

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE: ANCIENT AND MODERN THEORIES IN DIALOGUE

ROBERT MALTBY

The question of the origin of language and especially of the relationship between words and the things they denote is a problem which taxed ancient thinkers in the Greco-Roman world and is one which has still found no unanimous explanation from modern linguistic science. In the past the church has forbidden any discussion of the problem outside the account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis and for many years, until the beginning of the last century the topic was banned from discussion by the British Linguistics Society on the grounds that too many mad and fanciful theories were being proposed with no way of checking or testing them.

It is nevertheless a central question for anyone tracing the development of our own species, *homo sapiens*, and at last in recent years it has started to receive more attention from biologists and anthropologists.

In the ancient world we have two detailed discussions of the questions: one in Plato's dialogue, *Cratylus*, from the fourth century BC, and the second in Varro's *De Lingua Latina*, dedicated to Cicero and composed in the forties BC. There are also shorter accounts, usually connected with histories of the development of civilisation in Epicurus' Letter 7 to Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Lucretius, Cicero, Vitruvius and later Christian writers, including Augustine.

The aim of this paper is to follow the main strands of this ancient tradition and to juxtapose these ideas with modern theories on the subject. As will become apparent, in many respects modern linguistic science has not progressed much further than the ideas to be found in ancient speculation on this important subject.

One of the main problems that exercised the ancients was the question of whether language was natural or conventional, and this is the argument at the centre of Plato's *Cratylus*. As the dialogue opens, Cratylus, a follower of Heraclitus, is arguing for a natural connection between the sound of a word and the object or concept it describes, and says that this is true of the language of both Greeks and foreigners:

EPM. Κρατύλος φησὶν ὅδε, ὦ Σώκρατες, ὀνόματος ὀρθότητα εἶναι ἐκάστῳ τῶν ὄντων φύσει πεφυκυῖαν, καὶ οὐ τοῦτο εἶναι ὄνομα ὃ ἂν τινες ξυθήμενοι καλεῖν καλῶσι, τῆς αὐτῶν φωνῆς μόριον ἐπιφθεγγόμενοι, ἀλλὰ ὀρθότητά τινα τῶν ὀνομάτων πεφυκέσθαι καὶ Ἑλλήσι καὶ βαρβάροις τὴν αὐτὴν ἄπασιν. (Plato *Cratylus* 383 a-b)

HERMOGENES: Cratylus, here, Socrates, says there is a correct name for each thing which comes about by nature, and that this name is not whatever people agree to call a thing, applying to it a part of their own speech, but that there is a certain correctness of names, which is the same for everybody, both Greeks and barbarians.

His opponent Hermogenes says that on the contrary names are simply arbitrary and are assigned by convention. For this reason Greeks differ amongst themselves and with barbarians about the names for things:

ΕΡΜ. Καὶ μὴν ἔγωγε, ὡς Σώκρατες, πολλάκις δὴ καὶ τοῦτο διαλεχθεὶς καὶ ἄλλοις πολλοῖς, οὐ δύναμαι πεισθῆναι ὡς ἄλλη τις ὀρθότης ὀνόματος ἢ ξυνηθήκη καὶ ὁμολογία. ἐμοὶ γὰρ δοκεῖ, ὅτι ἂν τίς τι θῆται ὄνομα, τοῦτο εἶναι τὸ ὀρθόν· καὶ ἂν αὐθίς γε ἕτερον μεταθῆται, ἐκείνο δὲ μηκέτι καλῆ, οὐδὲν ἦττον τὸ ὑσπερον ὀρθῶς ἔχειν τοῦ προτέρου, ὡς περ τοῖς οἰκέταις ἡμεῖς μετατιθέμεθα· οὐ γὰρ φύσει ἐκάστω πεφυκέναι ὄνομα οὐδὲν οὐδενί, ἀλλὰ νόμῳ καὶ ἔθει τῶν ἐθισάντων τε καὶ καλούντων. (Plato *Cratylus* 384c-d)

HERMOGENES: I for my part, Socrates, have often talked with Cratylus and many others and cannot be persuaded that there is any correctness of names other than convention and agreement. For it seems to me that whatever name you give to a thing is its correct name; and if you change it for another one and no longer call it by the first name, the later name is no less correct than the earlier, just as we change the name of our servants; for no name belongs to any particular thing by nature, but rather by the habit and custom of those who establish the usage and call it so.

From 385d onwards Socrates refutes Hermogenes' position by getting him to agree that naming is a skill carried out by a name-making craftsman:

ΣΩ. Οὐκ ἄρα παντὸς ἀνδρός, ὡς Ἑρμόγενης, ὄνομα θέσθαι, ἀλλὰ τινος ὀνοματοργού· οὗτος δ' ἐστίν, ὡς εἴκεν, ὁ νομοθέτης, ὃς δὴ τῶν δημιουργῶν σπανιώτατος ἐν ἀνθρώποις γίγνεται. (Plato *Cratylus* 388e-389a)

SOCRATES: It is not then, Hermogenes, for every man to give names, but for a certain name-maker; and he, it seems, is the law-giver, who is the rarest of all artisans among men.

This name-maker is equated with a *νομοθέτης*, normally translated as a “law-giver”, from *νομός* “law”, possibly reflecting the ancient belief that language and law arrived together as civilisation developed. However, as Sedley has pointed out¹, the word *νομοθέτης*

¹ D. Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 66-74.

could equally well be related to other senses of *νομός*, such as “custom” (i.e. one who makes a word customary among people), or “distribution” from *νέμειν* “distribute” (i.e. one who distributes words among people).

