Convention or Nature?
The Correctness of names in Plato’s *Cratylus*
Abstract

This thesis is about Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus*, which is one of the earliest texts in the history of philosophy of language and has generated much interpretive controversy. In the dialogue, Plato examines two theories on the correctness of names; conventionalism and naturalism. However, there is no clear positive outcome in the dialogue in regard to the debate between conventionalism and naturalism. Therefore, scholars have long been divided as to what Plato’s own position on the correctness of names is. Another puzzling feature of the dialogue concerns the etymological section, which has often been ignored or treated in isolation in modern scholarship. This section takes up about half of the dialogue and offers elaborate explanations of a large number of words in the Greek language. Some recent studies of the *Cratylus*, however, are shedding much welcome light on the etymological section and the role it plays in the dialogue as a whole. In this thesis, I compare two competing interpretations of the etymological section and discuss how an understanding of the etymologies can help us understand Plato’s position on the correctness of names and the purpose of the dialogue as a whole. In Timothy Baxter’s interpretation, the etymological section should be read as a parody which amounts to a Platonic critique of a mistaken attitude towards names and language found especially in the poetry and philosophy in Plato’s time. David Sedley, on the other hand, argues that the etymologies are seriously intended by Plato as a method of linguistic and historical analysis, a method he himself endorsed and practiced. If the etymologies are taken seriously, Sedley argues, they show that Plato favored a form of naturalism in regard to the correctness of names. After providing an outline and evaluation of these two interpretations, the thesis concludes with my own proposal. Although I disagree with some of Sedley’s particular interpretations and arguments, I find myself in broad agreement with his general conclusions.
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1. Introduction

Plato (428 B.C.-348 B.C.) is arguably the most influential thinker in the history of Western philosophy. His works – written mostly in dialogue format – concern many different subjects, including metaphysics, epistemology, politics, ethics, and the living of a good life. A less known fact is that Plato was also the first philosopher to explicitly recognize and investigate language as a philosophical problem (Borgmann, 1974: 19). He did so primarily in his dialogue the *Cratylus*, which is about “the correctness of names”, i.e. what criteria, if any, makes a name correct? (Sedley, 2003: 3) In regard to this issue, the *Cratylus* examines two opposed theories proposed in the dialogue by Socrates’ two interlocutors: Cratylus and Hermogenes. The positions of Hermogenes and Cratylus are often labeled “conventionalism” and “naturalism” by modern commentators and linguists (Sedley, 2003: 3). As a naturalist, Cratylus holds that names are naturally linked to their objects; a name, to him, is an encoded description of the object it designates. A name that fails to describe its object is, in Cratylus’ view, not a name at all. Hermogenes, on the other hand, holds that the correctness of names is purely a function of linguistic convention. That is, the correct use of a name is determined not by nature, but simply by an agreement among speakers based on linguistic custom. Furthermore, Hermogenes concedes that a person could, if he wished, have private conventions that conflict with the public vocabulary, for example by calling a man “horse” and vice versa. For this reason, Hermogenes is taken to represent an extreme or subjective form of conventionalism.

As a preliminary, it will be helpful to say something about the meaning of “names” in the *Cratylus*. The Greek plural noun onomata, which is commonly translated as ‘names’, is a rather loose linguistic category. In the dialogue, it mainly refers to nouns, proper names, and (to some degree) adjectives. (Sedley, 2003: 4) In its more generic sense, however, it can also be used to mean ‘words’ or even ‘language’ in general (Sedley, 2013). Thus, although the *Cratylus* can be said to be Plato’s dialogue on language, it should be remembered that the element of language on which it concentrates is mainly nouns (including proper names). (Sedley, 2013)

In the dialogue, Socrates – who is usually taken to represent Plato – starts out by criticizing the conventionalism of Hermogenes, and persuades him that some form of naturalism must be
endorsed. This is then followed by a long etymological section that takes up about half of the dialogue, in which Socrates presents a form of naturalism by proposing etymologies of Greek words. This section has long been regarded as one of the most puzzling parts of the dialogue and scholars have often ignored it in favor of other sections of the dialogue (Baxter, 1992: 1). Some recent studies, however, shed new light on this section and how it relates to the dialogue as a whole.

In the final part of the dialogue, Socrates rejects Cratylus’ view by showing him that his conception of naturalism is too extreme. Thus, in the dialogue, Socrates seemingly rejects both naturalism and conventionalism. This rather ambiguous ending of the dialogue has also puzzled scholars for a long time. What, if any, is Plato’s own position on the question of the correctness of names? Is it a vindication of conventionalism, of naturalism, of both, or of neither? Some scholars have suggested that the question of the correctness of names is only the surface theme of the dialogue, which is subordinate to questions such as “what is truth”, “how can we know”, etc. (see MacKenzie, 1986: 125). However, this interpretation gives rise to new problems: if Plato was not primarily concerned with the debate between naturalism and conventionalism, then why did he engage in a discussion about language in the first place? What is Plato’s intended message if it is not to present his own position on the correctness of names?

Evidently, the *Cratylus* is one of Plato’s more enigmatic dialogues and it has, therefore, attracted a good deal of scholarly attention. However, the philosophical purpose of the dialogue, and the positive outcome, if any, is still an unresolved issue that merits further investigation. Part of the reason for this is that the etymological section has not received sufficient attention. The aim of this study is to investigate this puzzling yet fascinating dialogue, paying special attention to the etymological section. The research question is:

How does the etymological section of the *Cratylus* affect our understanding of:

1. Plato’s position on the correctness of names?
2. The purpose of the dialogue?
In the end of the thesis, I will argue – mainly in light of historical evidence – that the etymological section yields support to the interpretation that Plato favored naturalism. Furthermore, I will suggest that the length and significance of the etymologies suggest that the main purpose of the dialogue is to explore the correctness of names; any other issues are to be considered subordinate to this central topic.

2. Background

2.1 Philosophy of language in ancient Greece: the pre-Socratics

The pre-Socratic thinkers – who flourished from the late sixth to the mid-fifth centuries B.C. – were above all else interested in cosmology and ontology; they wanted to understand what the universe was made of, and how things came into being and passed away. Thus, we cannot really speak of a philosophy of language among the pre-Socratics. However, certain assumptions about the world and the nature of language, that laid the foundation for later Greek philosophy of language, can be found in their writings. (Modrak, 2009: 640) It is by no means my purpose to account for all these thinkers and their respective assumptions about language. Nevertheless, it is interesting to consider very briefly if and how the ontological thoughts and problems of these early thinkers helped shape the emergence of philosophy of language in early Greek philosophy.

A fundamental question in Greek philosophy of language is the relationship between language and reality. It is within the scope of this issue that the correctness of names is discussed in the Cratylus – is the correct relationship between language and reality one governed by nature or convention? According to Andreas Graeser, this issue emerges from the ontological view, held by many pre-Socratic philosophers, that reality is entirely different from what we are used to think it is. This is articulated, for example, in Parmenides’ ontological thesis that change, as perceived by the senses, is an illusion. This view implies, according to Graeser, that language may somehow be deceptive; there might be a fundamental gap between what reality actually is and our linguistic expressions used to describe it. In other words, language may express appearance but not reality. Thus, to Graeser, the issue of language versus reality is a direct consequence of the ontological distinction between reality and appearance (1977: 362). Albert Borgmann also argues that the understanding of homonymy and etymology expressed, for
example, in Heraclitus writings requires a prior distinction between form (i.e. a word’s sound or written form) and meaning, which, in turn, is a variant of what he calls “the metaphysical distinction” – a distinction between the natural or physical on the one hand and the metaphysical on the other hand which is beyond immediate reality (1974: 11; 26). Although it is hard to determine philosophical influence of this kind, I consider it likely that the early discourse on language in ancient Greece, including the Cratylus, placed much emphasis on the problem of language versus reality because of its close association with other philosophical issues at that time, such as the reality-appearance dichotomy.

