's oddness comes from the attempts to make sense of it either by emendation or alternative
   haec coniecturis restituerer conati sunt. Coniecerunt: sunt lacrymae: rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt: vel, sunt
   lacrymae, et rerum mentem mortalia tangunt. Heynius et Wagnerus tales coniuctorres merito reiecerunt. An ipsi
   felicius interpretati sint, aiorum est iudicium.... non multum mutabitur, si legas: sunt lacrymae, reor, atque homines
   mortalia tangunt."
4 With the possible exception of Servius, who comments only obliquely. Stanley (1965) 268 makes this point as
   well: "Successive attempts to refine either method of interpretation (i.e. the "universal" or "specific" interpretation)
   to the exclusion of the other are unwitting testimony to the lexical and syntactical ambiguity inherent in Aeneas' words." Although Stanley makes important contributions to our understanding of the passage, I disagree that lexical
   ambiguity plays much part here, as will become clear below.
Tears are universal (rerum).... Tears are part of the constitution of nature...; [S]ympathy is part of human nature. -- Henry (1873) ad loc. Tears are real things, i.e. sympathy exists as part of the real world, not as a merely imagined consolation. -- MacKay (1952) 258.

The universe has sympathy for us. -- Stewart (1971) 119.
Sorrow is implicit in the affairs of men -- Feder (1954) 201

...they can weep at human tragedy; the world has tears as a constituent part of it, and so have our lives, hopeless and weary -- Knight (1944) 193.

Il existe des larmes reservees aux aventures = nous sommes tous sensibles au spectacle des misères humaines -- Chabrol (1937) ad loc.

There are tears for what happens -- Williams (1983) 242.

There are tears for events -- Page (1957) ad loc.
Here too there are tears for human happenings -- R.D. Williams (1972) ad loc. Here too there are tears for human fortune -- Conington (1897) ad loc.

Even here tears fall for mens' lot -- Austin (1971) ad loc.

So finden die Dinge Tränen ... man kann hier weinen um die Dinge, d. h. um das leidvolle Menschenlos. Man hört darin aber auch: die menschlichen Dinge haben (finden) hier die ihnen gebührenden Tränen -- Klingner (1967) 398.

Sunt lacimae fusae de rebus, propter res dignas quae defleantur -- Dübner, quoted in Benoist (1882) ad loc.

(Even here) there are tears for misfortunes -- Anthon (1843) ad loc.

Es gibt noch Menschen welche Tränen für das Unglück haben -- Ladewig, et al. (1912) ad loc.

Sunt etiam hic lacrimae; id est, miseratio rerum. Deflentur res; id est casus humani: sunt hic pectora quae lacrimas impertiant casibus et calamitatibus aliorum -- Heyne (1821) ad loc.

Here too is sorrow for men's fortune -- Conway (1935) ad loc.

Est commiseratio calamitatum -- Ruaeus (1746) ad loc.

... they are evidently in a civilized. Country where "men can weep for human sorrows" -- Williamson (1919) 30.

Nostrae calamitates ad lacrimas illos excitant -- Scaliger, quoted in La Cerda (1642) ad loc.

Hic etiam est rerum nostrarum tristium miseratio -- Minelius (1815) ad loc.

Qui sono lagrime delle cose, de travagli, cioè qu’i sono dipinti i premi convenien] alla virtù di ciascuno; perché di ciascuno erant dipinto i fatti, che avevano fatto nelle cose di Troja. [Here are tears of things, of trials; that is, here are painted the rewards appropriate to each one; perhaps the deeds of each one were painted, which have deeds of the things of Troy.] -- Fabrini, Maltesta and Venuti (1741) ad loc.

Est in ista pictura quod dolorem moveat -- Donatus (1869) ad loc.
[Lacrimae] de rebus miseris sunt, id est, conspiciuntur in pictura hac: hoc est, res miserae Priami lachrymis afficiuntur -- Ascensius (1544)⁵ ad loc.

[The heroes in the panel] are weeping over sorrows -- Alexander (1954) 400.

The slipperiness of the line is also evidenced by the fact that many interpreters make repeated stabs at paraphrasing it, since a precise meaning, expressed as a single proposition, eludes them. Perhaps this point is too obvious to make, but some discussions of the passage assume that its ambiguity is merely apparent and unintentional, and that any perceived ambiguity is the fault of either Vergil or the reader.⁶ Others have been more comfortable allowing the poet an intentional ambiguity.⁷ In any case, I believe it is worth the effort to determine what kind of ambiguity is present here, and to consider what impression that ambiguity makes on us, or was likely to make on an ancient reader.

SEMANTICS: SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Stanley has said that A. 1.462 displays inherent lexical ambiguity,⁸ but many who work in lexical semantics would disagree. In that field, "ambiguity" means that a word has more than a single sense, and although the means to determine what, and how many, senses a word has are controversial, the categories describing words with multiple meanings are widely accepted. Words with two or more senses unrelated in meaning are homonyms; those with two or more senses that have some semantic relation to one another are polysemous; and those with a single broad sense are vague or general. Thus the noun "bark" is a homonym as regards its meanings involving the bark of a tree or the bark of a dog; the noun "fruit" is polysemous as regards "the fruit of the field" or "the fruit of his labor"; and "aunt," though it may denote a female relative on either the mother's or the father's side, is not polysemous between the two possibilities, but simply vague.