Things have names by nature and the role of this name-maker is to understand the true nature or form of each thing and to embody it in letters and syllables:

ΣΩ. Κίνδυνεύει ἄρα, ὃ Ἑρμογένες, ε ναι οὐ φαῦλον, ὡς σὺ οἶει, ἢ τοῦ ὀνόματος θέσις, οὐδὲ φαύλων ἀνδρῶν οὐδὲ τῶν ἐπιτυχόντων. καὶ Κρατύλος ἀληθῆ λέγει λέγων φύσει τὰ ὀνόματα ε ναι τοῖς πράγμασι, καὶ οὐ πάντα δημιουργὸν ὀνομάτων ε ναι, ἀλλὰ μόνον ἐκείνον τὸν ἀποβλέποντα εἰς τὸ τῆ φύσει ὄνομα ὃν ἐκάστω καὶ δυνάμενον αὐτοῦ τὸ εδος τίθεναι εἰς τε τὰ γράμματα καὶ τὰς συλλαβάς. (Plato *Cratylus* 390d-e)

SOCRATES: Then, Hermogenes, the giving of names can hardly be, as you imagine, a trifling matter or the work of trifling or chance persons. And Cratylus is right in saying that things have names by nature and that not every man is an artisan of names, but only the man who keeps in view the name which each thing has by nature and is able to put its form into letters and syllables.

Elsewhere Plato suggests an almost divine status for these name-givers, since they are found to be best at naming eternal and immutable essences: gods' names and cosmological terms are particularly likely to be correct:

ΣΩ. Εἰκὸς δὲ μάλιστα ἡμᾶς εὐρεῖν τὰ ὀρθῶς κείμενα περὶ τὰ αἰεὶ ὄντα καὶ πεφυκότα. ἐσπουδάσθαι γὰρ ἐνταῦθα μάλιστα πρέπει τὴν θέσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἴσως δ' ἐνια αὐτῶν καὶ ὑπὸ θειοτέρας δυνάμεως ἢ τῆς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐτέθη. (Plato *Cratylus* 397b-c)

SOCRATES: We are most likely to find correct names in the case of eternal and immutable essences; for the greatest care should have been given to the imposition of their names and perhaps some of them were given by a power more divine than that of men.

Furthermore just as a tool can be made out of more than one kind of metal, so different sounds can be used in different languages to embody the same concept:

ΣΩ. Ἄρ' οὖν, ὃ βέλτιστε, καὶ τὸ ἐκάστω φύσει πεφυκὸς ὄνομα τὸ νομοθέτην ἐκείνον εἰς τοὺς φθόγγους καὶ τὰς συλλαβάς δεῖ ἐπίστασθαι τίθεναι καὶ βλέποντα πρὸς αὐτὸ ἐκεῖνο ὃ ἔστιν ὄνομα, πάντα τὰ ὀνόματα ποιεῖν τε καὶ τίθεσθαι, εἰ μέλλει κύριος εἶναι ὀνομάτων θέτης; εἰ δὲ μὴ εἰς τὰς αὐτὰς συλλαβάς ἕκαστος ὁ νομοθέτης τίθησιν, οὐδὲν δεῖ τοῦτο ἀγνοεῖν· οὐδὲ γὰρ εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν σίδηρον ἅπας χαλκεὺς τίθησιν, τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα ποιῶν τὸ αὐτὸ ὄργανον· ἀλλ' ὅμως, ἕως ἂν τὴν αὐτὴν ἰδέαν ἀποδιδῶ, ἕαντε ἐν ἄλλῃ σιδήρῳ, ὅμως ὀρθῶς ἔχει τὸ ὄργαν-

νον, εἴαντε ἐνθάδε εἴαντε ἐν βαρβάρους τις ποιῆ. ἢ γάρ; (Plato *Cratylus* 389d-390a)

SOCRATES: Then, my good friend, ought not our law-giver to know how to put the name which is naturally fitted for each object into sounds and syllables? Ought he not to make and give all names with his eye fixed on the ideal name, if he is to be an authoritative name-giver? And if different law-givers do not put it into the same syllables, we should nevertheless not be ignorant of the ideal name for that sake. For different smiths do not embody a form in the same iron, although making the same instrument for the same purpose. So long as they reproduce the same ideal, even though it may be in different iron, still the instrument is as it should be, whether they make it here or in foreign lands. Is that not so?

Finally just as a carpenter making a rudder has to be supervised by a steersman, who will use it, so the law-giver, making a name must be supervised by a dialectician, the name-user *par excellence*:

ΣΩ. Τέκτονος μ ν ἄρα ἔργον ἐστὶν ποιῆσαι πηδάλιον ἐπιστατοῦντος κυβερνήτου, εἰ μέλλει καλὸν ε ναι τὸ πηδάλιον.

ΕΡΜ. Φαίνεται.

ΣΩ. Νομοθέτου δέ γε, ὡς ἔοικεν, ὄνομα, ἐπιστάτην ἔχοντος διαλεκτικὸν ἄνδρα, εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ὀνόματα θήσεσθαι.

ΕΡΜ. Ἔστι ταῦτα. (Plato *Cratylus* 390d)

SOCRATES The work of a carpenter, then, is to make a rudder under the supervision of a steersman, if the rudder is to be a good one. HERMOGENES Evidently. SOCRATES And the work of the lawgiver, as it seems, is to make a name, with the dialectician as his supervisor, if names are to be well given. HERMOGENES True.

The body of the dialogue, 390e-427d consists of a long series of etymologies proposed by Socrates in order to refute Hermogenes' initial position by showing how expertly names were manufactures in ancient times to give information about the objects they named. Starting with Homeric names he then works through a series of cosmological, theological, physical and finally ethical items to illustrate his point.

