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Ideal and Ordinary Language in Plato's Cratylus

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Interpreters of Plato's *Cratylus* are faced with a puzzle. If Socrates' etymologies (397a-421c) are intended to be parodies, as many have thought,[1] what is the status of the imitation theory of letters (421c-427d), which provides the theoretical foundation for etymology and, as some have thought, indicates Plato's ambition to construct an ideal language?[2] In this paper, I focus on three questions: [1] whether Plato thought that imitation provided a suitable basis for an ideal language; [2] whether Plato thought that the development of an ideal language would be philosophical possible or desirable; [3] whether he thought that ordinary language is unsuitable for philosophical discourse. I argue, first, that Plato provides two arguments against imitation grounding an ideal language; second, that one can reconstruct three independent arguments against the possibility and desirability of ideal language; and, third, that his own use of ordinary language at least tells against the idea that Plato thought it unsuitable for philosophical discourse. I aim to contribute to the scholarly debate about Plato's attitude towards an ideal language by laying out, in a maximally clear way, what I take to be the relevant arguments and by introducing Plato's own use of language as relevant evidence.

I.   Against Ideal Imitations

Socrates describes what looks like an ideal language while in the process of formulating the imitation theory of letters. He says:

> We'll apply letters to things, using one letter for one thing, when that's what seems to be required, or many letters together, to form what's called a syllable, or many syllables combined to form names and verbs. From names and verbs in turn, we shall finally construct something important, beautiful and whole. And just as the painter painted an animal, so—by means of the craft of naming or rhetoric or whatever it is—we shall construct sentences…It was the ancients who combined things in this way. Our job—if indeed we are to examine all these things with scientific knowledge—is to divide where they put together, so as to see whether or not, both the primary and derivative names are given in accord with nature. For, any other way of connecting names to things, Hermogenes, is inferior and unsystematic. (425a-b)[3]

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[1] See e.g. Brock 1990; Arieti 1991; Sallis 1996; Gonzalez 1998; Nightingale 2003. For those taking them as serious philological accounts, see e.g. Grote 1867; Findlay 1973; Sedley 1998; Sedley 2003.
[2] See Weingartner 1970, 14ff; Kretzmann 1971, 137; Anagnostopolous 1972, 729; Baxter 1992. Kretzmann claims that the result of Platonic dialectic might be an ideally precise language (1971, 137), while Baxter maintains that a perfect language serves as a prescriptive ideal for a precise terminology (1992, 48ff.). Against the idea that Plato envisions an ideal language at all, see e.g. Kahn 1973, 167; Gonzalez 1998, 78ff.
[3] All translations from the Hackett edition of the text, translated by C. D. C. Reeve.

Given this insistence on a strict correspondence between letters, syllables, names, and sentences and the world, I propose the following as a working account of an ideal language:

> (IL) An ideal language contains a vocabulary that is fixed, precise and systematic; a one-to-one correspondence between names (and their constituents) and things eliminates all ambiguity of meaning. There is an exclusive preference for direct statement, and all propositions in an ideal language are (analytically) true.4

Notice that while the establishment of the ideal language might require dialectical analyses, its establishment would render dialectic superfluous.5 On my reading, Plato's *Cratylus* provides two arguments against the suitability of imitation as grounding an ideal language and three independent arguments against the possibility and desirability of an ideal language.

After seemingly defending the naturalist view of names for the bulk of the dialogue, Socrates quickly reverses course and begins attacking it when Cratylus endorses and takes over the position. He employs two powerful arguments against Cratylus, which seem clearly to undermine the idea that imitation will provide the methodological basis for an ideal language. The first is the well-known 'two Cratyluses' argument (432b-e). Reflecting on the nature of imitation, Socrates asks:

> Suppose some god didn't just represent your color and shape the way painters do, but made all the inner parts like yours, with the same warmth and softness, and put motion, soul, and wisdom like yours into them—in a word, suppose he made a duplicate of everything you have and put it beside you. Would there then be two Cratyluses or Cratylus and an image of Cratylus?

When Cratylus concedes that there would be two Cratyluses, Socrates draws the implication that imitation must be abandoned:

> …we must look for some other kind of correctness in images and in the names we've been discussing, and not insist that if a detail is added to an image or omitted from it, it's no longer an image at all. Or haven't you noticed how far images are from having the same features as the things of which they are images?

Socrates is here responding to Cratylus' insistence that names perfectly represent or not represent at all. The central philosophical point is that, if one insists on the perfection or ideality of language, then one cannot make imitation the basis for correctness. Indeed, doing so has absurd consequences:

> [N]ames would have an absurd effect on the things they name, if they resembled them in every respect, since all of them would then be duplicated, and no one would be able to say which was the thing and which was the name.

