

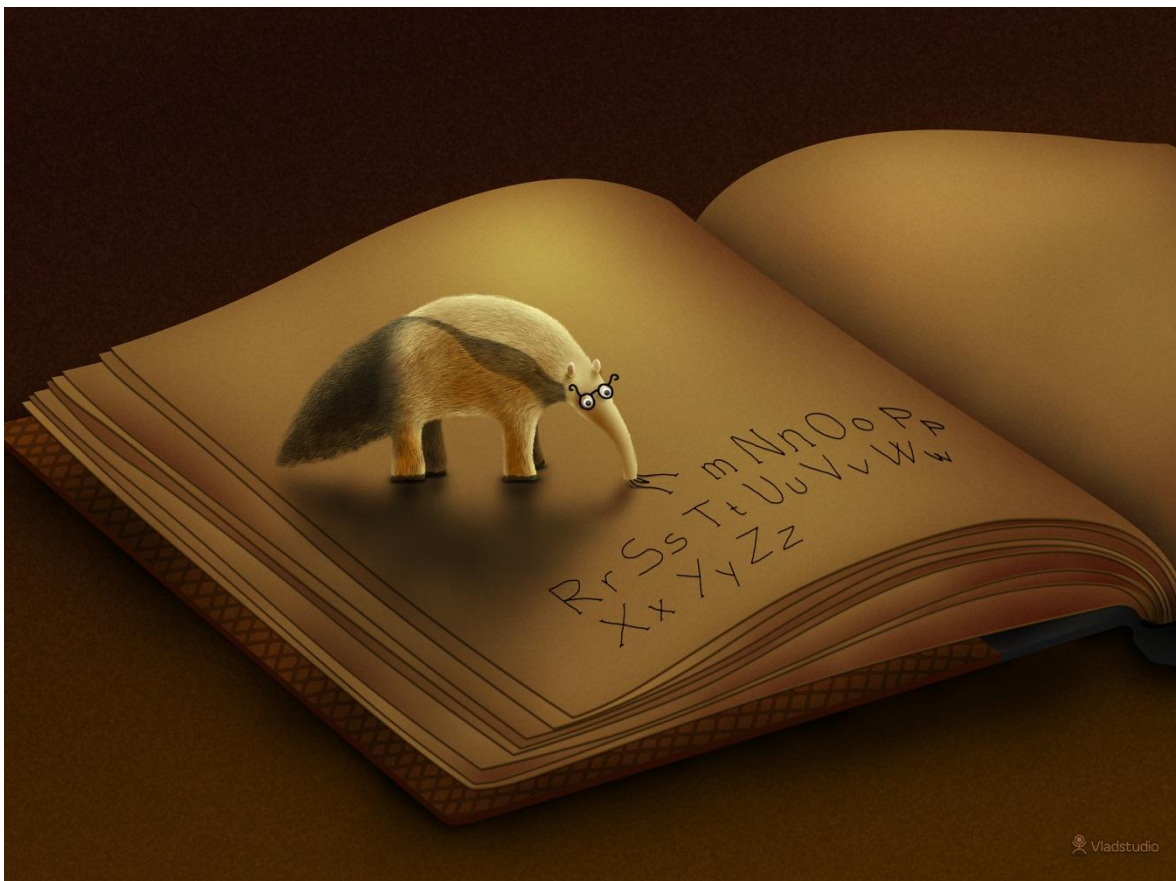
Lucian of Samosata

Trial in the Court of Vowels

Translated by H.W. Fowler

Δίκη Συμφώνων
Lis Consonantium (or Iudicium Vocalium)
The Consonants at Law

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The consonant sigma sues the consonant tau for stealing words from him. The case is heard by a jury of the seven vowels, a *jeu d'esprit*.

Archon, Aristarchus of Phalerum
Seventh Pyanepsion
Court of the Seven Vowels
Action for assault with robbery
Sigma *v.* Tau
Plaintiff's case — that the words in *-π-* are wrongfully withheld from him.

