A Theory of Language between the *Cratylus*, the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*

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Abstract

On the surface, the *Cratylus* presents us with two competing theories concerning the “correctness of names”, a naturalist and a conventionalist one. More in depth, it attacks the very idea that the study of language is the privileged or even the only way of acquiring knowledge. Besides casting doubt upon the epistemological value of words it raises the question of the ontology allowing for a theory of knowledge. In comparison with the *Cratylus*, the theory of language put forward in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* marks a double shift: from *onoma* to *logos* and from the relation *onoma–pragma* to the relation *logos–dianoia–eide*. The alternative between an ontology of flux and an ontology of unchanging Forms which underlies the debate about the correctness of names in the *Cratylus* resurfaces in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. The *Sophist* tries to resolve this conflict by assigning motion and rest their proper places among the greatest genera, thus replacing the primitive ontology of single Forms with a structured ontology of relationships among them. This ontology provides a basis for the theory of falsehood of judgement and speech and, more generally, for the theory of imitation which can be true or false. On this new basis, the conception of speech as a kind of *mimesis* can be reformulated. Since speaking and judging consist in a kind of imitation and since imitation, as such, allows for falsehood, neither speech nor judgement can be the criterion of truth. Only what is not itself an imitation can provide this criterion.

Keywords

Plato – *Cratylus* (Plato) – *Theaetetus* (Plato) – *Sophist* (Plato) – language – ontology

On the surface, the *Cratylus* is about two competing theories concerning the “correctness of names” (*orthotes onomaton*), a naturalist and a conventionalist one. For the most of the dialogue, the reader has the impression that the

objective of Socrates' debate with Hermogenes and Cratylus – the conventionalist and the naturalist respectively – is to weigh the pros and cons of each of these two theories in order to reach a somewhat intermediary position by taking both of them into account. Thus, in his discussion with Hermogenes, Socrates reinforces naturalist claims whereas, in discussing with Cratylus, he points out that conventionalism cannot be altogether abandoned. He is seemingly heading towards a basically naturalist theory (names imitate the things as they are in themselves) with a conventionalist ingredient added in (for some linguistic phenomena there is no other explanation than usage, i.e. convention).

Nevertheless, the outcome of the discussion as a whole is a different one. Socrates ends up disapproving of Cratylus' take on the correctness of names, and more particularly of his claim that names provide knowledge of things. We cannot rely on names, Socrates concludes, if we are searching for knowledge of things. As a matter of fact, the analysis of compound names into primitive ones, and of the latter into their elements, eventually demonstrates that, without an extra-linguistic criterion of truth, we cannot decide which names have been formed correctly, i.e. so as to imitate the things they refer to, and which have not. This outcome does not dismiss the naturalist principle as such – it still may be the case that names somehow imitate the nature of what they refer to – but it undermines the epistemological claim that we can draw on names in order to acquire knowledge of the nature of things. On the contrary, to establish whether names are correct or not, we have to know the things “from themselves rather than from their names” (439b7–8).¹ To put it in more general terms, parts of speech as such, no less than their elements and compounds, are not the place to learn the truth, either about names or about the things they denote. It thus turns out that the dialogue as a whole does not aim at finding a middle way between the two competing theories, but, much more radically, at attacking the very idea (not unfamiliar to modern readers) that the study of language is the privileged or even the only way of acquiring knowledge. What is at stake is the epistemological value of words.

Despite the fact that Cratylus still declares himself unshaken in his stance, the last section of the dialogue (437a–440e) casts a long shadow on the series of etymologies (393a–427d) that Socrates had previously provided in order to substantiate the naturalist theory, much to Cratylus' satisfaction (428c). This does not come totally as a surprise. There were warning signs from the very

1 Trans. after Francesco Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato. A Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 447.

