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FROM PLATO'S *CRATYLUS* TO SEMIOTICS: THE CORE OF LANGUAGE

HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS

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INTRODUCTION

According to Vivien Law, 'Throughout his life, Plato was deeply concerned with the question of knowledge. If we can no longer take it for granted that we all have access to the same ultimate reality, then how can I be sure that […] you mean the same realities that I do [especially concerning abstract concepts]?' (2003: 18). The same epistemological problem drives modern research that investigates human cognition and the roles of language and mind in the perception and interpretation of reality. Though Plato's influence on the development of the latest theories is not always acknowledged by scholars and, indeed, might not always be proved, many principles of what is now known as semiotics are already explored by Plato in his dialogues. Consequently, the aim of this research paper is to explore which of Plato's conjectures about the core of language echo in views expressed by more recent scholars and what role dialogue plays in the process of cognition. In order to reach this goal, first, commentaries on Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* will be explored and, secondly, Plato's ideas will be compared to those expressed by modern linguists and semioticians according to the qualitative perspective of a case study.

Thus, the study has drawn the following research questions:

1) How do scholars regard Plato's *Cratylus*?
2) Which ideas sketched out by Plato are rephrased in modern linguistics and semiotics?
3) How does dialogue as a form of intelectual inquiry contribute to cognition and acquisition of knowledge?

In view of the above stated, the research has set its enabling objectives:

1) To carry out a literature review on the research subject;
2) To analyze the research data by applying the selected research method;
3) To compile a comparative summary of the results;
4) To draw the relevant conclusions.

Chapter 1 reviews theoretical literature on Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, comparing his ideas on language with those of modern linguists based on works written by Plato, Vivien Law, John E. Joseph, Benjamin Jowett, David Sedley, Shlomy Mualem, Daniel Casasanto, and Steven Pinker.

Chapter 2 investigates the importance of dialogue in the process of meaning generation, placing Plato's ideas in a semiotic context described by Juri Lotman, Kalevi Kull and Floyd Merrell.

1. PLATO'S *CRATYLUS* AND MODERN LINGUISTS ON LANGUAGE AND THOUGHT

As Benjamin Jowett writes in his *Introduction* to Plato's *Cratylus*, 'The Cratylus has always been a source of perplexity to the student of Plato [because] there has been an uncertainty about the motive of the piece, which interpreters have hitherto not succeeded in dispelling' (1892: 1). Likewise, John E. Joseph admits that 'Many conflicting opinions have been raised about the middle section of the *Cratylus* […] on etymology, which […] in Greek, […] means literally "the study of truth" [and] is the central question raised by Socrates. […] It is in every sense the heart of the dialogue' (2000: 39). According to Joseph, the reason why scholars 'have denied its significance for the subsequent development of linguistic thought, [is] the "nomenclaturist" view of languages as consisting of names for pre-existing things; and [the insistance] upon the existance of one or more "law-givers" responsible for assigning them, which is seen as a naively non-evolutionary view of language origins' (2000: 8). In order to see whether indeed Plato's hypothesis can be regarded as 'naïve', first, his idea of legislator will be examined and, secondly, the role of name-givers will be discussed in context of Plato's Archetypes in comparison to propositions expressed by modern linguists on the nature of language.

1.1. Plato's legislator or name-giver

According to Vivien Law, drawing parallels with 'law-giver[s]' of 'city-state[s]' Plato's Socrates 'posits a name-giver ("nomothete") for each language, an individual who was able to perceive absolute reality directly [and assigned names] more or less closely, according to the accuracy of his perception and his skill in translating his percepts into speech sounds' (2003: 22). However, what Plato seems to understand with the name-giver/s is essentially the mind that shapes individual perception of reality by linking different phenomena with particular designations:

> HERMOGENES: But what do you say of kalon?
> SOCRATES: That is more obscure; yet the form is only due to the quantity […].
> HERMOGENES: What do you mean?
> SOCRATES: This name appears to denote mind.
> HERMOGENES: How so?
> SOCRATES: Let me ask you what is the cause why anything has a name; is not the principle which imposes the name the cause?
> HERMOGENES: Certainly.
> […]

> SOCRATES: Is not mind [of Gods, or of men] that which called (kalesan) things by their names, and is not mind the beautiful (kalon)?
> HERMOGENES: That is evident (360 B. C.: 89-90).

