Formulaic Delimiters in the Iliad and the Odyssey

How Homer Marked Speech Without Quotation Marks

Guillaume Lethuillier
glthr.com

December 26, 2025 · updated November 15, 2026

Series: Delimiters in Languages — Part 3 of 5
Next: Why XML Tags Are So Fundamental to Claude (glthr.com/xml-fundamental-to-claude)

Abstract

Homeric formulas open speeches, close them and pass the word between speakers, giving listeners cues that modern editions supply with quotation marks. Building on studies of these formulas, I read them as delimiters between the narrator's words and represented speech. My contribution is this connection to the delimiters framework; its possible application to undeciphered scripts remains speculative.

How did Homer mark speech without quotation marks? I came to this question through a modern edition of his poems.

A Modern Edition Raises the Question

During my middle school studies, I was introduced to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This year, I decided to revisit these epics and acquired a French edition from the *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* (translated by Victor Bérard and Robert Flacelière, edited by Jean Bérard and Robert Flacelière, 1955). This particular edition is noteworthy for its clear demarcation of dialogue: each speech is prefixed with the speaker's name, as can be seen in the excerpt available on the La Pléiade website (pages 12-13, for example).

The editorial practice of prefacing each speech with the speaker's name greatly aids modern readers, giving the poems a somewhat theatrical feel. In antiquity, in an environment where the audience relied solely on auditory cues, it would have been indispensable to provide clear signals so that listeners could unambiguously follow the dialogues. The modern convention of prefixing each speech with the speaker's name appears anachronistic. It is more likely to be an editorial solution designed to help readers navigate the complex interchanges of the poem rather than a reflection of Homeric or early performative practice. **This led me to wonder *how* Homer originally indicated (or even encoded) these shifts in speech.**

Cite as: Guillaume Lethuillier, "Formulaic Delimiters in the Iliad and the Odyssey", glthr.com, December 26, 2025. https://glthr.com/formulaic-delimiters-in-the-iliad-and-the-odyssey

Looking for Delimiters in the Greek Text

To answer, I turned to the primary text itself. Because I do not read Ancient Greek, I was primarily concerned with the structural aspects rather than lexical detail: in essence, I focused on the "architecture" of speech rather than dissecting its constituent parts. My goal was to determine if the epic contained explicit **"delimiters"**, or markers distinguishing Homer's narrative passages from the direct speech of characters.

The idea of delimiters, as outlined in the first article of this series, posits a general principle: **every language that is evaluated or interpreted uses markers that signal transitions between first-order and second-order expressions**. In contemporary English prose, quotation marks serve precisely this function; they separate the narrator's description (e.g., *It is raining*) from a character's utterance (e.g., *Alice said: "It is raining"*). I sought to identify analogous signals within the Homeric text that fulfill the same role.

In Homer's era, punctuation marks such as quotation marks had not been invented yet, and even if they had existed, they would have been invisible to listeners in a purely oral performance. Therefore, my search was confined to intrinsic textual structures that could signal a shift from narrative to direct speech. It is plausible that a delimiter can be discerned through its structural properties when it shares the same alphabetic system as the surrounding text (in other words, when it is not a special character). As demonstrated in the previous article, languages can employ distinctive patterns, like repeated sequences, to mark boundaries. Thus, I sought regular linguistic constructs within Homer's poems that could serve this delimiting function.

I used two resources to access the original text, hosted by Tufts University: the Perseus Digital Library (Greek text and English translation by A.T. Murray) and its Scaife Viewer (Greek text of the Iliad by David B. Monro and Thomas W. Allen). In this article, most of the examples come from the first book of the Iliad and the first book of the Odyssey to keep it readable.

Three Kinds of Formulaic Delimiters

My analysis revealed that **Homer frequently employs formulaic constructions as structural cues for navigating between narrative and direct speech**. These recurring phrases function as *delimiters* in three distinct roles:

1. **Opening delimiters** signal that the narrator yields the floor to a character (first-to-second order transition).
2. **Closing delimiters** indicate that a character's speech has concluded, and the narration resumes (second-to-first order transition).
3. **Transition delimiters** are used when one speaker responds directly to another within a continuous block of dialogue (second-to-second order transition).

The following table gives examples of each type.