2.2 The Sophist movement and their contribution to philosophy of language

The Sophists were an influential group of teachers, intellectuals, and authors of fifth-century B.C. Greece. Some of the more influential sophists include Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, Prodicus, and, according to some people, Socrates (Barney, 2009: 77). In philosophy, the sophists are often contrasted with the pre-Socratics and their investigations of nature and the origin of cosmos. The sophists, instead, focused mainly on questions of human affairs, such as ethics, politics, and rhetoric. One particular issue that received much attention from the sophists was the nature-convention dichotomy. According to Rachel Barney, this dichotomy has its origin in the above-mentioned distinction between reality and appearance (2009: 84). However, the sophists applied the nature-convention contrast mainly to ethics and politics. The central issue was about the status of moral and other social norms; were these norms in some sense grounded in the nature of things, or were they mere products of human customs or conventions? For example, in Plato’s dialogue Gorgias, which depicts a conversation between Socrates and a small group of sophists, Callicles draws on animal behavior and the aggression of states to present an argument for natural justice, according to which the strong should have more than the weak. Conventional morality, on the other hand, is devised by the weak to inhibit the strong from doing what they are entitled by nature to do, which is to exploit the weaker. In response, Socrates argues that what really characterizes the natural world is partnership, friendship, orderliness, self-control and other virtues. This, Socrates argues, is evident from the orderly motion of the heavenly bodies. Thus, Callicles is wrong, not because there is anything fallacious about deriving moral norms from nature, but because he misunderstood nature. This appeal to nature as a source for ethical norms is one of the sophists’ most important contribution to philosophy. (Barney, 2009: 84-85)
Besides morality, many texts testify to the sophists’ fascination with the workings of language. Their discussions on this topic range from rhetoric and literary criticism to what would nowadays count as linguistics, grammar, and philosophy of language. (Barney, 2009: 90) For example, in Plato’s Protagoras, Protagoras states that the greatest part of a man’s education is to be able to analyze and evaluate the utterances of the poets (339a). One of the most important sophistic texts on language is Gorgias On Not Being. In it, Gorgias argues for a gap between objects and our thoughts about them. A thought, Gorgias says, is not the thing itself and, therefore, things that are thought of are not things that are. To illustrate, Gorgias says “if someone thinks of a person flying or chariots racing in the sea, it is not the case that forthwith a person is flying or chariots racing in the sea” (7.791). This argument shows that our mental representations constitute a form of being that is fundamentally different from the things represented. This is then followed by another argument on the impossibility of communication in which another gap that separates speech (logos) from the objects we hope to signify is introduced. What we communicate are not the things themselves but our verbal representations of them, which, like thoughts, are of a different form of being than the objects themselves. Furthermore, Gorgias thinks it is impossible for the same thought to exist in two people or even that thoughts in different people are qualitatively similar. What follows from this argumentation is the impossibility of communication; language cannot be a means of communicating the truth about things in the world or representing our ideas of them. (Barney, 2009: 93-94)

From the above brief account, we can see how the sophistic discussions on language helped to set the scene for the Cratylus; the issue of the correctness of names in the Cratylus is concerned with exploring the dichotomy of nature and convention on the level of language. Besides this, the epistemological reliability of language raised by Gorgias in On Not Being is also addressed in the Cratylus; to what degree, Plato asks, is the study of names a means of obtaining knowledge about things? What is also clear from the above discussion is that philosophy of language in ancient Greece was deeply integrated with other philosophical concerns. For instance, the issue of the correctness of names revolves around the question raised by ethical inquiries; how far are our customary ways of speaking and thinking grounded in natural reality? As Rachel Barney puts it, for both Plato and the sophists “arguments about ethics are simultaneously vehicles for

1 Quoted in Barney, 2009: 93, italics added.
exploring important problems about language and reality – problems about what we might call the gap between names and things.” (2009: 90) As mentioned above, this language-reality dichotomy may be traced back to the pre-Socratics’ distinction between appearance and reality.

3. The Cratylus: outline of the dialogue

The conversations carried out in this (most likely fictive) dialogue involve three parties: Socrates, Hermogenes, and Cratylus. Hermogenes is believed to have been a good friend of Plato and, like Plato himself, to have been a disciple of Socrates. Cratylus was supposedly a late follower of Heraclitus and preached a more extreme version of Heraclitus’ theory of universal flux (Sedley 2003: 18). In broad terms, the dialogue can be divided into three parts:

**Part I (section 383a-390e)**

As the dialogue opens, Cratylus and Hermogenes approaches Socrates and invite him to join their discussion about the correctness of names, to help them resolve the issue. At this stage, Cratylus and Hermogenes have already been involved in a fierce discussion on the topic. To Hermogenes’s great dissatisfaction, Cratylus has informed him that “Hermogenes” is not his real name. “Hermes” is one of the Greek gods and “Hermogenes” means ‘son of Hermes’, but since Hermogenes is not actually the son of Hermes, Cratylus argues that this cannot be his real name, despite the fact that he responds when someone calls him by that name. The two positions of naturalism and conventionalism then quickly emerge. Cratylus’ position is described by Hermogenes in the following way:

> 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 a natural correctness of names, which is the same for everyone, Greek or foreigner.  

(383a-383b)

Hermogenes own position is laid out in the following way:

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2 Here I roughly follow David Sedley’s division (2003: 3-5).

3 Unless otherwise indicated, my translations follow C.D.C. Reeve (in Cooper and Hutchinson, 1997). For reference, Benjamin Jowett’s translation has also been consulted.
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)

Socrates then replies:

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: Whether it is a private individual or a community that does so?
HERMogenes: Yes.
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: So whatever each person says is the name of something, for him, that is its name?
HERMogenes: Yes.
(385e-385d)

This last passage is often read as reducing Hermogenes’ initial thesis to an extreme or subjective form of conventionalism – that is, the view that not only our collective impositions but all our individual usages of names are equally correct. This section is then followed by Socrates challenging Hermogenes for committing himself to some form of Protagorean truth-relativism. Plato’s idea here is that if anything can be given any name and be equally correct, then that seemingly eradicates the distinction between truth and falsity. If someone says that “grass is green” and someone else says that “grass is blue” neither of us is really wrong; the color of grass is equally green and blue, regardless of what one calls it. This suggests that the actual quality of things is equally unstable; the grass is green for me and is blue for you. Thus, there seems to be no fixed essence independent of us.

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4 Protagoras (ca 490 B.C. – ca 420 B.C.) is credited with the famous statement that "man is the measure of all things", which is often taken to mean that there is no absolute truth, only that which individuals deem to be true.
Following this reasoning, Socrates has Hermogenes concede, against the Protagorean thesis, that things have their independent objective natures and that there are, therefore, objective skills for dealing with them. For example, the right way to cut wood is determined not by our subjective preferences, but by the objective nature of the action and the objects involved in it. Like cutting, naming too requires an objective standard to measure itself against.