Thus, Socrates' etymology or 'study of truth' of the nature of proper denomination ('kalesan kalon') leads him to the craddle of mind through which the world is filtered since it is mind, the 'name-giver' or 'legislator' who translates sense impressions into verbal signs. As Law admits, 'This hypothesis accounts for the existence of different languages: different communities had different name-givers with diverging insights into reality' (2003: 22). Consequently, Plato's reference to the mind of God's might be interpreted in modern context as the 'mind' of a culture as opposed to that of separate individuals, both of which play a role in 'naming' reality from a certain viewpoint, which 'shows that language is at best a very imperfect mirror of reality: corruption can creep in at many points' due to the 'quantity' of 'form' mentioned by Socrates (Law on *Cratylus*, 2003: 22).

1.2. Language and Archetypes

As Benjamin Jowett reminds in his *Introduction* to *Cratylus*, 'Grammar and logic were moving about somewhere in the depths of the human soul, but they were not yet awakened into consciousness and had not found names for themselves, or terms by which they might be expressed' (1892: 2). This sensation of something that must be true though not yet fully cognized illustrates Plato's concept of 'the spiritual realities, the Archetypes or Forms or Ideas […] which are the blueprint for everything around us' (Law, 2003: 18) and, according to Sedley, are discussed also in *Cratylus* characteristic to 'Plato's so-called "middle-period" dialogues […] like the *Phaedo* and *Republic* [voicing] a "classical theory" of Forms' (2003: 6). As Plato writes in *Phaedo*, 'before we began to see and hear and use our other senses, we must have got somewhere knowledge of what the equal is, if we were going to compare with it the things judged equal by the senses and see that all things are eager to be such as that equal is, but are inferior to it' (399 B. C.: 571, 74A-75D). Consequently, according to Plato, 'we must have got the proper knowledge […] before we were born' and 'learning would be recollection' (ibid.: 571; 572).

But, as Law indicates, 'Plato knew [that not] everyone was going to be able to learn by themselves how to see the Archetypes. […] So in order to ensure [the same meaning] words [must serve] as a bridge [… and] a means to knowledge' (2003: 18). As Plato puts it via the voice of Socrates in *Cratylus*, 'a name is an instrument of teaching and of distinguishing natures, as the shuttle is of distinguishing the threads of the web'

(360 B. C.: 66). Consequently, though language fails to fully represent the reality of Forms, it still serves as an indispensable tool in sharing knowledge and outlining Ideas.

Since Archetypes belong to the ideal spiritual reality that is not susceptible to change the way names are, they can be directly experienced regardless of time, which accounts why modern linguists have come to similar ideas as those expressed by Plato, becoming name-givers who assign new terms to the eternal Platonic Forms. Thus, Shlomy Mualem observes that although she cannot 'claim that Plato actually *influenced* Wittgenstein's early thought. In fact, it is plausible to assume […] that while the *Tractatus* was written, he was not familiar with Platos *Cratylus*', there undeniably exist strong parallels between their works (2007: 28). In *Language as Picture in Plato's* Cratylus *and Wittgenstein's* Tractatus, Mualem argues that with a disparity of 'twenty-four hundred years' both Plato and Wittgenstein have 'reached the same conclusion' that language does not coincide with the origins of thought, 'first names (Cratylus) and meaningful propositions (Tractatus) are actually [only] a picture of reality' (ibid.: 10; 12). After comparative analysis of both works, she concludes that 'both Plato and Wittgenstein presuppose that reality, language, and pictures, consist of simple elements that stand in determinate relationship to one another' but while 'Plato tends to stress the weakness of [the] correspondence [of language to reality…] Wittgenstein emphasizes its logical substantiality' (ibid.: 30).

Likewise, parallels can be drawn between Plato's and Pinker's views on the relationship between language and thought. Plato's Socrates conjectures in *Cratylus*, 'I suppose that things may be known without names? […] But how would you expect to know them? What other way can there be of knowing them, except the true and natural way, through their affinities, when they are akin to each other, and through themselves?' (360 B. C.: 108). As a result he concludes that 'we may admit so much, that the knowledge of things is not to be derived from names. No; they must be studied and investigated themselves' (ibid.: 109). Thus, Plato makes a distinction between verbal and nonverbal thought where nonverbal images precede verbal expressions that attempt to capture their essence via naming the Idea, the Form that is the sum of signifieds impossible to fully voice via a single signifier.

Similar to Plato, Steven Pinker states that 'there's got to be something underlying the words themselves, because words can be ambiguous' (1998: 2). He argues that 'we invent slang, […] jargon, [and…] new figures of speech when we need to, [which] shows that we have the idea first' before we conceive of a way how to express it so others could understand it (ibid.). Thus, Pinker concludes that there exists a 'language of thought' he calls 'mentalese' that precedes verbal expression and manifests as an image, a picture before the mind's eye (ibid.: 4). Like Plato's mind, the legislator, Pinker's mentalese highlights an image as an

aspect of the Archetype that can be translated in verbal language more or less aptly but never as a direct equivalent.

