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Impartiality and timeliness in Plato's critique of language through *Cratylus*

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Highlights

- *Cratylus* holds a neutral philosophical stance regarding the origins of meaning.
- Not settling the debate about the correctness of names makes *Cratylus* methodologically productive and historically reliable.
- The findings confirm that conventionalism can be challenged by kinship terminology, while naturalism shows limitations with onomatopoeic expressions.

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Abstract

Cratylus has often led to two major observations: first, the dialogue astonishingly holds a neutral philosophical stance regarding the origins of meaning; second, despite its age, the work is still relevant to debates in the philosophy of language (Demos, 1964: 595). This lasting relevance originates from the dialogue's engagement with the fundamental debate between naturalism and conventionalism, a rhetorical clash that continues to guide scholars involved with research on linguistic reference (the correctness of names) and semantic grounding (the origin of meaning). Thus, Plato's work mainly appears to be intemporal because it relies on a methodological framework that remains balanced in the debate between naturalism and conventionalism. Therefore, the present paper advocates that the methodological neutrality and rich etymological discussion found in *Cratylus* enhance both its productivity and relevance. By confronting the antagonistic theories of naturalism and conventionalism, the study examines Socratic interventions that wisely critique and support aspects of each theory, which denotes a certain level of philosophical mastery from Plato. Using a mixed-methods approach, the paper combines a close textual analysis of major argumentative passages with a comparative corpus analysis of 200 expressions drawn from 10 languages (extended to 12 depending on the context) selected according to their typological diversity. The analysis evaluates lexical elements both at the semantic and phonetic levels but also demonstrates the degrees of arbitrariness in assigning names. The findings confirm that *Cratylus* is indeed significantly neutral, as conventionalism can be challenged by kinship terminology, while naturalism has shown certain limitations in the analysis of onomatopoeic expressions. Not settling the debate about the correctness of names makes *Cratylus* methodologically productive and historically reliable, hence preserving its value as an open philosophical inquiry.

Impartialité et intemporalité de la critique du langage chez Platon à travers *Cratyle*

Résumé

Cratyle a souvent donné lieu à deux constats majeurs : d'une part, le dialogue adopte, de façon étonnante, une neutralité philosophique sur l'origine du sens ; d'autre part, malgré son ancienneté, l'œuvre reste pertinente pour les débats actuels en philosophie du langage (Demos, 1964 : 595). Cette pertinence durable tient à l'engagement du dialogue dans le débat fondamental entre le naturalisme et le conventionnalisme, une confrontation rhétorique qui continue d'orienter les recherches sur la référence linguistique (la justesse des noms) et l'ancrage sémantique (l'origine du sens). Ainsi, l'œuvre de Platon paraît intemporelle dans la mesure où elle repose sur un cadre méthodologique qui demeure équilibré dans ce débat. Cet article soutient donc que la neutralité méthodologique de *Cratyle*, associée à la richesse de ses analyses étymologiques, renforce à la fois sa productivité et son actualité. En confrontant les théories opposées du naturalisme et du conventionnalisme, l'étude analyse les interventions de Socrate, qui critique et soutient habilement certains aspects de chaque position, ce qui témoigne d'une réelle maîtrise philosophique chez Platon. S'appuyant sur une approche mixte, l'article combine une analyse textuelle approfondie des principaux passages argumentatifs et une étude comparative portant sur un corpus de 200 expressions issues de dix langues (nombre élargi à douze selon le contexte), sélectionnées pour leur diversité typologique. L'analyse porte sur les éléments lexicaux aux plans sémantique et phonétique, tout en mettant en évidence les degrés d'arbitraire dans l'attribution des noms. Les résultats confirment que *Cratyle* manifeste une neutralité importante : le conventionnalisme peut être mis en question par la terminologie de la parenté, tandis que le naturalisme révèle certaines limites dans l'analyse des expressions onomatopéiques. En ne tranchant pas la question de la justesse des noms, *Cratyle* demeure particulièrement productif sur le plan méthodologique et fiable sur le plan historique, préservant ainsi sa valeur en tant qu'enquête philosophique ouverte.

Mots clés : Conventionnalisme, Naturalisme, Philosophie du langage, Platon, Sens.

Introduction

Who of Cratylus[1] and Hermogenes was right about the correctness of names? This deceptively simple question is probably familiar to many readers of Plato's book. However, the dialogue hardly provides any decisive answer. *Cratylus*[2] is essentially a dialogue that presents an overview of how language works from a philosophical standpoint, based on the investigation of names. A prominent task regarding the analysis of this book is to emphasise that although the dialogue draws a lot of attention to the etymological account of names, the main focus remains on language as a whole. In other words, when Plato uses the concept of "names" in *Cratylus*, he means language more than anything else. For this reason, the dialogue can be looked at as an inquiry into the foundations of linguistic meaning (i.e., where the correctness of meaning originates from). To emphasise this point, Sedley (2013) reports that the elements of language that *Cratylus* is initially interested in are nouns (including proper names) though the book, in short, can be thought of as Plato's dialogue on language.