Vowels of the jury. — For some time this Mr. Tau's trespasses and encroachments on my property were of minor importance; I made no claim for damages, and affected unconsciousness of what I heard; my conciliatory temper both you and the other letters have reason to know. His covetousness and folly, however, have now so puffed him up, that he is no longer content with my habitual concessions, but insists on more; I accordingly find myself compelled to get the matter settled by you who know both sides of it. The fact is, I am in bodily fear, owing to the crushing to which I am subjected. This ever-growing aggression will end by ousting me completely from my own; I shall be almost dumb, lose my rank as a letter, and be degraded to a mere noise.

Justice requires then that not merely you, the jury in this case, but the other letters also, should be on your guard against such attempts. If any one who chooses is to be licensed to leave his own place and usurp that of others, with no objection on your part (whose concurrence is an indispensable condition of all writing), I fail to see how combinations are to have their ancient constitutional rights secured to them. But my first reliance is upon you, who will surely never be guilty of the negligence and indifference which permits injustice; and even if you decline the contest, I have no intention of sitting down under that injustice myself.

It is much to be regretted that the assaults of other letters were not repelled when they first began their lawless practices; then we should not be watching the still pending dispute between Lambda and Rho for possession of *κεφαλαλγία* or *κεφαλαργία*, *κίσηλις* or *κίσηρις*: Gamma would not have had to defend its rights over *γνάφαλλα*, constantly almost at blows with Kappa in the debatable land, and *per contra* it would itself have dropped its campaign against Lambda (if indeed it is more dignified than petty larceny) for converting *μόλις* to *μόγις*: in fact lawless confusion generally would have been nipped in the bud. And it is well to abide by the established order; such trespasses betray a revolutionary spirit.

Now our first legislators — Cadmus the islander, Palamedes, son of Nauplius, or Simonides, whom some authorities credit with the measure — were not satisfied with determining merely our order of precedence in the alphabet; they also had an eye to our individual qualities and faculties. You, Vowels of the jury, constitute the first Estate, because you can be uttered independently; the semi-vowels, requiring support before they can be distinctly heard, are the second; and the lowest Estate they declared to consist of those nine which cannot be sounded at all by themselves. The vowels are accordingly the natural guardians of our laws.

But this — this Tau — I would give him a worse designation, but that is a manifest impossibility; for without the assistance of two good presentable members of your

Estate, Alpha and Upsilon, he would be a mere nonentity — he it is that has dared to outdo all injuries that I have ever known, expelling me from the nouns and verbs of my inheritance, and hunting me out of my conjunctions and prepositions, till his rapacity has become quite unbearable. I am now to trace proceedings from the beginning.

I was once staying at Cybelus, a pleasant little town, said to be an Athenian colony; my travelling companion was the excellent Rho, best of neighbours. My host was a writer of comedies, called Lysimachus; he seems to have been a Boeotian by descent, though he represented himself as coming from the interior of Attica. It was while with him that I first detected Tau's depredations.¹ For some earlier occasional attempts (as when he took to *τεππράκοντα* for *τεσσαράκοντα*, *τήμερον* for *σήμερον*, with little pilferings of that sort) I had explained as a trick and peculiarity of pronunciation; I had tolerated the sound without letting it annoy me seriously.

But impunity emboldened him; *καοσίτερος* became *καττίτερος*, *κάσσυμα* and *πίσσα* shared its fate; and then he cast off all shame and assaulted *βασίλισσα*. I found myself losing the society in which I had been born and bred;² at such a time equanimity is out of place; I am tortured with apprehension; how long will it be before *σύκα* is *ύκα*? Bear with me, I beseech you; I despair and have none to help me; do I not well to be angry? It is no petty everyday peril, this threatened separation from my long-tried familiars. My *κίσσα*, my talking bird that nestled in my breast, he has torn away and named anew; my *φάσσα*, my *νήσσαι*, my *κόσσυφοι* — all gone; and I had Aristarchus's own word that they were mine; half my *μέλισσαι* he has lured to strange hives; Attica itself he has invaded, and wrongfully annexed its Hymettus (as he calls it); and you and the rest looked on at the seizure.