SOCRATES: What do we do when we weave? Don’t we divide the warp and woof that are mixed together?
HERMOGENES: Yes.
SOCRATES: Would you answer in the same way about drills and other tools?
HERMOGENES: Certainly.
SOCRATES: And you’d also answer in the same way about names, since they are tools. What do we do when we name?
HERMOGENES: I don’t know what to answer.
(388b-388c)

Thus, naming, as described by Socrates, is a craft comparable to cutting or weaving, the tools it uses are names. But what, Socrates then asks, is the function of names as tools? Weaving uses a shuttle to form fabric or fabric items by separating and interweaving threads with each other; a cutting ax is used to separate or remove things from other parts or to make an opening in something by cutting it open. Do names have a function comparable to other tools? Following the above passage, Socrates’ provides the answer to his own question:

SOCRATES: Don’t we instruct each other, that is to say, divide things according to their natures?
HERMOGENES: Certainly.
SOCRATES: So just as a shuttle is a tool for dividing warp and woof, a name is a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being.
(388c)

As tools used for this purpose, names need to be properly made to fulfill its job. This passage is of great importance because it is probably in relation to this function that the correctness of names should be understood. Today, we might think of names (words) as something used primarily for communication. Communication, however, is not mentioned by Socrates above and plays (in my reading at least) a limited role in the discussion of language throughout the dialogue. Instead, this passage suggests that Plato is more interested in the philosophical function of names
than he is in their actual use in daily communication. That is, he is interested primarily in the
degree to which names carve reality at the joints, and provide insight into the nature of things.

In the last sections of the first part of the dialogue, Socrates develops his tool analogy by
postulating a name-maker. Being tools of the kind suggested above requires names, like any
other tool, to be a human craft. We must, therefore, postulate a name-maker who deliberately
coined the vocabulary of a given language. In Plato’s eyes, this is done by the name-maker in
collaboration with the expert name-user – the philosopher – who instructs the name-maker in his
work and helps him look to the reality of things and embody it in letters and syllables.

**Part II (section 391-427d)**

As part of his refutation of Hermogenes’ conventionalism, Socrates presents etymological
explanations to a large number of words in the Greek language, such as the names of gods and
historical people, of natural phenomena, and of virtues and vices, etc. For example, while
discussing two possible names of Hector’s son, Socrates says:

Well, let’s investigate why it [Astyanax] is more correct [than Skamandrios]. Doesn’t Homer
himself suggest a very good explanation when he says

*He alone defended their city and long walls?*⁵

For because of this, you see, it seems correct to call the son of the defender ‘Astyanax’ or lord of
the city (*astu, anax*) which, as Homer says, his father was defending.

(392d-e)

Thus, in Socrates’ eyes, the name Astyanax derives from *astu anax* ‘lord of the city’, which is
the correct name because it has a natural fitness with Hector’s son. Hermes, who was seen as the
god of oratory, is explained in the following way:

SOCRATES: Well, the name ‘Hermes’ seems to have something to do with speech: he is an
interpreter (*hermēneus*), a messenger, a thief and a deceiver in words, a wheeler-dealer—and all
these activities involve the power of speech. Now, as we mentioned before, ‘*eirein*’ means ‘to use
words’, and the other part of the name says—as Homer often does—‘*emēsato*’ (‘he contrived’),
which means ‘to devise’. And it was out of these two words that the rule-setter [i.e. name-giver]

⁵ *Iliad* xxii.507, referring to Hector.
established the name of the god who devised speech (legein) and words, since ‘eirein’ means the same as ‘legein’ (‘to speak’). It’s just as if he had told us: “Humans, it would be right for you to call the god who has contrived speech (to eirein emēsato) ‘Eiremēs’.” But we, beautifying the name, as we suppose, call him ‘Hermes’ nowadays.

(408a-b)

Thus, “Hermes” is the abbreviated form of to eirein emēsato ‘he devised speaking’. The word anthrōpos ‘man’, according to Socrates, derives from anathrôn ha opôpe ‘one who reflects on what he has seen’ (399c⁶). Man was seen as a unique species in that he possesses both eyesight and intelligence and in Socrates’ etymology the name anthrōpos is a name that captures that unique combination. Therefore, it is a correct name in the naturalist account. This specific example can also be seen as a refutation of Hermogenes’ idea above that the name “man” could just as easily be replaced with the name “horse”.

In some cases, the etymological connection is more subtle. For example, Tethys (the names of another Greek deity) is explained as:

SOCRATES: But it practically tells you itself that it is the slightly disguised name of a spring! After all, what is strained (diattōmenon) and filtered (ēthoumenon) is like a spring, and the name ‘Tethys’ is a compound of these two names.

(402d)

“Tethys”, Socrates proposes, is a contraction of diattōmenon ‘strained, sieved’ and ēthoumenon ‘filtered’, which resembles a description of spring water (Sedley, 2003: 105). However, only “T” from the first word and “eth” from the last word is supposed to survive into the resultant word “Tethys”.

After providing an extensive analysis of names, Socrates poses the question how the primary names, of which other names are composed, get their meaning. The answer provided (by Socrates himself) is that their meaning comes from the imitative significance of their sounds. That is, primary sounds directly resemble the quality of things. For example, the primary sound r is a tool for imitating motion and hardness (as it is produced by the vibration of the tongue); i for

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⁶ Here I follow Sedley, 2003: 37.
disclosing what is small and penetrating; \( d \) and \( t \) for stopping, \( l \) for conveying gliding, softness etc. (see 426c-4267c).

As Rachel Barney points out, the etymology of the *Cratylus* “is obviously not etymology in the modern sense, which offers non-evaluative, largely evolutionary accounts of the origins of words. Ancient etymology, for which the *Cratylus* was a classic and central text, was a quite different practice – or rather a loose family of practices, with a wide range of purposes and standards. As practiced by Socrates in the *Cratylus*, an etymology evidently amounts to a proof of the correctness of a name” (2001: 49). That is, the etymologies in the *Cratylus* demonstrate how words can be reduced to disguised descriptions revealing the nature of the objects named by them. Names, then, are correctly assigned to their objects in so far as they describe what they are.

Besides providing analyses of words, the etymologies are also said to convey certain philosophical ideas. In particular, they are supposed to give support to the Heraclitean doctrine of universal flux. For example, in section 402e-403a three different etymologies are offered for “Poseidon”, two of which identifies him with the sea and earthquakes respectively, both thus picking out features of fluidity and motion. In 409c *meis* ‘month’ is supposed to be derived from *meiousthai* ‘decreasing’ referring to the moons waning. In the same section, the *astra* ‘stars’ are supposedly derived from *astrapē* ‘lightning’, presumably because of their twinkling and motion (Sedley, 2003: 106). In discussing the elements, ‘air’ (\( \alpha\varepsilon\rho \)) comes from the expression ‘always flows’ (\( \alpha\varepsilon\rho\varei\rho\varei \)) and ‘aether’ (\( \alpha\iota\theta\varei\rho\varei \)) comes from ‘always runs’ (\( \alpha\iota\theta\varei\alpha\varei \)). This philosophical theme that runs through the etymologies is significant because it leads to an ontological conflict between Platonic and Heraclitean metaphysics. Regardless of how well names capture the objects they represent, if they do that within the scope of a flux cosmology, there will always be one set of entities that they cannot account for, namely the Platonic Forms. As we shall see, this is a major reason why Plato ultimately rejects the study of names as a philosophical method.