Cratylus, which arguably represents one of the very first texts in the philosophy of language, takes the form of a dialogue that involves three characters, notably Cratylus,

[1] Cratylus (non-italicised) refers to a character in the dialogue.
[2] *Cratylus* (italicised) refers to the book itself.

Hermogenes, and Socrates who plays a mediating role in the dialogue. As such, Socrates is taken to represent Plato, though not overtly. That is, Socratic opinions and interventions, which could be regarded as an argumentative trap, are designed to put up Plato's perception of the issues addressed in the book. Therefore, since Plato does not directly take part in the dialogue even though his influence on it is perceptible, he may appear as an intriguing person who raises several questions and whose true intentions throughout *Cratylus* are yet to be uncovered.

Plato (428 B.C.-348 B.C.) is thought of by many researchers as one of the most influential thinkers of his time. Likewise, several philosophers would even suggest that his influence transcends the history of Western philosophy. As Borgmann (1974) reports, Plato is remembered as the first scholar who explicitly acknowledged and investigated language from a philosophical perspective. In this regard, the dialogue he presents in *Cratylus* has been viewed not only as a precious legacy for its scholarly prowess and pioneering role; it has also been considered an enigmatic work since the dialogue does not lead to any clear-cut outcome. Specifically, what does this imply?

The revolutionising contribution of *Cratylus* in the way philosophers approach the investigation of language is generally not put to question. Still, despite this significant impact, the book has long been regarded as one that solely suggests a neutral account of language. More precisely, it analyses, interprets, and provides instances of naturalism and conventionalism without showing, when everything is considered, which of the two views best illustrates the correctness of names. Besides, although it could be argued that such neutrality, to some extent, makes *Cratylus* invalid and irrelevant to recent findings on meaning in language, the reality proves different. Astonishingly, as several philosophers report, Plato's dialogue has managed to meet temporal challenges and remain up to date. The main task, therefore, is to determine which view of meaning Plato advocates through *Cratylus*. In addition, what does the dialogue represent as an examination of meaning in language? What justifies the neutrality associated with Plato's approach? How does the dialogue manage to resist decay and remain relevant to current debates in the area? Based on these questions, the paper seeks to move beyond traditional philosophical interpretations and empirically validate the neutrality of *Cratylus*, showing that the lack of finality noted in the dialogue is not a limitation but rather a productive openness.

1. *Cratylus* Through a Platonic Lens

As Sedley (2003) points out, Plato's *Cratylus* explores the principles that govern the correctness of names; that is, it explores "what criteria, if any, make a name correct". More precisely, this question is manifested in the dialogue as such: when a name (or any other type of word or phrase) is correct in naming a given thing or performing a particular linguistic function, what is the source of such correctness? (Jowett, 1999). Plato addresses this question by examining two rival theories that modern philosophers and linguists often label as naturalism and conventionalism (Sedley, 2003). These two antagonistic views are held and defended in the dialogue, respectively, by Cratylus and Hermogenes. However, the dialogue also prominently features Socrates who intervenes to mediate the clash of ideas between the advocate of naturalism and that of conventionalism. In this regard, what the dialogue suggests is that Socrates incarnates wisdom, discernment, and patience. Knowing that Socratic views in the dialogue are taken to represent Plato's perception of the subject matter, it should be admitted, therefore, that the credit is naturally due to Plato himself. However, should *Cratylus*

be praised although it fails to achieve any clear-cut outcome from the debates between these two views? What exactly does Plato attempt to demonstrate in *Cratylus*?

1.1. Naturalism

Cratylus, a character portrayed as a radical linguistic naturalist, has already finished introducing the gist of his ideas as the dialogue is introduced. It is, therefore, Hermogenes who lays out Cratylus' views to Socrates as the latter is invited to participate in the discussion. Addressing Socrates, Hermogenes starts with the following words:

> Cratylus says, Socrates, that there is a correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature. A thing's name isn't whatever people agree to call it—some bit of their native language that applies to it—but there is natural correctness of names, which is the same for everyone, Greek or foreigner. (383a-383b)

Cratylus appears to advocate the theory that every name has a correct meaning in its essence. Likewise, knowing that the correctness of meaning is mainly determined by the essence of words, all correct names must have the same meaning in any language or any place. In other words, choosing names is not an arbitrary task since every name, under normal circumstances, should naturally reflect the particular object to which it is attributed. In the same perspective, Cratylus believes that the natural property of names triggers a situation where each name only pertains to the object it describes. That is, when you try to designate an object using a name other than its natural name, any reference to that object may simply be impossible. However, what Cratylus advocates in terms of names and their meaning differs, by far, from Hermogenes' perception of correctness.

