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978-0-521-87068-9 - A Greek Army on the March: Soldiers and Survival in Xenophon's Anabasis

John W. I. Lee

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

It all began with sibling rivalry. Darius II (r. 424–404 BC), Great King of Achaemenid Persia, had many children with his wife Parysatis, but his two eldest sons Arses and Cyrus got the most attention.¹ Parysatis always liked Cyrus, the younger of the two, better. Darius, though, kept Arses close, perhaps grooming him for the succession. Cyrus he sent west to Ionia on the shores of the Aegean Sea, appointing him regional overlord. Just sixteen when he arrived at his new capital of Sardis, the young prince found western Asia Minor an unruly frontier. Its satraps (provincial governors), cunning and ruthless men named Tissaphernes and Pharnabazus, often pursued virtually independent foreign policies, and sometimes clashed with each other. There were also western barbarians for Cyrus to deal with. Athens and Sparta, now in the twenty-third year of their struggle for domination over Greece (today we call it the Peloponnesian War, 431–404 BC), had brought their fleets and troops to Ionia. The Athenians needed to preserve the vital grain supply route from the Black Sea via Ionia to Athens; the Spartans wanted to cut it.

The Achaemenids had their own interest in this war: after two humiliatingly unsuccessful invasions of Hellas in the early fifth century, they wanted to see Greeks lose. Hoping to wear both sides down, the western satraps had intermittently supported Athens and Sparta, but Darius desired a more consistent policy. That was one reason why Cyrus was in Ionia, to coordinate Persian efforts.² He made friends with the newly arrived Spartan admiral Lysander. Persian gold darics flowed into Spartan hands; the ships and troops they bought helped put the Lacedaemonians on the way to final victory.³ In return, the Persians reasserted their old claims over the Greek cities of western Asia Minor.⁴ To safeguard their interests, Cyrus and the satraps relied on an unlikely source of manpower: Greek soldiers of fortune.

¹ On Darius, Parysatis, and their sons, see Briant (2002) 612–20.

² Briant (2002) 600. ³ Cawkwell (2005) 155–9.

⁴ Briant (2002) 593–600, Buckler (2003) 39–41, Rhodes (2006) 149.

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Mercenaries were nothing new in the eastern Mediterranean, but by the end of the fifth century unprecedented numbers of Greek hoplites (armored spearmen) had entered Persian employment. Many of them garrisoned the Persian-controlled cities along the Aegean coast.

In the fall of 405 BC, as Sparta tightened its grip on Athens, Darius took ill. He summoned Cyrus home; the prince arrived at the fabled city of Babylon with a bodyguard of 300 mercenary hoplites, a symbol of what Ionia could do for him. On his deathbed, Darius left the throne to Arses, who took the royal name Artaxerxes II. The satrap Tissaphernes took the opportunity to accuse Cyrus of plotting against the new Great King. Artaxerxes, believing the charge, had his younger brother arrested. Parysatis, though, intervened to keep Artaxerxes from executing Cyrus, and sent him back to Ionia. Cyrus took the lesson to heart. The only way to keep his head off the chopping block was to depose Artaxerxes and become Great King himself. He set about making his preparations.

Across the Aegean, the Peloponnesian War was coming to a close. In May 404, Athens fell to Lysander. The city was stripped of its fleet and empire, its walls pulled down to the music of flute girls. For nearly a year following the end of the war a murderous oligarchic junta ruled the city, and with democracy restored the Athenians would begin looking for scapegoats; Socrates was to be one of them. The victorious Spartans faced other challenges. Having promised liberation from Athenian domination during the war, Sparta now found itself ruling Athens' former subjects. The austere Spartan way of life provided poor preparation for the role of imperial master. Accustomed to unhesitating obedience at home, Lacedaemonian officials abroad alienated local populations with their harsh administration. Even wartime allies like Corinth and Thebes soon chafed under Sparta's overbearing hegemony. Then there was the problem of Ionia. While their struggle with Athens went on, the Spartans had acquiesced in Persia's expansionism, but now their attention began to turn eastward.⁵

It was against this backdrop that, probably in February 401 BC, Cyrus, now an impetuous twenty-three-year-old, again set out from Sardis. His goal: take Babylon, unseat Artaxerxes, and rule as Great King in his brother's stead.⁶ At the head of some 13,000 mostly Greek mercenaries along with perhaps 20,000 Anatolian levies, Cyrus marched east from Sardis across the plains of Lycaonia, over the Taurus mountains through the famed pass of

⁵ On Spartan imperialism and Asia Minor see Cartledge (1987) 77–115, Hamilton (1994), Buckler (2003) 1–34.

