Greek word order has always been a delicate and difficult subject. Plato is famously supposed to have struggled over the best way to arrange the dozen words that begin the Republic. And Dionysius of Halicarnassus, in the De compositione verborum, essentially gave up out of despair on the prospect of explaining how word order works in Greek. This is hardly surprising: even in English, where so much of word order is syntactically predetermined – subject, then verb, then object in most circumstances – there remains enough flexibility in the placement of various dependent phrases that I am grateful, as I write this review, for the fact that the word processor’s cut-and-paste function allows me to experiment so easily with different arrangements of the material. If this is the case with English, then how much more so with Greek, where no such syntactic constraint dictates a particular sequence in the ordering of an adjective and the noun it modifies, or of a verb and the object it governs. Accordingly, Helma Dik deserves great credit for tackling this question and arriving at such useful conclusions. It is a topic she had already begun to explore in her first book, ‘Word Order in Ancient Greek: A Pragmatic Account of Word Order Variation in Herodotus’ (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1995; henceforth WOAG), as well as in an important chapter in E. J. Bakker’s ‘Grammar as Interpretation’, ‘Interpreting Adjective Position in Herodotus’ (Leiden: Brill, 1997, pp. 55–76). In ‘Word Order in Greek Tragic Dialogue’, D. builds on the findings of these earlier works in two main ways: first, she tidies up some loose ends, with the word order for clauses proposed in WOAG satisfactorily streamlined; second, and more importantly, she extends her findings to the word order of the iambic trimeter of Greek tragedy, especially Sophocles. Overall, D.’s presentation of the material is much smoother than in WOAG: the clunkiness and enthusiasm for unnecessary pseudo-algebraic notation that dog so many books written by linguists are mercifully absent, and her bibliography shows the fruits of a great deal of conversation with scholars working on non-linguistic issues in Greek tragedy. The end result is a book that should be read by everyone who engages seriously with the language of the tragedians.

The book opens with a brief introduction (pp. 1–13) that both presents the general field of linguistics to which D.’s approach belongs – namely, pragmatics – and forestalls potential criticism about the application of this approach to tragedy.

Tragedy, as D. notes in her opening sentence, «is a genre firmly rooted in time and place», which, because of the attendant stylization, might not be expected to follow the same general rules as a prose text. Still, the author of a tragedy must communicate to his listeners just as any other language user must, and such communication, however stylized, cannot flout too many of the listeners’ expectations without becoming incomprehensible. In D.’s words: «Are the rules of word order rendered invalid when one stops ‘speaking prose’? It seems unlikely that this would be the case» (p. 3). Accordingly, the practical principle adopted by D. is to pay little or no attention to questions of meter in Chapters 2 through 5, in a preliminary attempt to see whether the rules of prose word order work in trimeter. (D. excludes lyric passages from her study.) Then, in Chapters 6 and 7, she refines her affirmative answer to this first question by examining the interaction of these rules with the metrical constraints of the genre.

Chapter 2 (pp. 14–41) sets out the theoretical groundwork of all that follows.
As pragmatics is, inter alia, the study of how speakers structure the information they present in order to achieve their communicative goals, the terms most central to D.’s book are not syntactic ones (e.g. subject or object), but rather pragmatic ones, particularly Topic and Focus. The Topic of a sentence is «an element which the speaker regards as an appropriate foundation for constructing a message which is relevant to the subject matter of the discourse» (p. 31). In other words, the Topic will typically be a participant already present in the narrative, from whose perspective the clause in question is oriented: it is who, or what, the clause is about. The Focus, on the other hand, is «an element expressing the information that the speaker considers the most urgent part of the message s/he wants to convey to the listener» (p. 32): that is, the Focus is the point of the sentence. In addition to these two elements, which had already been fully introduced in WOAG, D. also speaks of Themes and Tails (detached constituents that respectively precede and follow the clause proper), and Settings (which, like Topics, provide orientation for the clause, but have more to do with spatial and temporal organization, e.g. μετά ταῦτα). At this point, D. is ready to set out the order in which these pragmatically marked constituents occur: Setting – Topic – Focus – Verb – Remainder, where the Setting and Topic are optional, a verb not marked as Topic or Focus follows the Focus, and the Remainder slot is filled by constituents to which the speaker has assigned no pragmatic prominence. This pattern will come as no surprise to those who know D.’s earlier work, but she has presented it in a more user-friendly fashion here than in WOAG, she has rightly drawn greater attention to the fact that the Topic slot may not be filled, and she has explicitly made room for the Setting constituent (which she discusses in WOAG, but does not include in the main ordering rule proposed there, viz. Πτ – ΡΟ – Β – Χ). In the final section of this chapter, D. turns to the internal ordering of constituents and restates her earlier finding that adjectives follow their nouns, except when they are particularly salient, in which case they precede the noun. Both here and in the pre-verbal ordering of the Focus, Greek is adhering to the pragmatic principle that the most important information is attended to first.