As an example we may take the etymology of the name 'Uranus':

ΣΩ. ἔστι δὲ οὗτος Οὐρανοῦ υἱός, ὡς λόγος· ἢ δὲ αὖ ἐς τὸ ἄνω ὄψις καλῶς ἔχει τοῦτο τὸ ὄνομα καλεῖσθαι, οὐρανό, ὀρίσσεια τὰ ἄνω, ὅθεν δὴ καὶ φασιν, ὦ Ἐρμόγετες, τὸν καθαρὸν νοῦν παραγίγνεσθαι οἱ μετεωρολόγοι, καὶ τῷ Οὐρανῷ ὀρθῶς τὸ ὄνομα κείσθαι. (Plato *Cratylus* 396b-c)

SOCRATES And this (Cronos), according to tradition, is the son of Uranus; but the upward gaze is rightly called by the name *οὐρανό*, looking

at things above, ὀρώσα τὰ ἄνω, and the astronomers say, Hermogenes, that from this looking people acquire a pure mind, and Uranus is correctly named.

Finally, he shows how different individual sounds of the language imitate reality, for example, ‘rho’ expresses motion:

ΣΩ. Πρῶτον μιν τοίνυν τὸ ῥῶ ἔμοιγε φαίνεται ὡςπερ ὄργανον εἶναι πάσης τῆς κινήσεως. (Plato *Cratylus* 426c.)

SOCRATES: First of all it seems to me the letter rho is an instrument for expressing all motion.

‘lambda’ slipperiness:

ὅτι δὲ ὀλισθάνει μάλιστα ἐν τῇ λάβδᾳ ἢ γλῶττα κατιδόν, ἀφομοιῶν ὀνόμασε τὰ τε ‘λεία’ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ ‘ὀλισθάνειν’ καὶ τὸ ‘λιπαρόν’ καὶ τὸ ‘κολλῶδες’ καὶ τὰλλα πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα. ἢ δὲ ὀλισθανούσης τῆς γλῶττης ἀντιλαμβάνεται ἢ τοῦ γάμμα δύναμις, τὸ “γλίσχρον” ἀπεμιμήσατο καὶ ‘γλυκὺ’ καὶ ‘γλοιῶδες’. (Plato *Cratylus* 427b)

SOCRATES: And seeing that the tongue has a gliding movement most in the pronunciation of the letter lambda he made the words λεία (level), ὀλισθάνειν (glide) itself, λιπαρόν (sleak), κολλῶδες (glutinous) and the like to conform to it. Where the gliding of the tongue is stopped by the sound of the gamma he reproduced the nature of γλίσχρον (glutinous), γλυκὺ (sweet) and γλοιῶδες (gluey).

and ‘omicron’ roundness:

εἰς δὲ τὸ “γογγύλον” τοῦ οὐ δεόμενος σημείου, τοῦτο πλείστον αὐτῷ εἰς τὸ ὄνομα ἐνεκέρασεν. (Plato *Cratylus* 427c)

SOCRATES: He needed the sign O for the expression of γογγύλον (round), and made it the chief element of the word.

Up until this point Plato has been genuine in his presupposition, shared with most of his contemporaries, that the words coined by early members of the human race and by modern name makers in some way encoded descriptions of the things they named by a form of sound symbolism. The etymologies of the central section are not, as some scholars used to think, intended to make fun of etymological speculation, for such speculation is a serious and ubiquitous feature of ancient literature. In fact Plato himself often

uses such speculation in his other dialogues when trying to establish the true meaning of concepts². However, he is aware of the limitations of such speculation from the point of view of discovering philosophical truth. In general he gives the impression that ancient name-givers were successful in naming divine and cosmic entities³. They were, however, less successful in naming moral and intellectual virtues, the very area of ethics that Plato is most interested in investigating and for which the theory of unchanging Forms provides a better guide to philosophical truth than etymological study.

From 427d to the end of the dialogue *Cratylus*' belief in the correctness of names is accordingly put to the test. *Cratylus* is made to admit there are a number of ways in which the original naming process may have been defective. First, the name giver may sometimes have been successful in his imitation of the nature of things through letters and syllables, but on other occasions he constructed the name incorrectly by adding or taking away sounds:

ΣΩ. Τί δὲ ὁ διὰ τῶν συλλαβῶν τε καὶ γραμμάτων τὴν οὐσίαν τῶν πραγμάτων ἀπομιμούμενος; ἄρα οὐ κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον, ἂν μὲν πάντα ἀποδῶ τὰ προσήκοντα, καλὴ ἢ εἰκὼν ἔσται – τοῦτο δ' ἔστιν ὄνομα – ἐὰν δὲ σμικρὰ ἐλλείπη ἢ προστιθῆ ἕνιστε, εἰκὼν μὲν γενήσεται, καλὴ δὲ οὐ; ὥστε τὰ μὲν καλῶς εἰργασμένα ἔσται τῶν ὀνομάτων, τὰ δὲ κακῶς;

KP. Ἴσως.

ΣΩ. Ἴσως ἄρα ἔσται ὁ μὲν ἀγαθὸς δημιουργὸς ὀνομάτων, ὁ δὲ κακός;

KP. Ναί. (Plato *Cratylus* 431d)

SOCRATES: And how about him who imitates the nature of things by means of letters and syllables? By the same principle, if he gives all that is appropriate, the image – that is to say, the name – will be good, and if he sometimes omits or adds a little, it will be an image, but not a good one; and therefore some names are well and others badly made. Is that not true?

CRATYLUS: Perhaps.

SOCRATES: Perhaps, then, one artisan of names will be good, and another bad?

CRATYLUS: Yes.