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4 See Russell 1985. Bertrand Russell describes a philosophically ideal language thus: "In a logically perfect language the words in a proposition would correspond one by one with the components of the corresponding fact…[T]here will be one word and no more for every simple object, and everything that is not simple will be expressed by a combination of words" (1985, 58). Russell again: "A language of this [ideal] sort would be completely analytic" (1985, 58).

5 See Berger 1971, 223-224. As he puts it "the [ideal language] theory seems to demand tautological descriptions…because it renders thought, judgment and dialectic superfluous" (1971, 223). See also Kahn 1973, 167.

In this case, we would not even be able to tell the difference between a name and its referent. Socrates concludes this argument by counseling Cratylus to give up the idea that a perfect language is attainable *assuming that imitation or representation is the basis for it*:

> Don't insist that it have all the letters and exactly resemble the thing it names, but allow that an inappropriate letter may be included. But if an inappropriate letter may be included in a name, an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase. And if an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase, a phrase which is inappropriate to the things may be employed in a statement. Things are still named and described when this happens, provided the phrases include the pattern of the things they're about.

This argument shows that no system of names based on imitation could possibly satisfy the conditions of [IL].[6]

The second argument shows that there are some things that imitation will not be able will be beyond to represent at all. Socrates presents the example of number as a counterexample to any imitation theory:

> Consider numbers, Cratylus, since you want to have recourse to them. Where do you think you'll get names that are like each one of the numbers? (435b-c).

It is impossible to come up with an imitative principle that would explain the names for numbers. Socrates seems here to be pointing to both a conceptual problem, namely, how could we come up with an imitative principle for numbers at all, and an extensional problem, namely, how could an imitative principle cover all of the numbers. To this we might add a further problem, implicit in my view in Socrates' formulation of the principle. At least on Cratylus' version of the imitation theory, it would seem that the motions of the tongue and mouth imitate the motions of the world (426c-427d); this would seem to preclude imitation from representing the metaphysical stability of numbers. Worse, at least from Plato's perspective, imitation would not seem able to imitate the stable, eternal and immutable forms, at least not *insofar as* they are stable, eternal and immutable.[7] If certain objects are beyond the scope of imitation, it can hardly provide the basis for an ideal language.

II. Against Ideal Language in General

Even granting that imitation is ill-suited to the task, some scholars have wanted to attribute to Plato the view that one ought to try to construct an ideal language, or at least a technical terminology, in which all names are precisely *defined*. According to this view, Plato wants us to use the results of dialectical analyses to establish an ideal language, wherein each name is precisely defined by an account of the essence, the what-it-is, of the thing to which it refers. On my reading, three of Socrates' arguments can be generalized in such a way as to reveal the more ambitious achievement of an ideal language to be impossible and the less ambitious aspiration to establish a fixed technical terminology to be misguided. The first argument concerns the conditions of establishing an ideal language; the second, the temporal nature of names; and the last, the possibility of eliminating ambiguity from language.

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[6] Weingartner clearly sees that the argument rules out the possibility of "perfect representation regardless of what the mode of representation might turn out to be" (1970, 12).

[7] For a more detailed analysis, see [citation omitted or blind review]

First, in order to be developed, an ideal language would require knowledge of being in advance; this undermines the motivation for an ideal language in the first place. When describing the original establishment of the allegedly ideal language of the ancients (424c-425b), Socrates suggests that the task would require prior knowledge of the nature of beings and claims that the assignment of names only occurs after the name-makers "have well divided off the things that are" (424d1). Socrates explicitly questions this requirement, since Cratylus' theory has cut off the possibility of the name-makers ever *acquiring* the systematic knowledge required to name things accurately: "if things cannot be learned except from their names, how can we possibly claim that the name-makers had knowledge before any names had been given for them to know?" (438b5-8). This objection is specific to Cratylus' theory, but such reasoning can be generalized in the following way: either the ideal language will be established on the basis of knowledge achieved through names or in some other way; either way, the knowledge and its acquisition are prior to and independent of the ideal language.8 If knowledge can be acquired through the use of ordinary language, and again, the need for the ideal language dissolves. Similar considerations apply to a technical terminology: once the work of inquiry is done using the ordinary name and we have precise knowledge of the object, why do we need a technically precise name?9