Still, while there is much to commend this pragmatic approach to word order, there remains scope for fine-tuning, as D. herself would be the first to admit (she scrupulously points out the occasional examples in which her account runs into trouble). Two questions, for example, troubled this reviewer. First, D.’s final schema primarily consists of an ordering of pragmatic constituents (notably Topic and Focus) but also includes a slot for a syntactic constituent, the Verb – but is it theoretically advisable to mingle the pragmatic and the syntactic in a sequential ordering of this type? At any rate, it seems untidy to have to specify that the Verb slot will not be filled if, as so often, the verb is the Focus of the sentence: verbs seem too central to the clause for a Verb slot to be left empty. Now this is not a substantial problem, as D.’s Verb slot is, more properly, a Pragmatically Unmarked Verb slot, but the presentation is still a little misleading. On the other hand, if the verb is not pragmatically marked, then in a pragmatically-oriented schema, why shouldn’t it just count as part of the Remainder? Because, D. would presumably argue, to do that would obscure the key role of the verb as a signal that whatever precedes it is pragmatically important (pp. 38–9). Since, in the end, there is no getting around the fact that both a syntactic category (verb) and pragmatic categories (Topic, Focus) are relevant to word order, why not allow both types of determinant to operate on their own level? As an alternative to D.’s fusion of the two, one could, for example, argue that the unmarked word order for Greek was in fact VSO, but with rules allowing the subject or object to be fronted to a Topic or Focus slot as appropriate. A description of this type would not only keep the syntactic and pragmatic separate, but would also emphasize the salience of preverbal elements by viewing them as brought forward from the position they would otherwise be expected to occupy. D. seems happy to say that noun – adjective is the unmarked ordering within a noun phrase, so why not go one step further and say that VSO is the unmarked ordering within the clause? After all, this is the order her model already predicts for a clause with no pragmatically marked constituents.

A second concern has to do with the assignment of Topic function. D.’s schema might be seen as too flexible a model to have any explanatory power if a pair consisting of a given subject and an intransitive verb could be ordered either verb – subject (with the subject
unmarked and thus in D.’s Remainder slot; see D.’s example 3.10 on p. 51) or subject – verb (with the subject marked as Topic, as in example 3.A13 on p. 76). To be fair, D. is already well on her way to answering this question: a constituent is only likely to be marked as Topic if it is «new or (more frequently) contrastive» (p. 38 n. 39; see also the discussion of ὄρτος on p. 48). But a clearer delimitation of exactly what sort of constituents can be given what pragmatic assignments would help refute the potential charge that pragmatic rules are too accommodating to yield a falsifiable account of Greek word order.

In Chapter 3 (pp. 42–83), D. uses the framework established in the previous chapter to examine the word order of clauses in tragedy that have the verbs θάνσαο and ἀλλιμα (she begins with a thorough examination of Sophocles before turning more briefly to Aeschylus and Euripides).

Her first examples have Topic, Focus, and Verb as separate constituents, e.g. ἐμοὶ παράκτιον τεῦν τέθηκεν ἢ γείνος ἀληθικόν, | ἀστὴρ δὲ τερπνός (S. Aj. 966–7, p. 46), with three contrastive Topic-Focus pairs. But it is rare to find the Topic, Focus, and Verb slots all occupied: there is often no Topic, the verb is frequently the Focus, and even in the example just cited it is only the first of the three clauses that has a verb to occupy the Verb slot. Accordingly, most of the chapter deals with such deficient examples as μὴ μὲν σὺν καθ’ ἡθονίῃ | θάνσα (S. El. 1601–4), where no Topic function is assigned, but the Focal placement of καθ’ ἡθονίῃ before the verb is consistent with the line’s context in the play: «Aegisthus’ dying is a foregone conclusion. At issue is the way in which Orestes will make him die» (p. 51). On the whole, D.’s schema does a good job of explaining the ordering of the constituents (see the convenient tabular summary on p. 60) and, to foreshadow Chapter 6, works equally well no matter where the pragmatic functions fall in the trimeter line.

Chapter 4 (pp. 84–122) moves on to word order in the noun phrase.

First, D. dismisses previous attempts to explain adjective ordering, most of which sort adjectives into two semantic groups. Adjectives of the first group (determining adjectives, like Ἑλληνικός and ἄθλον) supposedly follow their noun; those of the second (qualifying and quantifying adjectives, like καλός and μέγας) should precede it. The statistics simply don’t support this position: in Sophocles, for instance, qualifying adjectives are preposed 56 times and postposed 58 times. Clearly some other factor must be at work. Given D.’s proposal that noun – adjective is the default ordering, her chief task is to explain why many adjectives (e.g. μέγας, πιάρως, possessive adjectives) are found more often before the noun than after it. In brief, her answer is that these adjectives are particularly prone to be so salient that they are moved in front of their noun. Frequently this salience stems from the fact that the adjective is contrastive, as in μέγας δὲ πλειάδα βοῶς ὑπὸ συμφράξῃ ὅμως | μάμπις ὀδύς εἰς ὅδον πορεύεται (S. Aj. 1253–4). As for the possessive adjectives, which are also usually preposed (in the Oedipus at Colonus, ἐμὸς and ὅς are preposed 70%, postposed 30% of the time, p. 169), the first- or second-person element is often more to the point than the noun it modifies. That is, in expressions like ὅς θανάτος ἐπικύρωτο (OC 112) or φόβον ... τῆς ἐμῆς ἑπειδόντος (OC 730), the possessive+noun complex serves as a virtual equivalent to the pronoun modified by a participle. When, by contrast, the possessive adjective really is pragmatically subservient to the noun, then the order is reversed, as nicely seen in E. Hel. 42–3: ἐγὼ μὲν ὅ, | τὸ δ’ ὅνομα τοῦκος (p. 166).