beginning of Socrates' astonishing performance, most notably his tracing the inspiration that befell him back to his having listened to Euthyphro earlier that day, as well as his declaring that, tomorrow, he and his interlocutors will need to purify themselves from it (396d–e). The important thing about these etymologies is that, on the whole and particularly up to the turning point in 437a, they fit a conception of reality as being in motion and of things as fundamentally differentiating themselves from each other in the way they move. While this point may not be obvious from the start, it gradually becomes plain until it is expressed most fully in the etymology of the words for “truth” (*aletheia*) and “being” (*on, ousia*) in terms of motion – “truth” signifying “divine roaming” (*aletheia = theia ale*) and “being” meaning “going” (*on = ion*, 421b–c) – and generalised in the following statement: “We say that names signify for us being on the assumption that everything moves and is carried about and flows” (436e2–4).² The turning point consists in the analysis of words for “knowledge” (*episteme*), “certain” (*bebaion*), “enquiry” (*historia*), “convincing” (*piston*) and “memory” (*mneme*) in terms of rest (*stasis*), instead of motion (*kinesis*), with the general conclusion that, in such examples, names signify things at rest (*menonta ta pragmata*, 437c6–8). The two alternatives, one based on the assumption that things are in motion, the other on the assumption that they are at rest, create a dilemma, which leads to Socrates' above-mentioned conclusion, according to which knowledge of the nature of things cannot be acquired from their names. More precisely, and more detrimentally to the naturalist concept of the correctness of names, the two accounts show that those who first established the names may have done so based on a false assumption, so that the names that we analyse deceive us (439c). As a matter of fact, the assumption of a general flux of things, which seems to underlie the signification of words previously analysed by Socrates, does not allow for the possibility of knowledge (*gnosis*) since the latter requires stability (439d–440e). Should knowledge exist, affirms Socrates, there must be rest on the side of the act of knowing, as well as on the side of the object known. This is why Socrates prefers to maintain that the things themselves – the beautiful itself, the good itself, etc. – are not in motion but at rest, i.e. that they always remain what they are. Having arrived at this conclusion, which Cratylus refuses to accept, the basic question is no longer about the epistemological value of words. It is now about the ontology allowing for a theory of knowledge. Can there be knowledge at all on the Heraclitean assumption of the flux of things? Must we not rather assume, for the sake of knowledge, that things in themselves are at rest?

² Trans. after Ademollo, *Commentary*, 438.

This is a question which is given great prominence in other, presumably later,³ dialogues such as the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. The *Theaetetus* contains an in-depth discussion of a flux ontology and its consequences for epistemology. It offers a broader but also a much more fine-grained picture of such an ontology than what we have learnt about it from the *Cratylus*. The points of contact, however, are of interest. The *Cratylus* attributes the view that everything is in flux to the “Heracliteans and many others” (440c2). The *Theaetetus* is more specific in attributing it to “all the wise men (*sophoi*) except Parmenides,” more particularly to Protagoras, Heraclitus and Empedocles, and tracing it back to the founders of comic and tragic poetry, that is Epicharmus and Homer respectively (152e). Homer is presented as the commander-in-chief of this whole army (153a) and Protagoras as the most prominent theorist of this crowd (152a ff.). The secret of his theory consists in the claim that there does not exist a single thing itself in itself because everything is in a process of becoming (*aei gignetai*) instead of a state of being (*esti*, 152d–e). A deeper analysis of becoming, attributed to the more refined among the adherents of a flux theory, based on the principle that everything is motion and nothing else (156a), analyses motion into two concomitant powers, a power to act (*dynamis poiein*) and a power to be acted upon (*dynamis paschein*), so that nothing can be one thing in itself, but everything always results from the interaction of these two powers, neither of which allows the other to stop changing (156a–157c).⁴ Since this account applies also to sense-perception and all kinds of judgement, cognitive acts are always changing processes, too, with no criterion available which would make it possible to differentiate between them in terms of truth and falsehood (157d–162a). The more elaborate picture of the ontology of flux in the *Theaetetus* thus serves a purpose similar to the rougher, if by no means less playfully presented, version of it in the *Cratylus*: the ontology of flux does not offer a firm ground for knowledge that distinguishes between truth and falsehood.

In the *Sophist*, an explicit sequel to the *Theaetetus*, the same theory of flux resurfaces. A class of refined flux-ontologists appears on stage – or rather the Eleatic Stranger imagines that there might be such a kind of reformed corporealists (246d) – who hold that being consists in nothing else than the capacity (*dynamis*) to act (*poiein*) and to be acted upon (*pathein*). The former is the

3 On questions concerning the relative chronology of the *Cratylus* see Michael Erler, *Die Philosophie der Antike, Band 2/2: Platon* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2007), 109 f.

