


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Baby talk on stage: performing Aristophanes *Clouds* 1382

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Abstract

In a scene of father-son conflict in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, father Strepsiades supports his right to be treated well by his son Pheidippides by reminding the boy of how well he was taken care of as a baby. Even before Pheidippides could talk properly, his father catered to his every wish. If he said 'brū', his father would get him something to drink, 'mammā' would make him get food, and 'kakkā' would lead to his being taken outside to relieve himself. These baby-words have always been taken for what Strepsiades claims they were: meaningful and intentional baby requests.

Starting with brū, we discuss ancient and modern interpretations of the passage and contextualize it within the history of ancient and later Western thought about child language. We then propose a new interpretation of brū as the conventional rendition of a universal baby vocalization, what is known as a 'raspberry'. In performance, this would lead to a mimetic 'depiction' in the middle of Strepsiades' sentence. Finally, we return to the utterances mammā and kakkā to show that there, too, Strepsiades may be demonstrating parental devotion by interpreting the virtually unintelligible and by acting out baby activities that lend plausibility to his mantic performance.

Keywords: Aristophanes; *Clouds*; infant vocalizations; brū; performance

1. Introduction

In Aristophanes' comedy *Clouds*, in a scene of father-son conflict, father Strepsiades gives us a vignette of parental reactions to baby language. His son Pheidippides has just beaten him, and claimed that he was entirely justified in doing so, making good use of the perverse rhetoric he has recently learned in the school of Socrates. Strepsiades counters by trying to establish the moral debt owed to him as a father. He recalls the time when Pheidippides was a baby and when he himself, the baby's father, was ever attentive to all of his son's sound productions, perceptive of their intended meaning and ready to interpret them as expressing desires that he would hasten to satisfy (1380–85):

καὶ πῶς δικαίως; ὅστις, ὠναίσχυντέ, σ' ἐξέθρεψα,
αἰσθανόμενός σου πάντα τραυλίζοντος, ὃ τι νοοίης.
εἰ μὲν γε βρῦν εἴποις, ἐγὼ γνοῦς ἂν πιεῖν ἐπέσχον·
μαμμᾶν δ' ἂν αἰτήσαντος ἤκόν σοι φέρων ἂν ἄρτον·
κακκᾶν δ' ἂν οὐκ ἔφθης φράσας, κάγῳ λαβῶν θύραζε
ἐξέφερον ἂν καὶ προσχόμην σε.

What do you mean, [I'm] rightly [beaten]? I, the man who raised you, you shameless boy,
hearing you while you were pronouncing everything badly and perceiving whatever you meant.

Whenever you said 'brū', I would understand and offer you something to drink, if you asked for 'mammā', I would come and bring you bread, and before you'd even finished saying 'kakkā', I would pick you up, carry you outside, and hold you out in front of me.

In this paper, we will focus primarily on the expression βρῦ(ν), which is problematic both from a phonological and a semantic point of view. Contrary to interpretations that have taken Strepsiades at his possibly over-confident word, and which have therefore attributed to βρῦ the straightforward meaning of 'drink(ing)', we will argue that the expression represents a particular form of proto-speech, noticed by linguists studying early language acquisition. This would make the *Clouds* passage our oldest Western observation of this aspect of child language (the version of *Clouds* that we have is Aristophanes' revision, dating from some time between 420 and 417 BCE). This interpretation strengthens Strepsiades' claim of parenting prowess in that he is able to attribute concrete meaning to obscure sounds. In addition, it would provide a stage direction that much enhances the comic possibilities of performing the scene. Clearly, the comic dramatist Aristophanes is not a linguist working in a baby lab. However, while constructing a comical scene, he may have made an almost casual, but important, observation whose originality and simultaneous embeddedness in its ancient context are easily missed.

In what follows, we will discuss ancient and modern interpretations of the passage (section II), briefly contextualize it in the Western history of thinking about child language in classical antiquity (section III), propose a new interpretation of βρῦ (section IV) and discuss the possibilities for performance offered by this reading (section V). Finally, we will return briefly to the other two child-language productions attributed to the baby Pheidippides (section VI).