Type	Greek	Translation	Line
Opening	… καὶ λίσσετο πάντας Ἀχαιούς, Ἀτρεΐδα δὲ μάλιστα δύω, κοσμήτορε λαῶν·	… and **he implored** all the Achaeans, but most of all the two sons of Atreus, the marshallers of the people:	Iliad 1.15-1.16
Opening	ἀλλ' οὐκ Ἀτρεΐδῃ Ἀγαμέμνονι ἤνδανε θυμῷ, ἀλλὰ κακῶς ἀφίει, κρατερὸν δ' ἐπὶ μῦθον ἔτελλε·	… yet the thing did not please the heart of Agamemnon, son of Atreus, but he sent him away harshly, and **laid upon him a stern command**:	Iliad 1.24-1.25
Opening	… μετέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς·	… and **spoke** swift-footed Achilles	Iliad 1.58
Opening	ἀγχοῦ δ᾽ ἱσταμένη ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα:	and she drew near to his side and spake to him winged words:	Iliad 5.123
Closing	ὣς ἔφατ᾽	so he spoke	Iliad 1.33, 1.43
Closing	ὣς φάτο	so he spoke	Iliad 1.188, 1.245
Closing	ὣς ἔφαθ᾽…	so spoke…	Odyssey 1.42
Closing	ὣς εἰποῦσ᾽	so she spoke	Odyssey 1.96
Closing	ὣς εἰπὼν…	so saying…	Odyssey 1.125
Closing	ἤτοι ὅ γ᾽ ὣς εἰπὼν	when he had thus spoken…	Iliad 1.68, 1.101
Transition	τὴν δ᾽ αὖ Τηλέμαχος πεπνυμένος ἀντίον ηὔδα:	Then wise Telemachus answered her:	Odyssey 1.230
Transition	τὸν δ᾽ ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς:	In answer to him spoke swift-footed Achilles:	Iliad 1.84

Opening Delimiters

The sentences that start a speech are highly variable, as the first three rows of the table show. Homeric opening delimiters have no single form, yet many end on a formula, the best known being "*ἔπεα πτερόεντα [winged words]*", as in the fourth row (Iliad 5.123). As noted by a researcher: "*All the usages of epea pteroenta / epea pteroent'—without any exceptions—introduce the direct discourse of a character in the epic.*"[1] She notes that the second half of such a line is "very neatly formulaic", while its first half varies with the speaker and the circumstances.[2] While all verses containing ἔπεα πτερόεντα are opening delimiters, not all opening delimiters contain this expression.

The variability of opening delimiters is not surprising. When a bard sang the poem, in a first-order context (as the narrator), they just announced a speaker *by implication.* For example: "*[Agamemnon] laid upon him a stern command"* implicitly

[1] Françoise Létoublon. *Epea Pteroenta ("Winged Words").* Oral Tradition, 1999, 14 (2), pp. 321–335, p. 331.

[2] Ibid., p. 332.

announces that Agamemnon is about to speak. The transition to the second-order expression is obvious.

Closing Delimiters

In contrast, signaling a return to narrative from direct speech proves more problematic for an oral reciter. A speaker might employ a phrase such as "*to conclude …*," but such strategies are difficult to systematize. To indicate a closure, Homer frequently had to use repetitions such as the six closing formulas of the table. They appear *after* the speech, much like closing quotation marks follow the enclosed text. By maintaining a uniform structure, these formulae enable listeners to recognize immediately that the current character has finished speaking and that the narrative voice resumes. The first of the Odyssey examples sits inside a speech: at 1.42 it is Zeus who closes, with *ὣς ἔφαθ' Ἑρμείας* [so spoke Hermes], the warning of Hermes he has just reported. The closing delimiter works one level down, too.

Transition Delimiters

As outlined earlier, transition delimiters demarcate the boundary between successive speakers: speaker A delivers an utterance; a delimiter signals that speaker B is now about to speak; then speaker B speaks. These delimiters typically begin with τὸν δ' [and him] or τὴν δ' [and her] followed by the speaker and a verb indicating the act of speaking, as in the last two rows of the table. As with the closing delimiters (ὣς…), the initial word of a transition clause strongly predicts that a delimiter is present.