1.2. Conventionalism

Hermogenes views the correctness of names from a conventional perspective. As he suggests, there is absolutely nothing but convention and agreement that can justify the correctness of names and, therefore, determine which objects are described or designated by which words. In this regard, Hermogenes has often been viewed a radical linguistic conventionalist. In *Cratylus*, he introduces his stance as follows:

> Well, Socrates, I've often talked with Cratylus—and with lots of other people, for that matter—and no one is able to persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention and agreement. I believe that any name you give a thing is its correct name. If you change its name and give it another, the new one is as correct as the old. For example, when we give names to our domestic slaves, the new ones are as correct as the old. No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name. (384d)

Hermogenes' principle of the correctness of names, when analysed from his standpoint, shows that meaning is not a rigid or static phenomenon, nor is a name (language) bound to perpetual stagnation. In other words, a single name could be used to designate various objects, and alternatively, different names could be ascribed to the same object. Of course, the only condition for such a practice to be durable is to maintain the convention or agreement initially established by the individuals who use those names and refer to the objects in their language.

1.3. The Socratic Rhetoric

Naturalism and Conventionalism are two positions that mostly make up the dialogue presented in Plato's *Cratylus*. At first glance, it may appear that there is nothing wrong with either of these two views since some argumentation is provided to support each one. In addition, from their advocates' standpoints, both naturalism and conventionalism have merit since each one conforms, at least partly, to the reality attached to language usage within various speech communities. However, when it comes to confronting both views with one another and deciding which one is the best account of the correctness of names, one realises that Plato failed—or perhaps refrained—to achieve a clear-cut outcome in the dialogue.

Indeed, it appears that *Cratylus* only gives a neutral account of the principle that should determine the correctness of names. For this reason, scholars have often had different opinions as to which one of naturalism and conventionalism is favoured and advocated by Plato himself. This confusion is even emphasised by the fact that Socrates, the intermediary whose arguments are taken to represent Plato's view, does not conclude his intervention by specifying which of the two views he supports. Thus, it would be opportune and even necessary to examine the neutrality found in *Cratylus* and see whether such neutrality should be viewed as positive or negative.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines a textual analysis (qualitative) with a comparative corpus analysis (quantitative). This is because the research questions require two distinct actions: (i) using close textual reading to assess the rhetorical neutrality of *Cratylus*, and (ii) analysing cross-linguistic data to test the empirical validity of naturalism and conventionalism (which both account for linguistic meaning).

More precisely, the qualitative account of this study suggests a textual analysis of Plato's *Cratylus*, with particular attention to Socratic interventions directed at both Cratylus and Hermogenes. This qualitative analysis aims at demonstrating neutrality throughout the dialogue. Relevant passages (instances where Socrates refutes or supports each interlocutor's position) are identified by their argumentative properties. The selection criteria are based on Sedley's (2003) research, which identifies Socratic rhetoric as the primary vehicle of Platonic argumentation in the dialogue.

The quantitative analysis is based, on the one hand, on a corpus of 200 kinship terms from 10 languages, compiled using the Kinbank global database of kinship terminology (Passmore et al., 2023) and, on the other hand, on a cross-linguistic (12 languages) comparison of commonly used onomatopoeias. The languages were purposively selected to represent typological and genealogical distance across the world's major language families (Indo-European, Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, Turkic, and Japonic). Cross-linguistic phonological similarity is measured using a three-level rating scale, i.e., high, moderate, and low (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2015), described as follows:

High Similarity: two or more languages share the same or almost identical place and manner of articulation for the dominant consonant(s) and vowel quality of the term (e.g., bilabial plosives /p/, /b/ and low central vowel /a/ in papa/baba).

Moderate Similarity: languages share only one of the dominant articulatory features (partial convergence). That is, the vowel is similar but the consonant differs.

Low Similarity: languages show distinct phonological forms with minimal or no shared articulatory features. This category indicates that convention or cultural practices play the dominant role in shaping the form of the term.

