8. General Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the ideas on language, linguistics, and literature that we find in the works of Dionysius of Halicarnassus. We have seen that Dionysius is a man of wide interests, who combines theories and methods from various ancient language disciplines, integrating them into a coherent programme of rhetorical instruction. On the one hand, Dionysius is not afraid of technical theories that he finds in the works of philosophers, philologists, grammarians, critics of poetry, metrical and musical theorists. He adopts ideas from all these disciplines and makes use of them. On the other hand, Dionysius does not forget the practical purposes of his own works. His rhetorical treatises aim to instruct the audience (mainly consisting of future orators) in the techniques of rhetorical writing, in particular in the art of stylistic composition. Therefore, Dionysius does not want to lose himself in the technical details of grammatical, metrical or philosophical theories. He only discusses those theories from other disciplines that can be helpful for his practical purposes. This balanced approach has consequences for our interpretation of Dionysius’ works: Dionysius is not a grammarian or a philosopher, and we should not interpret his treatises as grammatical or philosophical works. On the other hand, Dionysius’ practical purposes should not mislead us either: his learning is impressive, and he seems to be well informed: Dionysius studied innumerable works of earlier scholars and he seems to have increased his linguistic knowledge during his period in Rome, where he was in contact with various Greek and Roman intellectuals. For the study of the history of linguistics, Dionysius’ works are valuable for two reasons. First, since Dionysius reflects so many theories from various disciplines, he is an important source of information about the ideas that constituted the linguistic knowledge of intellectuals at the end of the first century BC, a period from which, apart from Dionysius’ works, only fragments of linguistic works survive. Second, his integration of ideas from different scholarly contexts perfectly illustrates the close connections between rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, and other ancient language disciplines. I will summarise the most important results of this study.

In chapter 2, I examined some of the more general ideas on language that we find in Dionysius’ works. Like many other ancient scholars, Dionysius believes that language is characterised by a hierarchical structure. Letters, syllables, words (parts of speech), clauses, periods and discourse (λόγος) are the different levels of language in which Dionysius is interested. He uses the term στοιχεῖα not only for letters, but also for the parts of speech. But unlike the Stoics, who call the parts of speech στοιχεῖα λόγου (elements of speech), Dionysius refers to them as στοιχεῖα λέξεως (elements of
diction), thus combining a philosophical idea with a stylistic interest. Although his works focus on formal aspects of expression, Dionysius does not ignore the importance of meaning behind words. Perspicuity is one of Dionysius’ main concerns, which implies that he is also interested in the clear expression of thoughts. There are many different ways in which one can express the same idea, but Dionysius implicitly assumes that there is one natural formulation to which the more figured expressions could be reduced. The distinction between τὸ σημαίνον (form) and τὸ σημαίνομενον corresponds to Stoic terminology, but Dionysius may also have adopted these terms from grammatical works. Dionysius’ views on Latin as a dialect of Greek should be understood as part of his efforts to present the Romans as descendants from the Greeks. We have seen that this theory, which has political dimensions, is found in the works of various grammarians of the first century BC, notably Philoxenus and Varro. The danger of reading too much into Dionysius’ works has been illustrated by an examination of his alleged philosophy of language. I have pointed out that the three passages in which Dionysius seems to make a remark on the relations between words and things should be interpreted within their rhetorical context: Dionysius’ statements do not reveal any explicit view on the natural or conventional relationship between ὅνόματα and πρᾶγματα. Dionysius’ reference to Plato’s Cratylus in a discussion of mimetic words is typical of his approach: Dionysius mentions Plato’s dialogue as a text in which the mimetic quality of certain words is discussed, but this does not imply that he agrees with the philosophical view of any of the characters in the dialogue.

Chapters 3-5 were mainly concerned with the grammatical parts of speech. Together, these chapters have illuminated the connections between grammar, philosophy and rhetorical theory in Dionysius’ works. In chapter 3, I focused on the grammatical theory itself. Dionysius’ works contribute to our knowledge of the development of grammatical theory in the period between Aristarchus and Apollonius Dyscolus. The grammatical theories that we find in Dionysius (which presumably reflect the theories of contemporary grammarians like Tryphon) combine elements from Alexandrian philology on the one hand and Stoic philosophy on the other. The Stoic aspects include the distinction between proper and appellative noun, the terms ὄρθα and ὑπτία (active and passive) and the distinction between ὄρθα and ἐγκλινόμενα (indicatives and other moods). Dionysius is the first extant author who uses the term ἐγκλίσεις for the verbal moods; the term ἐπίρημα (adverb) is first attested in Dionysius and Tryphon, who were contemporaries in Augustan Rome. I have argued that we should not attribute to Dionysius a ‘system’ of word classes. He is not interested in the exact number of the μόρια λόγου, but only in their role as building
blocks for composition. Dionysius’ references to the curriculum of grammar schools are highly important because they inform us about grammatical teaching in the first century BC. Because he clearly expects that his audience will recognise his description of ‘how we learn to read’, we should reject the claims of those modern scholars who argue that Dionysius’ characterisation is unrealistic.