Secondly, the ancients who gave names may have had false beliefs about the things they were naming:

ΣΩ. Δῆλον ὅτι ὁ θέμενος πρῶτος τὰ ὀνόματα, οἷα ἡγήετο εἶναι τὰ πράγματα, τοιαῦτα ἐτίθετο καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα, ὡς φαμεν. ἦ γάρ;

KP. Ναί.

ΣΩ. Εἰ οὖν ἐκεῖνος μὴ ὀρθῶς ἡγήετο, ἔθετο δὲ οἷα ἡγήετο, τί οἶε ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀκολουθοῦντας αὐτῷ πείσεσθαι; ἄλλο τι ἢ ἔξαπατηθῆσεσθαι;

(Plato *Cratylus* 436b)

² See D. Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, pp. 25-50 on Plato's serious use of etymology as a guide to meaning in his other works.

³ *Cratylus* 397b-c quoted above.

SOCRATES: Clearly the man who first gave names, gave such names as accorded with his conception of the things signified, as we said. Is that not so?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then if his conception was wrong, and he gave the names according to that conception, what do you think will happen to us who follow him? Can we help being deceived?

Furthermore the original forms of ancient names change over time so that, in some cases, the original intention of the name giver becomes obscured 414c-d:

ΣΩ. ὦ μακάριε, οὐκ ο σθ' ὅτι τὰ πρῶτα ὀνόματα τεθέντα κατακέχωσται ἤδη ὑπὸ τῶν βουλομένων τραγηθεῖν αὐτά, περιτιθέντων γράμματα καὶ ἐξαιρούντων εὐστομίας ἔνεκα καὶ πανταχῇ στρεφόντων, καὶ ὑπὸ καλλωπισμοῦ καὶ ὑπὸ χρόνου. ἐπεὶ ἐν τῇ 'κατόπτρῳ' οὐ δοκεῖ σοι ἄτοπον εἶναι τὸ ἐμβεβλήσθαι τὸ ῥῶ; ἀλλὰ τοιαῦτα οἱ μαι ποιοῦσιν οἱ τῆς μὲν ἀληθείας οὐδὲν φροντίζοντες, τὸ δὲ στόμα πλάττοντες, ὥστε ἐπεμβάλλοντες πολλὰ ἐπὶ τὰ πρῶτα ὀνόματα τελευτῶντες ποιοῦσιν μηδὲ ἂν ἓνα ἀνθρώπων συνείναι ὅτι ποτὲ βοῦλεται τὸ ὄνομα ὥσπερ καὶ τὴν Σφίγγα ἀντὶ "φικὸς" 'σφίγγα' καλοῦσιν, καὶ ἄλλα πολλά. (Plato *Cratylus* 414c-d)

SOCRATES: My dear friend, you have forgotten that the original words have long ago been buried by people who wanted to dress them up, adding and subtracting letters for the sake of euphony and distorting them in every way for ornamentation or merely through the lapse of time. In the word *κάτοπτρον* (mirror), for example, do you not think the addition of the letter rho is absurd. This sort of thing is the work of people who have no care for truth, but think only of the shape of their mouths; so they keep adding to the original words so that finally no human being can understand what the word means. So the sphinx, for example, is called sphinx instead of *phix*, and there are many other examples.

Finally the connection between individual sounds and concepts does not always work as suggested in the first part of the dialogue. So a sound with soft connotations like lambda can be found in words connoting hardness like *σκληρότης*:

ΣΩ. ἦ καὶ τὸ λάβδα ἐγκείμενον; οὐ τὸ ἐναντίον δηλοῖ σκληρότητος; ... (Plato *Cratylus* 434d)

SOCRATES: But how about the lambda in *σκληρότης*? Does it not express the opposite of hardness?...

435a ΣΩ. εἶπερ τὸ λάβδα ἀνόμιον ἐστι τῇ ἢ φῆς σὺ σκληρότητι ... τί ἄλλο ἢ αὐτος σαυτῇ ξυνέθου καὶ σοι γίγνεται ἢ ὀρθότης τοῦ ὀνόματος ξυνθήκη, ἐπειδὴ γε δηλοῖ καὶ τὰ ὅμοια καὶ τὰ ἀνόμοια γράμματα, ἔθους τε καὶ ξυνθήκης τυχόντα; (Plato *Cratylus* 435a)

SOCRATES: If in your examples of *σκληρότης*, the lambda is unlike hardness ... did you not make a convention with yourself, since both like and unlike letters, by the influence of custom and convention, produce indication?

The conclusion to which Cratylus must be drawn is then that both convention and imitation must have some role to play in the relation of sound to sense.

When we move on from Plato to his most influential pupil, Aristotle, it seems at first that in theory he is a follower not of Plato's views but of those of Hermogenes, namely that the relationship between words and things is merely conventional. This view is expressed most clearly in the opening of his work *De Interpretatione*. Language in this work is seen as a conventional symbol for the objects and concepts it represents both at the level of individual words and at the level of the sentence:

τὸ δὲ κατὰ συνθήκην, ὅτι φύσει τῶν ὀνομάτων οὐδὲν ἐστίν, ἀλλ' ὅταν γένηται σύμβολον· ἐπεὶ δηλοῦσί γέ τι καὶ οἱ ἀγράμματοι ψόφοι, οἷον θηρίων, ὧν οὐδὲν ἐστὶν ὄνομα. (Aristotle *De Interp.* 16a)

I said "by convention" because no noun is so by nature, but only when it becomes a symbol; for even inarticulate sounds, like those of wild beasts, mean something, but none of them is a noun.

ἔστι δὲ λόγος ἅπας μὲν σημαντικός, οὐχ ὡς ὄργανον δέ, ἀλλ' ὡς εἴρηται κατὰ συνθήκην. (Aristotle *De Interp.* 17a)

Every sentence has meaning, though not as an instrument (of nature), but, as was said above, by convention.