3. *Cratylus* and the Neutral Stance

The notion of neutrality is illustrated—subtly or not—in many regards throughout the dialogue. Besides, the most significant instance of such a position in the book has to do with the Socratic approach to critiquing both Cratylus' and Hermogenes' views. As a prominent orator, Socrates uses his skills to maintain neutrality, as evidenced in the dialogue. He knows how to explore different, perhaps opposing, views by highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each one without, however, showing any preference. Thus, what follows is a series of instances from the the dialogue where Socrates refutes respectively conventionalism and naturalism although he also happens to agree with each one. Also, Socrates showcases such rhetorical skills in refuting conventionalism and naturalism that Cratylus and Hermogenes cannot help having admiration for the pertinence of his arguments. For instance, Cratylus, addressing Socrates, asserts the following:

> … it occurs to me to say to you what Achilles says to Ajax in the "Prayers":
>
> *Ajax, son of Telamon, seed of Zeus, lord of the people,*
>
> *All you have said to me seems spoken after my own mind.*
>
> The same is true of me where you're concerned, Socrates: your oracular utterances—whether inspired by Euthyphro or by some other Muse who has long inhabited your own mind without your knowing about it—seem to be pretty much spoken after *my* own mind. (*Cratylus* 428)

In subsequent sections, illustrations are provided regarding Socrates' refutation of both views. This systematic refutation brings some balance in the dialogue since it is not singularly directed to either conventionalism or naturalism.

3.1. The Conventionalist Account of Neutrality

3.1.1. Textual Arguments

The gist of conventionalism is that the form of a name does not reflect its meaning, i.e. there is no direct link between the form and meaning of names. This view was held by Hermogenes who further suggests that the correctness of names is only determined by way of convention and agreement. For instance, Hermogenes in his argumentation posits that a servant's name can change, with the new name remaining as valid as the old one. Therefore, conventionalism radically refutes naturalism, especially by claiming that nature cannot determine correct names and that no name is more valid than others. In this regard, Socrates intervenes with the intent to prove Hermogenes wrong as to what determines the correctness of names. Below is an excerpt of the Socratic rhetoric from the dialogue:

> **SOCRATES:** Perhaps you're on to something, Hermogenes, let's see. Are you saying that whatever anyone decides to call a particular thing is its name?
>
> **HERMOGENES:** I am.
>
> **SOCRATES:** What about this? Suppose I call one of the things that are—for instance, the one we now call 'man'—suppose I give that the name 'horse' and give the one we

now call 'horse' the name 'man'. Will the same thing have the public name 'man' but the private name 'horse'? Is that what you mean?

HERMOGENES: Yes, Socrates, for I can't conceive of any other way in which names could be correct. I call a thing by the name I gave it; you [do likewise] …

SOCRATES: And if things are of such a nature [they have some fixed being or essence of their own], doesn't the same hold of actions performed in relation to them? Or aren't actions included in some one class of the things that are?

HERMOGENES: Of course they are.

SOCRATES: Now isn't speaking or saying one sort of action?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if speaking or saying is a sort of action, one that is about things, isn't using names also a sort of action?

HERMOGENES: Yes.

SOCRATES: And didn't we see that actions aren't in relation to us but have a special nature of their own?

HERMOGENES: We did.

SOCRATES: So if we are to be consistent with what we said previously, we cannot name things as we choose; rather, we must name them in the natural way for them to be named and with the natural tool for naming them. In that way we'll accomplish something and succeed in naming, otherwise we won't.

To reinforce the sense of neutrality put up in *Cratylus*, one should also note that conventionalism is not fully applicable to the philosophical critique of language. First, when Hermogenes affirms that whenever a thing's name changes, the new one is as correct as the old, it might be legitimate to wonder why there should be a new name since the old one is correct as well. Secondly, there seems to be a link between a name's form and the meaning it conveys or, more precisely, between a meaning (function) and the word (form) to which it is ascribed, suggesting that the function precedes the form. This case, for instance, has to do with the similarity that exists between kinship terms across various languages in the world, in which case, naturalism is would be favoured.

3.1.2. Empirical Counterarguments

To empirically refute the philosophical implications of conventionalism, this section analyses cross-linguistic elements in kinship terminology, especially the words designating *father* and *mother*. The aim is to determine whether these terms, though conventional across linguistic communities, demonstrate natural phonetic/phonological tendencies, which would imply universality and, therefore, give credit to naturalism.