Second, an ideal language would have to exist a-temporally to achieve and maintain the necessary fixity; this is impossible. During the etymological section, the tendency of names to shift in composition and meaning over time is highlighted several times as an enormous obstacle to etymology. In refuting Cratylus' claim that names either provide perfect imitations or are nonsense, Socrates adduces a counter-example, which shows that fixity is not necessary either for teaching or for dividing being, the dual functions of names (388b-c). Socrates refers to the words for 'hardness' in Attic and Etrerian, *sklêrotês* and *sklêrotêr*, respectively (434cff), and he gets Cratylus to admit that he understands what they mean. Despite presence in both names of an allegedly alien *lambda*, which is meant to indicate softness, and the differences between the words (*sigma* versus *rho*) that should alter their significance, Socrates manages to use both to pick out the notion of hardness and to communicate this notion to Cratylus. Socrates concludes that "both convention and usage must contribute something to expressing what we mean when we speak" (435b). The implications of this admission are wide-ranging, since any purportedly ideal language is precisely trying to exempt names from the messiness of convention and its 'corrupting' influences. But Plato seems certain that this is not possible. If

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8 To translate this into plausibly Platonic terms, either the knowledge on which an ideal language is based will be acquired piecemeal through the results of dialectic, or it will be acquired by some other means, like an eidetic vision of the whole. If the latter, then such knowledge must have been acquired all at once, as it were, and the establishment of an ideal language seems superfluous both because one already has the knowledge and because knowledge is *ex hypothesi* non-discursive. If the former, however, then there is discursive knowledge, but it can be acquired through the use of ordinary language, and again, the need for the ideal language dissolves. See also Partee 1972, 130-131

9One might object at this point that I have construed Socrates' claim that the name-makers need to have a prior division of being too strongly. It is not knowledge that the name-makers need, so the objections goes, but rather a merely preliminary taxonomy of being into discrete objects which may serve as the foundation for inquiry. This understanding of Plato is implausible, I think, since Plato makes division either *constitutive* of knowledge (e.g. in *Theaetetus*) or part of the *method* of acquiring knowledge (e.g. in *Sophist, Statesman* and *Phaedrus*). It is never preliminary and separable in the way that the objection would need to construe it in order to have force against my interpretation. Indeed, these dialogues lend support to my contention that the division requirement is a knowledge requirement.

we needed an ideal language or a technical vocabulary in order to communicate or learn, we would be in real trouble: Socrates claims that attempting to prevent convention and change from infecting the precision and fixity of an ideal language would be like hauling a boat up a very sticky ramp or, in other words, a quixotic enterprise (435c). Stability may be found only in the ultimate referents of names, i.e. forms, not in the names themselves. Names, like everything else in the physical world, change.

Third, an ideal language would have to eliminate all ambiguity, but this is simply not possible. The ambiguity of names is endemic and can be seen as operative on three levels: First, as the revamped etymologies for *episteme*, *bebaion, historia* and others (437a2-c4) show, one could analyze the very same names in such a way that they indicate contradictory metaphysical principles. Names are ambiguous in meaning, and they can be analyzed in different and incompatible ways. Second, names are ambiguous in reference, since—assuming a Platonic account—they are used both to refer the stable natures, or essences, and the objects and properties which owe their unity to the stable natures. This may be taken to be an implicit consequence of the ambiguity in meaning.[10] Third, however precisely one defines a name, it cannot be guaranteed that the definition will mean the same thing to everyone; unless the essence can simply be read off the definition, there will be a gap between the meaning and the reference of the name.

III. Plato's Use of Ordinary Language

If Plato had aspired to establish an ideal language or to stipulate a technical terminology, we might expect that his own writing would exhibit characteristics which embody this ambition. An analysis of Plato's use of language in the *Cratylus*, in which one finds a preference for ordinary language and a studied avoidance of technical vocabulary, reveals no such ambition. Commentators have typically failed to see this point as relevant.[11] Ordinary language must be understood in contrast to other, more technical ways of speaking.[12] However, in explicit contrast to (IL) above, I propose the following as a working account:

> (OL) An ordinary language contains a vocabulary that is fluid, ambiguous and unsystematic. It is the colloquial and customary language in which most people express themselves most of the time. Ordinary language contains a wide variety