The best criteria for detecting true lexical ambiguity -- polysemy or homonymy -- focus on two basic semantic properties: Are the supposed senses perceptibly distinguishable from one another? And do they belong to the word, or can they be attributed to the context in which it appears? Ambiguity tests have been devised to distinguish ambiguous words from those that are merely vague;⁹ but the validity of the tests depends on the intuitions of native speakers. For this reason, such tests are not particularly useful to us, since none of us are native speakers of Latin,

⁵ In Virgil (1976).
⁶ Cf., e.g., Alexander's (1954) 400. wish for an interpretation with "No cobwebs, no nuances, no mysteries, no O altitudo's any longer; just a plain speech developed out of the factual surroundings in accordance with the dramatic needs of the situation...." Alexander (1954) 395 refers to people like me as "the 'neoterics' of Virgilian interpretation ... who have spun fine webs of every sort in this particular corner still further to cut it off from the last chances of the plain comprehension of men." In this vein, see also Martindale (1993).
⁷ Or at least multiplicity of meaning, e.g. Knight (1944) 193; Stanley (1965). There is often no clear dividing line between multiplicity of meaning and ambiguity (defined as uncertainty about what is meant), as the perceptions of readers naturally differ. Su (1994) 43-59 is right to point out that, although ambiguity often has a semantic or syntactic basis, the perception of ambiguity depends upon the pragmatic assumptions and inclinations of writers and readers.
⁸ Stanley (1965) 268.
⁹ See Lakoff (1970); Zwicky (1973); Zwicky and Sadow (1975); Cruse (1986) 54-66; Geeraerts (1993); Tuggy (1993); Channell (1994) 34-8; Taylor (2003).
and if we were to attempt to use them, we would be unlikely to get anything more out of them
than the unreliable notions, derived from our reading of the relevant dictionary entries, that we
bring with us.

In the case of *sunt lacrimae rerum*, the fact that *rerum* is translated variously by commentators as
"the world," "affairs," "fortune," "lot," "calamitates," "sorrows," etc. might be taken as *prima facie*
evidence that the word is polysemous or homonymous. But even the dictionaries, which
tend to be profligate in distinguishing senses, do not list most of these glosses as senses of *res*,
which is instead a vague word; the assortment of translations here come from the commentators'
judgment about what it refers to in context, not from any great variety of senses the word itself
carries with it.10

*Lacrimae* presents a different picture. The word has a basic, concrete sense, denoting teardrops,
and is also used as a metonym for the act of weeping, as well as for various mental states that
accompany weeping.11 But it is hardly certain that the metonymic use of *lacrimae* had resulted in
the formation of distinguishable and independent senses meaning "weeping," "grief," "joy" or the
like by Vergil's day; rather, those are meanings that the word may acquire in various contexts
and that are attributable to those contexts, or rather to inferences we make about the causes of the
*lacrimae*. Thus *lacrimae*, like *res*, is probably not ambiguous at the semantic level, although
some commentators have translated its literal meaning ("tears"), while others interpret it as a
metonym for an emotion (*"miseratio," "commiseratio," "dolor," "sympathy," "sorrow") closely
associated with tears.

These distinctions matter insofar as the absence of lexical ambiguity here has aesthetic
consequences. When we perceive real lexical ambiguity in puns, the effect (syllepsis or
wordplay) is usually salient and draws attention to itself.12 In "The despot executed the laws and
his citizens," for example, our simultaneous awareness of two senses of "execute" makes the
sentence slightly odd or funny. And in situations where there is doubt about the intended sense of
a word, we are usually presented with an either-or choice; thus the sense of "glasses" in "He
found his glasses on the counter" can be selected using contextual knowledge (was he looking
for his spectacles or something to drink from?). But no such clear-cut choices are available when
we assign meaning to *res* or *lacrimae*. Furthermore, the various referents proposed by translators
(about which more below) are closely related conceptually, and are not simply or easily
differentiated, so that the interpretive options for the words have fuzzy rather than sharply
delineated edges.

The situation regarding the semantics of the genitive in *rerum* is similar. Many interpreters
identify this as an objective genitive, a few as subjective;13 but either characterization is difficult,
as the terms "objective" and "subjective" are most descriptive when the noun-phrase in question

10 Cf. Ruhl (1989) vii: "... words contribute much less to meaning than usually sup- posed; the apparent lexical
meanings of a word includes in large part a contribution of contextual factors, both linguistic and extralinguistic.
Factoring out contextual meaning, we find that some words have a single, highly abstract meaning; other words,
referring to highly diverse realities, represent the unity of that diversity."
11 Thus the TLL under *lacrima*: I.A.1. "Lacrimae inficant affectum animi...: a: dolorem, timorem, pudorem,
paenitentiam, miserationem, iram, sim...: b: gaudium."
12 On the difference between Vergil's and Ovid's use of syllepsis, see Mack (1980).
13 Eg. Stewart (1971).
can be understood as the nominalization\(^\text{14}\) of a verb-phrase, e.g., *metus hostium* = *hostes metuunt* or *amor patriae* = *amo patriam*.\(^\text{15}\) Those who argue for an objective or subjective use must therefore assume that *lacrimae* has an underlying verbal notion like *lacrimare*, making the phrase a nominalized version of something like *hominis* (nom.) *res* (accus.) *lacrimant*, *res lacrimantur*,\(^\text{16}\) or even *res* (nom.) *lacrimant*. Yet the attribution of such valence to *lacrimae* along with an argument structure\(^\text{17}\) with obligatory subject or object arguments in the genitive,\(^\text{18}\) is problematic, as the expression lacks a parallel outside the *Aeneid* in the classical period, and should probably be understood (if this is how we wish to take it) as a nonce-usage. Such innovations are common in Vergil, but the motivation to understand *lacrimae* this way is not overwhelming, especially given that other options are available. It seems likely that this use would have struck a native speaker as novel,\(^\text{19}\) and that many readers, even if they finally settled

\(^{14}\) As described, e.g., in Chomsky (1970); Rosén (1981) and (1983).