Table 1: Cross-Linguistic Comparison of Kinship Terms

Family	Language	Term for 'Father'	Term for 'Mother'	Similarity for 'Father'	Similarity for 'Mother'
Indo-European	English	dad	mom	High	High
	French	papa	maman	High	High
	Russian	papa	mama	High	High
	Hindi	papa	mā	High	High
	Spanish	papá	mamá	High	High
Afro-Asiatic	Arabic	abba	umma	High	High
Niger-Congo	Bamanankan	baba	mā/mama	High	High
	Swahili	baba	mama	High	High
Turkic	Turkish	baba	anne	High	Moderate
Japonic	Japanese	otōsan	okāsan	Low	Low

These terms reveal significant cross-linguistic phonological similarities, especially in bilabial sounds (/m/, /b/, /p/) used in early child speech acquisition. As noted by Murdock (1959) and Passmore et al. (2023), the recurrence of bilabial consonants and open vowels in parental terms is a near-universal feature of human language. These similarities suggest that while names may be ascribed based on convention, certain phonetic/phonological principles mainly guide the selection of sound patterns in a natural way, regardless of languages or speech communities. The notable exception is Japanese (*otōsan*, *okāsan*), which presents a low similarity rating for both terms due to its distinct phonological nature.

Chart 1: Degree of Phonological Similarity Across Languages

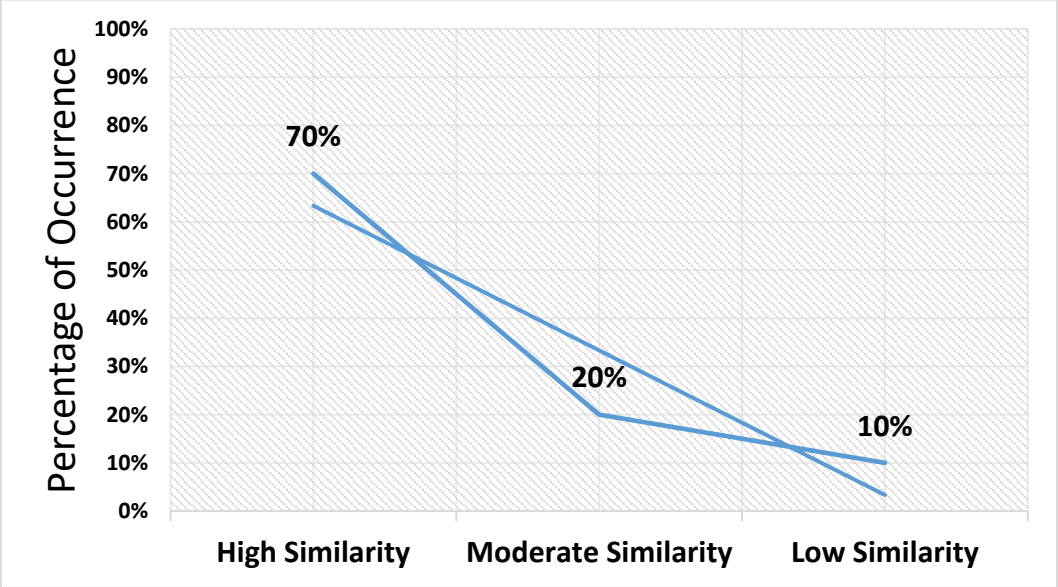


Chart Interpretation

- High Similarity: Shared bilabial consonant(s) and open vowel quality; reflects a strong natural phonetic tendency in parental terminology.
- Moderate Similarity: The similarity is mixed between phonetic closeness and partial conventional divergence.

- Low Similarity: Distinct phonological forms across languages; indicates the primary influence of language-specific convention.

Indeed, Chart 1 shows that the majority of kinship terms (70%) share high cross-linguistic phonological similarity, which means there is mainly a natural basis for certain linguistic forms. The result partially challenges Hermogenes' strict conventionalist view and shows that phonetic similarity across languages is not strictly subject to intentional change and follows certain natural principles. The analysis of kinship vocabulary shows that even though names are ascribed in terms of agreement, form and meaning considerably share a natural and universal relationship. Therefore, these findings reinforce the Socratic claim that names must correspond "in the natural way", and align with cross-typological evidence provided by Passmore et al. (2023), and Khalilia et al. (2023).

3.2. The Naturalistic Account of Neutrality

3.2.1. Textual Arguments

The foundation of naturalism, as Cratylus suggests, is that the form of a name is inextricably related to the meaning ascribed to it. Cratylus believes that "everything has a right name of its own, which comes by nature" even though he also acknowledges that some names may be ascribed incorrectly (*Cratylus* 383). Cratylus illustrates this view by telling Hermogenes that the latter's name 'Hermogenes' is not the actual one. Therefore, Socrates takes turn, and his rhetoric designed to refute Cratylus' naturalistic position, can be summed up as follows:

> **SOCRATES:** What about rule-setters? Do some of them produce finer products, others inferior ones?
>
> **CRATYLUS:** No, there I no longer agree with you.
>
> **SOCRATES:** So you don't think that some rules are better, others inferior?
>
> **CRATYLUS:** Certainly not.
>
> **SOCRATES:** Nor names either, it seems. Or do you think that some names have been better given, others worse?
>
> **CRATYLUS:** Certainly not.
>
> **SOCRATES:** So all names have been correctly given?
>
> **CRATYLUS:** Yes, as many of them as are names at all.
>
> **SOCRATES:** What about the case of Hermogenes, which we mentioned earlier? Has he not been given this name at all, unless he belongs to the family of Hermes? Or has he been given it, only not correctly?
>
> […]
>
> **SOCRATES:** Your argument is too subtle for me at my age. All the same, tell me this. Do you think it is possible to say something falsely, although not possible to speak it falsely?
>
> […]
>
> **SOCRATES:** Even though the name I utter is unlike the thing I mean—since '*l*' is unlike hardness (to revert to your example). But if that's right, surely you have entered into a convention with yourself, and the correctness of names has become a matter of

> convention for you, for isn't it the chance of usage and convention that makes both like and unlike letters express things? And even if usage is completely different from convention, still you must say that expressing something isn't a matter of likeness but of usage, since usage, it seems, enables both like and unlike names to express things. Since we agree on these points, Cratylus, for I take your silence as a sign of agreement, both convention and usage must contribute something to expressing what we mean when we speak.

In this regard, it is legitimate to assume, in a certain fashion, that the correctness of names cannot always be justified with a naturalistic argumentation. In other words, Cratylus' claim that form and meaning are inextricably interdependent can hardly be defended on a constant basis. This is because, had his claim been receivable, onomatopoeias would have had the same form across all languages and speech communities. However, the reality turns out to be otherwise.

3.2.2. Empirical Counterarguments

Cratylus' naturalistic view posits that names are correct by nature and that there exists an intrinsic relationship between the form of a name and the meaning it conveys. To put this claim to test and, eventually, refute the philosophical implications of naturalism, the second part of the data focuses on the concept of onomatopoeias. Indeed, the observation of onomatopoeic terms, based on their imitative character, should theoretically demonstrate strong cross-linguistic similarity, assuming that naturalism is universally valid. These concepts involve both continuous sounds (buzz, crackle) and punctual impact sounds (splash, knock) to diversify the acoustic type of the data analysed.

Table 2: Cross-Linguistic Onomatopoeic Terms

Family	Language	Splash	Buzz	Dog Bark	Knock	Fire Crackle
Indo-European	English	splash	buzz	woof	knock-knock	crackle
	French	plouf	bzzz	ouaf	toc-toc	crac
	Spanish	chap	zumbido	guau	toc-toc	crep-crep
	Russian	plesk	zhzh	gav-gav	tuk-tuk	tresk
	German	platschen	summen	wuff	klopf-klopf	knister
	Italian	splash	ronzio	bau-bau	toc-toc	scoppiettio
Niger-Congo	Bamanankan	bádawo	firinfirin	wówo	kɔ́nkɔn	pɛrɛn-pɛrɛn
Niger-Congo	Swahili	bwata	zii	bwau	dok-dok	krrrr
Japonic	Japanese	basha	bun-bun	wan-wan	ton-ton	pata-pata
Afro-Asiatic	Arabic	rashash	zazaz	haw-haw	taq-taq	far-far
Turkic	Turkish	şap	vızvız	hav-hav	tak-tak	çıtır-çıtır
Uralic	Finnish	loiskaus	surina	hau-hau	kop-kop	rätinä

As observed from the dataset, several onomatopoeic expressions reveal high cross-linguistic divergence or dissimilarity, i.e., clear phonetic differences at various levels. For

example, forms representing "dog bark", "knocking", and "fire crackling" differ significantly, probably as a result of cross-linguistic phonological constraints or even cultural conventions rather than universal natural tendencies (cf. Körtvélyessy & Štekauer, 2024). Besides, the data reveal that even expressions such as *splash* or *buzz*, which sometimes demonstrate partial similarity, fail to show such regularity when the linguistic sample is expanded to 12 languages.