II. The problem: ancient and modern interpretations

The first thing to observe is that the three child-language productions reproduced by Strepsiades have all been given an accusative case-ending -ν. When stripped of it, we end up with βρῦ, μαμμᾶ and κᾰκκᾶ, which Kenneth Dover calls 'plausible baby-words'.¹ *Kakkā* is easy to interpret (it has cognates in adult language), and it also fits a pattern of early speech production recognized by child-language researchers, consisting of a reduplicated consonant-vowel sequence.² *Mammā*, too, follows this form, but its alleged meaning should give us pause. In fact, there is very little reason to think that Strepsiades' interpretation of

¹ Dover (1968) *ad loc.*; we disagree with his judgement on βρῦ as a 'plausible baby-word', and feel that even μαμμᾶ as interpreted here should make us suspicious of what is going on. Dover explains the case-endings as a phenomenon belonging to the use of these words by parents in talking to infants (although the passage, of course, claims they were uttered by the baby to the parent): in those contexts, *mammā* and *kakkā* 'were treated as feminine nouns', while *brū* 'was treated not like the uninflected γρῦ but like δρῦς or μῦς'. This is an important observation to which we will return: βρῦ is not treated like an interjection or an inarticulate sound, it is inflected as if it were a noun. Dover refers to Theoc. *Id.* 15.13–14 and to Hsch. β 1210 βροῦς, as well as to Ar. *Lys.* 878–79, where an infant cries 'μαμμᾶ, μαμμᾶ, μαμμᾶ' when told by his father 'οὐ καλεῖς τὴν μαμμᾶν'. Note, incidentally, that if βρῦ were used for πειεῖν, it would represent the replacement of a simple-onset word with a more difficult double-onset one; see below, section IV.

² Dover (1968) *ad loc.* cites adult-language cognate κᾰκκῆ (*Peace* 162; *Nub.* 1390 'ποίησα κᾰκκᾶν'). Sommerstein (1982) *ad loc.* adds *kakkōnion* ('potty'). For productions at different stages of speech development, see Stark (1980); Oller (1980).

the utterance as (a need for) food, and its implementation as ‘bread’ is correct, although commentators have not been too concerned. Mark Golden lists μά, μαῖα, μάμμα, μάμμα, μαμμία, μαμμίδιον as words referring to ‘mother, grandmother, old woman, nurse, midwife’, but accepts a separate entry μαμμῶ, ‘food’, on the strength of our passage.³ However, it is only reasonable to take the possibility into account that Strepsiades’ confident interpretation may itself be a source of humour, while his point (that he was doing what he could for his little son) remains intact.

Two of the three utterances, *kakkā* and *mammā*, appear to be straightforward and not entirely straightforward child productions, respectively. However, contrary to Dover’s claim, βρῦ is not a ‘plausible baby-word’ at all, and reflecting on this issue may be a meaningful point of entry into a different interpretation of the passage. When children start to articulate (proto-)words (and our passage clearly suggests that we are at a very early stage of language production), they tend to avoid consonant clusters, and in fact usually simplify the pronunciation of target words containing consonant clusters in order to get rid of them, as in ‘tain’ for the target word ‘train’.⁴ The consonant cluster in [brū:] is thus highly unusual in early language use. So is the rounded front vowel /y/, which usually appears late in language development (in contrast to the /a/ in the other two articulations mentioned by Strepsiades).⁵ In summary, the phonetic shape of the word is not easily compatible with actual early child-language productions.

Besides issues of phonology, there is also a semantic problem: the meaning of βρῦ is far from obvious, despite assurances to the contrary in ancient and modern commentaries, which may all have followed Strepsiades rather too trustingly in his confident (over-) interpretation of his baby son’s vocalizations.