With Chapter 5 (pp. 123–67), D. turns to the structure of questions in Sophocles and Euripides, with a particular interest in examining postponed interrogatives (the τυρε τάρος δὲ ποίος δεξιέται μ’, ὅππεν θάνοι; (E. IT 625)).

Most questions, it seems, have a fairly simple structure: no Topic is present, and the Focus function is assigned either to the interrogative or, in yes/no questions, to the verb. In the former case, the verb ought to follow directly after the interrogative, resulting in an interrogative – verb (i.e. Focus – Verb) ordering; in the latter case, the verb will the the first mobile element, and everything that follows will be pragmatically unmarked. D. then
spends most of the chapter dealing with the two main exceptions to this pattern. First, there are Q – X – V questions, in which some additional element intervenes between the interrogative-Focus and the verb. Relatively rare (occurring only about 30% of the time, p. 135 n. 17), this pattern can be accounted for by assuming that such questions have multiple Focus on both the interrogative and on the intervening constituent (which, incidentally, is often a demonstrative). Such an interpretation seems in line with the examples: in ποιεῖσθαι ἦσσετος; (S. Aj. 270), for instance, the point of the question lies both in the interrogative and in the object: Why do you say that (of all things)? While, prototypically, any one utterance should be limited to presenting just one new item of information (i.e. just one Focus), questions in Greek seem unusually open to the piling up of several such items, as D. aptly illustrates with Housman’s parody (“Wherefore seeking whom | Whence by what way how purposed art thou come | To this well-nightingaled vicinity?”). The second anomalous pattern, the postponed interrogative, is easy for D. to explain: the element that precedes the interrogative has been assigned Topic or Setting function, and a postponed interrogative-Focus is precisely what D.’s model would predict in such a case.

Chapter 6 (pp. 168–224) then addresses the question of meter.

Are particular points in the line, especially the beginning and end, more emphatic than others? How does enjambment interact with the default word order schema? In the introduction to the chapter, D. shows that there is only a limited correlation between metrical position and pragmatic function: the Topic, Focus, and Verb are all equally likely to be line-initial – although the Remainder is not found in that position in D.’s relatively small sample. But this is not to say that there are not some words that prefer particular positions in the line: D. argues that the final iambic slot in a line is more likely to be filled by a pragmatically weak word (κυρόν, τυγχάνω, βουνός) than by a weightier one (πονεῖν, παύετε, κυλῆτε); by implication, the line-initial position is more often occupied by an emphatic word. In Sophocles and Euripides, the word orders suggested by D.’s pragmatic schema and by meter often coincide, but Aeschylus, D. proposes, had not yet achieved complete mastery in coordinating line boundaries with the pattern of emphasis created by general pragmatic considerations, leading e.g. to an emphatic line-initial εἶπεν at Ag. 1194. Turning to enjambment, D. distinguishes between line-initial run-on words that are syntactically necessary and those that are more loosely appended. Those of the first class occur late in their clause (i.e. in the Remainder slot) and so, despite their metrical position, are emphatic: οὐτὶ τὸν Χαρμάνων ἔγραψεν ἔδειξεν (S. OT 277–8). Those of the second are often a Tail element: as such, they represent the start of a new information unit, are pragmatically marked, and therefore emphatic (e.g. Ἀχιλης at E. El. 885). As for clauses that start late in a line (the type ἐχοῦσαν τὸν Σειρίναν ἔργα ἐκεῖνον ἐδέιξεν, S. Ant. 389–90), such positioning generally allows pragmatically marked elements (like the Focus) to be metrically prominent.

In Chapter 7 (pp. 225–48), D. presents case studies offering analyses of four passages from Sophocles’ Electra. These usefully flesh out the ideas discussed in earlier chapters, and in the second two D. has conveniently marked up the Greek text with Topics underlined and Foci in boldface to give the reader a clear picture of how D. would assess the pragmatic functions in a wide range of clauses. Finally, in the conclusion (pp. 249–54), D. succinctly summarizes the main lessons that non-linguists should draw from her work: when reading slowly, as a good philologist always does, one should linger on preverbal elements and on proposed modifiers: this is where a Greek writer would place the most important words, whether in prose or in trimeter.

Charlottesville, Virginia Coulter H. George