Chart 2: Degree of Cross-Linguistic Onomatopoeic Similarity

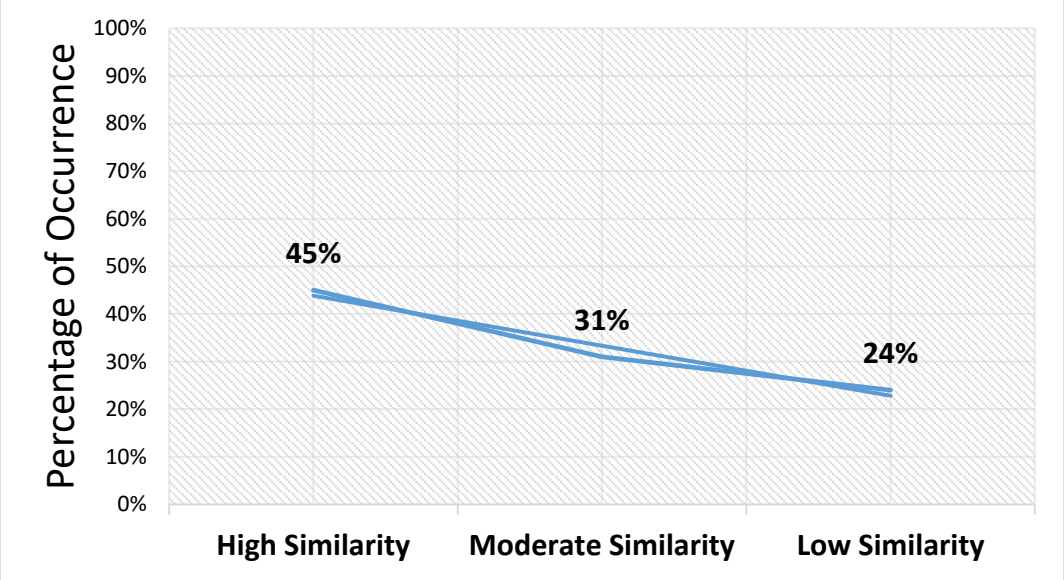


Chart Interpretation

- High Similarity: Limited convergence; natural tendencies are relatively rare.
- Moderate Similarity: Partial convergence influenced by both natural acoustic tendencies and phonological convention.
- Low Similarity: Strong divergence; dominant place and manner of articulation differ, reinforcing conventionalist claims

Chart 2 shows that less than twenty-five percent of the onomatopoeic expressions demonstrate high cross-linguistic similarity, whereas about thirty-one percent show partial convergence, and up to forty-five percent reveal strong divergence. These results provide evidence that imitation, hence naturalism, does not play a major role in shaping words. Despite the relative frequency of phonetic elements such as /p/, /t/, and /z/, significant variation can be observed, ranging from bilabial plosives /p, b/ to the labiodental fricative /f/, the alveolar trill /r/, and the alveolar lateral approximant /l/. For instance, these phonetic variations mainly occur with expressions such as “dog bark” (illustrated with “woof” and “bau-bau”) and “fire crackle” (as observed in “far-far” and “scoppiettio”). The low percentage of similarity (≈ 45%) presented in chart 2 provides evidence that convention and cultural realities strongly influence linguistic creations which, therefore, reinforces the Socrates’ claims on conventionalism.

3.3. Neutrality as a Source of Productivity

Based on the results, it appears that Plato's view of meaning in language, as presented in *Cratylus*, is not only neutral but also productive for s. In other words, the absence of a clear-cut outcome (the explicit advocacy of one view over the other) makes the dialogue an open critique of meaning in language and allows scholars from various tendencies to interpret the philosophical views that the dialogue deals with. Admittedly, one may even suggest that this neutrality in *Cratylus* is what allows Plato's dialogue to resist time and remain up to date. Further understanding, however, is needed regarding this particular aspect of the discussion, i.e., the idea that *Cratylus* remains relevant to current debates in the area.

4. Meaning From Plato's Perspective: An Imperishable Legacy?

Although it was written two millennia ago, *Cratylus* has consistently drawn scholars' positive attention due to its astonishing relevance to current debates in the philosophy of language. This situation brings about a major question: Based on its significant capacity to remain relevant, is *Cratylus* an imperishable legacy from Plato?

One of the main reasons why Plato's discussion of meaning has retained its relevance is that it is applicable to various disciplines of language studies. Indeed, the flexibility (i.e., the absence of any firm preference) that Plato demonstrates in the dialogue has certainly invited scholars to approach to the dialogue from various angles and for different purposes. Also, the neutrality of *Cratylus* makes it a book that can neither be harshly critiqued nor firmly embraced for a particular stance it may take. That is, the non-resolution posture (cf. Sedley, 2003) found in the dialogue makes it a common ground that allows not only interrogation and rigorous research, but also balanced and measured interpretations.