⁶ On the revolt of Cyrus, see Dandamaev (1989) 274–85, Briant (2002) 615–34, Buckler (2003) 31–6, Cawkwell (2005) 159–61.

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the Cilician Gates, through northern Syria, and down the Euphrates River valley into the heartland of Mesopotamia. Artaxerxes had been intent on suppressing a revolt in Egypt, but after being warned by Tissaphernes, he turned to face the new threat. Mustering an army at Babylon, the Great King waited until Cyrus was a few days away, then moved north against him.

In early August the two brothers and their armies met near the hamlet of Cunaxa, north of Babylon and west of present-day Baghdad.⁷ The heavily armed mercenaries routed the Persian wing opposing them, but to no avail: Cyrus, charging forward against Artaxerxes, fell mortally wounded on the field.⁸ In the days following the battle, the prince's levies quickly fled or switched loyalties to the Great King, leaving the mercenaries stranded in unfamiliar and hostile territory. Their generals tried negotiating a way out of the predicament, but the Persians had other ideas. After a shaky six-week truce, Tissaphernes succeeded in luring the senior mercenary leaders to his tent under pretense of a parley; then they were seized, brought before Artaxerxes, and beheaded.

Rather than surrendering or dispersing after this calamity, though, the mercenaries rallied, chose new leaders, burned their tents and baggage, and embarked on a fighting retreat out of Mesopotamia. Unable to return the way they came, they slogged north up the Tigris River valley, then across the rugged mountains and snow-covered plains of what is today eastern Turkey, finally reaching the Black Sea (the Greeks called it the Euxine) at Trapezus (modern Trabzon) in January 400 BC. From there they traveled west along the water, plundering coastal settlements as they went. Arriving at Byzantium (today Istanbul) that fall, the soldiers then spent the winter on the European side of the Hellespont, working for the Thracian kinglet Seuthes. Finally, spring 399 saw the survivors return to Ionia, where they were incorporated into a Spartan army led by the general Thibron. In two years of marching and fighting, the mercenaries of Cyrus, the Cyreans, had covered some 3,000 kilometers, or almost 2,000 miles – a journey roughly equivalent to walking from Los Angeles, California, to Chicago, Illinois.⁹ Of the 12,000 Cyreans who set out with Cyrus, approximately 5,000 remained under arms to join Thibron. At least a thousand had deserted along the way; the rest had succumbed to wounds, frostbite, hunger, or disease.

⁷ For the battle of Cunaxa see Rahe (1980), Bigwood (1983), Wylie (1992), Lendle (1995) 57–90.

⁸ On Cyrus' death see Bassett (1999).

⁹ I follow Xenophon (*Hell.* 3.2.6–7) in using the name "Cyreans." On the more common, but later, label of the "Ten Thousand" see Bonner (1910) 97, Stronk (1995) 22–3.

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The march of the Cyreans fascinates on many accounts. Cyrus' machinations open a revealing window on Achaemenid dynastic rivalry and satrapal politics. His reliance on Greek mercenaries and Artaxerxes' attempt to destroy them dramatically symbolize the convoluted blend of cooperation and conflict that characterized Greek–Persian relations between the first meeting of Hellene and Persian in mid-sixth-century BC Ionia and Alexander's entry into Babylon some two centuries later. With its unprecedented mustering of more than 10,000 mercenaries, the campaign marks a crucial moment in the development of paid professional soldiering in the Aegean world. Perhaps most of all, though, Cyrus' revolt draws attention because of our main ancient source for the event: Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

