PLATO'S "CRATYLUS": AN OLD DIALOGUE DESCRIBES THE DIFFICULTY OF ATTRIBUTING A MEANING TO WORDS.

By

Roberta Pelletta

Freelance Conference Interpreter

Plato's "Cratylus" is considered the oldest essay on language, among those we know about. This is in spite of the fact that he was not a linguist, but a philosopher: in fact, in this dialogue, Plato deals with the problems created by the meaning of words, in relationship with the theory of ideas he was about to work out.

Words are images, and as such they will be a copy of reality that will hardly ever correspond to the original; the author thinks that words are a tool that may prove dangerous, because people may make unscrupulous use of it, and thus produce misleading, or even false, opinions.

Οσιθα δι το λόγος το πᾶν σημαίνει και κυκλεί και πολλά ἄκος, καὶ ἕστι διπλοῦς, ἀληθῆς καὶ
ψευδῆς. (408 c 2-3)

(You know well that a word means everything, "pan"; it moves around all the time, and is double: both true and false)

I would like to take this text as a starting point, and make a few considerations on the difficulties we tackle with words when language is used in simultaneous interpretation.

The first part of Cratylus is focused on the long-standing problem of whether things (πράγματα) have an appellation which is given to them by nature (φύσις), this being the view held by Cratylus, or whether words have been attributed to things on the basis of an agreement (νόμος), and are therefore conventional: this is the theory of Hermogenes. A third character, Socrates, (representing Plato) takes part in the discussion with a provocative attitude, and holds the conventional view in the first part of the dialogue; he eventually agrees with Cratylus, but in the last part of the text, he accepts that no solution has been found to the problem.

Κράτυλος ἰδικόν δε, ὅ Σωκράτης, ὀνόματος

(Here, Socrates, Cratylus declares that every

being has the appellation that rightly by nature is suitable for it)

(...οὐ δὲ δύναμαι πεισθῆναι ὡς ἄλλη τις ὑπόθεσης ὄνομας ἢ συνθήκη καὶ διμορφία ἢ ἡμιωνή καὶ ὁδὸς τῆς...

(383 a 3-4)

I...and yet I cannot be persuaded that for words other rules exist than agreement or consent - in fact, it seems to me that whatever name one ascribes to one thing, that will be its right name...because I believe that no thing has a name by nature, but through the rule and habit of those who, being used to it, call it that way)

The discussion deals much more with the

rightfulness (ἀρετής) of words than with their origin:

οὐδὲ τοῦτο ὡς ἐλεγήτης, ὅτι ὁ ὅνωμα τῶν

(393 d 1-3)

(....it makes no difference if you add or remove some letters, as long as the essence of the object is clear in the name)

We therefore have an indication of how difficult it is to work with such a complex tool of communication as words: this holds even more true when this process is taken one step further, through simultaneous interpretation, and we have a
double passage: meaning to words- processing of words in the interpreter's mind - working out of a new meaning- and words again. The process is so complex that words may become a factor of multiplication of a pre-existing misleading image of reality.

At this point, I would like to discuss where a relationship can be found between Cratylus and the use we make of words when we interpret somebody else's speech.

Simultaneous interpretation is the reconstruction of a speech that has been thought and pronounced by another person: and when I say " has been thought", I mean that each word in that speech will have a specific meaning for that person, and has therefore been selected by the speaker on the basis of the way in which he considers it corresponding to what he thinks: and not only that, but the speaker will also choose words that are part of a "common code" with those who are listening to him. He therefore adapts to a conventional meaning in order to make himself understood. (see Beaugrande R.A. and Dressler W., 1978, Introduction to Text Linguistics, London and New York, Longman).

This is the reason why, in working out our own interpretation of a speech, it is necessary to "step back" from the original "logos" (logos meant as speech and as the word itself): if we think, as we should do, that an interpreter is a real re-elaborator of a speech, and not someone who simply seeks the correspondence of one word to another, we understand that the "operator" (the interpreter) re-elaborates the speech not only on the basis of the words he is listening to, but also on the basis of the "feelings" that the speaker is communicating through words. He therefore operates as a "filter" of the subject matter, works it out, and reproduces it in another language, on the basis of a critical approach, not of merely linguistic considerations.

In fact, when we make a comparison between two different good interpretations of the same speech, however good they may be, we will consider one of them "more correct" than the other, if we feel it closer to our own way of interpreting what the speaker says, and therefore what he means.