Ancient interpretations that blandly equate βρῦ with ὕδωρ, ‘water’, or πιεῖν, ‘to drink’, are all clearly directly derivative of our passage, and cannot therefore be considered conclusive,⁶ although they may at least be less likely to shock a modern reader than the one identifying βρῦ with wine or beer.⁷ Although, presumably and not unreasonably, drink and food may have been welcome to any baby, the ‘word’ βρῦ cannot simply mean ‘drink’: it takes the efforts and attentiveness of the father to come to this interpretation. Moreover, as we will argue, that is the very point of Strepsiades’ argument: he was willing and able to interpret his son’s wishes long before the boy had even heard of the fancy and corrupt

³ Dover (1968) *ad loc.* rightly observes that the cognate μάμμα does not mean ‘food’ but ‘mum’ ‘ma’, referring to Pherecrates *fr.* 70.4 and adding ‘hardly “mummy”, for the speaker has been mixing wine and is addressed as ὦ κατάρταε’. We are not sure if these phenomena would be incompatible in a comic context, so ‘mummy’ seems an acceptable interpretation. Sommerstein (1982) *ad loc.* points at ‘the derived verb *mammān* or *mammīān* ‘eat (like an infant), occasionally used in comedy’. On ‘*mammā*’, cf. Jakobson (1962b). Note that in *Clouds*, the baby’s mother is not in the picture at all, except for Strepsiades’ elaborate complaints in lines 41–80 about his mismatched marriage to a spoilt higher-class woman. This gender aspect of male nurturing behaviour may have contributed to the comic effect.

⁴ Cf. Ingram (1974); Levelt et al. (2000). Henricus Stephanus, in the late 16th century, observes in his *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae s.v.* παππῶζω (3.33–34) that little children have trouble with the sound /r/; hence he suggests an emendation to βῦν, in which case there would also emerge a word for food, ascribed to the baby lexicon by adults, similar to the presumed Latin baby word *bua*.

⁵ On the development of ‘Kindersprache’, cf. Jakobson (1962a).

⁶ Σ *Ar. Nub.* 1382d: βρῦν· ὕδωρ Par, πιεῖν Crh; Lex. Seguer. s.v. βρῦ· ἐπὶ τοῦ πιεῖν. Ἀριστοφάνης Νεφέλαις δευτέραις ‘brū: used for “to drink”. Aristophanes in the second *Clouds*; Hsch. β 1247 βρῦν· πιεῖν.

⁷ Σ *Ar. Nub.* Tzetzes 1381a3 βρῦν· οἶνον κατὰ τὴν νηπίων παίδων φωνήν (‘brū [acc.]: “wine” [acc.] in children’s speech’). For (diluted) wine being given to little children, cf. Phoenix’s behaviour in *Il.* 9.489 ὄψον προταμών καὶ οἶνον ἐπισχών (‘cutting up bits of meat and offering wine’ (to little Achilles, see below); Odysseus giving wine to the little Eurymachus in *Od.* 16.444. We owe these references to Van Leeuwen (1898) on our passage s.v. ἐπέσχων. See also Hippoc. *Aer.* 9 (with the advice of only giving wine that is very diluted to young children; we thank an anonymous reviewer for this reference). For the interpretation ‘beer’, assuming *brū* to be short for the very rare βρῦτος, see West (1969); his proposals are also discussed by Stephanopoulos (1983).

rhetoric on which he now prides himself, at a time when he was virtually inarticulate. And although his guesses at what his son needs are not unreasonable, they may not reflect what the baby ‘says’.

Yet some ancient commentators do not just emphasize the semantic content of the ‘word’, but actually imply a form of intentionality. The scholia to Aristophanes mostly simply identify the word as a baby word,⁸ but one comment also refers to the intentions of the baby (Σ Ar. *Nub.* 1382c):

βρῦν εἴποις] δι’ οὗ ἐμφαίνουσι τὰ βρέφη, ὅτι βούλονται πιεῖν.
[W]henver you said ‘brū’] by this word, babies indicate that they wish to drink.

Something similar may be going on when Phrynichus states s.v. βρῦ (*Praep. soph.* 55.13):

τὸ ὑποκόρισμα, ὃ ἐστι λεγόμενον τοῖς παιδίοις σύμβολον τοῦ πιεῖν.
[S]ound imitation,⁹ said by babies as a symbolic indication of ‘drinking’.