Amongst the replacement generals the Cyreans selected in Mesopotamia was Xenophon the son of Gryllus, a twenty-seven-year-old Athenian aristocrat and sometime associate of Socrates.¹⁰ A later biographer would call him “modest and superlatively handsome.”¹¹ Having joined the army as a sort of observer at the invitation of his friend Proxenus the Boeotian, Xenophon stepped forward after Proxenus was seized at Tissaphernes' tent. At times as commander of the rear guard, at others as a skilled orator in the mercenaries' assembly, Xenophon played an active role in the army's successful retreat from Cunaxa to the sea and in its adventures along the Euxine coast and in Thrace. Three decades later, he set down his account of the Cyrean experience in a work entitled the *Anabasis*. Part military handbook, part ethnography, part retrospective self-justification, the *Anabasis* is above all a personal reminiscence of war, making it arguably the first soldier's memoir in world literature.¹²

Like Cyrus' revolt, the *Anabasis* has been approached from manifold angles. Traditional military historians have long mined the text for information on tactics and equipment, on discipline and leadership, and on the conventions of mercenary service. Those interested in politics and philosophy have examined Xenophon's panhellenism and his depiction of the Cyreans as an ideal, ordered society. Others have scrutinized Xenophon's evidence for Near Eastern geography and his ethnographic portrayals of the “barbarian.” Yet others have followed a more literary bent, examining Xenophon's artful construction of a seemingly guileless yet subtly focused narrative.¹³

¹⁰ On Xenophon's life and works see Delebecque (1957), Breitenbach (1967), Anderson (1974a); Krentz (1995) 1–11 offers an excellent short overview.

¹¹ Diog. Laert. 2.48.

¹² For the *Anabasis* as memoir and on the meaning of its title, see Lee (2005) 47–9.

¹³ See below for more about Xenophon's style and the *Anabasis* as a source.

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Although it draws on all these perspectives, this book is different. It is a history of the Cyreans themselves, an attempt to rediscover the daily rhythms of an army, not a generic “classical Greek army,” but a particular force in a particular set of circumstances. I employ three intertwining threads of analysis. First, I focus on the lived experience of ordinary soldiers, an approach well known to students of ancient and modern warfare. The second thread, that of military supply or logistics, is less familiar, but equally essential to understanding Cyrean life. The third thread, the concept of the army as a mobile community, began with Xenophon himself and has remained an enduring concern of *Anabasis* studies; I put a new twist on it by showing how the dynamics of small communities within the army shaped the troops’ behavior. None of these threads alone suffices to tell the story of the Cyreans. All three woven together, though, produce a remarkable tapestry, never glimpsed before, of soldiering and survival in an ancient army.

THE FACE OF BATTLE

John Keegan’s *The Face of Battle*, published in 1976, may well be the single most influential work of military history written in the past fifty years. Dissatisfied with a traditional historiography that privileged strategy and tactics, treated armies as sterile abstractions, and narrated fighting in stereotypical, bloodless terms, Keegan decided to examine battle through the soldier’s rather than the general’s eyes, from the “personal angle of vision,” as he called it.¹⁴ Using three famous British examples – Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme – he focused on the physical and emotional dimensions of war at its most basic: how soldiers overcame their fears to advance into the fight, what combat sounded and smelled like, the effects of arrows, blades, and bullets on human flesh, the fates of the captured, the wounded, and the dead.

Keegan restored humanity to stale military history. Little wonder, then, that historians of modern warfare quickly and widely accepted his method.¹⁵ In classical studies, although there had always been a few who combined conventional military studies with a concern for the lived experience of ancient soldiers, it took about a decade for the new approach to take hold.¹⁶ Victor Davis Hanson’s *The Western Way of War*, appearing in 1989, explicitly acknowledged Keegan as progenitor, but went a step further. In addition to

¹⁴ Keegan (1976) 42–3, III–15.¹⁵ An important early example is Holmes (1985).¹⁶ See for example Griffith (1935) 322–4.