Plato states that among the actions performed by man (πραξις), we find that of naming, of denominating (δοματις), words being the tools for this action. In order to describe these tools, he makes a comparison with the weaving shuttle: as the shuttle separates the woof of fabric, words are the tool used to separate the essence of things:

"Δομα αρα διδασκαλικον τι έστω δραγαν και διακριτικον τε ουσιας δαπερ κερις υψασματο" (388 b 13 - c 1)

(words are then a tool that can teach us and let us distinguish the essence, as the shuttle does with fabric)

Who is manufacturing words?

Plato's dialogue goes on to ask a question that comes out logically at this point: who is providing us with the words we use? Are they defined by law? If that is the case, are those who make use of words relying on the work of the legislator?

Ους μη φέρεται ονοματογονος οντος δε εστιν, ζε οικεν, δ νομισθηκε, δ δη των δημοσιων σπαινωτας εν ονοματις γηγναται (388 ε 7-389 a 2)

(not every man can attribute words, but only the "craftsmen" of words: which means, the legislator, who, among men, is the rarest of craftsmen)

He therefore draws a comparison between the craftsman (δοματογονος) and the legislator (νομισθηκε), and he comes to the conclusion that they are doing the same job: they are both manufacturing a tool on the basis of the idea they have in mind of that tool.

Let's now go back to the comparison with a weaving shuttle: it must be wooden in order to adapt to all fabrics; similarly, the words that must adapt to objects must be crafted by the legislator with the due sounds and syllables; but we should not be surprised if different legislators use different syllables for the same meaning, because:

"οδη γαρ ετος ονας σιδηρον άπεις χαλκος τηθησαν, του αυτος έν τοιοι ποιεσ το ους πραγματειμεν άλλος δωμα έκει την αυτη ανασαν αποσιων, ενθεν εν άλλω σιδηρη, δωμα ορθος έχει το δραγαν, ενθεν εν θαδε έποτο εν θετειρας τενοι - (389 έ 1-5)

(Even a blacksmith, making the same tool for the same use, does not make it with the same iron; but still, if it gives the same idea, even if made in a
different type of iron, the tool will do its work, be it made here, or among barbarians.

We have seen that an "expert", the legislator, is in charge of defining words: Plato indicates that there is no one-and-only way to define a meaning: and he even concedes the possibility of barbarians manufacturing words.

Who will supervise the work of the manufacturer of words?

Not everyone is capable of giving an appropriate definition to things, and we have seen that the legislator is in charge of producing words: but someone will have to supervise the legislator's activity. Who could be in a better position to do that than the dialectician, that is the person who is supposed actually to use words? And being the user, he will probably be the best possible person to judge the compliance of words to meaning.

And Plato depicts a clarifying simile:

Τέκτονος μὲν ἄρα ἔργον τούτον ποιήσαι πηδάλιον ἐπιστατούσος κυβερνήσαι, εἰ μέλλει καλὸν εἶναι τὸ πηδάλιον... Νομοθέτοι δὲ γε, ὡς ἔσκειν, ὄνωμα, ἐπιστάτην ἐχοντος διαλεκτικὸν ἄνδρα, εἰ μέλλει καλὸς ὄνομα τῇ θήσεσθαι (390 d 1-5)

(the carpenter's work therefore will be that of shaping a rudder under the surveillance of the coxswain, if the rudder is to be good... likewise the legislator's work, if I am not mistaken, will be that of creating words, under the surveillance of a dialectician, if he wants rightly to attribute words)

Conclusion

Plato's Cratylus does not come to a conclusion about the meaning of words: is it "natural", or is it "conventional"?

The central part of the dialogue, that deals with etymology, is not of special interest from the viewpoint of linguistics, while in the first and the last part of this work we find those principles that were taken over by general linguistics in the nineteenth and twentieth century, particularly by Saussure: there is no natural relationship between words (the meaning) and concepts (what is meant); signs are arbitrary, the relationship between form and substance, are all considerations that were already there, in Plato's Cratylus: they only had to be translated into a modern jargon.

But what modern linguists state in "technical" terms, is said by Plato in metaphorical language, in a style rich in similes, so that we actually see what he means, as if his language could turn into images. The text itself is an indication of the creative way in which words can be used, and of how strong their effect can be.

After a long discussion, Cratylus ends as follows:

Ἰσως μὲν οὖν δὴ ὁ Κρατύλης, οὐτοις ἔχεις, ἦς δὲ καὶ οὗ (440 d 2-3)

(To conclude, Cratylus, it may be so and it may not)