For this reason, Plato's views in *Cratylus* have been used within various areas of linguistics and the Philosophy of language. For instance, Stavelas (1996) indicates that Plato's universal truths inspired Noam Chomsky in elaborating the modern linguistic theory known as Universal Grammar (i.e., the belief that the exists and innate faculty or system that enables language acquisition). More specifically, Stavelas pointed out:

> The origin of universal grammar can be traced further in the medieval coalescence between grammatical theory and logics and the association of language with philosophy. The speculative grammars of the modistae were a step forward from what was considered as the ancient philosophy of language, namely, the works of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Dionysius Thrax, and Apoltlonius Dyscolus. (1996:6)

Besides, part of what is presented in the book as Hermogenes' position is also present in modern linguistic theory. Indeed, De Saussure (1916) relied on Hermogenes' theory that observes that the meaning of names is determined by how they relate to other names rather than their form. In this regard, De Saussure believes that names are a matter of social convention and agreement—even though it should be noted that the scholar's studies take into consideration other aspects of the arbitrariness of names.

Moreover, part of Hermogenes' stance is also displayed in Bloomfield's (1914; 1933) and Skinner's (1953; 1957) behaviourist theory. By suggesting that "no name belongs to any particular thing by nature, but only by the habit and custom of those who employ it..." (cf. *Cratylus* 384), Hermogenes inspired the behaviourists in many respects. Indeed, they, too, believe that the assimilation of language is a matter of habit.

Therefore, should *Cratylus* be viewed as an imperishable legacy? What seems fair to suggest is that Plato's reflexions on the issue of meaning in language should be of durable and precious help. Furthermore, based on its time-resilient nature so far, the analysis presented in *Cratylus* is likely to serve a basis for research as long as the philosophy of language will be an influential discipline involved with the study of language matters.

Finally—and without intending to disprove the results obtained so far—observations invite reflexions on whether the etymological discussions in the book do not give an idea on Plato's possible preference between naturalism and conventionalism, although Cratylus is said to be a neutral account of meaning in language. Hence, what does this mean specifically?

5. The Etymologies: A Touch of Irony or an Indicator of Plato's Position?

Examining properly the issue of etymologies in *Cratylus* often reveals to be a hard task. Indeed, this theme deals with the meaning of names in terms of their historical evolution. It appears, however, that Plato uses the discussion on etymologies in the dialogue to provide some sense of irony—nearly a parody of his argumentation. Besides, this aspect has often been disregarded by scholars, or rather treated as an isolated part of the dialogue. Several analysts also find it redundant as they believe it just offers elaborate explanations of a myriad of Greek words. However, when observed from a different angle, this etymological section can reveal interesting facts.

Furthermore, far from the seemingly ironic account of meaning, the etymological section of *Cratylus* is, as Sedley (2003) suggests, seriously intended by Plato as a method of linguistic and historical analysis, one that he considerably advocated and practised. Indeed, Sedley insists that etymologies can reveal and justify the primacy of naturalism and the attribution of names according to the actions they describe. More precisely, the persuasion power displayed by Socrates to refute and sometimes support his interlocutors' positions—which Plato takes to represent his own position—gives many insights into Plato's real motivation stance.

Based on the principles listed in Sedley (2003), Plato's etymological analyses appear to rest on the following assumptions which actually favour a broadly naturalistic account of meaning: (i) early name-givers expressed their understanding of things through the names they created; (ii) these names have since been altered by sound change; (iii) names function as tools that imitate the nature of the objects they are ascribed to; and (iv) such imitation can be analysed through simple components (phonological elements) until primary sounds are traced back.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with Plato's views of meaning in language at two major levels: (i) its philosophical neutrality and (ii) its enduring relevance despite its age. On the one hand, based on textual and empirical evidence, Plato's neutral stance in *Cratylus* has been confirmed. Additionally, the discussion has emphasised that despite such neutrality, the dialogue remains a common ground for critical thinking and rigorous research, but also balanced interpretations, hence revealing its high productivity. This made it possible to indicate that the dialogue's non-resolution stance aligns with measurable linguistic data, which confirm the Socratic claim that both natural resemblance and conventions contribute to the correctness of names. On the other hand, elements of evidence have sustained the astonishing relevance of *Cratylus* to current debates on meaning in language. This relevance is mainly facilitated by the flexibility and openness noted in the dialogue where Plato manages to navigate between naturalism and

conventionalism without taking a firm or irreversible position. However, it has been also been suggested that although it is generally admitted that Plato's views on linguistic meaning are neutral, a focus on the etymological discussions in the dialogue indicates that the book may have displayed some subtle preference for naturalism. As a result, this leaves room for curiosity and further research. All in all, it is fair to suggest that the enigmatic nature of *Cratylus* probably makes it one of Plato's most discussed books from the scholarly audience, hence receiving both positive and negative criticism. Likewise, aspects of the dialogue also provide evidence that *Cratylus* needs further investigation.

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