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reconstructing the battle experience of the Greek citizen hoplite, Hanson also sought, by portraying the quest for decisive pitched battle as a defining aspect of Greek culture, to make an ideological point about the nature of Western civilization.¹⁷ In a collection of essays on hoplite battle published a few years later, Hanson went on to argue that “in the future the pragmatic concerns of hoplites will not be a footnote to more conventional studies; rather they will rightly become the central focus of Greek military history.”¹⁸ Battle, he asserted, and above all hoplite battle, represented the central, only truism of Greek warfare.¹⁹

Thanks to Keegan and Hanson, emphasis on the common soldier's experience of combat has over the past few decades become a standard of Greek (and Roman) warfare studies.²⁰ Indeed, what was once revolutionary has now become so well entrenched that even books largely devoted to straightforward expositions of ancient strategy and tactics include an obligatory section on the face of battle.²¹ The widespread acceptance of the approach has been invaluable for understanding Greek warfare not merely as an unreal game of faceless ranks and files but as the affair of ordinary people with ordinary concerns.²²

There is no denying that battle deserves a central place in the story of soldiering and warfare. Keegan himself opined that “military history . . . must in the last resort be about battle.”²³ Nonetheless, if we want a full comprehension of the ordinary soldier's experience, examining battle is not enough; we must go beyond the battlefield. Most soldiers in all times and places, after all, spend most of their time not actually engaged in combat. This brings us back to the Cyreans, who fought a single major pitched battle – Cunaxa – in two years' campaigning. As we will see, they did a lot of other kinds of fighting, but combat was nowhere near the totality of their existence. Understanding the experiences of the Cyreans requires looking at the entirety of their lives, not just how they behaved on the battlefield. We must reconstruct the physical environment of the campaign and its effects on the troops. We must examine what soldiers carried, how they marched and encamped, where they obtained food and water, when and how they cooked, and where they disposed their waste. Acknowledging

¹⁷ The book is now in a second edition: Hanson (2000). For an incisive critique of the idea of a “western way of war,” see Lynn (2003) 12–27; cf. van Wees (2004).

¹⁸ Hanson (1991c) 253.

¹⁹ Hanson (1991a) 3. His rhetoric notwithstanding, some of Hanson's most important research has examined war beyond pitched battle; see for example Hanson (1998).

²⁰ See e.g. Mitchell (1996) 87, Goldsworthy (1996), Sabin (2000).

²¹ See for example Daly (2002). ²² Hanson (1991a) 8, Hanson (2000) 6–8.

²³ Keegan (1976) 29, but cf. Keegan (1976) 30, which leaves room for “campaign history.”

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these aspects of Cyrean life takes us to our second interpretive thread, the study of logistics.

LOGISTICS

If examining the face of battle has become a familiar trope of ancient warfare studies, the study of military supply or logistics has not. Indeed, logistics – shorthand for the feeding, maintaining, and moving of military organizations – is perhaps the most important but least appreciated facet of warfare in any place or period.²⁴ Yet the vast modern literature on military history has tended either simply to ignore, or at best to treat fragmentarily, how armies have been equipped and supplied.²⁵ Those who do tackle logistics tend to be a little apologetic about it, as if the subject were somehow not glamorous enough to merit attention.²⁶ The situation is a little better than average when it comes to Greek antiquity, where the philological impulse and dedicated scholarship have resulted at least in the collection and presentation of much of the literary evidence.²⁷

The most influential treatment of ancient military supply, though, remains Donald Engels' slim volume, *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army*, published in 1978, just two years after *The Face of Battle*. While the eminent Alexander historian W. W. Tarn had confined his examination of Macedonian logistics to a single passing reference, Engels made supply the key to understanding Alexander's astounding conquests. He combined close reading of ancient texts, mathematical calculations, and topographical analysis to create a logistical model for the Macedonian army that explained "how the availability, acquisition, distribution, consumption rates, and transport of provisions affected Alexander's strategy, tactics, and the timing and direction of his marches."²⁸ The method was not entirely unprecedented, for already in 1930 the British Army general Frederick Maurice had used topographical and hydrographical analysis to reevaluate the size of Xerxes' Persian army of 480/79 and its route through the Hellespont region.²⁹ Still, Engels was the first systematically to apply what might be called a mechanical model of logistics to examine the entirety of an extended ancient campaign.

²⁴ For the genealogy of the term see Thorpe (1986) xi–xxviii.

²⁵ Luttwak (1993) 3. ²⁶ See for example Thompson (1991) xvi.