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[10] Silverman, taking his bearings from *Phd.* 102aff., argues that the point of the *Cratylus* is to demonstrate "by misdirection" the necessity of the distinction between the name, which refers to the form, and the eponym, which refers to the participants (1992, 26-7). On my account, the crucial difference is between different *uses* of names.
[11] Weingartner's dismissal of this point is hardly adequate. He claims that the "use of such a language would not be congenial to Plato insofar as he was a dramatist and a poet"; further, he attributes to Plato a persistent modesty, which would rule him out as an establisher of names (1970, 21). In my view, Plato avoided technical terminology on principled grounds.
[12] See Ryle 1953, 167-168. According to his characterization, "[w]hen people speak of the use of ordinary language, the word 'ordinary' is in implicit or explicit contrast with 'out-of-the-way', 'esoteric', 'technical', 'poetical', 'notational', or, sometimes, 'archaic'. 'Ordinary' means 'common', 'current', 'colloquial', 'vernacular', 'natural', 'prosaic', 'non-notational', 'on the tongue of Everyman', and is usually in contrast with dictions which only a few people know how to use, such as the technical terms or artificial symbolisms of lawyers, theologians, economists, philosophers, cartographers, mathematicians, symbolic logicians and players of Royal Tennis. There is no sharp boundary between 'common' and 'uncommon', 'technical' and 'untechnical' or 'old fashioned' and 'current'" (1953, 167-8). He claims that it is difficult to pin down exactly what ordinary language is since, as Ryle puts it, "[t]he edges of 'ordinary' are blurred" (1953, 168).

of syntactical constructions, some of which are not truth-functional (e.g., exclamations).

The *Cratylus* portrays a conversation by employing for the most part ordinary language, and this can be seen in the use of colloquial diction, comedic imagery and a wide variety of syntactical constructions.

Plato's use of colloquial diction is very well attested, and the *Cratylus* is no exception.13 A name is compared to a shuttle and a drill and the original name-maker, to a carpenter and a blacksmith (388aff.).14 To take one prominent example, Plato uses the terms *glischōs* (414c) and *glischra* (435c) to mean 'resisting in a sticky manner,' a usage only found in Aristophanes.15 Plato employs comic imagery in the majority of his dialogues;16 in this dialogue, for example, Socrates provides a wickedly funny image of Heracliteanism, claiming their metaphysics makes things out to be like "leaky cups" and "people with runny noses" (440c-d). The speakers make use of a wide range of grammatical forms, syntactical constructions, etc., and there is no exclusive preference for propositions that faithfully and clearly communicate already established truths.17 Agreement, especially in response to Socrates' questions, is often expressed elliptically18 and we also find a plethora of questions, exclamations, oaths, demonstratives, and vocatives. If anything, the favored construction is the question. The use of colloquialisms, comedy, imagery in general, and perhaps even questions would fall away once a technically precise language was established. Thus, Plato's own use of language thus seems to indicate that the language of philosophy is contiguous with, and not radically distinct from, ordinary discourse.

Plato does not, of course, merely rely on what ordinary language provides him. He was a very prodigious coiner of words.19 However, Plato's gestures at terminology rarely extend beyond a very limited conversational framework.20 In his essay on Plato's use of language, Campbell concludes that "in Plato…philosophical terminology is incipient, tentative, transitional"; in other words, it is not *terminology* in the relevantly precise sense at all.21 Words may of course be taken up and incorporated into the larger philosophical discourse, but their usefulness for inquiry appear limited to the particular context of their utterance. Even when

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13 See Tarrant 1946; Tarrant 1958; Campbell 1973, 280ff.

14 This recalls Alcibiades' complaint about Socrates in the *Symposium* that "he always talks about asses, or blacksmiths, or cobblers, or tanners" (221e). Cp. *Grg.* 491a: "You simply never stop talking about cobblers, cleaners, cooks and doctors"; and *Hp. Ma.* 288d1, where such "vulgar talk" is decried as "uncultured." See Campbell 1973, 280-6. Nor does Plato shy away from outright obscenity—there is no example from the *Cra.*, but in *Grg.*, the life of the hedonist is compared to that of the 'dirty bird' that defecates while it eats, the man who constantly scratches himself, and the passive homosexual who gets his fill of what he needs (494b-d).

15 Cp. Ar. *Ach.* 452; *Pax* 482; Plato *Cri.* 53e; *Rep.* 488a. For an analysis of the phrase, see Williams 1982, 93.

16 See Brock for an account of the comic inheritance (1990, 42ff.).

17 In Attic Greek, we might expect a gnomic aorist rather than the present indicative for such true propositions, but the dialogue shows no preference at all for the gnomic aorist.

18 See Campbell 1973, 213-7.

19 See Campbell for a fairly extensive selection (1973, 260-79); Brock comments that the "full list would be immense" (1990, 44).

20 While Plato will have his interlocutors define or attempt to define a term, he conspicuously avoids a technical philosophical vocabulary (of the sort that one finds in Aristotle). What successfully defined terms do emerge in a given dialogue are never carried over into another dialogue. Cp. *Theaetetus* 184c; *Statesman* 261e and *Euthydemus* 277e-278b.

