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Saussurean Delimitation and Plato's *Cratylus*

In Ferdinand de Saussure's seminal *Course in General Linguistics*, a word is defined as a linguistic sign, that is, as a combination of a signification (concept) and a signal (sound).¹ More than two millennia prior Plato also offers a definition of a word or name: "A name is therefore some instrument for instructing and for dividing reality, just as a weaving-shuttle divides the weave-web" (ὄνομα ἄρα διδασκαλικὸν τί ἐστὶν ὄργανον καὶ διακριτικὸν τῆς οὐσίας ὥσπερ κερκὶς ὑφάσματος, *Crat.* 388b-c). If at first glance these two definitions appear completely dissimilar, Plato's ὄργανον διακριτικὸν does share some similarities with Saussure's concept of a word's linguistic value. In this paper, I define and describe Saussure's concept of delimitation relative to linguistic value in order to clarify Plato's definition of a name in the *Cratylus*. This discussion leads into the larger issue of languages' relation to concepts and reality, which I will treat cursorily in conclusion.

For Saussure, if a word is combination of signal and signification, a language is a combination, a system, of signs. Any communication within a language requires both the speaker and listener to delimit the "continuous ribbon of sound" into discreet linguistic units.² For instance, *ἴλυγγοο* is meaningless noise until one delimits the three linguistic units: the noun, the verb, and the direct object. Once the ribbon of sound is delimited, meaning is apparent in the

¹ Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. trans. Roy Harris. Duckworth. 67.

² *ibid.*, 102.

phrase, “I love you.” Delimitation, as a cognitive ability, is essential to communication. Saussure defines this subjective delimiting as “seperat[ing] from whatever there may be on either side of [the linguistic entity] in a sequence of sounds.”³ Yet, in his discussion of “linguistic value,” Saussure also conceives of a kind of conceptual, objective delimitation within a language system itself.

Saussure begins his treatment of linguistic value by distinguishing it from meaning. While the two are intertwined, a word’s meaning is synonymous with its signification or concept. A word is a token of a concept; that concept is the word’s meaning. A word’s value, however, is found within the linguistic system as a whole:

Values always involve: (1) something *dissimilar* which can be exchanged for the item whose value is under consideration, and (2) *similar* thing which can be *compared* with the item whose value is under consideration. These two features are necessary for the existence of any value. To determine the value of a five-franc coin, for instance, what must be known is: (1) that the coin can be exchanged for a certain quantity of something different, e.g. bread, and (2) that its value can be compared with another value in the same system, e.g. that of a one-franc coin, or of a coin belonging to another system (e.g. a dollar). Similarly, a word can be substituted for something dissimilar: an idea. At the same time, it can be compared to something of like nature: another word. Its value is therefore not determined merely by that concept or meaning for which it is a token. It must also be assessed against comparable values, by contrast with other words. The content of a word is determined in the final analysis not by what it contains but by what exists outside it. As an element in a system, the word has not only a meaning but also - above all - a value. And that is something quite different.⁴

If meaning exists within the sign or word, value exists outside. For example, although πνεῦμα and spirit share meaning, they have differing values because πνεῦμα covers meanings (wind, breath, spirit) that are differentiated in English. Thus our term “spirit” has a different linguistic

³ *ibid.*, 102.

⁴ *ibid.*, 113-14.

value insofar as it is delimited by terms like breath and wind. Likewise, the value of πνεῦμα is delimited by a term such as ἄνεμος. Saussure defines this objective form of delimitation thus: “in a given language, all the words which express neighboring ideas help define one another’s meaning.”⁵ It follows that different languages delimit or divide concepts differently, such that no two conceptual maps overlap. In English the concept of spirit is clearly distinguished from wind, while in Greek it is not.

This linguistic fact brings us to Plato’s *Cratylus*. As noted above, Plato offers a definition of word quite distinct from Saussure. If Saussure’s “word” is inert and arbitrary (a mere phonetic vessel for a concept), Plato’s “name” is active and purposeful (a tool with a purpose embodied phonetically). Plato’s word has two functions: to teach and to divide reality. The first is evident. As a token of a concept, a word permits communication whereby the teacher imparts this token to the student, thus sharing a concept. That a word also divide’s reality is made more sensible following our discussion of Saussurean delimitation. Of necessity words mark out territories within a linguistic system, dividing up the conceptual real-estate. This second purpose proves implicitly important for Plato’s epistemology.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato introduces the epistemological method of “division and collection” (τῶν διαιρέσεων καὶ συναγωγῶν, *Ph.* 266b). Plato’s definitions of these two movements of the mind illuminate both words’ roles and the key difference between Plato and Saussure’s view of language. The method of collection requires one “to construe and collect into one form things dispersed in many places, so that one may define and make clear each thing that one wishes to teach” (εἰς μίαν τε ιδέαν συνορῶντα ἄγειν τὰ πολλαχῆ διεσπαρμένα, ἵνα ἕκαστον ὀριζόμενος

⁵ *ibid.*, 114.

