



THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE –
ACTUAL AND USEFUL
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It was both an impressive and a challenging semester. From the still life of the narrow *Fach* of classical philologists, I found myself in the company of the people at the forefront of science and scholarship. It was a unique opportunity to learn more about the colouration of animals, their suffering of pain (do they suffer?), the philosophical and scientific

impact of Bohemia in Einstein's career, the role of sacrifice in Christian mentality, Maria Theresia from the perspective of her close, non-elite circle and so on. All was exciting and provided food for thought, and certainly changed and enriched my mind.

My small "official" project was related to the *Magna Moralia*, the shortest of three ethical treatises of the Corpus Aristotelicum, which, as I try to show, is an authentic Aristotelian ethics, contrary to the view prevailing today. But I was able to complete a piece on this subject before my arrival at the Wiko, and here I turned instead to an older work, an essay on Epicurus' theory of the origin of language, a shortened and updated version of my older writings on the subject – the work I abandoned five years ago, during my previous stay in Berlin. Due to a lucky chance, one of the Focus Groups this year worked on "The Origins of Language", and this invited me not only to re-consider the difficult fragments of Epicurus' theory, but also to think about similarities and differences between the ancient and modern approaches to the problem of the origin of language and, also from this angle, about what use (if any) a historical study has for contemporary attacks on the same problem.

Now it is clear that the ancient theories of the origin of language (the first traces of an evolutionary approach to human language are attested in the mid-fifth century BC) maintained some fundamental elements of language evolution: first, the development from inarticulate, animal-like sounds to articulated ones; second, the parallel semantic transformation of the initial sounds, which had purely emotional character and were involuntary, into words that are assigned to "things" and are used intentionally for reference; third, it has been supposed (due to observation of gesticulation by people whose organs of speech are damaged) that gestures were a natural tool of reference used by human beings before vocal speech developed.

Plato's *Cratylus* belongs to another vein of ancient linguistic thought that is alien to evolutionism. Although it is often asserted that the discussion of the dialogue does not bear on the question of the origin of language, but only on the relation of words and things within existing language, this is true only in the sense that Plato shows no interest in the pre-linguistic state of human beings or in the development of sound articulation. But the whole discussion of the *Cratylus* is relevant for the origin of language from the points of view of the original semantics of words, of the intellectual attitudes of the creators of language and also of the epistemological value of language (the latter subject is of course Plato's main interest).

The main collision in the dialogue is the opposition between conventionalist and naturalist views, which for the first time becomes distinctive. In the view of one of the interlocutors, Hermogenes, words are assigned to things arbitrarily, by agreement, and the things can be renamed again at any moment; moreover, nothing prevents us from naming a thing with one word in the official field and with another in private, provided that the reference of the word is clear to the participants in communication (this is a conventionalist view). According to this position, words have no epistemological value; they are made from any elements at hand by ordinary people and there is no need to investigate such words.

In the view of the second interlocutor, Cratylus, words should be assigned to things appropriately, i.e. made according to the features of things, according to their nature; from this position stems our concept of linguistic naturalism. Cratylus does not want to reveal what sort of appropriateness he has in view, and this allows Socrates to develop his own naturalist theory: the appropriateness of the word is primarily its etymological appropriateness; the words are encoded descriptions or definitions of the things they refer to, and such words were made accordingly by the wise legislators of language in remote antiquity; since words are our primary tools in philosophically distinguishing things, they should not be made by people on the street, but by wise persons under the supervision of the most important users of language, the philosopher-dialecticians.

Socrates' speech contains the earliest known argument against the conventionalist thesis based on the differences of languages, which Hermogenes brought forward earlier in the dialogue (Crat. 385 d). Socrates' answer (389 a 5–390 a 10), is that the craftsman of names, having in mind the general type of name for a thing, will produce an appropriate name for each thing, which can have variable elements (syllables); such names will be appropriate, no matter what elements they are made of, and the varying names for one and the same thing will accordingly be appropriate in different languages (390 d 9–e 5). One thing that remains puzzling is why the creators of language in different countries should make words for the same things from different elements. There is an important hint at an answer in the analogy that Socrates uses: the smith producing the drill *even for one and the same purpose* does not always use the same kind of iron for it, but it remains nevertheless the right drill, provided that the generally appropriate form of a drill is preserved, no matter whether this drill has been produced among the Greeks or among the Barbarians. By the same token, the word can be made from different phonetic material, but it remains a correct word for the thing if it reproduces the generally appropriate type

of the word for this thing and if the creator of such a word in one language is not less competent than the creator in another language. This implies that the creators of words have no other option but to employ the material they have at their disposal or, in other words, that words are composed of the elements that exist before the act of forming words start and that these elements are not identical among different peoples.