The ‘word’ βρῦ would then be onomatopoeic, not just in the sense of imitating the sound of drinking, but in that the baby makes drinking noises as a conscious indication that he wants to drink. However, this comment is probably better taken as referring to the caregivers’ register, which would also provide a more natural interpretation for ὑποκόρισμα. It would then mean that βρῦ is uttered in the sweet tone of voice used to talk to babies (‘a baby word’, a natural extension of the use of ὑποκόρισμα for ‘term of endearment’), and that it is said not ‘by’ but ‘to’ babies to refer to drinking.¹⁰

Modern lexica and commentaries also allow themselves to be led by Strepsiades in interpreting βρῦ: LSJ lists it s.v. βρῦν and gives the whole construction βρῦν εἶπεῖν, defined as ‘cry for *drink*, of children’.¹¹ This suggests both intentionality and referential meaning of a sound production by the baby, not the caregiver. Jan van Leeuwen *ad loc.* explicitly derives his interpretation of βρῦν as a baby word from the context, and Alan Sommerstein *ad loc.* concurs that *brū* is ‘evidently a nursery word meaning “a drink”’.¹² In his survey of

⁸ There is some ambiguity as to whether this refers to words addressed to babies by adults or utterances by babies themselves. The former is most likely in Σ Ar. *Nub.* 1382b α: τὸ βρῦν πρόσφθεγμα παιδικῶν καὶ νηπίων, 1382b β: πρόσφθεγμα παιδικόν; the latter in 1382d νηπίωδης φωνή.

⁹ This use of ὑποκόρισμα would be unusual, but cf. Philostr. *V S* 2.10.2 [2. p. 587.20 Olearius] τοὺς μὲν τὸ φθέγμα ὑποκοριζομένους, τοὺς δὲ τὸ βάδισμα, ‘while some were imitating his voice, others his way of walking’.

¹⁰ An alternative form is βροῦ: Phrynichus, *Praep. soph.* 55.15 de Borries [= *Anecd. Bekk.* 31.9]; Hsch. s.v. βροῦ· πιεῖν; Photius, *Lexicon* s.v. βρῦ insists on spelling it without the omicron: χωρὶς τοῦ ο· λέγουσιν ἐπὶ τῶν παιδίων τῶν αἰτούντων πιεῖν, ‘they say this in the case of children asking to drink’ (note that here it is a word used by adults to, or in the context of, children; this is also how Hermann sees the origins of the term: Hermann (1830), on verse 1382 (= 1386 by his count)). For the ‘caretakers’ register’ in antiquity, see Thomas (2010), especially 191–92. Theoretically, the subject of λέγουσιν could also be ‘authors’.

¹¹ The use of different verbs with the three different baby words does not seem significant (εἶπεῖν with βρῦν, αἰτάω with μαμᾶν, φράζω with κακᾶν).

¹² Van Leeuwen (1898) *ad loc.* βρῦν] *infantulorum hanc fuisse uocem ... contextus docet.* He is alone (but may very well be correct) in doubting the relationship between βρῦν and the verb βρύλλειν, a *hapax* in Ar. *Eq.* 1126 (where Demos claims: αὐτός τε γὰρ ἤδομαι | βρύλλων τὸ καθ’ ἡμέραν); Sommerstein (1982) does believe that *brū* can be presumed to be the source of that verb, meaning ‘to have a feed’. LSJ translates βρύλλω ‘to cry for drink’ (of children), comparing βρῦ, and so does Chantraine (1999) [1968] s.v., who resorts to the somewhat desperate explanation that βρύλλω is a ‘dérivation expressive’. Hesychius also connects the two words. The context in *Knights* is inconclusive. Demos loves to βρύλλειν his daily portion (or ‘on a daily basis’, if βρύλλω is an intransitive verb), but he contrives this by fattening up politicians and then killing them off; the chorus suggests he sacrifices and eats them when he runs out of ὄψον, dainty dishes: is that what Demos likes on a daily basis? The term does seem to suggest a form of ‘eating’ rather than ‘drinking’ (Sommerstein (1982) deftly finds middle ground with his rendition). But there is no good parallel for the derivation in -λλω. ‘To say βρῦ’, would require βρύζω, with the productive suffix. So the derivation is highly doubtful, and the meaning unclear.