\(^{15}\) Examples from Kühner-Stegmann (1976) II.1 p. 415.

\(^{16}\) Cf. one of Heyne's (1821) translations, "deflentur res."

\(^{17}\) As described, e.g., by Devine and Stephens (2006) 315-60; cf. Grimshaw (1990). The underlying idea is old, but goes by different names in linguistic circles, e.g. sub-categorization, thematic roles, theta roles, valence grammar or predication.

\(^{18}\) The *TLL* does list two instances of *lacrima* with attributive prepositional phrases that the article's author claims encode an object: *patris lacrimae de fili periculo* (Cic. *Ver*. 5.109) and *miserrimi inter necessarias super occisum patrem lacrimas* ... *inertiam* (Sen. *Con*. 10.1.6). The presence of a prepositional phrase in the noun phrase is often taken as an indication that the noun has verbal valence (e.g. in Rosen 1981), but I show elsewhere (forthcoming) that this is not the case. Besides, the prepositions occurring with *lacrima* in these examples (*super* and *de*) are not ones that normally encode object relations in verbal nominalizations; *in* and *erga*, for example, are much more frequent, e.g. *amor erga palriam* for *amal palriam*. In addition, the transitive use of *lacrimare* does not appear before Seneca, according to the *TLL*. Thus it would seem that these two examples are nominalizations of the intransitive rather than the transitive use of *lacrimare*, and cannot be used in support of an objective reading of *lacrimae rerum*. The same problem faces those who argue for a subjective genitive, since they also supply an understood object argument, e.g. Stewart (1971) 119: "the universe has sympathy for us," (emphasis mine). Thus if *lacrimae rerum* is a nominalization of a transitive verb phrase, it is unique in that respect during the classical period (but see below for discussion of an apparently parallel use in Book 2).

\(^{19}\) Pace Horsfall (1995) 107 n. 39, who says that "only rank bad Latin" could account for any but an objective reading here. We might get a rough idea of exactly how unusual the locution is by using an analogically similar expression in English, namely the preposition *of*, which is used frequently for object relations in noun phrases, e.g., "the destruction of Troy," "the murder of Caesar." The ease (or lack thereof) with which we process "tears of things" as an objective genitive probably approximates to some degree that of a Latin speaker. My native English-speaking informants usually scratch their heads and furrow their brows before offering such an interpretation. The English expression corresponding to the subjective genitive, "things' tears" is even odder.

An apparently parallel passage at *A*. 2.784, is frequently cited as a proof text that 1.462 is an objective genitive. In that passage, the shade of Creusa appears to Aeneas as he searches for her in the burning city, and offers him advice and prophecy (2.780-8):

\begin{quote}
    longa tibi exsilia et uastum maris aequor arandum, 780
    et terram Hesperiam uenies, ubi Lydius arua
    inter opima uirum leni fluit agmineThybris.
    illic res laetae regnumque et regia coniunx
    parte tibi; lacrimas dilectae pelle Creusae.
    non ego Myrmidonum sedes Dolopumque superbas 785
    aspiciam aut Graii seruiut matribus ibo,
    Datdanis et diuae Veneris nurus;
    sed me magna deum genetrix his detinet oris.
\end{quote}

Yet an objective genitive here is subject to the same reservations expressed at 1.462, and is also open to alternate interpretation. An objective reading makes good sense, but so does a simple possessive genitive, if we assume that Creusa imputes to Aeneas a certain anxiety involving a grief-stricken Creusa -- a situation she herself describes in
on an objective reading, would first have tried to interpret the phrase along more conventional lines.

Another popular suggestion is that the genitive expresses an idea normally expressed by a preposition such as propter, ob or de; i.e., lacrimae rerum is equal to lacrimae propter res vel sim. Given that the attributive use of prepositional phrases is not as common in Latin as in English, using the genitive as a substitute is a reasonable strategy. But the use of the genitive to express such notions as "cause," etc. is as unusual as using lacrimae as a verbal noun.

A third possibility, first explicitly offered by Henry and taken up by many, allows us to use a well-established meaning of the genitive. Henry conjectures that rerum here has the semantic properties of a predicative genitive -- what Borghini (1980) calls a genitive of inerenzia -- specifying that lacrimae somehow inhere in the res. If we wish to interpret the genitive according to ordinary usage, this looks like a straightforward option. But the interpretation is complicated by the phrase-initial sunt, which is strongly associated with presentative assertions ('there are...'), and I know of no other instances in which a presentative sunt or est combines with a predicative use of the genitive. Henry's interpretation would seem to require a different word-order: either lacrimae sunt rerum or lacrimae rerum sunt, rather than sunt lacrimae rerum. These word-orders are impossible in the hexameter, and one might argue that Vergil has been forced to alter the normal mode of expression to accommodate the meter. But sentence-initial est or sunt is so strongly associated with presentative notions that the poet would have known that the word-order was odd.