Consequently, images as metaphors bridge the gaps of linguistic ambiguity and mirror the mental process of thinking that, according to Pinker, does not function according to 'any left-to-right linear oder the way language does, but [displays] a web of connections between concepts […] connected with other aspects of experience – with visual images, with body sensations' (ibid.: 3). Thus, the ancient Greek mode of rhetorics corresponds to the Platonic Form of Pinker's mentalese. As Law indicates, 'Instead of imagining the search for truth as a straight path with occasional detours along false tracks, the Greeks experienced it as a zigzag lurching between extremes […] a series of antitheses [where] the truth was the middle way' (2003: 20). Moreover, Pinker admits that 'the contents of mentalese are supplied a lot by language, […] evolution of language and the evolution of language in thought probably went together; each one helped the other' (ibid.: 6).

So, in spite of the initially arbitrary nature of language, once the words have been asigned a meaning, they begin to affect the way reality is perceived, forming a bond between the signifier and the signified. As a result, since 'the mind does not manufacture abstract concepts out of thin air... it adapts machinery that is already there' (Jackendoff, 1983: 188, quoted in Casasanto, 2010: 457), 'each time we use a linguistic metaphor, we activate the corresponding conceptual mapping' (Casasanto, 2010: 471). Jowett indicates that 'While delivering a lecture on the philosophy of language, Socrates is also satirizing the endless fertility of the human mind in spinning arguments out of nothing, and employing the most trifling and fanciful analogies in support of a theory [of etymology, i.e. truth]' (1892: 9). Thus, it seems that one of Plato's aims has been to provide a multitude of mappings as possible investigation routes for future generations to explore and interpret in greater detail, knowing that due to shared Archetypes different cultures can communicate ideas and experiences without having 'exact […] equivalent[s]' to name them (Pinker, 1998: 7).

2. DIALOGUE AS A COGNITIVE METHOD

Asking 'Why did Plato write dialogues?', Sedley reasons that thinking is dialogical therefore, via dialogues, Plato illustrates 'the model of our own processes of philosophical reasoning [by creating a sense of witnessing] *Plato thinking aloud*' (2003: 1). According to Vivien Law, 'Dramatising an argument, putting the arguments for a case into the mouth of one speaker and those against into the mouth of another, with a third to act as moderator, suited the Greek perception of reasoning' (2003: 20). As Jowett explains, 'To have determined beforehand, as in a modern didactic treatise, the nature and limits of the subject, would have been fatal to the spirit of enquiry or discovery, which is the soul of the dialogue' (1892: 3). However, according to Joseph, although 'Classicists, rhetoricians and historians of linguistics have been quicker than philosophers or linguists to appreciate the great importance of the dialogue [, …] even historians of linguistics have tended to characterize it as aporistic, culminating in paradox rather than resolution' (2000: 8).

But, according to Kalevi Kull, exactly paradox is at the root of new meaning generation. He notes that the paradox of 'the everlasting controversy between identity and change: in order to continue, one has to remain the same – life itself, however, is *the* changing, life is permanent movement', which is central to the debate in *Cratylus*, is 'already [resolved by] Socrates in the principle of dialogue' (2005: 177). However, as Kull indicates, the idea of dialogue as a cognitive method leading to infinite semiosis is stated more clearly by Juri Lotman who 'claims that there is always more than one text, more than one code. […] In order to have a message, at least two different codes, or two languages are required' (ibid.). Thus, according to Lotman, 'The division between the core and the periphery is a law of the internal organization of the semiosphere' which he defines as 'the semiotic space outside of which semiosis cannot exist' (1984: 214; 205). Moreover, 'The dominant semiotic systems are located at the core' whereas 'peripheral semiotics may be represented […] by […] fragments or even separate texts [that, being] "foreigners" within a given system, […] fulfil the function of a catalyst in the whole mechanism of the semiosphere', leading to 'enhanced meaning generation [via the potential of] reconstruction of the whole system' (ibid.: 214).

As Lotman indicates, 'a game between different structures and sub-structures; the continuous semiotic "invasions" to one or other structure in the "other territory" gives birth to meaning, generating new information' even 'the conversion of the text into an avalanche of texts' (1984: 215; 216). This is what Plato achieves by arranging and sharing his ideas in the form of a dialogue. According to Jowett, what can be deduced from Plato's *Cratylus* is that

> Nature, art, chance, all combine in the formation of language. And the three views respectively propounded by Hermogenes, Socrates, Cratylus, may be described as the conventional, the artificial or rational, and the natural. The view of Socrates is the meeting-point of the other two, just as conceptualism is the meeting-point of nominalism and realism (1892: 4).