4 See Štěpán Špinka, “Nothing Is in Itself One (Motion, Relation and Corporeality in the Context of Protagoras’ ‘Secret Doctrine’ in the *Theaetetus*),” *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik* 10 (2011): 241–269.

power to make another thing different, the latter is an aptitude of something weaker to suffer from something more powerful (247d–e). These reformed corporealists – or “dynamists” as we may call them – are contrasted with the friends of Forms who distinguish between being (*ousia*) and becoming (*genesis*) and hold that intelligible and incorporeal Forms alone constitute true being, whereas bodies are nothing but a flux of becoming (246b–c). These two ontologies, the dynamist and the idealist, as presented by the Eleatic Stranger, have in common the theory of flux conceived of as an interaction between conjoined capacities of acting and being acted upon. Yet whereas the dynamists take such an interaction to be the only being there is, the idealists relegate it to the realm of becoming, which is opposed to that of true being from which the capacities to act and to be acted upon are banished (248c). Both theories are tested for their capacity to account for knowledge and both fail this test. The friends of Forms are the first to be brought on trial (248d–249b). If they hold that our body is in communion (*koinonei*) with becoming by means of sense-perception, whereas our soul is in communion (*koinonei*) with true being by means of reasoning, and if they concede that, in both cases, to be in communion or communicate (*koinonein*) consists in acting and being acted upon, they will be forced to acknowledge that the act of knowing (*gignoskein*), by which the soul is in communion with true being, is acting (*poiein*) and that, correspondingly, in being known (*gignoskesthai*), true being is acted upon and thus subject to motion. Since this would be in contradiction with the theory of being the idealists profess, they will prefer to reject altogether this kind of relationship as an explanatory pattern for knowledge. But in so doing – so at least the Eleatic Stranger puts it – they will withhold, together with motion, also life, soul and thinking (*phronesis*) or intellection (*nous*) from true being. There will be an unmoved being at rest (*on ... akinēton hestos*), in splendid isolation as it were, but there will be no intellection (*nous*) of anything whatsoever by anyone whomever, if intellection occurs in the soul and the soul moves and lives. On the other hand, and this is the verdict on the dynamists (249b–c), if we allow that everything is moved and changed (*pheronēna kai kinoumenē panta einai*), we will deprive the realm of being of the very character of identity (*tauton touto, to kata tauta kai hosautos kai peri to auto*) which – so at least the Eleatic Stranger suggests – seems to suppose that there is rest. The problem is that where there is no identity there is no intellection. This is why such a theory must be fought by all rational means, the Eleatic Stranger says, since it would make all knowledge, thought and intellection vanish (249c).

As in the *Cratylus* and the *Theaetetus*, we also learn in the *Sophist* that the ontology of flux is no good basis for epistemology. But unlike the accounts of the former dialogues, and more disturbingly, the discussion in the *Sophist* seems

to suggest that the dream Socrates spoke about at the end of the *Cratylus* – the dream about the beautiful itself, the good itself and each one of *ta onta* (439c–d) – may not be a viable alternative either. In this respect, the *aporia* in which the *gigantomachia* of the central part of the *Sophist* results resembles the *aporai* in which the old Parmenides, in the eponymous dialogue, involves the young Socrates. The latter too, like Socrates in the *Cratylus* and the friends of Forms in the *Sophist*, puts forward a very elementary theory of Forms (*Parm.* 128e–129e) which posits their existence, each one in itself, without specifying the nature of the relationship that exists between them and sensible objects, without asking whether there are relations among the Forms themselves and without raising the question of the relation between the soul and the Forms. In the *Parmenides*, the character Parmenides does raise these questions (130a–135b) but gives no satisfactory answer to them. Instead he engages in a dialectical performance (135b–166c) the epistemic value of which is as ambiguous as that of Socrates' etymological performance in the *Cratylus*. Each performance seems to constitute a deliberate concoction of science and trickery, of truth and falsehood.