The perceptual effect of the genitive is probably more closely related to the vagueness of res than to the ambiguity of "glasses" discussed above. Some evidence for this conjecture -- and I admit that it is almost pure conjecture -- comes from the fact that, as far as I am aware, the Romans did not make puns based on different semantic functions of the cases, indicating that case-ambiguity lacked the salience associated with lexical ambiguity, and that there is good reason to believe

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785-7. Thus the line might be read "Put beloved Creusa's tears (i.e., grief, suffering) out of your mind; I will not see the haughty citadels of Myrmidons or Dolopes, nor will I enter the service of Greek matrons, etc." In this case, one must choose either an ordinary possessive (and subjective?) genitive combined with a more complicated assumption about what Creusa is trying to communicate, or an unusual objective genitive combined with a slightly simpler assumption. I leave it to the reader to decide which is better.

The TLL cites only five instances of lacrima appearing with the objective genitive; two are those from the Aeneid discussed here, while the other three are much later. The apparent similarity in subject matter for all three -- grief over the death of a loved one -- arouses suspicion that they are all modeled on an objective reading of lacrimas dilectae... Creusa: Cassiod. Ios. Antig. 4.259: sufficiunt... isti dies... ad lacrimas amatorum; CE 1401.5: lacrimas tarn mortis acervae; CE 1534b, 1: conigis amissae lacrimas... me fudisse.

E.g., Ascensius (1544) glosses it as de rebus; Meyen (1576) as rerum causa; Ruaeus (1746) and Benoist (1882) as propter res; Aubertin (1889) as de rebus or ob res; Conington (1897), Conway (1935), Page (1957) and others as "for"; Plessis and Lejay (1919) as "pour" (both of the latter I assume to be equivalent to propter.). These approaches are essentially analogous to that of Pagliaro (1948), who argues that the genitive expresses cause.

Kenney (1964) and forthcoming.

Kenney (1964) 13 traces this interpretation of lacrimae rerum at least as far back as the 18th century, and Venantius Fortunatus in the 6th century, at least, seems to have used it this way.

Compare, e.g., pehilantia magis est adolescensium quam senum, where petulance is said to inhere in the young (Kühner-Stegmann (1976) II 1 p. 452).

that it should not be described as ambiguity at all, but rather as indeterminacy or "semantic incompleteness."  

PRAGMATICS: FURTHER PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In fact, the entire clause sunt lacrimae rerum is semantically incomplete or "underdetermined." Until we assign referents to lacrimae and rerum, and work out the meaning of the genitive, the words cannot even be said to have a literal meaning; their meaning must be enriched by information not encoded in the language at all. Help in understanding how this happens comes from pragmatic theory, as pioneered by philosophers of language such as J.L. Austin and Grice, and developed by Atlas, Levinson, Horn, Sperber and Wilson, and others. All these approaches have in common the goal of explaining how people regularly mean something other than what they say, and how addressees are able to work out that meaning. Most pragmatic theorists agree that utterances usually do not fully encode speakers' intended meanings, and that both speakers and hearers use inference to "enrich" the literal meaning of utterances, as well as to infer intended meanings in addition to or different from what the enriched literal utterance expresses. These inferential processes are not yet well understood, and pragmatic theory is still in its infancy. This does not mean that using pragmatic theory to illuminate Vergil's text is a pointless exercise. To the contrary, the theoretical explicit-ness such analysis brings to the problem of indirect communication provides a framework in which the passage can be examined more lucidly than is possible using ad hoc principles of interpretation. If the principles proposed by pragmatic theory are grounded in an accurate understanding of human cognition, our understanding of this passage (and others so analyzed) is to that extent more likely to be well-founded.

In particular, Kelevance Theory (hereafter RT) as developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995) and Wilson and Sperber (2005) offers a model of inferential communication that is comprehensive, coherent and plausible. RT has the added advantage of directly addressing problems of literary

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25 We can get some notion of how perceptually distinct the meanings of the genitive are by means of a thought-experiment in English. One test for lexical ambiguity involves the use of zeugma or syllepsis (Cruse (1986) 61-2), and we probe whether a word has two senses by trying to use them both at the same time or in quick succession; if in doing so we experience "zeugmatic oddness," we have evidence for true ambiguity, as in the example given above, where the despot executes the laws and his subjects. But note how much less noticeable is the alternation between subjective (or possessive) and objective genitive in "She was his passion and his undoing." Note also the inherent semantic overlap between subjective, objective and possessive genitives: "he" can be said to be the subject, the possessor or the experiencer of his passion, and the object, the possessor or the experiencer of his undoing. Obviously, many of the semantic functions associated with the genitive in English and Latin are not clearly distinguishable from one another.

I believe that the genitive has no -- or few -- inherent semantic functions. On this hypothesis, we could say that, although genitive substantives tend to fall into certain semantic, "thematic" categories in their contexts (e.g. possessor, agent, goal, etc.), in fact these semantic notions are derived from our real-world knowledge of the participants involved in the predication, and are not encoded in the case itself. Sperber and Wilson (1995) 188 hold a similar view of the genitive: "It is hard to believe that the genitive is ambiguous, with as many senses as there are types of relationship it may be used to denote, or that all these relationships fall under a single definition which is the only meaning expressed by use of the genitive on any given occasion.... Contextual information is needed to resolve what should be seen as the semantic incompleteness, rather than the ambiguity, of the genitive."