child language and baby talk, Golden also simply gives ‘drink’ as the meaning of βρῦ.¹³ Oliver Thomas takes it as ‘holophrastic’, representing a ‘condensed request’.¹⁴

III. Child language in antiquity

Aristophanes’ rendition of the infant Pheidippides’ sounds is among the very first attempts in Western history to register baby or toddler (proto-)speech.¹⁵ Herodotus’ famous report of Psammetichus’ experiment is another, but very different one: there, two babies taken from random parents are deprived of normal human interaction. Their only company is each other, some goats whose milk they drink, and the goatherd who comes in daily to tend to their needs, but who has been ordered to refrain from any communication. The experiment was set up in an attempt to establish what the children would utter as their first articulate utterance (φωνή) and thus to discover experimentally which language, and by extension what people, was the oldest on earth (Hdt. 2.2).¹⁶ It is important that Psammetichus expressly excluded any ‘meaningless whimperings’ (ἀπαλαχθέντων τῶν ἀσήμων κυζημάτων).¹⁷ He was looking for something articulate, and that only came after two years (διέτης χρόνος). It turned out to be the word βέκος, which both children said to the goatherd one day when he came in, falling at his feet and extending their hands to him. When this happened more frequently and Psammetichus had heard it for himself, he had inquiries made, and learned that βέκος was Phrygian for ‘bread’, and that settled the matter.¹⁸

The differences with little Pheidippides are clear: he was interacting with a parent, a much more ecologically valid situation; there was no obvious deprivation of stimuli in the environment.¹⁹ Strepsiades’ point and claim to fame is precisely that he could understand utterings that were jumbled or lisped (τραυλίζοντος, 1381); in fact, this increases the likelihood that these utterances were not articulate words. Note also that in contradistinction to the Herodotean passage, in which the children were two years old when they became articulate, the Aristophanic passage does not indicate an age.

The most relevant other ancient passage focusing on the interaction between a baby or toddler and a caregiver is Aeschylus’ *Choephoroe* 749–62. Believing that Orestes is dead, the nurse Cilissa remembers her interaction with him in his infancy. She recalls how much work caring for a baby is: they just eat, there is no sense yet and they cannot speak (755–60):

οὐ γάρ τι φωνεῖ παῖς ἔτ’ ὦν ἐν σπαργάνοις
εἰ λιμὸς ἢ δίψη τις ἢ λιψουρία
ἔχει· νέα δὲ νηδὺς αὐτάρκης τέκνων.
τούτων πρόμαντις οὔσα, πολλὰ δ’ οἶμαι

¹³ Golden (1995).

¹⁴ Thomas (2010) 205.

¹⁵ For a survey of ancient Greek child language and baby talk, see Golden (1995) 18–30; see also Thomas (2010).

¹⁶ See Launay (1980); Gera (2003) 68–111 (chapter 3); cf. Salmon (1956); Sułek (1989); Vannicelli (1997). On φωνή as articulate sound here, see Gera (2003) 78.

¹⁷ Cf. Golden (1995) 12; Thomas (2010) 196 (with n.30, on *asēmos*, ‘which may also mean “not clearly enunciated”’).

¹⁸ Note how ‘scientifically’ the set-up is executed: the result needs to be reached repeatedly; Psammetichus does not take the goatherd’s word for it, but wants to hear the children speak for himself; he checks whether there is a language that actually uses the word *bekos* for anything; and when that turns out to be the case, the Egyptians are willing to take this as evidence for the antiquity of the Phrygians, and abandon their own claims on the strength of it.

¹⁹ It has been suggested many times since antiquity that the ‘first word’ was an onomatopoeic imitation of the sound of the goats, see Golden (1995) 12; Gera (2003) 78–79 with n.25.

ψευθεῖσα, παιδὸς σπαργάνων φαιδρύντρια,
κναφεὺς τροφεύς τε ταύτῶν εἰχέτην τέλος.²⁰

For a child still in swaddling clothes does not speak (articulately)
if it is affected by hunger or thirst or the desire to make water:
the young stomachs of children are independent.