In contrast to this, in the *Sophist* the Eleatic Stranger offers a way out of the perplexity concerning the fact that knowledge appears impossible both on the assumption that everything is in motion and on the assumption that being is at rest. The solution, to put it briefly, consists in the thesis that there are different kinds of relationships between the Forms themselves and that these relations allow for bridging the gap between being and becoming. They do so in so far as they allow for the being of things other than being itself, i.e. for participation in being, so that not only Forms other than the Form of being, but also things or phenomena other than intelligible Forms participate in being. The Forms of being, identity and difference, by participating mutually in each other, play a major role in the distribution of being among everything other than the Form of being itself. Motion and rest, on the other hand, being genuine opposites one to another, do not accede to this lofty all-pervasive status so that neither of them can claim to constitute a fundamental characteristic of being. On this account, not only must the ontology of flux be dismissed, but so too must an ontology that divides the whole of reality between rest and motion as two opposites. Rather, motion and rest have to be re-evaluated in their respective roles within the structured whole dominated by the Forms of being, identity and difference.⁵

5 See Filip Karfík, "Pantelôs on and megista genê (Plato, *Soph.* 242c–259b)," in *Plato's Sophist: Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium Platonicum Pragense*, ed. Aleš Havlíček, Filip Karfík (Praha: Oikúmené, 2011), 120–145.

This structured ontology, as we may call it,⁶ provides a new basis for a theory of language which will differ from the attempted theory of the correctness of names in the *Cratylus*. There are two main points that differentiate the one from the other. The first consists in the fact that the *Sophist* does not focus on the name (*onoma*), but on the sentence (*logos*) whose basic elements are the name (*onoma*), in the function of the grammatical subject, and the verb (*rhema*), in the function of the grammatical predicate: the *rhema* indicates an action, the *onoma* signifies the agent (262a–c).⁷ The simplest combination (*symploke*) of *onoma* and *rhēma* in this sense is “so to say the first and smallest of utterances” (σχεδὸν τῶν λόγων πρῶτός τε καὶ σμικρότατος, 262c6–7). Not every combination of words is a meaningful utterance (*logos*), only a sentence gives rise to such speech. But even among meaningful utterances, not every combination of *onoma* and *rhema* is right. Sentences – and compounds of them – have a specific quality. They are true or false with respect to the things they refer to. They are true if they say (*legein*) about the things that are that they are (τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν) and they are false if they say about the things that are not that they are (τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα, 262e–d).⁸ The important idea is that the truth or falsehood of a *logos* results from a right or wrong combination of elements suited to form it, the smallest elements of such a kind being the grammatical subject (*onoma*) and predicate (*rhema*) and the smallest combination of them being the sentence (*logos*). This implies that words outside sentences are neither true nor false. This implication is, of course, fatal for Cratylus’ view on the correctness of names, as well as for the kind of etymologies Socrates produces in the *Cratylus*.

The second point of difference, as against the *Cratylus*, concerns the mimetic function of language. Cratylus’ claim is that names (*onomata*) imitate things (*pragmata*). An *onoma* is a *mimema* or *eikon* of a thing (423a–e, 430a–431d,

6 See Štěpán Špinka, “Das Sein des Nicht-Seins. Einige Thesen zur strukturellen Ontologie im Dialog *Sophistes*,” in *Plato’s Sophist: Proceedings of the Seventh Symposium Platonicum Pragense*, ed. Aleš Havlíček, Filip Karfík (Praha: Oikúmené, 2011), 221–239.

7 See Frédérique Ildefonse, “Quelques différences entre le *Cratyle* et le *Sophiste*,” in this volume.

8 See *Crat.* 385b where Socrates gives a definition of true and false speech (λόγος ἀληθής, λόγος ψευδής) in terms of “the one which says about the things that are that they are” and “the one which says about them that they are not” (ὅς ἀν τὰ ὄντα λέγει ὡς ἔστιν, ἀληθής· ὅς δ’ ἀν ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν, ψευδής) and 429d where Cratylus gives a definition of a false speech (τὸ ψευδὴ λέγειν) in terms of “not saying the things that are” (τὸ μὴ τὰ ὄντα λέγειν). On the theory of true and false speech discussed in *Cratylus*, however, it does not matter whether the spoken unit is a name (*onoma*), a verb (*rhema*), a sentence (*logos*) as a combination (*synthesis*) of a name and a verb, a syllable (*syllabe*), a letter (*gramma*) or an element (*stoicheion*), i.e. a phoneme, see *Crat.* 431a–434b.