21 Campbell 1973, 292. For *eidos* and *idea*, see 294-305; for other terms, 305-40.

Socrates does seem to use some words in a technical sense, they are not established in a way that rules out other uses, as they would have to be in an ideal language. In fact, Plato seems almost whimsical both in his repetitions of the same word with a different meaning and his introduction of synonymous words for no apparent reason.22 In order to bring this point out, it will be helpful to look at the *Cratylus'* use of a familiar 'term' from Platonic dialogues: *eidos*, the *vox propria* in the dialogues for 'form.' Most instances of *eidos* in the dialogue are clearly not specialized.23 The only candidate for technical use is the controversial "name-form" (387d-390e), and many scholars have noticed that Socrates is not using *eidos* in the same sense throughout.24 Though I will not purse the point here, it is at least possible that Plato *deliberately* exploits an ambiguity in the meaning of *eidos*: it can refer to the 'nature' of something or its 'physical shape' or 'look.'25

From these considerations, we might conclude that ordinary language is *good enough* for philosophical discourse. It is not hopelessly inadequate, systematically misleading and/or in need of a major overhaul. In the context of certain conversations, we might need to precisely define a term or come up with a new term, but these emendations to language are, I suggest, context-dependent. What we should certainly not expect is that the coining of words can function as a reliable philosophical methodology, whereby we can somehow firmly affix words to their referents to ensure stable reference outside of the contexts of language use.

IV. Conclusion

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22 Campbell 1973, 251.

23 In the first instance of *eidos*, Socrates asks to include actions in "*eidos* of the things that are" (386e8); the term here means something like 'class' (cp. 411a1) but surely is not meant to indicate forms in the 'theory of forms' sense. In fact, when Socrates is most likely to be talking about forms in this stronger sense in the "dream" passage, he does not use *eidos* at all but rather *idea* (439c).

24 See e.g. Luce 1965; Calvert 1970. Some very good articles have attempted to disentangle the web in this passage: see e.g. Calvert 1970; Kretzmann 1971; Anagnostopoulos 1972; Bestor 1980; Silverman 1992. Calvert recognizes the ambiguity but attributes it to the "bewilderment in his thought at the time of writing the *Cratylus*"; he also criticizes Plato for failing to keep his terms straight (1970, 34).

25 If, in the end, *eidos*—the best candidate for a technically precise term—turns out to be a case of intentional ambiguity, then this tells decisively against the idea that Plato wants to correct ordinary language and establish an ideal one, since ambiguity was one of the 'problematic' features of language which an ideally precise language purports to eliminate. One might justly wonder, to what end Plato might employ ambiguity? The answer can only be to provoke us, his readers, to pursue the argument to see where it goes wrong so that we can see which parts of the view put forth can be saved and which must be jettisoned. One might want to protest here Plato precisely wants us to *clear up* the ambiguity and to formulate a clear and appropriate account of what a name is and thus infer that my placing philosophical significance on the ambiguity is misguided. In my view, this is not a very powerful objection. It is one thing to say that conversational contexts often require disambiguation in order to get clear on the topic at hand. It is quite another to say that such ambiguity should and can be eliminated *tout court* by establishing a precise terminology or formulating a timelessly true proposition. Indeed, the pedagogical exploitation of ambiguity is arguably not limited to the *Cratylus*. On Plato and ambiguity, see Robinson 1941; Robinson 1942; Sprague 1962. Nor is Plato's insistence on using *eidos* in both technical and ordinary senses. In general, the exploitation of the ambiguity of language we find here seems to take us rather far from the ideal of an ideal language. If the exploitation of ambiguity is appropriate and useful for philosophical inquiry, then the construction of an ideal language which rules out or eliminates ambiguity would run counter to the intentions of philosophy. Plato's playfulness with language—his proclivity for puns, use of oxymoron, etc.—often exploits double meanings and ambiguities in the language (see Campbell 1973, II.ii.d: "§22: Playing with words" (290-1).). So too do the etymologies, especially insofar as they provide multiple explanations for the same word and play on the multiple meanings.

In this paper, I hope to have shown Plato does not endorse imitation as a means for establishing an ideal language; that he denies the possibility and desirability of an ideal language; and that he does not think ordinary language is unsuitable for philosophical discourse. The aspiration to establish an ideal language is misguided and names will always only imperfectly refer to the things themselves, i.e. stable natures or forms. Despite the imperfection, the two purposes attributed to names, to teach and to divide being, can be achieved. Only through a certain kind of use of ordinary names—dialectical question and answer (390c-d)—will names be able to teach and divide being. This kind of use, however, requires shifting one's focus away from names (and their internal constituents) and towards the things to which names refer, i.e. the forms.

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