*Part III (section 427d-440e)*

The whole etymological section does, in a sense, provide support for Cratylus’ naturalist position in that it treats names as encoded descriptions of their objects. In this last section, however, Cratylus’ view is scrutinized in more detail. Socrates demonstrates that, even though names can
be seen as disguised descriptions of their objects, a name is rarely a perfect description of its referent, and linguistic convention has to play some part as well. To illustrate this, Socrates takes the Greek word sklêrotês ‘hardness’, which contains both the letter r which, as we saw above, signifies hardness, and the letter l which signifies softness (the other letters can be assumed to be neutral in that they do not conflict with the nature of hardness). Ideally, however, the word for ‘hardness’ should, on a naturalist account of naming, contain only letters conveying qualities related to its meaning, or at least no letters conflicting with its meaning, so what is l doing in the word sklêrotês? Socrates’ exposure of this leads him to ask how we manage to understand each other when we use this word, upon which Cratylus admits that “it is custom” (ethos) that permits us to do so (434e). Upon which Socrates says:

But if that is so, what has happened if not that you have made an agreement with yourself, and the correctness of the name for you becomes agreement, seeing that both the similar and the dissimilar letters are communicating, thanks to custom and agreement? And even if custom is not at all the same thing as agreement, it still wouldn’t be right to say that similarity is the means of communication, but that custom is. For custom it seems, is communicating both by what is similar and by what is dissimilar.7

(434-435b)

This passage makes it look like Hermogenes’ conventionalism has secured its victory in the debate – that there is no correctness of names beyond custom and agreement and the imitative function of names is irrelevant. However, Socrates continues in the following manner:

But since we agree on this, Cratylus – because I shall set down your silence as assent – it is presumably inevitable that agreement and custom should also make some contribution to the communication of what we have in mind when we speak. […] I myself too like the idea that so far as possible names do resemble their objects. But what worries me is that this is, to use Hermogenes’ word, a ‘sticky’ trail that resemblance has to travel, and that it may be unavoidable to add the use of this nasty thing, agreement, for the correctness of names. Because it may well be that things can be spoken of in the best possible way when spoken of with all or as many as possible of the sounds resembling them – that is, with appropriate sounds – but worst when the opposite is true.8

(435b-435d)

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7 This translation follows Sedley 2003: 140.
8 Here I have followed Sedley 2003: 41, italics are his.
The initial impression that conventionalism has triumphed now turns out to be a premature conclusion. Socrates’ position seems to be rather that convention makes some contribution. But Socrates, in the above quotation, also makes clear his fondness for the naturalist position in stating that “I myself too like the idea that so far as possible names do resemble their objects”. Some scholars have seen this sentence simply as a vain regret; a vindication of what the ideal language should look like (see for example Schofield 1982: 67).

Following this, Socrates concludes the dialogue by arguing that the study of names is not a reliable tool for achieving knowledge about things. He does so mainly for two reasons: (1) the original name-maker might have been mistaken in their understanding of the world; (2) the above acknowledgment that an element of convention inevitably plays a role in (at least some) names and conventional symbols provide no indication of the things they represent. Therefore:

SOCRATES: […] Haven’t we often agreed that if names are well given, they are like the things they name and so are likenesses of them?
CRATYLUS: Yes.
SOCRATES: So if it’s really the case that one can learn about things through names and that one can also learn about them through themselves, which would be the better and clearer way to learn about them? Is it better to learn from the likeness both whether it itself is a good likeness and also the truth it is a likeness of? Or is it better to learn from the truth both the truth itself and also whether the likeness of it is properly made?
CRATYLUS: I think it is certainly better to learn from the truth.
SOCRATES: How to learn and make discoveries about the things that are is probably too large a topic for you or me. But we should be content to have agreed that it is far better to investigate them and learn about them through themselves than to do so through their names.
CRATYLUS: Evidently so, Socrates.
(439b)

This is more or less the only clear outcome of the dialogue. However, this outcome is not an answer to the initial question of the correctness of names. The problem of Plato’s own position on this issue is one of the most puzzling problems of the Cratylus. Below we will see how a careful study of the etymological section can help us resolve this problem.
4. The etymologies of the *Cratylus*

4.1 A neglected problem

The etymological section has received little attention in modern scholarship; it has often been isolated and discarded on the assumption that it has nothing to contribute to the more serious philosophical content of the dialogue. As noted by Timothy Baxter, “recent scholars have in the main concentrated on the opening and closing sections of the *Cratylus*, where we find what one might call the argumentative core of the dialogue, and have ignored the etymologies.” (1992: 1)

For example, this is manifest in some of the discussions on Plato’s position on the correctness of names:

For example, Robinson (1965; 1969), and Schofield (1982), argue that Plato opts for conventionalism whereas Kretzmann (1971) presents an interesting argument for attributing naturalism to Plato. None of them, however, pays much attention to the etymologies but draw their conclusions mainly on the basis of other sections of the dialogue. Mittelstrass and Lorenz (1967) argue that Plato rejects both conventionalism and naturalism. In regard to the etymologies, the authors briefly remark that Plato did not treat them seriously, which is “clearly indicated” by Plato’s extremely cautious expressions and ironic attitude (1967: 10). Such statements, however, seem to be rash assumptions that require more careful historical and textual support, which the authors do not offer.

Some other notable contributions are MacKenzie (1986), Harris and Taylor (1997), Kahn (1973), and Ackrill (1999). In her “Putting the *Cratylus* in its Place”, MacKenzie puts forth an interesting interpretation of the philosophical purpose of the dialogue. However, she remarks that “the function of the etymologies is obscure and, as far as this paper is concerned, will remain so.” (1986: 124) Thus, what she attempts to do is to put the *Cratylus* in its place while more or less ignoring half of its content. Kahn and Ackrill both present interesting discussions of how the *Cratylus* relates to Plato’s ontological ideas and Harris and Taylor emphasize how the *Cratylus* should be placed in the context of Plato’s political views. None of them, however, includes a detailed discussion of the etymologies.
In all of the above works, it remains a mystery why the etymological section is so long and in what way it contributes to the dialogue as a whole. This issue is, however, addressed in great detail in some more recent scholarship. Timothy Baxter (1992) argues that the etymological section should be read as a parody which amounts to a Platonic critique of a mistaken attitude of Greek poets and thinkers towards names and language. David Sedley (2003), on the other hand, argues that the etymologies are seriously intended by Plato as a method of linguistic and historical analysis, a method that Plato himself endorsed and practiced. Besides these, a work that deserves to be mentioned is Rachel Barney’s *Name and Nature in Plato’s Cratylus* (2001) which also provides a detailed discussion of the etymologies and should be read by anyone interested in the *Cratylus*. Due to scope limitations, however, it will not be included in this study. Instead, in what follows, I will outline and evaluate Baxter and Sedley’s interpretations of the *Cratylus*, and the etymological section in particular.