439a–b). Cratylus does not expand himself on this claim. It is Socrates who lends the view a conceptual garb by introducing the idea of a legislator who established the names in “reproducing the form of name suitable for each given thing in whatever syllables” (τὸ τοῦ ὀνόματος εἶδος ἀποδιδῶ τὸ προσήκον ἐκάστῳ ἐν ὁποιαισοῦν συλλαβαῖς, 390a5–6) or, to put it more simply, in “imitating, by means of syllables and letters, the essence of things” (ὁ διὰ τῶν συλλαβῶν τε καὶ γραμμάτων τὴν οὐσίαν τῶν πραγμάτων ἀπομιμούμενος, 431d2–3). At the end of the dialogue, Socrates suggests that the things thus imitated are items such as the beautiful itself or the good itself, which are always such as they are (439c–d), i.e. intelligible Forms. Cratylus, however, sticks to the Heraclitean view of reality (440c–e). This suggests that, for him, the things imitated by names are objects of sense-perception. But, notwithstanding this difference, both Socrates and Cratylus suppose a relationship of resemblance between names and things. Neither Socrates’ idea of a kind of expert knowledge supervising the fabrication of names (390b–e) nor Cratylus’ acknowledgement of the role of habit (*ethos*), i.e. convention (*syntheke*), in understanding (*gignoskein*) what another person has in mind (*dianoesthai*) when he or she utters his or her thought⁹ (434e–435c) affect the core idea of Cratylus’ naturalist position, according to which there is a direct relation of resemblance between name and thing (ὄνομα ὅμοιον τῷ πράγματι, 434a). A name manifests (*deloun*) a thing by virtue of a resemblance (*homoïoma*) between them (τὸ ὄνομα δῆλωμα τοῦ πράγματος, 433d; ὁμοιώματι δηλοῦν ὅτι ἄν τις δηλοῖ, 434a). Cratylus even claims that knowledge of names is the only way of knowing things (435d–436a). Socrates casts doubts on this view in pointing out that there must have been a source of knowledge prior to the imposition of names and that there must be a criterion of the correctness of names that is independent of them (438a–439b). But no relation of resemblance other than that between names, their constituents and compounds, on the one hand, and things imitated by them, on the other, is discussed. Here lies the second point of difference between the *Cratylus*, on the one hand, and the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, on the other. In the *Theaetetus*, *logos* is conceived of as an imitation not of things, but of thought. *Logos* is “like an image of thought in the voice” (διανοίας ἐν φωνῇ ὥσπερ εἰδωλον, *Tht.* 208c5). The first of the three definitions listed in the passage dealing with the meaning of the term *logos* runs as follows:

9 On this topic, see the contribution of Francesco Aronadio, “Intentionality and referentiality in Plato’s *Cratylus*,” in this volume.

to make one's own thinking (*dianoia*) apparent through the voice accompanied by verbs and nouns, by imprinting the judgment (*doxa*) into the flux which goes through the mouth like into a mirror or water. (*Tht.* 206d1–4)¹⁰

Speech (*logos, legein*), Socrates tells us in an earlier passage of the *Theaetetus*, is a judgement (*doxa, doxazein*) passed by a thinking soul (*psyche ... dianoooumene*) if it is uttered by the means of voice (*phone*, 189e–190a). The same conception of the *logos* as utterance of thought is endorsed by the Stranger from Elea in the *Sophist*:

- STRANGER: Aren't *dianoia* and *logos* the same except that the *dialogos* of the soul with herself occurring without voice was given the name *dianoia* by us?
- THEAETETUS: Quite so.
- STRANGER: And, originating from it, the flux which goes through the mouth accompanied by sound, don't we call it *logos*?
- THEAETETUS: True, we do.