26 Though it has prominent critics among pragmatic theorists, e.g. Levinson (2000); Atlas (2005).
language, whereas much recent work in so-called neo-Gricean theory has tended to focus on problems of "conventional" implicatures. RT starts with the premise that human communication is both intentional and cooperative: speakers and hearers work together to be understood and to understand. It further assumes that communication happens in a context, defined as everything that is "mutually manifest" to the parties in communication. Thus context is a psychological construct bounded by the mental limitations of the participants: since the capacities of the human mind are finite, what is mutually manifest to all parries is necessarily limited. The real world is not the context of communication, since no one can be aware of much of it at once. But fictional or erroneous assumptions can be a part of the context, just as Aeneas and Achates are part of the mutually manifest cognitive environment that holds between Vergil and his audience.

Context is not static; it undergoes constant modification by both speaker and hearer. In RT, communication is understood as individuals' attempts to modify their shared cognitive environment, and acts of communication are effective insofar as they change that environment. Communicators may do this by introducing new assumptions into the context; by strengthening already existing ones; or by negating or modifying previously manifest assumptions. Context may also expand or change when speakers and hearers search their memory or their environment for information to which an utterance might be relevant.

RT asserts that "relevance" is a general principle of human cognition, and proposes that "human cognition tends to be geared toward the maximisation of relevance." An ostensive act of communication -- not only speaking or writing, but also gesturing or any other action performed with a communicative intent -- is more relevant, the more "cognitive effects" it produces in a context, and is less relevant, the more processing effort is involved in interpreting it. Communicators try to produce utterances that are as relevant as possible, and addressees tend to select interpretations that are maximally relevant in this sense. Thus if I wanted to communicate the idea that I think Abraham Lincoln was a fine orator, saying "I think Abraham Lincoln was a fine orator" would achieve a high degree of relevance, because it brings about the intended cognitive effects with only a small processing effort on the part of me and my addressee. I might also try to communicate the same idea by doing a dramatic reading of the Gettysburg Address while wearing a fake beard and stovepipe hat. Because this would require the addressee not only to listen to and evaluate my speech, but also to infer that I meant to praise Lincoln by reciting it, it would have a much lower degree of relevance, probably to the point of being uninterpretable.

RT asserts that every act of ostensive communication, such as saying or writing something, carries with it the "presumption of optimal relevance".  

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27 Pilkington (2000) has done the most to develop the theory in this direction. But much of the analysis here from an RT perspective can also be accomplished using neo-Gricean terms and assumptions; many basic ideas of pragmatics are "non-denominational."

28 Sperber and Wilson (1995) 142: "It is not that first the context is determined, and then relevance is assessed. On the contrary, people hope that the assumption being processed is relevant (or else they would not bother to process it at all) and they try to select a context which will justify that hope: a context which will maximise relevance. In verbal comprehension in particular, it is relevance which is treated as given, and context which is treated as variable."


(a) The set of assumptions $I$ which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee's while to process the ostensive stimulus.

(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate $I$.

Of course, it is often not the case that the communicator's ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used, but that presumption motivates the addressee to try to infer the communicator's meaning; if it were not so assumed, listeners would have no reason to attend to speakers in order to figure out what they mean. When speakers or writers fail to use a reasonably relevant stimulus, communication fails, a common occurrence.

Finally, language, considered purely as a grammatical-semantic code, is not the fundamental cognitive system of human communication; ostensive-inferential communication occupies that place. This allows RT to deal with the fact that nearly all instances of language-coded communication do not fully specify the thoughts they are intended to communicate, and that language-coded communications are frequently used to communicate thoughts they do not encode at all. Only through processes of inference are we able to understand them.

The enrichment of a bare utterance is called "explicature" in RT literature, and is understood to be an inferential process that operates on the principle of relevance: people identify referents, choose senses, assign spatial or temporal scope to deictic words, choose the appropriate syntactic structure and the like, in a way that involves a maximum of cognitive effort and a minimum of processing effort. *Sunt lacrimae rerum* is a clear case of an utterance that needs to be enriched before it can be said to have even a literal meaning.

Beyond the level of explicature, speakers often intend utterances to communicate something other than, and not just a contextually enriched version of, what they say, and depend on their addressees to infer an intended meaning different from the literal meaning of an explicature. The standard term for such intended meanings is implicatures. Figurative language in ordinary speech and literature, as well as many other kinds of indirect communication, all involve implicature. Sperber and Wilson (1995) hold that utterances and other contextual assumptions are loaded freely into a "deductive device" that helps produce the implicatures, though deduction itself is insufficient to explain them, since their meanings are not strictly deducible from what is said. Rather, implicatures are deducible from what is said only once other contextual assumptions are supplied as premises. Thus a grocery store clerk might say to a customer in line with a full cart, "I'm sorry, you have more than ten items," an utterance whose literal meaning is only marginally relevant to the customer, who is well aware that he has more than ten items. But if the customer is also aware, or becomes aware, that he is in a line restricted to customers buying 10 items or fewer, he will use this assumption, plus his new knowledge that the checker is aware and has informed him of the number of items in his cart, to infer that the checker is politely asking him to move to another line.