But why dwell on such trifles? I am driven from all Thessaly (Thettaly, forsooth!), *θάλασσα* is now *mare clausum* to me; he will not leave me a poor garden-herb like *σεύτιλιον*, I have never a *πάσσαλος* to hang myself upon. What a long-suffering letter I am myself, your own knowledge is witness enough. When Zeta stole my *σμάραγδος*, and robbed me of all Smyrna, I never took proceedings against him; Xi might break all *συνθήκαι*, and appeal to Thucydides (who ought to know) as sympathizing with his system; I let them alone. My neighbour Rho I made no difficulty about pardoning as an invalid, when he transplanted my *μυρσίναι* into his garden, or, in a fit of the spleen, took liberties with my *κόρη*. So much for my temper.

Tau's, on the other hand, is naturally violent; its manifestations are not confined to me. In proof that he has not spared other letters, but assaulted Delta, Theta, Zeta, and almost the whole alphabet, I wish his various victims to be put in the box. Now, Vowels of the jury, mark the evidence of Delta:

“He robbed me of *ευδελέχεια*, which he claimed, quite illegally, as *ευτελέχεια*.”

¹ For the probably corrupt passage § 7 fin. — § 8 init. I accept Dindorf's rearrangement as follows:

μέχρι μὲν γὰρ ὀλίγοις ἐπεχείρει, τεππράκοντα λέγειν ἀξιούν, ἐτι δε τήμερον καὶ τα ὅμοια ἐπιπώμενον, συνήθειαν ὡμην ἴδια ταυτί λέγειν, καὶ οἰσὸν ἦν μοι τὸ ἀκουσμα καὶ οὐ πάνυ τι εδακνόμεν ἐπ' αὐτοῖς. 8. ὁπότε δ' ἐκ τούτων ἀρξάμενον εἰλόγησε καττίτερον ἐπειὶν καὶ κάττυμα καὶ πίταν, εἶτα ἀπερυσθρίασαν καὶ βασιλιταν ονομάζειν, ἀποστεροῦν με τῶν συγγεγεννημένων μοι καὶ συντεθραμμένων γραμμάτων, οὐ μείωρος ἐπὶ τούτοις ἀνακτιώ.

² [See fn. 6, above.]

Mark Theta beating his breast and plucking out his hair in grief for the loss of *κολοκύνθη*. And Zeta mourns for *συρίζειν* and *σαλπίζειν* — nay, *cannot* mourn, for lack of his *γρύζειν*. What tolerance is possible, what penalty adequate, for this criminal letter's iniquities?

But his wrongs are not even limited to us, his own species; he has now extended his operations to mankind, as I shall show. He does not permit their tongues to work straight. (But that mention of mankind calls me back for a moment, reminding me how he turns *γλώσσα* into *γλώττα*, half robbing me of the tongue itself. Ay, you are a disease of the tongue in every sense, Tau.) But I return from that digression, to plead the cause of mankind and its wrongs. The prisoner's designs include the constraint, racking, and mutilation of their utterance. A man sees a beautiful thing, and wishes to describe it as *καλόν*, but in comes Tau, and forces the man to say *ταλόν*; *he* must have precedence everywhere, of course. Another man has something to say about a vine, and lo, before it is out, it is metamorphosed by this miserable creature into misery; he has changed *κλήμα* to *τλήμα*, with a suggestive hint of *τλήμων*. And, not content with middle-class victims, he aims at the Persian king himself, the one for whom land and sea are said to have made way and changed their nature: Cyrus comes out at his bidding as Tyrus.

Such are his verbal offences against man; his offences in deed remain. Men weep, and bewail their lot, and curse Cadmus with many curses for introducing Tau into the family of letters; they say it was his body that tyrants took for a model, his shape that they imitated, when they set up the erections on which men are crucified. *Σταυρός* the vile engine is called, and it derives its vile name from him. Now, with all these crimes upon him, does he not deserve death, nay, many deaths? For my part I know none bad enough but that supplied by his own shape — that shape which he gave to the gibbet named *σταυρός* after him by men.