As Sedley writes, 'Plato [thus aimed at] captur[ing] and keep[ing] alive whatever it was that had been unique and compelling about Socrates' way of so conversing with people as to force them to rethink their own lives and values' (2003: 6).

Consequently, 'aporistic' and 'paradoxical' as dialogue may be, it embodies the mythological 'Wisdom within foolishness […] represented by the archetype of the Trickster [who] does not conform to the laws of the everyday world, and challenges authority. […] Thus, while appearing to have a destructive effect, through his mischief he helped people to see that there was more than one way of looking at things' (O'Connel and Airey, 2007: 53). 'Such is the character which Plato intends to depict […] as the Silenus Socrates; and through this medium we have to receive our theory of language' (Jowett, 1982: 7). As Jowett concludes, 'On the whole, the Cratylus seems to contain deeper truths about language than any other ancient writing. But feeling the uncertain ground upon which he is walking, and partly in order to preserve the character of Socrates, Plato envelopes the whole subject in a robe of fancy, and allows his principles to drop out as if by accident' (1892: 33).

Similar to the three characters in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, 'Peirce's sign is something that interrelates with something for someone in some respect or capacity' (Floyd Merrell, (2001: 392). Consequently, Merrell draws attention to the fact that

> Peirce's prescribed road to the best of all possible worlds of knowing rests in amicable conversation, banter, debate […] the dialogic way toward knowing [that] entails *neither* necessarily "A" *nor* necessarily "Not-A", but most likely something else, something new […] emerged from the erstwhile excluded-middle […] from the range of possibilities, from within Firstness, or the sphere of "homogeny", from which all the "heterogenic" alternatives between "A" and 'Not-A" can emerge (ibid.).

Thus, the newly cognized meaning is born from the range of latent signifieds made prominent via dialogue, juxtaposition, the interaction between the self and its other.

So, Peirce's Firstness corresponds to Plato's sphere of Archetypes, the equal that encompasses all the possible signifieds that, only partly present in Secondness, are realized in Thirdness. Via juxtaposition of views expressed by Cratylus and Hermogenes, Socrates arrives at some glimpses of truth about the linguistic sign: 'I can assign names as well as pictures to objects', however, 'images are very far from having qualities which are the exact counterpart of the realities which they represent' (360 B. C.: 102; 103). Moreover, he states that 'some names are well and others ill made' so that 'the artist of names may be sometimes

good, or he may be bad' though he 'is called the legislator' (ibid.: 102). Thus, 'a name [is only] the representation of a thing' (ibid.: 103). Consequently, Plato's 'name' in modern semiotic terminology would be a 'sign' that stands for the ideal 'Form/Idea/Archetype', designated by Peirce as 'representamen' that can be expressed as an 'icon', 'index', or 'symbol' none of which exactly corresponds to the idea they represent. But, as Merrell indicates, 'if there are no sign makers and takers [Plato's name-givers and Peirce's interpretants], then there is no geniune *semiosis*' (2001: 396). Thus, Merrell concludes in line with Plato's Socrates, 'There is no Cartesian clarity to be had at this "nonlogocentric", "nonlinguicentric" sphere of vague and overdetermined possible signs where nothing is distinct and where there are no sharp lines of demarcation' (ibid.). From a semiotic perspective, for the semiosis to be truly infinite, tension between the two codes must persist.

CONCLUSIONS

Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* has puzzled its readers over centuries, leading to various conjectures and interpretations as to what the author has meant by the etymologies explored and whether the idea of legislators is to be taken seriously. However, a closer inspection of *Cratylus*, reveals that Plato has mapped out a number of propositions regarding the relationship between language, thought and the linguistic sign likewise defined and explored by modern linguists and semioticians. More importantly, the very form of Plato's argumentation, namely, the dialogue, is what the recent study of semiotics views as the essence of semiosis. Consequently, via juxtaposition of contrasting positions in relation to the nature of language and the placement of Socrates in the observant center of arguments, Plato has illustrated not only the process of philosophical thought marked by metaphors, but also the tension within the semiosphere between two clashing codes that ignite the spark of new realizations or, in Plato's terms, recollections of the archetypal nature of signs. As if inviting the minds of future generations and cultures to explore, expand and experience the Ideas for themselves, Plato leaves the trails indicated in *Cratylus* open for further research.

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