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31 Sperber and Wilson (1995) 176: "The coded communication process is not autonomous: it is subservient to the inferential process. The inferential process is autonomous: it functions essentially the same way whether or not combined with coded communication (though in the absence of coded communication, performances are generally poorer)."
In the RT account, literary communications invite many weak implicatures rather than a single strong one like the grocery clerk's, but no sharp division exists between literary and non-literary implicature. RT argues:\(^3\)

...that there is a continuum of cases, from implicatures which the hearer was specifically intended to recover, to implicatures which were merely intended to be made manifest, and to further modifications of the mutual cognitive environment of speaker and hearer that the speaker only intended in the sense that she intended her utterance to be relevant, and hence to have rich and not entirely foreseeable cognitive effects.

In many cases communicative intentions are vague:

...the communicator's informative intention is better described as an intention to modify directly not the thoughts but the cognitive environment of the audience. The actual cognitive effects of a modification of the cognitive environment are only partly predictable. Communicators -- like human agents in general -- form intentions over whose fulfillment they have some control: they can have some controllable effect on their audience's cognitive environment, much less on their audience's actual thoughts, and they form their intentions accordingly.\(^3\)

It is often impossible to tell which implicatures a communicator intends, and which are made solely by the hearer:

...there may be no cut-off point between assumptions strongly backed by the speaker, and assumptions derived from the utterance but on the hearer's sole responsibility. The fiction that there is a clear-cut distinction between wholly determinate, specifically intended inferences and indeterminate, wholly unintended inferences cannot be maintained.\(^3\)

RT would thus argue that a reader's task in interpreting *sunt lacrimae rerum* entails working out not only its explicature, but also the implicatures it invites if its "enriched" meaning does not achieve much relevance. The task is complicated by the fact that the line occurs in a complicated context: Aeneas utters it to Achates in a fictional context, which is itself only one part of the context of communication between Vergil and his readers.

**EXPLICATURES OF SUNT LACRIMAE RERUM**

Because of the semantic underdetermination of *sunt lacrimae rerum* and the richness of the context, the processing burden of working out the words' explicature is heavy. Commentators have generally tried to use assumptions that are readily available in the mutually manifest context to make the most relevant explicatures. Thus, in attempting to fix the referents of *rerum*, Henry argues that, since no other word in the context definitively restricts its scope, there is no

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\(^3\) Sperber and Wilson (1995) 199.
sufficient reason to do so, and assumes that rerum refers to the world or to nature. Others find elements in the context that encourage them to make different assumptions. Some have thought that the res are tristes, probably because of an assumption that they are related to lacrimae (Minelius (1815)); are human happenings, because they assume that people are unlikely to shed tears for the non-human world (R.D. Williams (1972)); are calamitates or casus humani, because the res must be related to the depicted events Aeneas and Achates are looking at (La Cerda (1642); Ruæus (1746); Heyne (1821)); or are Priam's res, because of the content of the picture Aeneas is looking at (Donatus (1969); Ascensius (1976)). But since all these assumptions are easily available in the mutual context, and nothing in it excludes them in forming the explicature, rerum's referential meaning is protean, because all the interpretive options appear to be reasonably relevant.

Fixing the referents of lacrimae is difficult in the same way. Some have assumed that the lacrimae are those of the Trojans in the pictures (Alexander (1954)); some take them to be Aeneas' tears (Chabrol (1937)), or the Carthaginians', and in particular the artist's, or Dido's (Pöschl (1962) 70; Otis (1963) 66); and some believe they are tears in general (Henry (1873)). Others have inferred an associated emotion, interpreting lacrimae as a metonym (Donatus: dolor; Heyne: miseratio; Chabrol: pitié admirative; Henry: "sympathy"), although the particular emotion inferred depends upon whose lacrimae these are thought to be. Other interpreters waffle among possibilities, as there is once again nothing in the context that prompts the reader decisively to narrow the choices.

The reader must also infer whether hic etiam is to be supplied from the previous line. Many have thought that the anaphora of sunt... sunt necessarily implies a "zero anaphora" of hic etiam, or at least that its adverbial modification extends to the second clause, and probably to the third (mentem mortalia tangunt). But the fact that hic etiam does not appear explicitly in those clauses leaves open the possibility that it is not to be supplied, and the line can be punctuated to support either possibility. Henry comes close to the truth in saying that if Vergil wanted us to understand hic etiam in 462, he would have put it there. It is truer to say that Vergil could have removed all doubt about the syntactic scope of hic by repeating it instead of sunt. The deixis of hic, finally, if one assumes that it is to be read in the line, is not easily fixed. Does it refer simply to the representation of Priam that Aeneas is looking at (Donatus (1969)); to all the artworks, which are described a few lines later (Feder (1954); Barigazzi (1986)); to the temple area in general, so as to include the numen of the deity in its scope (are tears attributable to Juno?); to Carthage and the

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35 Henry (1873) ad loc.: "I know of no instance in which res without adjunct signifies res adversae, casus, and... we find "afflicits" added to it only ten lines previously, in order to give it such sense...."

36 Such as Chabrol (1937), who sees lacrimae as referring both to Aeneas' tears in the scene and to the pity of those responsible for the pictures; Henry (1873), who seems at one point to imply that lacrimae rerum indicates that sadness or suffering is a part of the universe, then later that "sympathy" is the notion to be derived from lacrimae; or Heyne, who first gives miseratio, then deflentur res, then pectora quae lacrimas important, and is unclear about whether lacrimae is a metonym for a state of mind, an act of weeping or the faculty of sympathy.