This theoretical position, however, appears to be contradicted by his actual practice in other works where he can be seen, just like his teacher Plato, assigning inspired name-giving, based on the nature of the thing named, to the ancients: as with *αἰθήρ* from *αἰεὶ θεῖν*:

Ἔοικε δὲ καὶ τοῦνομα παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων παραδεδοσθαι μέχρι καὶ τοῦ νῦν χρόνου, τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον ὑπολαμβάνόντων ὅπερ καὶ ἡμεῖς λέγομεν· οὐ γὰρ ἅπαξ οὐδὲ δις ἀλλ' ἀπειράκις δεῖ νομίζειν τὰς αὐτὰς ἀφικνεῖσθαι δόξας εἰς ἡμᾶς. Διόπερ ὡς ἑτέρου τινὸς ὄντος τοῦ πρώτου σώματος παρὰ γῆν καὶ πῦρ καὶ ἀέρα καὶ ὕδωρ, αἰθέρα προσωνόμασαν τὸν ἀνωτάτω τόπον, ἀπὸ τοῦ θεῖν αἰεὶ τὸν ἄδιον χρόνον θέμενοι τὴν ἐπωνυμίαν αὐτῆ. (Aristotle *De Caelo* 1.3 (270b))

It seems too that the name 'aether' has been passed down to the present time by the ancients, who thought of it in the same way as we do; for we cannot help believing that the same ideas recur to men not only once nor twice but over and over again. Thus they, believing the primary body was something different from earth and fire and air and water, gave the name 'aether' to the

uppermost region, choosing its title from the fact that it ‘runs always’ ‘aei thein’ and eternally.

Similarly in his work on animals Aphrodite is derived from ‘aphros’ ‘foam’:

”Βοικε δὲ οὐδὲ τοὺς ἀρχαίους λανθάνειν ἀφροΐδης ἢ τοῦ σπέρματος οὐσαφύσις· τὴν γοῦν κυρίαν θεὸν τῆς μίξεως ἀπὸ τῆς δυνάμεως ταύτης προσηγόρευσαν. (Aristotle *De generatione animalium* 736a)

It seems that the ancients were not unaware of the fact that the nature of sperm was foamy (from ‘aphros’ ‘foam’), for they called the goddess of coupling (Aphrodite) from this fact.

Perhaps, if pressed, Aristotle would have been willing, like Plato in the *Cratylus*, to admit that although an element of convention had a role to play in naming, divinely inspired naming, based on the nature of the *nominatum*, could sometimes provide information in scientific and philosophical investigations.

One figure, who like Hermogenes, appears to have stood out against the natural theory of language was Democritus, the atomist and elder contemporary of Plato. According to Proclus *In Plat. Crat.* 16 p. 7, Democritus gives four arguments against the natural theory of language. (1) homonymy: the same name being used for different things; (2) polynymy: the same thing having more than one name; (3) metonymy, the transference of names between things and (4) anonymity, the existence of things with no name.

Despite Democritus, however, the idea that language was the invention of one or more gifted individuals in the past, who often betrayed a deep knowledge of the *nominata* in their choice of names remains the cultural norm until the fourth century BC when Epicurus, possibly under Democritus’ influence, criticised in book 12 of his *On Nature* the etymologising of gods’ names by Prodicus and others. Our only detailed account of Epicurus’ linguistic views is to be found in his letter to Herodotus:

”Ὅθεν καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὴ θέσει γενέσθαι, ἀλλ’ αὐτὰς τὰς φύσεις τῶν ἀνθρώπων καθ’ ἕκαστα ἔθνη ἴδια πάσχουσας πάθη καὶ ἴδια λαμβανούσας φαντάσματα ἰδίως τὸν ἀέρα ἐκπέμπειν στελλόμενον ὑφ’ ἑκάστων τῶν παθῶν καὶ τῶν φαντασμάτων, ὡς ἂν ποτε καὶ ἡ παρὰ τοὺς τόπους τῶν ἐθνῶν διαφορά ἦ· ὕστερον δὲ κοινῶς καθ’ ἕκαστα ἔθνη τὰ ἴδια τεθῆναι πρὸς τὸ τὰς δηλώσεις ἤπτον ἀμφιβόλους γενέσθαι ἀλλήλοις καὶ συντομωτέρως δηλουμένας· ἵνα δὲ καὶ οὐ συννορήμενα πράγματα εἰσφέροντας τοὺς συνειδόμενους παρεγγυήσαι τινας φθόγγους τοὺς ἀναγκασθέντας ἀναφωνήσαι, τοὺς δὲ τῇ λογισμῷ ἐλομένους κατὰ τὴν πλείστην αἰτίαν οὕτως ἐρμηγεύσαι. (Epicurus *Letter to Herodotus* (Diogenes Laertius 10.75-6))

Thus names did not originally come into being by coining (θέσει), but men’s own natures underwent feelings and received impressions which varied peculiarly from tribe to tribe, and each of the individual feelings and

impressions caused them to exhale breath peculiarly, according also to the racial differences from place to place. Later particular coinings were made by consensus (*κοινῶς τεθῆναι*) within individual races, so as to make the designations less ambiguous and more concisely expressed. Also, the men who shared knowledge introduced certain unseen entities, and brought words for them into usage, some because they had been compelled to utter them and others they had chosen by reasoning and thus articulated according to the most widely held assumption.

Here Epicurus proposes the view, which has striking parallels with some modern ideas, that language started as animal cries provoked in humans by their perception of objects and only at a later stage were these sounds correlated to objects in a systematic way by conventional agreement between men. This account involves a three-stage development of language:

1. Sounds are produced by people interacting directly with their environment.
2. Reason is applied to these sounds and produces words with mutually agreed meanings.
3. Names for abstract entities are invented by intellectuals.