²⁷ See for example Tänzer (1912), Anderson (1970) 43–66, Pritchett (1971) 30–52, van Wees (2004) 102–8.

²⁸ Engels (1978) 1–3.

²⁹ Maurice (1930). The study by Perjés (1970) of early modern European logistics also seems to have influenced Engels.

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Although less widely read than *The Western Way of War*, Engels' book has been equally influential, and with good reason. It provides extraordinary insight into the practical dimensions of supplying an ancient army on campaign: the complexities of moving columns of men and animals that could extend for kilometers, the problems of transporting large amounts of provisions overland, the difficulties of drawing water from a limited number of wells. Such is the usefulness of Engels' method that ancient historians have adopted it to analyze the logistical problems of other campaigns, including the Persian assault on the Greeks in 480/79, and Hannibal's march through Italy during the Second Punic War.³⁰ A few have borrowed the model to analyze portions of the Cyrean march, although not the entire campaign.³¹ The book's reach today stretches well beyond classical studies. For example, several general surveys of the history of warfare, including one by John Keegan, rely almost entirely on Engels for their treatments of ancient Greek logistics.³²

For all its value, though, Engels' book shares with most other works on logistics a highly impersonal view of the realities of daily life on campaign. If learning, for example, that 65,000 troops required some 195,000 pounds of grain daily heightens our appreciation of the Macedonian logistical accomplishment, we never discover how individual soldiers obtained their ration, how they carried and cooked it, with whom they ate.³³ To be sure, Engels did not set out to describe Macedonian logistics from anything but the commander's perspective, and his interest rests not so much in logistics itself but in Alexander's relation to supply factors. Nonetheless, his mechanical model largely keeps its distance from the realities of life at the army's lowest levels.³⁴ Reading Engels and his emulators, it is easy to forget that ancient armies existed not just as staff officers' ration lists, but also as living social organisms, comprising common soldiers, slaves, women, children, and animals, whose daily survival required the performance of essential but prosaic logistical tasks like foraging and cooking.

The reader may already perceive the direction we are headed: pairing Engels' emphasis on the practical constraints of logistics with the soldier's-eye view of Keegan and Hanson offers a promising path to recovering the totality of the Cyrean experience. Just as it is possible to reconstruct soldiers'

³⁰ Persians: Young (1980); cf. Tuplin (1997a). Hannibal: Shean (1996). For the extent of Engels' influence, cf. Manfredi (1986) 38–9.

³¹ Lang (1992), Descat (1995), Gabrielli (1995).

³² Ducrey (1986) 201–8, Jones (1987) 45–65, Keegan (1993) 301–5.

³³ Note that Foxhall and Forbes (1982) 80 make some important corrections to Engels' figures for grain requirements and bread production.

³⁴ See for example Engels (1978) 13.

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behavior in battle, so too can we investigate the army's life on the march and in camp. The picture that such a combined approach can furnish, though, remains incomplete without one final thread, that of community life.

COMMUNITY

So much has been made of the Cyreans as a mobile community that it is worth taking a closer look at the various ways their society has been portrayed. Perhaps the most enduring tendency has been to concentrate on the mercenaries' political life. Xenophon himself started the trend: the *Anabasis* gives much attention to the army's politics and communal decision-making, its assemblies and speeches. Comparing the Cyreans to a stereotypical Greek *polis* (city-state) has been a scholarly habit since at least the nineteenth century.³⁵ Taken to extremes, it appears in Carleton Brownson's introduction, written in 1922, to his Loeb Classical Library translation of the *Anabasis*: "These Greek soldiers of fortune . . . have truly been called 'a marching democracy,' 'a roving commonwealth,' 'deliberating and acting, fighting and voting; an epitome of Athens set adrift in the center of Asia.'"³⁶

Flaws in this formulation are easy to find. For instance, of the more than sixty Cyreans whose origins Xenophon records, only eight are Athenians; more than half the troops were actually from Achaia and Arcadia in the Peloponnesus.³⁷ More importantly, although assemblies were sometimes critical in altering the army's course, they were infrequent events until the Cyreans reached the Black Sea shore, more than halfway through the campaign. Most of the time, the generals made decisions without consulting the soldiery, and even in assemblies, the soldiers' role was often simply to rubberstamp officers' resolutions.³⁸ A *polis*, in any case, required much more than simply an assembly of male citizens. Children and wives, public buildings and temples, private households and shrines, not to mention a sense of common ancestry and shared customs, were its indispensable ingredients. The Cyreans themselves told Xenophon as much when they refused his proposals to settle on the Euxine coast.³⁹