Hermogenes is convinced by this argument and switches from his conventionalist stance to naturalism. But Socrates moves forward in his development of the naturalist view. The appropriateness of words can be pushed beyond etymological appropriateness, since we come inevitably to words that cannot be etymologized. Socrates demonstrates that these can be analysed into sounds that imitate the particular features of things such as smoothness, harshness, etc. by the corresponding work of speech organs. Now, if we look at this theory from the perspective of the name-tool analogy, it becomes clear that the previous argument against conventionalism fails. If every element of the most primitive word imitates some feature of the nominatum, and together in combination they imitate all its essential features, then there simply cannot be various words for one and the same nominatum, and the differences between languages cannot be explained on naturalist lines.

This difficulty for the naturalist theory is implicit, but in his following conversation, now with Cratylus, Socrates points explicitly to other difficulties for it. First, already mentioned, is that Socrates shows that one of the two horns of the dilemma should be rejected: either the names in different languages were made of different phonetic material but reproduce in equal measure the essence of things, or there is a strict one-to-one correspondence between each particular sound and particular features of things, which rules out the existence of various languages that are all “natural”. Second, that extreme naturalism is self-refuting, since the words that designate physical features, like *sklerotes*, harshness, contain sounds corresponding with the opposite features: -r- corresponds to harshness, and -l- to something liquid. Third, that, contrary to Cratylus’ view, it is unsafe to use words to learn the nature of things, at least in a philosophical sense, since the etymology of some words implies that all things are in constant flux, while the etymology of others implies that they are, on the contrary, permanent; and last but not least, if one assumes that the names of things are the single or the most important source of knowledge of things, how could the first name-givers create the names that incorporate their wise knowledge of things, if they did not yet have names at their disposal to acquire this knowledge? The result is that there is another, more reliable source of knowledge of

things – through things themselves, or more precisely through the Forms (Ideas), the metaphysical substances, rather than their sensual particulars.

Epicurus' innovative theory of the origin of language is rightly regarded as the culmination of the ancient evolutionary approach. According to the earlier views, human language developed from inarticulate, animal-like emotional sounds through the learning of the skill of articulation, the composing of words and their assigning to things. Epicurus modifies this, assuming that the initial emotive utterances are from the beginning linked with the certain things that evoked these emotions, and that these utterances were phonetically distinctive enough to correspond to the variety of objects, thus to a certain degree *naturally* articulated. Nevertheless, the Epicurean theory did not admit that vocal communication existed from the beginning of humankind. According to one passage of Lucretius (5.1028–90), specifically human language arose through the combination of two inborn human capacities: 1) uttering emotional sounds in response to things and 2) pointing to things with one's finger. But another passage of Lucretius' (5.1019–23) shows that the Epicurean theory acknowledges a stage at which sounds were not sufficiently articulated and at which gestures were used, if not as the sole, then at least as the most important means of communication. Thus the transformation of emotional sounds into the means of reference took a lot of time, a whole historical epoch during which the sounds gradually took on the referential function from gestures. The moving forces of this process were the development of social organization, emotional development and the development of sound articulation resulting from the advance in emotional development.

Epicurus' innovative theory is usually rightly regarded as the development of the evolutionary ideas of the Greek Enlightenment, but, as I try to show in my paper written at Wiko, it was also a response to the problems raised in the *Cratylus*.

First of all, Epicurus effectively rejects both alternatives at the heart of the discussion in Plato's *Cratylus* – that language was created by accidental and conventional imposition or that it was created by an imposition that penetrates deeply into the nature of things. Epicurus argues that “the names did not originally come into being by imposition”, thus rejecting the view that was held before him, no matter how this imposition had been understood. The main Epicurean argument against imposition is as follows (see *Lucretius* 5.1046–49): if people had not yet used sounds for communication, nobody could have foreknowledge that they would be useful; accordingly, the hypothetical name-giver could neither be aware of the utility of assigning words to things nor understand how to do this. The argument is based on the fundamental Epicurean assumption that it is impossible to

invent something for which there is no analogy in our experience. But the argument holds against Plato to the degree that the latter did not explain who came up with the idea of imposing names for things and how this was primarily done.

But in another respect, Epicurus seems to owe much to Plato both in the negative sense and in aspects of linguistic naturalism that are specific to Epicurus' own theory. As has been said, the *Cratylus*, in my view, contains two incompatible versions of linguistic naturalism: one, of the soft kind, the name-tool analogy, which is used to demonstrate that the variety of languages does not contradict linguistic naturalism, granted that the words were created in various lands correspondingly to the essential features of things but from various linguistic material; another, of the hard kind, that there is a strict correspondence between sounds and the elementary properties of things, which excludes any variety. The second option is finally rejected in its strict form, and the interlocutors yield to admitting a bit of conventionality in words; the fortune of the first remains obscure, but it is clearly incompatible with the second, even in the latter's modified form.