Trying to be a prophetic predictor of these things, but often, I think,
mistaken, the cleaner of the child's swaddling clothes,
fuller and feeder had the same job.

This tragic passage does not reproduce any actual utterings of the baby, but it does agree with the Herodotean and Aristophanic passages in insisting on the lack of clear articulation, and hence the fundamental incomprehensibility, of baby talk. Alexander Garvie *ad loc.* quotes the scholiast on *Septem contra Thebas* 348: τὰ νεογνὰ οὐδέπω τὴν φωνὴν ἔναρθρον ἔχοντα ..., ὥστε αὐτὰ ἄναρθρον φωνὴν καὶ ὥσπερ προβατώδη²¹ προῖσθαι ('babies cannot yet produce articulate sound ... so that they utter an inarticulate and cattle-like sound'). It is reasonable to assume hunger, thirst or the need to urinate, but this does not correspond one-to-one with any particular utterance. This means that it takes almost mantic qualities to predict (in particular) when the child needs to urinate. And even the immediate caregivers, frequently the only ones to 'read' and understand a baby, may fail at this task. The nurse in this case failed regularly, and as a result had to do a lot of laundry. The passage is a wonderful counterpoint to the Aristophanic one: the three basic baby needs are identical and it is precisely the masterful feat of being fully focused on Pheidippides' intentions (ὄ τι νοοίης) and (presumably) correctly and instantly guessing his son's meaning (γνοῦς ... ἂν οὐκ ἔφθης φράσας, κάγω ...) that proves Strepsiades' utter devotion as a parent. But if babies could talk so that their words were a precise indication of their meaning, there would be no special merit in understanding them.

IV. What is βρῦ?

Aristophanes is very much a child of his time in his interest in issues of language, 'grammar', rhetoric and argument. The *Clouds* in particular, with its parody of Socrates as a representative of all forms of new-fangled learning, including a sophistic focus on language and rhetoric,²² offers a wonderful occasion to mock ideas of linguistic correctness, etymology and perversely complicated argumentation. However, like all other exponents of ancient linguistic thought, Aristophanes' focus is primarily semantic and pragmatic: he thinks about language in terms of meaning and effect. This is a tendency that would even affect 'technical' grammar, once that had separated itself as a discipline from a more general interest in language.²³ Ancient observations of language rarely touch on the domain of phonology for its own sake. This may be the reason why the true nature of what Aristophanes is saying here has escaped detection.

²⁰ On the complex syntax, see Garvie (1986) *ad loc.*

²¹ For the parallel with mute cattle, see in our same nurse passage, Aesch. *Cho.* 753 ὥσπερ εἰ βότον.

²² The more perverse manifestations of rhetoric are delegated to the teaching of the 'Weaker Argument' in the *agōn*. On the study of language in the fifth century BCE, see Classen (1976); on ancient comedy and the sophists, Carey (2000); on the figure of Socrates in Old Comedy, Edmunds (2007); on the relationship between Aristophanes, Euripides and the 'sophists', Silk (2000), 415–17. A complete survey of ideas on language in Aristophanes is a desideratum.

²³ Sluiter (1997).

If we abandon the idea that we must be dealing with an actual baby word, uttered intentionally and with some form of referential meaning, βρῦ may prompt an entirely different interpretation. Along the lines of some of the ancient interpretations discussed above, we may regard it as the imitation of a sequence of sounds (onomatopoeia) which together constitute a baby sound that Aristophanes has of necessity tried to render with the alphabetic means available to him.²⁴ This would put βρῦ in the category of conventionalized renditions of interjections, of which ancient literature (and grammar) is full.²⁵ But if we ask what actual sound was at the basis of this conventionalization, it so happens that we find a perfect fit in what we know of first-language acquisition in infants.