### 4.2 The etymologies as a parody: Timothy Baxter

In his work *The Cratylus: Plato’s Critique of Naming*, Timothy Baxter aims at providing a comprehensive study of the *Cratylus* and, in particular, at solving the problems about the etymological section, to which he devotes almost half of his book.

At the beginning of his text, Baxter draws a distinction between prescriptive and descriptive theories of naming: “A prescriptive theory of naming lays down the properties that make a name a correct name, whilst a descriptive theory by contrast tries as far as possible to eschew *a priori* considerations about what a name should or should not be in order to qualify as a correct name in favour of drawing conclusions from the names in existing languages” (1992: 4). He then argues that Socrates’ naturalist theory is prescriptive: “it is not tied to any particular language, but is a general theory about how naming should be carried out” (1992: 4). Furthermore, Plato aims at “prescribing what a philosophically ideal language would look like, in which case the idea of language as a mirror of the world has more plausibility” (1992: 52). Such a language would consist of names that reveal the nature of their objects, but need not be identical with any existing language. Plato’s aim in the etymological section, according to Baxter, is to show that actual Greek is not such a language and that etymology, therefore, is an unreliable tool in seeking knowledge about things. As I will return to below, I consider the prescriptive-descriptive
distinction a meaningful one, but I am not convinced that Socrates’ naturalist theory, as laid out in the etymologies, should be understood only as a prescriptive theory.

Regarding the etymologies, Baxter starts out by arguing that the order of the etymologies is a schematized reflection of the development of Greek thoughts: they “form a general schematic view of Greek thought, starting naturally with Homer [. . .] and his opinions on the correctness of names, and moving on to other areas of Greek thought” (1992: 92). Thus, from the etymologies relating to Homer and the nature of the gods, Socrates moves on to words and concepts relating to Pre-Socratic cosmology, such as the nature of the elements and the stars, and then we finally reach words that were of concern to the Sophists, such as virtues. The conclusion that names are unreliable tools for seeking knowledge about things, Baxter argues, “is the major positive result from the etymological inquiry, and it is here that one should seek the unifying feature of the etymologies. This unifying feature is indeed the exposure of a culture-wide error [concerning] language and its relationship to reality, an error which is set in the context of a schematic history of the development of Greek thought” (1992: 96). To Baxter, the etymologies, therefore, amount to a Platonic critique of a mistaken conception among Greek poets and thinkers regarding the relationship between language and reality, in which names are seen as epistemologically prior to things. Cratylus is the most extreme representative of this tradition. (Baxter, 1992: 160-162) Thus, a refutation of the practice of etymology as a way of gaining knowledge of things amounts to a critique of Cratylus’ theory that naming is a reliable method of learning about the nature of things through studying their names. According to Baxter, the final section of the dialogue, in which Socrates’ refutes Cratylus’ position, presupposes the conclusions of the etymological discussion and is really a continuation of it. The etymological section should be understood as a careful examination of the naturalist theory – to see if naturalism holds water. The examination results in rejecting it as an adequate description of the Greek language. (1992: 155)

On the whole, Baxter reads a lot of irony into the etymologies. This appears to be a rather obvious fact to him: “Since the etymologies appear ridiculous, one is bound to ask why Plato wrote them at all” (1992: 86) and “Most importantly, I have tried to show that the etymologies are not the embarrassing error of judgment they might appear to be” (1992: 184). To support his interpretation of the etymologies as parodies and explain why Plato wrote them, Baxter discusses
a large number of possible targets of the etymologies – that is, earlier thinkers devoted to etymology who Plato particularly sought to ridicule in his etymological section. For instance, Euthyphro – who was an Athenian prophet – could have had a significant influence on the style and content of the etymological section. Baxter argues that a “Euphronic inspiration pervades the etymological section, whereas his influence upon the content of the etymologies is negligible at best.” (2009: 109) Another important source of influence for Plato might have been Homer and the Homeric tradition. Particularly important in that tradition is the use of allegories, which sometimes resemble etymologies, through which philosophers and poets reinterpreted the Homeric texts for their own philosophical ends. (1992: 113-119) Among the early philosophers, Pherecydes and Empedocles are possible targets. Pherecydes supported a reworking of tradition by means of allegory and etymology, which resulted in his specific cosmogony. Similarly, Empedocles deliberately reworked epic language and tradition in his poetry. (1992: 119-124) One Sophist that seems to have had a significant influence on the etymologies was Prodicus. He tried to demonstrate, by means of etymology how Greek, properly understood, reflects important distinctions in reality, making it fundamentally a natural language. (1992: 152-153) Thus, according to Baxter, Prodicus believed that the Greek language reflected reality with a considerable degree of accuracy, a thesis that Plato rejects on the basis of his own etymological investigation.

These are just some of the many possible targets and sources discussed by Baxter.⁹ Although it is very difficult to determine influence of this kind, Baxter’s careful historical survey is in my eyes very commendable. It seems likely that many of the poets and philosophers mentioned by him, to some degree at least, inspired Plato’s etymologies in the Cratylus. However, whether Plato sought to ridicule these thinkers and poets is still an open question. This is perhaps the most problematic part of Baxter’s argument. Despite the many possible links to earlier and contemporary thinkers, pointed out by him, the overall discussion about influence remains quite speculative and Baxter’s claim that Plato made fun of etymological practice by presenting ridiculous etymologies depends, ultimately, on Baxter’s impression of the etymologies in question. Consequently, Baxter’s central argument that the etymological section represents “a full frontal attack by Plato on representative figures in Greek culture, poets, philosophers,

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⁹ For a full account see Baxter, 1992: Ch. 5.
'philologists' and so on” (1992: 160), does not necessarily follow from his historical survey. An equally possible conclusion, in my eyes, is that Plato drew upon these earlier people to present serious etymologies that he himself approved of. It should be mentioned that Baxter himself is very much aware of these limitations, stating that “The hypothesis of this chapter [5] is that Plato is attacking the way in which various representatives of Greek culture have misunderstood the relationship between names and things. The detailed arguments and connections made to back up this hypothesis certainly do not prove it conclusively, but the general approach does, I believe, explain the many references to individuals and groups of thinkers, and the sheer variety of opinions that emerge in the etymologies.” (1992: 162, italics added) The fact that we find many references to other representatives of Greek culture throughout the etymological section, does, however, not tell us exactly how to read the etymologies themselves. As we shall see below, we have significant historical reasons to doubt the idea that the etymologies should be read as a parody.

In regard to Plato’s own position on the correctness of names, Baxter is not very clear about this. Based on his prescriptive-descriptive distinction, however, it is clear that Plato, in his eyes, favored (some form of) naturalism when it comes to how names should be. The ideal language is one where names resemble the essence of their nominata. According to Baxter, however, Plato denies that actual Greek fulfills his prescriptive criteria. He awaits the results of the etymological examination, which is a kind of description of Greek according to the naturalist hypothesis. This examination shows, in Baxter’s eyes, that Plato does not consider Greek a philosophically sound language that fulfills the naturalist requirements; this is supported not only by the (seemingly) absurd nature of the etymologies, but also by the concluding section where Socrates explicitly argues that the study of names is not a reliable tool for achieving knowledge about things. Although Baxter does not explicitly state that Plato embraced conventionalism in regard to actual Greek, the refutation of naturalism on a descriptive level leads one to conclude that linguistic convention must at least play a major role when it comes to actual languages. Thus, Baxter’s prescriptive-descriptive distinction, along with his reading of the etymologies as a parody, leads me to conclude that, to him, Plato’s position represents some form of compromise; naturalism is favored as a prescriptive theory of how names should be, but conventionalism is the best

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10 I.e. the thing that is named by a sign, word, or linguistic expression (sing. nominatum).
description of how actual languages work. It should be noted, however, that, to Baxter, the main purpose of the etymological section is not to settle the issue of the correctness of names. As noted above, it is rather to show that names are unreliable tools in seeking knowledge about things (1992: 96).