(*Soph.* 263e3–9)¹¹

According to this theory, *logos*, as a combination of nouns and verbs, has a mimetic nature, but what it imitates are not directly the things (*pragmata*), as Cratylus' naturalist theory has it, but thinking (*dianoia*) or judgment (*doxa*), the latter being nothing other than a completed act of thinking (*dianoias apo-telesma*) which constitutes either an affirmation or a negation and which is either true or false (*Soph.* 263b–264b). The analysis of speech in terms of a combination (*sumploke, plegma*) of components functioning as grammatical subject and predicate¹² must apply to thinking as well, which constitutes such a *plegma* or *symploke* prior to speech. One may ask: If the *logos* is a combination of *onoma* and *rhema*, both of them being words formed by articulated sounds, what are the components combined by *dianoia* and *doxa*? This we are

10 τὴν αὐτοῦ διάνοιαν ἐμφανῆ ποιεῖν διὰ φωνῆς μετὰ ῥημάτων τε καὶ ὀνομάτων, ὥσπερ εἰς κάτοπτρον ἢ ὕδωρ τὴν δόξαν ἐκτυπούμενον εἰς τὴν διὰ τοῦ στόματος ῥοήν.

11 ΞΕ. Οὐκοῦν διάνοια μὲν καὶ λόγος ταῦτόν· πλὴν ὁ μὲν ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς πρὸς αὐτὴν διάλογος ἄνευ φωνῆς γιγνώμενος τοῦτ' αὐτὸ ἡμῖν ἐπωνομάσθη, διάνοια; – ΘΕΑΙ. Πάνυ μὲν οὖν. – ΞΕ. Τὸ δὲ γ' ἅπ' ἐκείνης βεῦμα διὰ τοῦ στόματος ἰδὼν μετὰ φθόγγου κέκληται λόγος; – ΘΕΑΙ. Ἀληθῆ. See. also *Tim.* 37a–b where the cognitive processes of the world soul are described in terms of a λόγος ... φερόμενος ἄνευ φθόγγου καὶ ἡχῆς.

12 See *Tht.* 202b, 206d; *Soph.* 261e–262d.

not told. Certainly, the components of thought which are mirrored in speech by *onoma* and *rhema* are not themselves words in the sense of articulated sounds. Nor are they mental representations (*phantasia*) since representation, the Eleatic Stranger says, is a combination of sense-perception and judgement (*symmeixis aistheseos kai doxes*, *Soph.* 264b). One might think that they are the intelligible Forms (*eide* or *gene*) which themselves constitute a *plegma* or *symploke* prior to thinking. After all, does not the Eleatic Stranger say that “*logos* came about through the combination of Forms one with another”?¹³ Forms themselves may be what the dialectical science (*dialektike episteme*) knows in so far as it grasps them correctly in their mutual relationships (253b–e),¹⁴ but they will probably not be reducible to the contents of knowledge.¹⁵ Be that as it may, thinking (*dianoia*), judgment (*doxa*) and representation (*phantasia*), no less than speech (*logos*), admit of falsehood (263d–264d, see also 241e). This is what makes them *imitations* of things (*mimemata ton onton*, 264d4). If the *logos* is an image, whether true or false, of *dianoia/doxa*, the latter is likely to be an image, whether true or false, of things (*ta onta*), an image constituted by the combination of certain elements of thought – we may call them concepts, but Plato does not – which imitate the Forms and are themselves imitated by *onomata kai rhemata*. Thus in the last resort, the *logos* does imitate *ta onta*, but it does so through the intermediary of *dianoia/doxa*, so that, to put it more accurately, speech is an image of an image of *ta onta*.

We are not given more details about the way in which *dianoia/doxa* relates to *ta onta* and *logos* to *dianoia/doxa*. In particular, we are not told what exactly the imitation of *ta onta* by *dianoia/doxa* and of the latter by speech consists in. Nor are we told how exactly the *logos* relates to the *phantasia* as a combination of *doxa* and *aisthesis*, and more precisely how this very combination comes about. To know this is important in order to understand how *logos* relates not only to the objects of thought, but also to the objects of sense-perception.¹⁶ But, from the discussion in the *Sophist*, there emerges what I would like to call, for the sake of convenience, the principle of structural analogy. Let me

13 διά γάρ τὴν ἀλλήλων τῶν εἰδῶν συμπλοκὴν ὁ λόγος γέγονεν ἡμῖν, 259e.