So far, we have seen that whereas *mammā* and *kakkā* correspond to formations we may expect from a normally developing infant, *brū* appears abnormal: the front-round vowel is unusual in early child language and, if anything, a baby would omit the complex onset, certainly not add it to a target word originally lacking it (for example, hypothetically, πειν, 'to drink'). *Brū* would only fit either a later stage, when the child has mastered consonant clusters, or a much earlier one. Now, of course, there is no reason why Aristophanes should not have simply combined utterances from different developmental phases as identified by modern observations. However, the solution that *brū* should belong to a later stage seems excluded by the fact that there is no plausible target word, since *brū* is not recognizably related to 'normal' Greek words for eating or drinking. Considering an earlier stage, on the other hand, provides a highly realistic and plausible solution for the whole conundrum: between four and six months, babies start experimenting with the production of different sounds. This stage is called the 'expansion stage'.²⁶ One of the results is what is referred to as an oral 'raspberry',²⁷ technically a linguolabial trill [ɾ] or a bilabial trill [B]. In our own 'regular' orthography in the Latin alphabet 'bwr̥r' is the closest approximation. It is produced by putting the tongue against or between the lips and blowing, which may produce a sound accompanied with many little spit bubbles. As a bilabial trill, it resembles the way in which we imitate the sound of a snorting horse. Examples of babies blowing raspberries can be found on the Internet.²⁸ The question then becomes how Aristophanes would have rendered this sound in his own Greek alphabet,²⁹ and it seems to us that βρῦ (the same would be true for βροῦ) is a fair attempt: it renders a bilabial trill with rounded lips. Given this succession of phonemes, and the fact that it is unlikely that βρῦ with its complex onset and front rounded vowel belongs to early child language, we propose that βρῦ is actually a conventionalized rendition in writing of the sound of a raspberry. This would make Aristophanes the oldest attestation of this baby sound production, well over 2,000 years earlier than the oldest references currently recognized. These belong to German diaries with parental observations of their children's development, and their solution to the transcription problems match the Aristophanic one very well: they come up with renderings like 'Brrr or Urrr', or 'brrr-há'.³⁰

²⁴ Golden (1995) 17 emphasizes that accounts of child language (outside an experimental setting) 'may reveal adult preconceptions above all'.

²⁵ On ancient theories of the interjection, see Sluiter (1990) 173–245 (chapter 4).

²⁶ Oller (1980) 96–98.

²⁷ I.e. a farting sound. The term 'raspberry' is short for 'raspberry tart', a common form of English rhyming slang for 'fart' (see <https://www.cockneyrhymingslang.co.uk> for many other examples, such as 'adam and eve' for 'believe' ('can you adam and eve it?').

²⁸ We provide a beautiful specimen at https://osf.io/8tbjy/?view_only=aee89609a4d54aab994dfb75d3529377.

²⁹ A question also raised for English. For a collection of different spellings in cartoons, see https://web.archive.org/web/20230602204402/http://www.thesneeze.com/mt-archives/cat_cartoon_raspberries_new.php ('Cartoon Raspberry Museum', collected by Steven Molaro, snapshot taken by the Wayback Machine on 2 June 2023).

³⁰ Sigismund (1856) 49 describes a purring sound (in German: *schnurrend*), resulting from vibration of the lips, 'wie Brrr oder Urrr'; Preyer (1882) 312 also describes a 'Lippen-r', produced by his five-month-old son, and writes 'brrr-há'. Wilamowitz refers to the Aristophanic passage in his commentary on *Lysistrata* ((1827) ad 294), and

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If βρῦ(v) represents a raspberry, new possibilities in performance present themselves: rather than articulating [brü:], the actor playing Strepsiades may have graphically mimicked the intended baby behaviour by blowing a prolonged raspberry himself, with his tongue between his lips, resulting in a lot of audible spit bubble production, until it comes to an end in the astonishingly grammatical accusative ending -v. The unexpected grammaticality would add to the performative humour.³¹ As would the claim that Strepsiades knew what this extraordinary sound actually ‘means’. Embedding a mimetic, performative element in a ‘normal’ sentence, such as a full-blown ‘raspberry’ here, is a recognized linguistic phenomenon, styled ‘depiction’.³²

Clearly, one would need extraordinary mantic qualities to derive any kind of meaning from a raspberry, as the rest of the ancient tradition about baby language, scanty as it is, suggests. But long before Pheidippides even came close to becoming a rhetorician, his devoted father had guessed impossibly expressed (or unexpressed) desires and come running with anything a baby might need. Since this is a more remarkable feat by far than providing a drink when simply asked for a drink in so many words, this should inspire the feelings of obligation and debt in Pheidippides that would persuade him to desist from his perverse bad behaviour.