4.3 Etymologies taken seriously: David Sedley

In contrast to Baxter, David Sedley is a strong advocate of the seriousness of the etymologies. In his *Plato's Cratylus* (2003), he argues that “contrary to an almost universal perception, Plato in his mature work – including the *Cratylus* – remained thoroughly committed to the principles of etymology, that is, to the possibility of successfully analysing words as if they were time capsules – encoded packages of information left for us by our distant ancestors about the objects they designate.” (2003: 23).

With respect to etymologies, Sedley distinguishes between two concepts of correctness, exegetical and philosophical correctness: “the etymologies are, broadly speaking, *exegetically* correct, in that they do recover the original beliefs of the name-makers, but it remains a moot point whether they are also *philosophically* correct, that is whether [...] the beliefs they recover for us are true beliefs.” (2003: 28, italics in the original)

Sedley’s interpretation is admirably defended by both textual and historical support and well-grounded assumptions. One of his primary arguments comes from Plato’s account of the function of names. As we saw above (see section 3.), Socrates thinks that the function of names is to instruct by dividing being (essence) of the object to which it has been assigned. To Sedley, Plato’s etymological project is intended to account for the function of names by showing that names divide being by encoding descriptions of it: “that names are, in their very nature, *some* kind of vocal imitation is a thesis, massively documented in the etymological section, from which Socrates never retreats.” (2003: 145) Thus, Sedley seems to reason that in relation to the function of names, the etymological section is best understood, not as a joke, but as a serious undertaking meant to demonstrate how names fulfill this function. This is quite reasonable in my view. Given that Socrates makes clear that the function of names is to divide being, it appears natural to proceed with the etymologies to demonstrate how names perform this task by encoding descriptions of their objects, so as to find support for the aforementioned function of names. If,
on the other hand, the etymologies are rather meant as parodies, it is harder to see what support Socrates has for his idea that names instruct by dividing being. Certainly, it cannot be the etymologies since they are meant to show that actual Greek names fail to meet the criteria of resemblance (by which they divide being). Thus, in such a reading, the etymological section undermines, rather than supports, Socrates’ idea of the function of names. In Baxter’s view, however, Socrates’ tool analogy, that outlines the function of names, refers to the prescriptive ideal, not the function of actual Greek words (1992: 48). This is a plausible solution to the problem but it should be noted that there is nothing in the passage about the function of names that immediately suggests that Socrates was not referring to an actual language. In the end, both Sedley and Baxter’s interpretations of the etymologies are coherent with Socrates conception of the function of names. Sedley’s interpretation, however, requires less reading between the lines, which I regard as a virtue of his interpretation.

Among the textual evidence offered by Sedley, one important passage near the end of the dialogue undermines, according to him, the idea that the etymologies are not intended seriously:

SOCRATES: Then let’s go on to consider the following question, so as not to be deceived by this proliferation of names which point in the same direction. The question is whether, while those who imposed the names really did so with the thought that everything is always on the move and in flux (because that is what I, for my part, believe they had in their own minds), nevertheless, if they did, that’s not the way things actually are, but having themselves fallen into a kind of whirlpool and got into a spin they are dragging us too in after them. For consider, my good friend Cratylus, the thing I often dream of: should we say that there are a Beautiful in itself, and a Good in itself, and likewise each single one of the things that are, or shouldn’t we?

CRATYLUS: I think there are, Socrates.\footnote{Here I follow Sedley, 2003: 164-165, italics added.} (439b-439d)

Besides suggesting a link to Plato’s metaphysical theory of Forms (the Beautiful in itself, and the Good in itself), this passage is important to Sedley mainly because it announces Socrates’ “conviction that the etymologies have proved, by and large, to be exegetically correct, while immediately adding his suspicion that they are not, at least so far as regards flux, philosophically correct as well.” (2003: 164-165) That is, this passage reaffirms Socrates conviction in etymology as an exegetically sound method: it really does recover the beliefs of the original
name-givers. Whether or not those ancient beliefs further turn out to be true (i.e. philosophically correct) is another question. Although interesting, I am not fully convinced by Sedley’s argumentation here. In Sedley’s words, this is “the strongest single piece of evidence against the dismissal of the etymologies as ironic” (2003: 41) In my eyes, however, the fact that Plato acknowledged etymology as an exegetically sound method for recovering ancient beliefs does not in itself show that he took etymology seriously, or that he favored any naturalist conception of names on which the practice of etymology (in the Cratylus at least) is based. It is equally possible, I think, that the (mistaken) beliefs recovered through etymology is exactly why Plato wished to make fun of it. Especially if those beliefs go against his own philosophical convictions, which, as we saw above (see section 3.), is the case with Heraclitus doctrine of flux. As Sedley himself concedes, the reason why the etymologies are not philosophically correct is because of the flux doctrine’s failure to allow for the existence of Forms (2003: 165). That said, the above passage suggests that Plato had a fundamental belief in the etymological method, and, given that he held ancient beliefs in high regard, that he considered etymology a serious and rewarding enterprise.

Further textual support for Sedley comes from other Platonic dialogues that include etymological discussions. For example, the Philebus – one of Plato’s later dialogues – in which we find a passage that includes a hitherto unnoticed etymological discussion of words. For instance, “At d 5–6 the ancients are said to have instructed us, with regard to dance, to use the terms ‘rhythms and measures’, rythmous kai metra (d6), because these things are di’ arithmōn metrēthenta, ‘measured by means of numbers’ (d5). That is, the description of them as ‘measured by means of numbers’ is etymologically conveyed by the technical terminology of ‘rhythms and measures’ which our Promethean ancestor chose for dance.” (2003: 26-27) In Sedley’s eyes, this brings out “some of the vital etymological strands in Plato’s thought. Plato is conveying to us that the vocabulary which we have inherited from our forebears can be expected to embody important scientific insights, having in fact been devised by them precisely in order to encode and thus transmit those insights.” (2003: 27-28) The significance of the Philebus passage for Sedley’s argument is not merely the occurrence of etymology in another Platonic dialogue, rather “the vital evidential value of the Philebus passage lies in the fact that it can hardly be dismissed as ironic or otherwise fanciful. Far-fetched as the etymologies may look to us in the light of modern
philology, they are not treated as such by the author.” (2003: 29) This is, in my eyes, a significant piece of evidence that makes Sedley’s interpretation more coherent with Plato’s philosophical legacy as a whole. The one potential threat I see is that Plato developed much throughout his philosophical career. For instance, by the end of his career, such as in the Parmenides, he presents critique against his own theory of Forms. Since it is generally agreed that the Philebus belongs to Plato’s later dialogues, it cannot be excluded that the attitude towards etymology found in this (or some other) text is among his later philosophical insights and that it is not, therefore, representative of the Cratylus. 12