What I find interesting about these transition delimiters is their frequent pairing with an epithet that characterizes the speaker: the *wise* Telemachus, the *swift-footed* Achilles, *etc.* For instance: "*τὸν δ' ἠμείβετ' ἔπειτα* ***ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν*** *Ἀγαμέμνων: [Then* ***the king of men****, Agamemnon, answered him:]*" (Iliad 1.172). Homer needed these epithets to fill the dactylic hexameter: they adjust the syllable count of the delimiter (i.e., "to him/her, `<epithet-as-filler>` `<name>` replied/answered/*etc.*:"), which explains why he repeats them across both poems.

(Update November 2026) This is Milman Parry's thesis: he showed that the choice of a noun-epithet formula is governed by metrical convenience[3], and Mark W. Edwards studied the formulas that introduce speeches themselves.[4] What I add is only the reading of these formulas as delimiters.

What Scholars Have Observed

The role of these formulaic expressions has already attracted scholarly attention. A notable example is the observation of Françoise Létoublon: "*In an oral epic one has a compelling need for signals of direct discourse, in principle both before and after the reported speech, so that the audience will be aware that the narrating bard is assuming the voice of his characters. And these signals must be clear, perceptible even by a less than attentive audience: they must therefore be regular enough to play the role that iconic marks of quotation ("…") play for us in the written text. . . . Following direct discourse, the signals for closure—equivalent to closing quotation marks in the typographical tradition—at times include epos, but other formulas are used more often, most frequently with a verb of speaking in the aorist tense.*"[5] In other words,

[3] Milman Parry. *L'Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère.* Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1928.

[4] Mark W. Edwards. "Homeric Speech Introductions", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 74, 1970, pp. 1–36.

[5] Françoise Létoublon. *Epea Pteroenta ("Winged Words").* Oral Tradition, 1999, 14 (2), pp. 321–335, p. 332.

the delimiters function as highly recognizable formulaic markers that cue listeners to a shift from narration to direct discourse (i.e., first-order to second-order expressions) and signal a change of speaker. Létoublon illustrates this point by comparing the delimiters to quotation marks: these formulaic clauses demarcate transitions within the narrative flow.

Beyond Homer

After having applied this intuition about delimiters acting as a fundamental law of any language to LLMs, I suggest using it as a conceptual tool for analyzing ancient texts. I believe that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* demonstrate that delimiters can be systematically encoded using ordinary alphabetical forms *in a natural language*. This observation raises an intriguing possibility: if similar delimiter structures exist in ancient undeciphered scripts, they might provide a foothold for decipherment. There is precedent: the cartouches around royal names gave Young and Champollion their way into hieroglyphs, and a word divider and formulaic royal titles gave Grotefend his into Old Persian. However, successfully applying this strategy requires establishing whether a target script encodes higher-order expressions such as dialogues, which is very speculative.

Series and Companion Articles

Delimiters in Languages (glthr.com/page/delimiters-in-languages)

#	Article	Address
1	What Quotation Marks, String Literals and DNA Have in Common	glthr.com/quotation-marks-string-literals-and-dna
2	Special Tokens: The Quotation Marks of LLMs	glthr.com/special-tokens-the-quotation-marks-of-llms
3	**Formulaic Delimiters in the Iliad and the Odyssey** (this article)	glthr.com/formulaic-delimiters-in-the-iliad-and-the-odyssey
4	Why XML Tags Are So Fundamental to Claude	glthr.com/xml-fundamental-to-claude
5	Transitive Policies for Agents	glthr.com/transitive-policies-for-ai-agents

How to cite this article

> Guillaume Lethuillier, "Formulaic Delimiters in the Iliad and the Odyssey", glthr.com, December 26, 2025.
> https://glthr.com/formulaic-delimiters-in-the-iliad-and-the-odyssey

For BibTeX:

```
@misc{lethuillier2025formulaic,
  author = {Lethuillier, Guillaume},
  title  = {Formulaic Delimiters in the Iliad and the Odyssey},
  year   = {2025},
  month  = dec,
  url    = {https://glthr.com/formulaic-delimiters-in-the-iliad-and-the-odyssey},
  note   = {glthr.com}
}
```

This document was typeset with LaTeX from the article published at https://glthr.com/formulaic-delimiters-in-the-iliad-and-the-odyssey, which remains the reference version (as updated on November 15, 2026).