In chapter 4, we saw that Dionysius effectively applies the grammatical theory of the parts of speech to his theory of stylistic composition. Dionysius’ history of the theory of the parts of speech, which is characterised by an internal approach to the history of linguistics, introduces the μόρια λόγου as the building blocks for composition. Dionysius makes use of these units for his composition theory and for his stylistic analyses. The concept of μόρια λόγου as the elements of style leads to the analogy of text as architecture. His ideas on σύνθεσις that should please ‘the ear’ show the influence of the Hellenistic critics of poetry (the κριτικοί). It seems that these critics used the theory of the parts of speech for similar purposes as Dionysius. The theory of the three composition types brings grammatical, musical and rhetorical theory together. The different χαρακτήρες συνθέσεως are characterised by, among other things, their use of σύνθεσις and ἠρθρα. In the Second Letter to Ammaeus, Dionysius closely analyses the style of Thucydides by pointing to his deviating use of the parts of speech. Here, we have encountered some interesting ideas on syntactic construction. Dionysius’ grammatical notes on Thucydides may be partly based on an Alexandrian commentary. But there are also interesting similarities between Dionysius’ observations and the theory of figures that survives in the fragments of Caecilius of Caleacte.

Chapter 5 was concerned with Dionysius’ views on natural style, syntax and word order. We saw that in the works of the middle and later periods Dionysius adopts a grammatical framework that enables him to analyse the characteristics of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ style in a more efficient way than in his early works. Dionysius’ use of the terms ἀκολουθία and ὁ κατάλληλος λόγος marks an important development in the history of syntax: these terms, which seem to be absent (as far as we can judge) from the works of the grammarian Tryphon (active in the same period as Dionysius) were to become the central concepts in Apollonius Dyscolus’ Syntax. For Dionysius, natural style is characterised by regular syntax and word order, which is supposed to be typical of everyday language: Dionysius’ rhetorical works are deeply influenced by the contrast between φύσις and τέχνη. In On Composition 5, however, Dionysius adopts a different concept of φύσις: in his experiment concerning natural word order, he argues that the parts of speech should be arranged according to the logical order of
substance, accident, etc. I have argued that the Stoic theory of categories lies behind Dionysius’ ideas in the passage on natural word order. Because of the aesthetic interests and the grammatical terms that do not fit with the Stoic theory of the μὴ λόγου, we should not assume that Dionysius borrowed the entire experiment from Chrysippus. I have suggested that Dionysius combined Stoic theories on the logical order of the parts of speech with his own interest in σύνθεσις. The passage on natural word order functions as a foil in the treatise On Composition, which is primarily concerned with aesthetic effects on the basis of musical means such as rhythm and euphony.

In chapter 6, we turned from grammar and philosophy to poetical, metrical and musical theory. I argued that Dionysius’ discussion of poetic prose in On Composition 25 aims to bring all literature together under the heading of aesthetic composition. His ideas on the magical character of poetic prose correspond to the views of the kritikoi in Philodemus, which are also reflected in ‘Longinus’, On the Sublime. In most of his works, Dionysius closely follows Aristotle’s precepts on the difference between the styles of prose and poetry. In On Composition, however, Dionysius focuses on the aesthetic aims of beautiful literary writing: this approach leads him to blur the boundaries between prose and poetry. It is significant that the discussion of the relations between prose and poetry concludes Dionysius’ work On Composition: the writing of poetic prose is a subject that is for the ‘initiated’: it completes Dionysius’ detailed instructions on stylistic composition. Because oratory is ultimately ‘a kind of music’ for Dionysius, it is understandable that his views in the work On Composition largely correspond to those of musical and poetical critics.

The method of metathesis is closely related to Dionysius’ views on language. In chapter 7, I discussed the various different ways in which Dionysius applies this useful method. By rewriting classical texts, Dionysius is able to analyse the exact qualities, defects and particularities of a given text. It forms an important tool in the pedagogical process: metathesis enables Dionysius to show which stylistic aspects of the writing of different models should be imitated or avoided. Thus, metathesis and μὴσις, a central concept in Dionysius’ works, are closely connected.

This study has clearly shown that Dionysius does not merely refer to ideas from earlier and contemporary scholars, but also brings them together in a coherent system of rhetorical teaching. In each of the chapters Dionysius’ practical purposes have become manifest. Throughout his rhetorical works, Dionysius’ main concern is to instruct his audience on the writing of effective texts, which should be based on the
eclectic imitation of classical examples. The many different ideas on language and linguistics that he brings together all contribute to the success of both his analysis of classical models and his instructions for future writing. Dionysius of Halicarnassus was after all not a ‘kleine Seele’, but an intelligent scholar who studied a large number of literary and scholarly works from earlier times; he acquired an impressive knowledge of linguistic theories, not only from his reading but also from his contacts with the intellectuals in Augustan Rome, and he effectively integrated these theories into a practical programme of rhetoric.