Sedley’s point that the etymologies of the Philebus may appear far-fetched in the light of modern philology brings us to another of Sedley’s major arguments, namely that the interpretation of the etymologies as parodies is based on an anachronistic reading of the text. Sedley remarks that “before the rise of comparative philology in or around the early nineteenth century, the Cratylus etymologies were regularly assumed to be serious. It was only when it began to become clear what a real linguistic science would look like that it dawned on scholars that Plato must have been joking all along. The almost universal assumption ever since has been that Plato must think the etymologies as ridiculous as we do.” (2003: 34-35) But, Sedley argues, it is mistaken to assume that even prominent Greek thinkers in ancient times could tell a fanciful etymology from a historically sound one. To support this claim, he presents samples of ancient text where people juxtaposed (what modern scholarship would call) fanciful and sensible etymologies without any sign recognizing the difference (2003: 35). Thus, an important part of Sedley’s answer to the objection that Plato’s etymologies are not seriously intended is that such an assumption lacks sufficient historical support; we have no remarks from ancient thinkers that indicate that they were perceived as ridiculous. The ridiculous nature of the etymologies comes instead, Sedley thinks, from modern scholars relying too much on their own “too highly educated ear to tell us what, to an ancient Greek, was or was not a far-fetched etymology”. (Sedley, 2003: 35) But, according to Sedley, “no one in antiquity ever thought Plato was joking here. His etymology for anthrōpos [‘man’] is repeated with approval by many later authors, by no means all of them Platonists.” (2003: 37) Consequently, “This ancient consensus should be enough in itself to shift

12 The date of the Cratylus itself is still a matter of debate among scholars.
the burden of proof firmly onto any modern reader who wishes to downplay Plato’s seriousness in the matter.” (2003: 40)

In my view, Sedley here provides a strong argument against Baxter and others who interpret the etymologies as ironic. The idea that we, today, impose our views about what is and is not sensible discussions of language on ancient Greek thinkers is a very important methodological issue that has not been noted by Baxter or any other of the above-mentioned scholars. If Sedley is right\(^\text{13}\), it shows that we lack strong historical evidence to support the idea that Plato (and other Greek thinkers) thought of the etymologies as ridiculous. Indeed, if the etymologies appeared ridiculous to Plato himself, one would expect to find comments and remarks throughout the ancient literature that expresses this fact. In lack of any such support, one must concede that such an impression might very well be based on modern presuppositions, rather than a proper understanding of ancient thoughts.

Lastly, how does Sedley’s interpretation of the etymological section bear upon his understanding of Plato’s position on the correctness of names? In the end, Sedley ascribes a form of naturalism to Plato. As noted, Sedley holds that the etymological section is meant to show that there is a natural resemblance between words and letters on the one hand and the objects or qualities they designate on the other. However, convention is not completely insignificant. As we saw above, there are passages in the dialogue that suggests that Socrates endorsed conventionalism, as illustrate with the word sklêrotês ‘hardness’ (see section 3). By the naturalist account, sklêrotês should only contain letters that designate things related to ‘hardness’, or at least not have any letters that designate anything contrary to hardness. Led by this problem, Socrates confesses that:

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\text{[...]} \text{what has happened if not that you have made an agreement with yourself, and the correctness of the name for you becomes agreement, seeing that both the similar and the dissimilar letters are communicating, thanks to custom and agreement? And even if custom is not at all the same thing as agreement, it still wouldn’t be right to say that similarity [i.e. naturalism] is the means of communication, but that custom is. For custom it seems, is communicating both by what is similar and by what is dissimilar.}
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(434e-435b)
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\(^\text{13}\) I am for obvious reasons unable to verify Sedley’s claim that none of the ancient commentators thought Plato was joking. I have, however, not seen this claim being questioned in any review of Sedley’s work or in any subsequent literature on the Cratylus that I am familiar with.
According to Sedley, however, this example applies only to the word *sklêrotês* and is not generalized to describe all signification. What Socrates assumes is that convention clearly makes *some* contribution to signification, but that imitation still plays the major role in the way that language gets its hold on things. This is supported by the following passage:

SOCRATES: [...] it is presumably inevitable that agreement and custom should also *make some contribution* to the communication of what we have in mind when we speak.\(^{14}\) (435b)

In *sklêrotês*, for example, some resemblance still obtained (through the letter *r*), and it does, therefore, not show that imitation can be dispensed with altogether. To say that resemblance cannot do the whole job, Sedley argues, is very different from saying that resemblance can be dispensed with altogether. (2003: 140-141) The role of convention is explained by Sedley as follows: “because the word [*sklêrotês*] resembles hardness and softness in equal measures [through the *l* and the *r*], so that only an independent awareness of its conventional meaning can *break the deadlock.*” (2003: 144) That is to say, words, such as *sklêrotês*, that simultaneously resembles contrary things in equal measure and we are unable to tell which one it is an imitation of, convention is required to make signification complete. Thus Socrates’ final position, according to Sedley, is “not the reversion to conventionalism that it has so often been taken to be” (Sedley, 2003: 145). To say that convention makes some contribution is rather part of Socrates’ refutation of Cratylus’ thesis that names represent things with perfect precision, which would make the study of names an ideal route to knowledge about things. (2003: 147) Instead, Sedley argues that Plato favors resemblance over convention. Sedley’s major textual support for this is the following passage:

SOCRATES: I myself too like the idea that so far as possible names do resemble their objects. (435c)

According to Sedley, this is not, as some scholars have interpreted it, a fanciful dream or a statement setting the norms for an ideal language. Sedley argues that it should be taken as a

\(^{14}\) Here I have followed Sedley (2003: 141), italics are his.
serious verdict applicable to actual Greek. His main support for this is that the expression “I like the idea…” (lit. ‘it pleases (areskei) me that…’) is commonly used by Plato to indicate endorsement of a doctrine and has been used that way in the *Cratylus* by all three speakers. (2003: 148) Furthermore, that names resemble their objects “as far as possible” is, in Sedley’s eyes, something built into the etymological theory all along in that names, as stated above, are not perfect representations of their objects (as Cratylus holds). Thus, “as far as possible” is in Sedley’s view not a new limitation conceded by Socrates. (2003: 148)

Summarizing his interpretation of Plato’s position, Sedley writes:

> A name is a vocal instrument whose function is to instruct by separating the being of the object to which it has been assigned. […] A name fulfills its function, i.e. is a correct name, to the extent that it imitates the object’s being or nature, analogously to a portrait. This imitation is never so perfect as to exclude any role for linguistic custom in securing the name’s meaning. […] A primary name may contain all or only some appropriate components, and thus be more or less correct, but cannot have a preponderance of positively inappropriate components. (2003: 150)

Inappropriate sounds are sounds that actually conflict with the nature of the object named, such as *l* in *sklērotēs*. Although Sedley holds that Plato, by the end of the day, favors naturalism (i.e. resemblance) over conventionalism, he concedes that the final product of his interpretation is some form of compromise between the two: “Thus the opposition underlying the debate as Socrates constructs it, is not to be understood as one between *nomos* [‘convention, custom’] and *physis* [‘nature’] as such, but as one between *mere* custom on the one hand, and custom founded on nature on the other.” (2003: 68)