VI. A brief and speculative return to μαμμῶν and κικκῶν

Now that this new interpretation of βρῦ is available, what about μαμμῶν and κικκῶν? Although more plausible as linguistic child productions at an only slightly later stage of language development than βρῦ,³³ there is still the issue that Strepsiades offers a suspect interpretation of μαμμῶν, and that κικκῶν is not objection-free itself: while it is certainly among the baby-talk words used by *parents*, the sound [k] is usually not favoured in the set of early produced consonants, although this also depends on the frequency of the sound in the surrounding language, and on individual preference.³⁴

Given our interpretation of βρῦ and Strepsiades’ comically effective interpretation of what is at heart perfectly meaningless, we should at least acknowledge the unprovable possibility that *all three* ‘words’ should be taken to reflect roughly the same stage of infant linguistic experimentation, at the threshold between the expansion and canonical stages, although, obviously, there is no inherent reason why Aristophanes should be held to any standards of consistency here.³⁵ In this period, not only do we hear raspberries (friction noises), but other sounds also appear: nasal murmurs and glottal stops ([ʔ]).³⁶ Marginal babbling occurs at this stage as well, in which a closure of the vocal tract is opposed to a vowel sound. The typical reduplicated consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel structures appear next, at around seven months.³⁷ The words typically associated with early child

states, strikingly, but without further analysis: ‘wir würden seine (= des Säuglings) Laute Pruschen nennen und mit brr wiedergeben’.

³¹ Peter Meineck kindly tried this out for us with one of his reconstructed Greek theatre masks. The experiment resulted in a perfectly recognizable ‘raspberry’. Video can be viewed here: https://osf.io/8tbjy/?view_only=aee89609a4d54aab994dfb75d3529377.

³² Clark (2016).

³³ Oller (1980) 99 describes a ‘canonical stage’ (at seven to ten months old), which starts ‘fairly sudden[ly]’, and is ‘usually seen with reduplicated syllables’ (consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel).

³⁴ [k] appears as a late acquisition in all the lists for acquisition order of sounds in 26 different languages collected in McLeod (2007). This is also true for [y].

³⁵ However, if a measure of simple and recognizable realism increases the comic potential of a scene, the principle of charity requires us to make the most of Aristophanes’ text in this way.

³⁶ Stark (1980).

³⁷ Oller (1980).

language, like ‘mamma’, ‘pappa’, ‘pipi’, result from *parents* assigning meanings to their infant’s babbling sequences!³⁸

This opens up the possibility that Strepsiades imitates a baby in all three cases, with the ‘mamamama’ sequence suggesting munching on food (which in turn leads him to the interpretation ‘bread’), and the form ‘kakkā’ being the closest one could get in writing to a more onomatopoeic form of the action [ʔaʔa], involving the glottal stop, but possibly also suggesting the effort needed to relieve oneself. Especially in the last case, the conventional parental interpretation seems to have won out and led to the spelling with κ as well.

When performed in this way, all three sounds would mimic a baby of four to seven months of age, and the text would indicate a rather careful observation on the part of Aristophanes of the ‘expansion stage’ of language acquisition. However, given the relationships between *mammā* and *kakkā* to conventionalized lexical entities³⁹ and the fact that Aristophanes’ priorities clearly lie with raising a laugh in any way possible rather than with phonology, there is no reason to insist. Our interpretation of ββῦ is sufficient to make of Aristophanes the first observer to put this infant sound production on our Western-European record. And in passing he is putting the widespread tendency of adult caregivers to over-interpret such infant vocalizations to good comic effect.

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³⁸ So Jakobson (1962b) on ‘mamma’ and ‘pappa’. The recognition that ‘baby words’ are often the product of the caretakers (for example, wet nurses) is also present in Hermann (1830) (see above, n.10).

³⁹ See nn.2–3.

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