As with Plato and Aristotle, then, we have a combination of the natural and the conventional, but the difference with Epicurus is that it is not the nature of the object that determines the sound of its denomination, but rather the effect of the perception of the object on man's nature that produces a sound, which at a later stage is developed by convention into language. Most of Epicurus' philosophical followers stress his insistence on the role of nature in the creation of language, but tend to lose sight of his second and third stages in which reason and convention have a role to play⁴. However, Lucretius and the non-Epicurean rationalist tradition represented by Cicero, Diodorus Siculus, and Vitruvius in their discussions of the development of human society, tend to preserve Epicurus' stages of development from natural sounds to conventional language.

In Lucretius where the theory of language origin is concentrated in two lines, we have nature compelling men to emit sounds and then usefulness *utilitas* turning these sounds into the names of things. Here Epicurus' stage three is omitted:

at uarios linguae sonitus *natura* subegit mittere, et *utilitas* expressit nomina
rerum. (Lucretius 5.1028-29) (emphasis mine)

⁴ So Demetrius Lacon (*P.Herc.* 1012 col. 67) "We say that it was by nature that the first crying out of words arose"; Origen *c. Cels.* 1.24.16 "As Epicurus teaches ... names were given by nature, the first men having burst out with certain sounds descriptive of objects"; Proclus *In Plat. Crat.* 17.5-17 Epicurus said that they (sc. The first humans) did not assign names to things by intelligence, but prompted by natural instinct, like coughing and sneezing, mooing and howling, and moaning".

In Cicero's *De Republica* something like "human reason" *ratio* is the subject of the sentence. It organises confused sounds and turns them into words (Epicurus stages 1 and 2). Cicero then goes on to add the invention of writing, which turned the sounds of words into written signs:

eademque cum accepisset homines inconditis uocibus inchoatum quiddam et confusum sonantes, incidit has et distinxit in partis et ut signa quaedam sicut uerba rebus inpressit hominesque antea dissociatos iucundissimo inter se sermonis uincolo conligauit. A simili etiam mente uocis, qui uidebantur infiniti, soni paucis notis inuentis sunt omnes signati et expressi, quibus et conloquia cum absentibus et indicia uoluntatum et monumenta rerum praeteritarum tenerentur. (Cicero *De Republica* 3.3)

Diodorus Siculus has stages one and two, but also the Epicurean explanation of language differentiation between different nations:

τῆς φωνῆς δ' ἀσήμου καὶ συγκεχυμένης οὔσης ἐκ τοῦ κατ' ὀλίγον διαρθροῦν τὰς λέξεις, καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλους τιθέντας σύμβολα περὶ ἐκάστου τῶν ὑποκειμένων γνώριμον σφίσιν αὐτοῖς ποιῆσαι τὴν περὶ ἀπάντων ἐρμηνείαν. τοιούτων δὲ συστημάτων γινομένων καθ' ἅπασαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, οὐχ ὁμόφωνον πάντα ἔχειν τὴν διάλεκτον, ἐκάστων ὡς ἔτυχε συνταξάντων τὰς λέξεις. (Diodorus Siculus 1.8.3)

And though the sounds which they made were at first unintelligible and indistinct, yet gradually they came to give articulation to their speech, and by agreeing with one another upon symbols for each thing which presented itself to them, made known among themselves the significance which was to be attached to each term. But since groups of this kind arose over every part of the inhabited world, not all men had the same language, inasmuch as every group organised the elements of its speech by mere chance.

Vitruvius ties the invention of language with the discovery of fire and moves from a stage of gesturing, to the construction of language out of incoherent sounds. He shares with Lucretius an emphasis on the role of usefulness (*utilitates*) in the development of a communication system:

accedentes cum animaduertissent commoditatem esse magnam corporibus ad ignis teporem, ligna adicientes et id conseruantes alios adducebant et nutu monstrantes ostendebant, quas habent ex eo utilitates. In eo hominum congressu cum profundebantur aliter e spiritu uoces, cotidiana consuetudine uocabula, ut optigerant, constituerunt, deinde significando res saepius in usu ex euentu fari fortuito coeperunt. (Vitruvius 2.1)

Before we move on finally to analyse the innovations introduced to this theory by Varro in his *De Lingua Latina* it is worth pausing a moment at this Epicurean stage to consider the similarities between Epicurus' ideas and those of modern linguistic theorists on the origin of language. Here is a quotation from a book written on this subject in 2008 by Peter Macneilage:

Some sound pattern must have been produced in the presence of the entity for which we had a conceptual representation leading someone, and eventually many people, to take, by convention, the sound pattern to signify the concept. The question is, what were the circumstances that led to a particular sound pattern being produced in the presence of the entity for which presumably two observers had a common conceptual structure?⁵

His account is remarkably close to that proposed by Epicurus: the production of a sound pattern in the presence of the entity named is Epicurus stage 1; the later use of the sound pattern by convention to represent the concept is Epicurus's stage 2. Macneilage, however, adds a significant question that no ancient author, except perhaps in the discussion of onomatopoeia, ever poses or attempts to answer: "The question is, what were the circumstances that led to a particular sound pattern being produced in the presence of the entity for which presumably two observers had a common conceptual structure?" Macneilage then goes on to posit a hypothesis which has something in common with another of our ancient sources quoted above, namely Vitruvius. Vitruvius begins with a stage of gesturing as a preliminary to the use of sounds as symbols. With a gesture, for example the flapping of the arms in the presence of a bird, there is a clear natural relation, an iconicity, between the concept and the symbol. In the case of vocal symbols no such iconicity exists in most cases, except for onomatopoeic words like splash or cuckoo where the sound of the word imitates the sound made by the object named. However, according to Macneilage it is possible to see how gesturing while simultaneously vocalising would eventually lead to a stage where the vocalising alone, without the gesture, could represent the object.