Even so, the notion of the Cyreans as a moving *polis* long persisted. Its foremost proponent, Gerald Nussbaum, divided the army into institutional components – soldiers, generals, captains – equivalent to the assembly, archons, and council of a generalized *polis*, and then enumerated a

³⁵ Bury (1852) 527, Grote (1852) XI.2, 191–2; cf. Dalby (1992) 16.³⁷ See Chapter Three on the ethnic origins of the mercenaries.³⁸ Stronk (1995) 27 and note 26. ³⁹ *An.* 5.6.15ff.; cf. 6.4.7–8.³⁶ Brownson (1992) xii–xiii.

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bewildering array of formal relationships amongst these components.⁴⁰ Nussbaum considered this political framework so important that he denied the significance of life outside the assembly, asserting that in the simplified Cyrean political community, “the ‘private life’ of the individual and its interaction with ‘public life’ is also simplified and largely eliminated.”⁴¹ Moreover, despite recognizing that non-citizens formed an important component of a “normal” *polis*, and that numbers of non-soldiers (“non-citizens” in his interpretation) accompanied the army, he deliberately omitted them from discussion.⁴² The effect was an artificial view of the Cyreans as a monolithic creature comprising nothing but soldiers and concerned with nothing but politics.

While Nussbaum took the *Anabasis* as an objective account of Cyrean political reality, others recognize Xenophon’s artful narrative and subtle ideological purposes. John Dillery, for instance, sees in the *Anabasis* an attempt to depict the evolution and decay of a model community of order and discipline.⁴³ In a nuanced analysis, he demonstrates how the army’s shifting levels of unity and concord, changing objectives, division of tasks, and command structures both enact and contradict Xenophon’s utopian vision. Even so, Dillery, like Nussbaum before him, views Cyrean community only at the highest, most abstract level, that of the army as a whole. He does write of “an army of comrades,” but treats only the officers.⁴⁴ Thus we find Dillery asserting that in books three and four of the *Anabasis*, the soldiers themselves “do not figure in the narrative very much at all.”⁴⁵ That, as we shall see, is not the whole story. The soldiers’ actions, from marching to quartering to building fires and cooking, are central to any reading of the *Anabasis* that does not view events solely through political eyes. It is just that in books three and four the Cyreans meet only once in assembly, and that, for Dillery as much as for Nussbaum, is what counts.

Another view of Cyrean community comes from Andrew Dalby, who compares the army to a Greek colonizing expedition.⁴⁶ Thinking of the mercenaries as colonists is problematic, not least because the troops themselves made a point of refusing to found a colony anywhere. Nonetheless, by concentrating on what he terms “economic” aspects of Cyrean behavior – food collection and preparation – Dalby suggests an escape from the model of the army as an abstract political entity. He correctly observes that for

⁴⁰ Nussbaum (1967); cf. Mossé (1963), Aymard (1967). For critiques of Nussbaum see Perlman (1976–7) 242, Marinovic (1988) 192–5, Dillery (1995) 64–5. It is worth noting that there was not much modern scholarship on the *Anabasis* when Nussbaum wrote; he faced the additional challenge, as he remarks in his preface, of being blind.

⁴¹ Nussbaum (1967) 10.

⁴² Nussbaum (1967) 12.

⁴³ Dillery (1995), especially 59, 63.

⁴⁴ Dillery (1995) 64, 77.

⁴⁵ Dillery (1995) 93.

⁴⁶ Dalby (1992).

In an interesting excerpt from natural conversation, he shows how speakers negotiate the meaning of the term "open" in the context of a service establishment. From Cambridge English Corpus. In the following excerpt, the customer likewise produces an iconic hand gesture in combination with a term. From Cambridge English Corpus. An appendix of some sixty pages of translated excerpts from several responsa collections is a welcome addition. From Cambridge English Corpus.