37 So Conway (1935); Horsfall (1995) 107 n. 39: "Decisive is the repetition of sunt... sunt, with hic, here in the temple, attached to the first member."

38 The anaphora of hic is far more common in Vergil than is anaphora of est or sunt; see Ecl. 7.49-50; 9.40-2; 10.42-3; A. 1.13-14, 229-30. Hic's use at 1.462 instead of sunt, would thus seem to present no metrical or stylistic difficulties.
Carthaginians in general; or to some combination of these? Horsfall, for example, specifies at one point that *hic* refers to the temple, but then broadens the scope to include Carthage.  

None of these inferences are made in isolation; each necessarily influences others. Thus Henry's strong assumption that *res* refers to "nature" leads him to reject the zero anaphora of *hic etiam* and to adopt a predicative or "inherent" understanding of the genitive in *rerum*; but Horsfall's equally strong assumption that *hic etiam* is part of the explicature of *sunt lacrimae rerum* leads him to adopt quite different assumptions about the referential scope of *res* and the relationship between tears and things that the genitive signals. The number of possible, and reasonable, inferential paths multiplies quickly. In fact, the processing burden of working out the explicature of the phrase is so heavy that some have thought that *sunt lacrimae rerum* never achieves sufficient relevance as a fully successful communication, and have for that reason emended the line so that it appears (to them, at least) to achieve more relevance.  

It is also possible to assume that Aeneas has made a failed communication because of his highly emotional state. Such utterances are not unusual in situations where people are upset; compare radio reporter Herb Morrison's famous "Oh, the humanity!" as he witnessed the destruction of the Hindenburg, a phrase in which it is impossible to fix the referent of "humanity" to the people killed in the disaster, the general tragedy or the emotions felt by the announcer. So too Aeneas' *sunt lacrimae rerum* may be understood as an inarticulate, emotional outburst without much content at all, whose intent is simply to make Achates aware of Aeneas' inner turmoil.

**IMPLICATURES OF SUNT LACRIMAE RERUM**

Nearly all commentators, however, have avoided the interpretation sketched out above because they make the "presumption of optimal relevance": that is, they assume that Aeneas is saying something worth processing. But simple explicature is not enough, because no single explicature of *sunt lacrimae rerum* is particularly relevant to the Aeneas-Achates context without inviting further implicatures. Thus an explicature whose paraphrase is "even here in this temple are tears for human calamities" invites Achates to adduce assumptions such as:

- Aeneas has said that "even here in this temple are tears for human calamities."
- There are no actual tears here besides Aeneas'.
- "Tears" can be a metonym for an expression of sympathy.
- The artworks we are looking at can be understood as an expression of sympathy.

Any of these would yield the implicature:

- Aeneas is communicating that in this temple there is an expression of sympathy for human calamities.

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40 So Peerlkamp (1843) and Heinsius and Burmannus quoted in n. 3, above.
41 Aeneas is frequently less than perfectly articulate; cf. Feeney (1983) 217, who characterizes his private speeches as "weak and insubstantial."
This implicature, when combined with other easily accessible assumptions, can be the premise for yet other implicatures, such as the following:

- Artworks that express sympathy for human calamities express the feelings of their makers.
- The people who made these artworks have sympathy for human calamities.
- People who have sympathy for human calamities are likely to have sympathy for our calamities, since we are human.

These could yield the implicature:

- Aeneas is communicating that the people who made these artworks are likely to have sympathy for us.

Interestingly, nearly all the other proposed explicatures of *sunt lacrimae rerum* invite implicatures that tend toward the same idea. In a more restricted explicature, such, as "Even here in this artwork are tears for Priam's wretched affairs," Achates is invited to arrive at an implicature similar to the one just mentioned, since tears for Priam's affairs imply sympathy for him, implying sympathy for the Trojans. So also Henry's broad construal, "Sympathy is a part of human nature," logically entails, "sympathy is a part of the Carthaginians' nature," and invites the inference "The Carthaginians are likely to be sympathetic to us." Feder's "Sorrow is implicit in the affairs of men" points in the same direction, since, if sorrow is implicit in all human affairs, it is implicit in those of the Carthaginians, and if we assume that the experience of sorrow tends to induce feelings of sympathy for others who experience the same, we may again infer that Aeneas is suggesting the likelihood of Punic commiseration with the Trojans. The key language, of course, that guides all the implicatures in this direction is Aeneas' final sentencer: *feret haec aliquam tibi fama salutem*.

But Aeneas is not the only, or even the primary, communicator in this passage. Vergil wrote the line, and we need to ask whether he intended his audience to recover any implicatures beyond those Aeneas has encouraged Achates to recover. Stanley (1965) argues that Aeneas' communication to Achates expresses his belief in the Carthaginians' sympathy for the Trojans, but that Vergil as narrator uses the phrase *sunt lacrimae rerum* with relevance to the disastrous events to follow, making it not simply an expression of Aeneas' perception of Punic sympathy, but an intimation about the nature of the remaining res of the Aeneid. Thus the utterance functions as foreshadowing and dramatic irony (since Aeneas does not fully understand the implications of what he is saying). Stanley's argument is satisfying in that he accommodates two of the most popular explicatures of *sunt lacrimae rerum*, and especially in that he has realized that the communicative intentions of Vergil and Aeneas in this passage are not the same.