Modern historical linguistics, however, usually has very little to say about this important question of how words began. If, as anthropologists suggest, language began some 70,000 years ago, roughly at the time of the emigration of our ancestors from Africa, this is some twenty times more distant in the past than the process of modern linguistic reconstruction dares to go. Dixon (1997) for example is unwilling and unable by modern methods of linguistic reconstruction from known written forms of language to trace individual words back more than three or four thousand years. Two daring individuals, Bengtson and Ruhlen (1994) did, however, go as far as to posit a list of 27 possible proto-words, words that would go back to the creation of language, on the basis that similar forms were widely spread over a large group of otherwise unrelated languages. But their approach was shown by Boe et al. (2008) to be deeply flawed. Given the speed of linguistic phonetic change all these forms, it was argued, could just as well have come about by chance.

⁵ P.F., Macneilage, *The Origin of Speech*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 137.

Perhaps more promising is a modern approach that sees baby-talk as reflecting the early stage of human language development. Ferguson (1964) considered items of baby talk in six languages. He found that the words involved, which varied from 25 to 60 items per language, shared a number of characteristics: kin items –*mama, papa*, simple prohibitions *a a*, greetings *bye bye*, bodily functions, *wee wee*. The actual phonetic shape of the words resembled that of early non-linguistic babbling. Consonant vowel *ma* was preferred to vowel consonant *am*. Reduplicated forms, *mama, papa, bye bye* predominated and accounted for some 53% of the items studied. Is baby talk a separate genre from real language? There is in fact some overlap between the two. *Mama* and *papa* correspond, for example to the PIE forms *ma-ter* and *pa-ter* where the *-ter* suffix denotes kinship, as in *brother, sister, daughter* and so on. Of 211 parental terms studied in real languages by Murdock (1952) 45% showed syllabic reduplication. One further point of contact between baby language and real language in this context was that the name for the female parent had a nasal consonant *ma-* or similar- in all six languages studied by Ferguson, whereas words for the male parent had oral consonant like *pa-* in all six. Similarly in real languages (Murdock 1959) showed that words for the female parent had nasal consonants in 75% of the instances and the male parent words had oral consonants in 81% of the examples. Can we push the case for these child words occurring early in human linguistic development any further? Jacobson (1960) explains the nasal consonant in mother words as being associated with sucking and nasal murmuring, whereas the oral consonant *pa-* in father words is associated with food. Here again Jacobson was in dialogue, perhaps unwittingly with the ancients. In this case Varro, who in his *Logistorici* tells us that *buo* in children's language is associated with drinking and *pappa* with eating:

cum cibum ac potionem buas ac pappas uocent et matrem mammam, patrem tatam. (Varro *Logistorici* fr. 14)

Another modern author, Falk (2004) also points to mother child interactions as a key possibility for the development of language in general. With the development of bipedalism human babies could no longer be held by the mother at all times so that vocal contact may have developed as a substitute for physical contact in keeping the pair together. In fact the sound 'ma-' 'ma-' as a nasalised demand vocalisation is documented in modern baby babbling at the age of 2 months. Early infant mothers could have associated this sound with themselves and thus the ma-ma vocalisation would come to be linked with her. Other modern theories can be mentioned in passing. Mutual grooming has been shown to become more common with apes as the size of the group they live in increases. This could have happened in early hominid groups. Grooming, like sucking, could have been accompanied by nasal vocalisations, and eventually vocalisation without grooming could have taken over the grooming role. Many modern socio-linguists believe that language itself is more fitted to a social-cohesive function than, for example, to the function of passing on information. Most modern talk is of a social nature, such as greetings and (in England) discussing the weather rather than for the purpose of information transfer.

In some areas, such as spatial directions, language is in fact very defective at the information transfer function (as anyone will know who has tried to construct a wardrobe following the maker's instructions). One other study has shown that in languages generally there is an inverse relation between the sound frequency of vowels and the size of the object described. Big objects are more commonly described by low frequency vowels (e.g. *huge*) small object with fast frequency vowels *tiny*, *piccolo*. But this final modern theory is less convincing than the mother-child or grooming scenarios as it would not have any evolutionary advantage or significance.

The final section of this paper returns to the ancient world with an analysis of historical linguistics in Varro's *De Lingua Latina*. Although Varro is an eclectic scholar, taking ideas on language development and etymology from both grammarians and philosophers of different persuasions⁶, nevertheless there are one or two areas where he seems to have particularly innovative ideas of his own, and it is on these that the discussion will focus.

Basically Varro believed that a number of primary words, he calls them *primigenia uerba* in 6.37 and *principia uerborum* in 6.39 were originally imposed on things (*impositio*) by a number of more or less experienced name givers. These original words then went on to produce all the others through a natural process called *declinatio* – a process determined by nature with no voluntary input from individual speakers. It is clear from the examples given that under *declinatio* Varro includes what we would call both inflection and derivation. So:

duo igitur omnino uerborum principia, *impositio* et *declinatio*, alterum ut fons, alterum ut riuuus. *impositicia* nomina esse uoluerunt quam paucissima, quo citius ediscere possent, *declinata* quam plurima, quo facilius omnes quibus ad usum opus esset dicerent. (LL 8.5) (emphasis mine)

8.3 nisi etiam ita esset factum, neque discere tantum numerum uerborum possemus – infinitae enim sunt naturae in quas ea declinantur (LL 8.3).