δῆλον ποιῆ περι οὗ ἂν ἀεὶ διδάσκειν ἐθέλη, *Ph.* 265d). Contrarily, the method of division entails “being able to cut up each thing again according to its form along its natural joints” (τὸ πάλιν κατ’ εἶδη δύνασθαι διατέμνειν κατ’ ἄρθρα ἧ πέφυκεν, 265e). The two functions of a word loosely, but aptly correspond to these two methodologies. Insofar as a word can teach (διδασκαλικόν), it must collect disparate concepts under one token;⁶ conversely, for a word to divide reality, it must be delimited from other signs. Likewise, these two purposes correspond to Saussure’s two types of delimitation. A word teaches a concept when it is delimited within a continuous speech act as a unique linguistic entity; it divides reality to the degree to which it is delimited by other words. Following Plato’s analogy in the *Cratylus*, if a word is like a weaving-shuttle (an instrument of weaving), a word is an instrument of knowing.

This marks the primary point at which Plato and Saussure diverge. For Saussure, a word is merely an instrument of communication because it has not authentic relation to the world. As he famously claims, a word is an “arbitrary sign.” For Plato, however, “names belong to things by nature” (φύσει τὰ ὀνόματα εἶναι τοῖς πράγμασι, *Crat.* 390d-e). Yet it is important to note that names can be arbitrary in Plato’s system: “each name-giver must know how to embody the name naturally fitted to each nature in sounds and syllables” (τὸ ἐκάστῳ φύσει πεφυκὸς ὄνομα τὸν νομοθέτην ἐκεῖνον εἰς τοὺς φθόγγους καὶ τὰς συλλαβὰς δεῖ ἐπίστασθαι τιθέναι, *Crat.* 389d). This implies that some names do not properly embody their natural concept. Moreover, the phonetics of the word are arbitrary for Plato: “[the name-giver] gives the proper form of the name to each thing in syllables of whatever kind” (τὸ τοῦ ὀνόματος εἶδος ἀποδιδῶ τὸ προσῆκον ἐκάστῳ ἐν ὁποιασοῦν συλλαβαῖς, *Crat.* 390a). Plato proves closer to Saussure than perhaps originally

⁶ Note the infinitive διδάσκειν (*Ph.* 265d) in Plato’s definition of the method of collection.

expected. In both Plato and Saussure the sounds or signal are arbitrary. In Plato the possibility exists for certain words to be arbitrarily related to a concept; in Saussure, this fact is universal. In both thinkers a word is an instrument for communication, although for Plato a word also serves to divide reality. Here Plato offers the most provocative thought contra Saussure. For Saussure, language has no positive terms, nothing exists in-itself because both signals and significations gain meaning only through differentiation, through negative relations. As a result, words themselves *do* nothing; they merely arise passively out of the linguistic system. Plato sees words as active. Words, specifically names, do work precisely because of their differential nature; they cannot help but to cut up, to divide our conceptual map. Of course, for Plato, there exists an ideal conceptual map with authentic divisions between concepts. Thus, insofar as words carve out the terrain of our subjective concept map, one ought to endeavor to have this subjective map mirror the objective map as much as possible. This is one function of dialectic, to interrogate our definitions of terms in order to ensure they map onto the paradigmatic map.

I conclude with a simple question: does Plato have something here? Can different languages in which the linguistic value of words are differently delimited possess varying degrees of correctness with relation to specific concepts? Take a simple example, classicists often struggle to define and teach the Greek concept of $\xi\epsilon\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ because our term “hospitality” seems lack something central to $\xi\epsilon\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$. Moreover, many classicists feel $\xi\epsilon\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ communicates a better concept of “hospitality.” Does this intuitive sense suggest that the Greek name $\xi\epsilon\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ divides reality in a manner superior to English’s “hospitality”? Has our term been overly delimited by neighboring terms; is it meager compared to its concepts? I tend to think that Plato does point to something in this passage from the *Cratylus*. While it is impossible to find or create

a “perfect” language, one in which all the words are delimited to the exact degree some ideal conceptual map is, I do believe that there is some degree of superiority relative to concepts among languages. This superiority is fuzzy, non-scientific, and perhaps practically worthless, but it does suggest some form of conceptual foundation, call it a quasi-objective conceptual map. Perhaps, however, the feelings suggesting such a quasi-objective map are specious or purely subjective. Undoubtedly the debate between Plato and Saussure constructed here will rage on further.