Others, such as Feder (1954), Lyne (1987) and Horsfall (1995), have seen an even more bitter irony, achieved by highlighting contextual assumptions shared by Vergil and us, but not necessarily by Aeneas and Achates. These critics point out that Aeneas is in the temple of Juno, and insofar as the epic tradition of Juno's hatred of Trojans is mutually manifest to Vergil and us, we are likely to interpret the artworks in her temple at Carthage as a celebration of her triumph over the Trojans. On this understanding, Vergil's intent is to make us simultaneously aware of
Aeneas' view of the meaning of the artworks, and of their different meaning in the divine context of the poem and the epic tradition. As Lyne observes:42

Thus, when we read Aeneas's words (461 f.) "sunt hic etiam sua praemia laudi / sunt lacrimae rerum," then survey what is actually on the temple, and remember whose temple it is, we should again have a sense of dramatic irony: the pictures on the temple mean one thing to Aeneas, another to us.... A further voice operating by dramatic irony is commenting on him, and I am not sure that it is sympathetic.

What Lyne calls a "further voice" a pragmatic theorist would call an implicature, but one not quite like those recovered above, whose meaning is easily paraphrased as a proposition: Instead, it produces a "cognitive effect" that engages our feelings in ways that are powerful, but difficult to describe. In RT terms, Vergil has introduced new assumptions that have modified our cognitive environment, but has not forced any specific thoughts upon us.

In a larger context, which includes our awareness of events later in the poem, the different explicatures of sunt lacrimae rerum produce slightly different, but again convergent, cognitive effects. If we accept Feder's explicature of sunt lacrimae rerum ("sorrow is implicit in the affairs of men"), in the broader context we become aware that Aeneas' literal utterance is relevant to painful circumstances and events he has yet to experience, which invalidate for us his intended, somewhat hopeful implicature to Achates... If we accept Henry's explicature ("sympathy is a part of human nature"), we are aware that Aeneas' literal utterance is factually wrong as it applies to any Punic sympathies expressed toward Trojans in the artworks. A similar effect is produced if we use the explicature "even here in this place the Carthaginians have sympathy for human (or Trojan) affairs (or calamities)." In nearly every case, however, the effect produces irony (of the tragic kind), in that Vergil makes us aware of Aeneas' ignorance of his true situation in a way that produces pathos.

Given this underlying conceptual unity at the level of implication, we might wonder whether attempts to confine the line to a single discrete explicature are to the point. Vague or "underdetermined" and suggestive utterances are a staple of communication; the word "vagueness," in fact, is only meaningful to the extent that it relates to the informational needs of the participants. If we ask whether Aeneas has communicated sufficiently to Achates what he intended, and ask the same about Vergil's communication to us, the problem of which explicature we should choose begins to evanesce. This is not to say that investigating the subject is vain, especially for us as non-native speakers of Latin, who need such analysis to compensate for the deficiencies of our linguistic reflexes. My effort has been to map out the multiple paths of interpretation that might have been taken by Vergil's Latin-speaking audience, on the assumption that many of these paths were in fact taken by individual hearers or readers.

The contemplation of these possibilities leads to an appreciation of the subtlety of Vergil's poetry. For A 1.462 is not simply vague or ambiguous (in a loose sense), but vague and ambiguous in a productive way; its semantic and pragmatic properties force us to seek a context or contexts to which it is relevant. The line is sufficiently communicative at the level of implication without submitting to a definitive explicature. By offering an excess of interpretive

options, it disrupts the flow of our reading and draws us into explicit contemplation, which some have argued is the very essence of artistic technique.\textsuperscript{43}

The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.... A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is imposed and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception.

Vergil has done this in a way that draws minimal attention to his method. His use of unobtrusive elements -- vague and ordinary words -- ensures that the effect is subtle rather than flashy or clever. All of this, it seems to me, is typical of the poet's sensibility. It is hardly possible that he could have foreseen all the inferential paths interpreters might follow, as Austin remarks.\textsuperscript{44} But it is also unlikely that Vergil was unaware that \textit{sunt lacrimae return} is implicationally rich "in a not entirely predictable" (to paraphrase Sperber and Wilson) but to my mind quite effective way.

Such a way of communicating is bound to confound commentators who set it as their task to put into discursive prose something the author has expressed in implication.\textsuperscript{45} But writers often have aims different than those of critics and commentators, one of the most important being to please their readers; as Susan Sontag has argued, the "erotics of art" is at least as important as its interpretation.\textsuperscript{46} In this respect, Vergil has succeeded brilliantly, since, though various commentators interpret the passage variously, nearly everyone likes and remembers it.\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{WORKS CITED}


\textsuperscript{43} Shklovsky (1965), quoted in Pilkington (2000) 18. So also Fowler (1986) 41-2: "When we speak or listen or write or read according to the normal lazy conventions of communication... symbols are transparent, automatic, simplified. Accepting as natural a coding which is in fact arbitrary, we become acquiescent, uncritical, we acknowledge meanings without examining them. Similarly we recognize our friends without really seeing them. Defamiliarization is the use of some strategy to force us to look, to be critical."

\textsuperscript{44} Austin (1971) ad loc.

\textsuperscript{45} Wright (1967) is notable for underscoring the central role of implication in appreciating the passage.

\textsuperscript{46} Sontag (1961) 3-14.

\textsuperscript{47} I would like to thank S. Douglas Olson and the anonymous reviewers of Classical Journal, whose comments remedied many defects in an earlier version of this paper. Those that remain are attributable to me alone.


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