This idea of the difficulty of learning a huge number of words may contain an echo of Lucretius' rejection of the idea that one man could teach others the names of things at *DRN* 5.1049-50: cogere item pluris unus uictosque domare non poterat, rerum ut perdiscere nomina uellent.

Impositio, then, leaves room for the name-givers' free will, whereas *declinatio* is determined by nature and is out of men's hands:

uoluntatem dico *impositionem* uocabulorum, naturam *declinationem* uocabulorum. (LL 10.51) (emphasis mine)

⁶ Sources for the *De Lingua Latina* mentioned by Varro: a) Greek: Aristophanes of Byzantium (LL 5.9, 6.2), Cleanthes of Assos (5.9), Pythagoras (5.11), Chrysippos (6.2), Antipater of Tarsus (6.2), Apollodorus of Athens (6.2); b) Roman: Aelius Stilo (5.18, 21, 25, 66, 101, 6.7, 5.9), P. Mucius Scaevola and M. Junius Brutus (5.5), Q. Cosconius (6.36).

impositio est in nostro dominatu, nos in naturae: quemadmodum enim quisque uolt, imponit nomen, at *declinat*, quemadmodum uolt natura. (LL 10.53) (emphasis mine)

This idea is clarified further in 10.15:

secunda diuisio est de his uerbis quae declinari possunt, quod alia sunt a *uoluntate*, alia a *natura*. *uoluntatem* appello, cum unus quiuis a nomine aliae rei imponit nomen, ut Romulus Romae; *naturam* dico, cum uniuersi acceptum nomen ab eo qui imposuit non requirimus quemadmodum is uelit declinari, sed ipsi declinamus, ut huius Romae, hanc Romam, hac Roma. (LL 10.15) (emphasis mine)

He goes on to say that of these two parts voluntary *declinatio* goes back to usage (*consuetudo*) and natural to a logical system (*ratio*). It is not only *impositio* then that involves the free will of the name giver but also derivational *declinatio* of the type Rome from Romulus. This is made explicit in 8.21-2:

declinationum genera sunt duo, *uoluntarium* et *naturale*; uoluntarium est, quo ut cuiusque tulit uoluntas declinauit....(22) contra naturalem declinationem dico, quae non a singulorum oritur uoluntate, sed a communi consensu. (LL 8.21-2) (emphasis mine)

In 6.36-7 Varro cites the authority of the grammarian and antiquarian Quintus Cosconius, who was working around 100 BC, that the number of original words was around 1000:

horum uerborum si primigenia sunt ad mille, ut Cosconius scribit, ex eorum *declinationibus* uerborum discrimina quingenta milia esse possunt ideo, quod a singulis uerbis primigeniis circiter quingentae species declinationibus fiunt. (37) primigenia dicuntur uerba ut lego, scribo, sto ... contra uerba declinata sunt ... ut ab lego, legis, legit. (LL 6.36-7) (emphasis mine)

Varro adds in 6.38 that by *declinatio* these can be turned into 500,000 and then by the use of 10 prefixes into 5,000,000.

LL 6.37 shows clearly the difference between *primigenia* such as the verbs *lego*, *scribo* and *sto*, and the derivative forms *legis*, *legit* etc. I do not think that Varro intends here to say that *primigenia* were all verbs⁷. Priscian on the other hand consistently says that nouns were derived from verbs⁸, whereas the modern view, put forward, for example, by Calvin and Bickerton (2000), makes nouns the original words.

⁷ At LL 8.13, for example, he seems to suggest that some verbs were derived from nouns.

⁸ Prisc. GL III 480.5 and *passim*.

Finally at 6.39 we have the analogy between the way *primigenia* give rise to derived words and the way atoms according to Democritus and Epicurus give rise to things:

Democritus, Epicurus, item alii qui infinita principia dixerunt, quae unde sint non dicunt, sed cuiusmodi sint, tamen faciunt magnum: quae ex his constant in mundo, ostendunt. quare si etymologus *principia uerborum* postulet mille, de quibus ratio ab se non poscatur, et reliqua ostendat, quod non postulat, tamen, immanem uerborum expediat numerum. (LL 6. 39) (emphasis mine)

Clearly Varro does not share the Stoic view, echoed by Augustine, but ridiculed by Cicero,⁹ that the etymology of every word can be found; in the case of the *primigenia* this may not be possible. The role of the etymologist is to explain all derived forms and to give reasons for as many *primigenia* as he can.

By way of a final conclusion to illustrate the originality and in this case the modernity of Varro's linguistic thinking I would like to draw attention to a passage on the role of the people in establishing linguistic usage. Whereas Varro adopts the modern approach that correctness in language is established by the practice of its users, the people, Quintilian over a century later is still arguing that *consuetudo* can be established only by the usage of the educated few.

populus enim in sua potestate, singuli in illius: itaque ut suam quisque consuetudinem, si mala est, corrigere debet, sic populus suam. ego populi consuetudinis non sum ut dominus, at ille meae est. ut rationi optemperare debet gubernator, gubernatori unus quisque in nauis, sic populus rationi, nos singuli populo. (LL 9.6) (emphasis mine)

sic in loquendo non si quid uitiose multis insederit pro regula sermonis accipiendum erit. nam ut transeam quem ad modum uulgo imperiti loquantur, tota saepe theatra et omnem circi turbam exclamasse barbare scimus. ergo consuetudinem sermonis uocabo consensum eruditorum, sicut uiuendi consensum bonorum. (Quint. *Inst.* 1.6.44-5)

Varro then was an eclectic scholar but he was capable of considerable innovation and truly original thinking in his theories of language change and development. In conclusion. This paper has attempted to illustrate that modern linguists may still have much to learn from a dialogue with the ancients.

⁹ Augustine *De Dialectic* 6.9, Cicero *Nat. Deor.* 3.24.61-3.