14 This would correspond to what the *Timaeus*, in the case of the world soul, terms intellection and science νοῦς ἐπιστήμη τε (37c).

15 See *Epist.* vii, 342a–e, especially c4–d3.

16 An answer to this question is the theory of the combination of two circular motions within the structure of the soul in the *Timaeus* 37a–c and 43c–44c. One of them relates to the sensibles and produces *doxai* and *pisteis*, the other relates to the intelligibles and produces *nous* and *episteme*. Together they constitute the soundless *logos* of the soul. While in the case of the world soul it is always true (37b4), in the case of human beings it allows for falsehood (44a3).

formulate this principle as follows: If the Forms that constitute being in its complexity (the *symploke ton eidon*) are terms in a network of combinatory relationships, as the Eleatic Stranger's structured ontology has it (259a–b), so are the corresponding components of *dianoia/doxa* (concepts in the soul) and so are the correspondent components of *logos* (*onomata kai rhemata* uttered by voice). If nothing else, at least this structural analogy provides the mimetic link between the three strata of being, thinking and speaking, the first of which is paradigmatic for the subsequent two. Even the composition of words made of vowels and consonants – though no word in itself is either true or false – repeats this pattern, since the connection of vowels with consonants to form syllables is not arbitrary, but governed by combinatory rules (253a). The formal analogy between the network of interrelated terms at the level of *logos* with the one at the level of *dianoia* and, again, the one at the level of *eide* is a version of the mimetic principle which lies at the heart of Cratylus' naturalist theory. In this formalised version, transferred from the *onoma* to the *logos* as the minimal unit which can be true or false, the mimetic principle is to some extent even compatible with the conventionalist theory. The basic elements of speech (*grammata, stoicheia*) and the rules governing their combinations may, in fact, be a matter of social convention. The fact that different societies use different languages with different sets of such elements and different rules for their combination testifies to this fact. But the capacity of these languages to produce statements, i.e. affirmations and negations, which are either true or false, does not stem from convention. It is based on the mimetic principle which applies, first, to the relation between thinking and being and, second, to the relation between speaking and thinking.¹⁷ Since the object of thought is itself constituted by definite relations between definite items (Forms), thinking assimilates them by putting analogous items (concepts) in analogous

17 See Aristotle's account of language at the beginning of *De interpretatione*: "First we must settle what a name (*onoma*) is and what a verb (*rhema*) is, and then what a negation (*apophasis*), an affirmation (*kataphasis*), a statement (*apophansis*) and a sentence (*logos*) are. Now spoken sounds (*ta en te phone*) are symbols of affections (*pathemata*) in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken words. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of – affections of the soul – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses (*homoiomata*) of – actual things (*pragmata*) – are also the same." (*Int.* 1, 16a1–8, trans. John Lloyd Ackrill, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, The revised Oxford translation, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995⁶). Aristotle adopts the conventionalist view of the relation between the language (both written and spoken) and the soul's affections but employs the mimetic principle to explain the relationship between the soul's affections and the things themselves.

relations and speaking imitates thinking in producing again analogous relations between analogous items (words). It is through their analogous structures that speech imitates thought and thought imitates the combination of Forms.

In comparison with the *Cratylus*, the theory of language put forward in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* marks a double shift: from *onoma* to *logos* and from the relation *onoma–pragma* to the relation *logos–dianoia–eide*. The alternative between an ontology of flux and an ontology of unchanging Forms which underlies the debate about the correctness of names in the *Cratylus* resurfaces with vehemence in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*. The *Sophist* tries to resolve this conflict by assigning motion and rest their proper places among the greatest genera, thus replacing the primitive ontology of single Forms with a structured ontology of relationships among them. Most importantly, this ontology provides a basis for the theory of falsehood of judgement and speech and, more generally, for the theory of imitation in which, unlike in *Cratylus*' view, imitation can be true or false. On this new basis, the conception of speech as a kind of *mimesis* can be reformulated. Since speaking and judging consist in a kind of imitation and since imitation, as such, allows for falsehood, neither speech nor judgement can be the criterion of truth. Only what is not itself an imitation can provide this criterion.

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