Epicurus' solution to the problem of the variety of languages shows that he endorses naturalism of the first, "soft" kind: words stem from utterances provoked in the earliest human beings; but these utterances vary from language to language because a) the same things trigger different specific visual representations and different specific emotions in different places, presumably because things of the same type have different specific features in different lands, and because b) there are, additionally, differences among nations themselves, in accordance with differences in their locations; this possibly implies some physiological peculiarities that influence the utterances. This answer differs fundamentally from Plato's (spontaneous utterances versus purposefully created words), but it shares with it the important assumption that similar things should produce fundamentally identical words. That Epicurus assumes this is also shown by Lucretius' argument from the various sounds of animals: in spite of their variety, there is one fundamental type of utterance that corresponds to a certain situation and a certain emotion; in a similar way, due to the more considerable variety of human sounds (and also of emotions), these can correspond to the whole multiplicity of things of the external world. Moreover, contrary to Plato, who provides no explanation for the differences in the original "matter" from which his name-givers coin the word, Epicurus effectively explains this differences by local varieties of the things themselves and by differences in the physiology of nations.

But Epicurus' debt to Plato is greater than is usually assumed. When Epicurus rejects Plato's imposition of names in favour of the spontaneous origins of words, he not only

proposes a more plausible explanation of the origin of language, which escapes the danger of the a priori invention, but also opts for linguistic naturalism: according to him, words are linked with things by necessary, objective bonds, and there are good reasons to suppose that “the first meanings” of words, which can be recognized as immediately obvious by all language bearers (Ep. Hdt. 37–38), correspond to the objects that evoked the words initially through perceptions and accompanying emotions. These “first meanings” have a high cognitive value: they are identical to *prolepseis*, empirically attained concepts, which are formed through infallible perceptions without the help of reason and henceforth are themselves infallible and serve as criteria of truth, along with emotions and perceptions. Language is thus the channel through which one can attain veridical concepts that can be unattainable through limited personal experience. Epicurus thus seems to give his answer to the dilemma of the *Cratylus* – whether words are accidental labels that have nothing to do with essential features of things or they are encoded descriptions and definitions of things created by wise name-givers: according to Epicurus, the cognitive value of words consists in their origin from non-rational, emotional reactions to perceived objects, from utterances that demarcated the objects of the external word without the help of fallible reason.

Many aspects of Epicurus’ theory remain obscure and debatable, and my interpretation, which owes a lot to current scholarship, most of all to David Sedley (I give here a shortened and simplified conspectus of my view), is still incomplete and leaves many questions open, for instance whether Epicurus regarded language today as being learned or naturally acquired (my tentative answer is: both). What I would stress at this point is that the inspiring presence of specialists on the origin of language at Wiko made me more sensitive to the difficulties of Epicurus’ theory. Moreover, it made me rethink both the relation of the ancient theories on the subject to the current attempts to solve this problem and the value of our historical study (in a broad sense) for contemporary science. Now it is obvious that the ancient approach was inevitably limited by a lack of knowledge of human evolution and by very poor information about animal languages and child psychology; there was no comparative study of language, and the study of native grammar did not bear (largely) on the ideas about the origin of language. It may be even more important that ancient theories were not a part of empirically based science, but were heavily burdened by philosophical and ideological assumptions; Epicurus’ theory, the highest point of evolutionary approach in this field, is not an exception.

The value of ancient theories for modern science, in the sense of directly appropriating ideas and methods, is thus very questionable. If one asks what use there is, then, in studying these theories and in trying to fill gaps in tradition by means of better interpretation of texts and better understanding of ideas in their context (so we hope), my answer would be that we study history and that this is of great value, provided that we do this methodologically correctly and honestly. Whether the results of this could be used by science, scholarship, moral etc., is not irrelevant but secondary: it does not depend on historical disciplines, but on these branches of modern culture and what they find useful in their own and our common past. The historical disciplines have their field of research and their methods. The occasional interventions of contemporary interests, terminology and the methods and interests of other sciences can be fruitful, as well as harmful. They are secondary to the internal logic of the development of scholarship: its most current problems are those that the past could not solve and that are important for understanding the general processes and minutia of history and that we are able to solve. Thanks to Wiko, its staff and Fellows for another occasion to live and work in an environment where “current” and “useful” are not required tickets for entrance. This may turn out to be current and useful on occasion.