### 5. Concluding discussion

Above, I have investigated two different interpretations of the *Cratylus* and the etymological section in particular. We have seen how different interpretations of the etymological section leads to different answers to the question of Plato’s position on the correctness of names. Of the two interpretations discussed, there are things that merit some further discussion. Firstly, I consider Baxter’s distinction between prescriptive and descriptive valuable in that it
acknowledges a normative aspect of the *Cratylus*. Since Plato seems interested in language primarily as a tool for philosophical inquiry, it is likely to me that he was not only interested in describing how actual names work but also (or perhaps more importantly) to discover the standard by which they should be judged. Well-crafted names should ideally be perfect linguistic representations of reality. Sedley explicitly rejects the prescriptive interpretation of the *Cratylus*, to him the correctness laid down is assumed to account for the actual Greek language (2003: 46). To me, it seems that Sedley ignores an aspect of the dialogue here that would otherwise enrich his interpretation. Even if Plato’s etymologies are indeed meant to account for actual Greek, it is possible that they, at the same time, set the standard for how names should be. In such a reading, the etymological section would do prescriptive work that claimed to be descriptive by trying to demonstrate how actual Greek names function along naturalistic principles (which is how names should ideally be coined). Similarly, Plato’s final position on the correctness of names would then be a prescriptive theory that, at the same time, claimed to be descriptive. Given that Plato does not explicitly present his theories as either prescriptive or descriptive, drawing a too sharp distinction between the two might oversimplify the matter.

In regard to the seriousness or lack thereof in the etymological section and the accompanying question whether Plato believed in the etymologies or not, I personally consider Sedley’s interpretation the most convincing one. As mentioned above already, Baxter’s (and many others’) impression that “the etymologies appear ridiculous” has to be supported by more historical evidence before we can say that it represents Plato’s original intentions. Ideally, it has to be shown that they appeared equally ridiculous to Plato and his contemporaries. Baxter’s historical survey of possible targets does not quite show this. For the etymologies to be, as Baxter puts it, “a full frontal attack by Plato on representative figures in Greek culture”, aimed at exposing a culture-wide error concerning language and its relationship to reality – in which names are epistemologically prior to things – he would have to present stronger evidence to support his reading. As it now is, he takes it more or less for granted that what appears ridiculous to us today was equally ridiculous to ancient Greek thinkers, which seems like a hasty assumption. Without providing stronger evidence for this, it is equally possible that the so-called “targets” are instead inspirations for Plato and that he followed the same etymological practice himself, even though
he also saw its limitations as a philosophical method. Thus, in regard to this issue, I would certainly side with Sedley’s interpretation.

So what consequences does an interpretation of the etymologies as seriously intended have for our understanding of Plato’s position on the correctness of names? It seems most natural to conclude that, by the end of the day, Plato favored naturalism over conventionalism. Given that Plato probably believed the etymologies to be historically sound, we have not a single example of a word in the Cratylus that signify its object merely through convention (except for words borrowed from other languages), at least if we follow Sedley’s interpretation of the sklērotês example. It should be mentioned, however, that this issue is not about signification as such, but about correct signification. It is quite possible that Plato realized that names are perfectly capable of signifying their objects purely by means of linguistic convention; this is suggested by the aforementioned borrowed names from other languages, which bears no resemblance to their objects but can still be understood in ordinary conversation. But to convey their meaning merely through convention is not, in Plato’s view, the correct way for names to function, not because it is not possible, but because it is in Socrates’ words, “a nasty thing”. Here, I might be in some disagreement with Sedley who states that a names’ “success as a tool for communication depends, at least largely, on its imitative powers” (2003: 145) In fact in my own reading of the dialogue, communication plays a minor role in the discussion. Once again, language is discussed primarily as a potential vehicle of philosophy and the correctness of a name is measured against this potential. That is, its potential to recover the primitive wisdom about the world encoded in words by the earliest name-makers. Taken as seriously intended, the etymological section shows that the Greek names are indeed natural names, even if convention undoubtedly also plays a subordinate role and despite the fact that Plato himself might not agree with the specific worldview recovered through etymological practice.

Besides the above discussion, are there any other reasons for assuming that Plato opts for naturalism? I think there are and I would like to draw attention to one piece of evidence that comes from another aspect of Plato’s philosophy of language, namely his method of definition, which has not been discussed by any of the scholars mentioned in this study. A central

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15 For examples of borrowed names, see 410a-b.
philosophical project for Plato throughout his career was to define philosophical terms. Many of his dialogues are structured around this project and in some of his later writings, he advocates a method of division by which to arrive at a proper definition terms. (Modrak, 2009: 645) In the *Sophist*, the attempts to define certain difficult terms result in up to seven types of definitions, of which only the seventh one is a proper one. What characterizes a proper definition is that it captures the nature of its object, i.e. reveals the distinctive feature that unifies all the particulars to which the concept in question is applied. According to Modrak, “Definition, for Plato, is a form of conceptual analysis, and the method of division is an analytic technique for arriving at truth, if properly and carefully applied. The object of division then is to discover the relations among linguistic concepts that reveal the structure of the extralinguistic world.” (2009: 646) This is strikingly similar to a naturalist strategy to analyze names. In Socrates’ conception of the function of names and in the etymological section of the *Cratylus*, names are almost treated as short definitions in that they encode descriptions that capture the essence of their objects. Thus, the idea that Plato favored a naturalist position on the correctness of names is coherent with his method of definitions. This, in my eyes, increases the probability of such an interpretation. It should also be mentioned that Plato’s method of definitions is not confined to a prescriptive ideal. As noted above, Plato gives examples of proper definitions throughout his dialogues. A proper definition, however, is at the same time normative in that it sets the scope for particulars that may be applied to a given concept (Modrak, 2009: 646). This would support my interpretation above that the etymological section should also be read both as a prescriptive and descriptive account of names.

As a final note, a study of the *Cratylus* that takes the etymologies into account strongly suggests that the main philosophical purpose of the dialogue is to discuss the initial question about the correctness of names. Even if we read the etymologies as seriously intended or setting the standard for an ideal language, it shows that this large and important section of the dialogue is concerned with the question whether names are well or poorly designed, especially for the purpose of philosophical inquiry. Besides this, we also find other motivations at work in the dialogue. For example, it is certainly important for Plato to show the falsifiability of language – which follows from his rejection of Protagorean truth-relativism – and to show that, ultimately, it is better to seek philosophical knowledge directly from things, rather than names. As briefly
noted above, we also find links to Plato’s metaphysical ideas. Many interpreters, holds that Socrates reason for rejecting the flux theory revealed through the etymologies is that it fails to allow for the existence of Forms (see: Sedley, 2003: 165; Ackrill, 1999: 125). And Rachel Barney holds that “much more Platonic metaphysics than might appear” lurks in the dialogue (Barney, 2001: 10). In my eyes, however, investigating the correctness of names remains the central purpose of the dialogue.

This thesis is not meant to be the final word on the issue of Plato’s position on the correctness of names, nor to exhaust all the possible interpretations of the etymological section. Rather, I have tried to show what comes to light if we take the etymological section into account. I believe the above study convincingly shows the important role that the etymologies play in the dialogue and that they provide keys for understanding both the dialogue as a whole and some of its puzzling issues.
6. Bibliography


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