What’s in a Name: Semantic In/stability in the Ancient World and in Today’s Global Classroom

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Abstract: This article explores the continuing debate, from antiquity to the present, over the nature of names. While divided on the role of human choice versus adherence to an idea or object’s true nature in the naming process, ancient intellectuals from Greece, Rome, and China largely agreed on the necessity of codifying names to ensure political and universal stability. One notable exception was the Daoists, who advocated for namelessness, believing that names created divisions and binaries that were inconsistent with the united nature of reality. In contrast to the ancients, many of today's students do not agree on the extent of language's power over humans and value the fluidity of language over its rectification.

Keywords: Semantics, language, names, philosophy, conventionalism, realism, Cratylus, Socrates, Confucianism, Analects, Daoism, Platonism, Hobbes
What’s in a Name? Semantic In/stability in the Ancient World and in Today’s Global Classroom

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If the ability to name is a mark of the divine, confusing names is surely human. From the image of the tower of Babel to the Dao that can’t be named1 to current arguments about the “true” definition of patriotism, semantic instability, when words shift meanings and mean different things to different people and even to the same person at different times,2 is part of the human condition. When semantic shift occurs, our socio-political realities concurrently change. Effects range from a descent into anarchic disorder and meaninglessness to simple neutral change to evolution and even “progress”3 in regards to individual development and understanding of

1 “The Way is hidden and without name.” (Daodejing of Laozi 41, tr. Ivanhoe). Cf. DJ 1, 32, 37.
2 As Hobbes noted, “The names of such things as affect us, that is, which please and displease us, because all men be not alike affected with the same thing, nor the same man at all times, are in the common discourses of men, of inconstant signification. For seeing all names are imposed to signifie our conceptions; and all our affections are but conceptions; when we conceive the same things differently we can hardly avoyd different naming of them.” Lev. 4.17.
3 The post-enlightenment notion of ‘progress towards perfection’ in regards to naming has admittedly a social Darwinist flavor compared to random evolution, and thinkers voice very different notions of what constitutes ‘progress.’ For example, a Confucian seeks to restore the meanings of names to what they meant under the Zhou dynasty, a Platonist to make names match the Forms to which they refer as much as possible, and a Ciceronian promulgates a political vocabulary of an idealized republic that never really existed.
others’ points of views. In the global classroom, diversity of language and meaning is prized as a tool for enhancing learning. We encourage students to voice varying definitions of words such as “justice” and “equality” so that a breadth of views fosters both a depth of understanding and a respect for varying interpretations of these values. In stark contrast to this fostering of definitional plurality, pre-modern thinkers both in the Greco-Roman world and ancient China encouraged their students to practice semantic stability as a means of ensuring unity of thought and thereby harmonious political order. The thing to which a name refers, its nominatum, should be the same thing for everyone. Why does semantic instability cause, rather than diminish, social instability for these classical thinkers, and why did they think “out of one foolish word may start a thousand daggers,” as Bentham later warned?

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Greece of the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, conversations about semantics were typically couched in the larger debate about the contest between nature, or physis, and nurture, or nomos, which were treated for the most part as antagonistic, rather than complementary, binaries. Ever since Plato’s Socrates was famously blamed for having divided the “mind” from the “tongue,” series of binaries have shaped the western philosophical and rhetorical tradition. Conventionalists, represented here

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4 For example, in our globalized Great Books curriculum at NYU, students learn the difference between arithmetic (one for one equity) and proportional justice (the more one puts into a system, the more one gets out of it) and grapple with the Ciceronian view that (arithmetic) equality is most unequal. Cf. Cic. Rep. 1.43, 53; Plato, Laws 757b, Rep. 558c; Arist. Pol. 1301b29ff.

5 For more on diversity in all forms as a key ingredient in modern education and the perspective that “there is no education without diverse points of view” and “Diversity is like Veritas: it’s an ideal of which we are in constant pursuit,” see Powell (5/31/18).


7 For more on the fifth century interest in investigating the nature of language, see Connor (1984, p. 99, n. 48).

8 For Cicero’s lament that Socrates divorced eloquence from wisdom, see esp. De Orat. 3.56–62, 72. The following binaries dominate ancient Western philological discussions on naming: Conventionalism: Realism :: Nomos: Physis :: Non-Being: Being :: False: True :: Unstable: Stable :: Ignorance: Knowledge :: Body: Mind :: Experience: Reason :: Eloquence: Philosophy.
by Hermogenes from Plato’s late dialogue *Cratylus* and by Hobbes,⁹ argue that names are the result of an artificial consensus and are customs created by man to avoid the anarchy that would result if everyone were to name everything as he or she pleased.¹⁰ True and false are aspects of speech, not of things,¹¹ and the application of a name is no guarantee of a thing’s epistemological reality. For these moderate skeptics, the application of names allows us to have a working knowledge of the world, but this application will not confirm the “realness” of said world. We shall never be sure if our perceptions, or anyone else’s, are correct or not, and submission to an agreed upon name ensures the preservation of peace and security for all.¹² From the conventionalist standpoint, incorrectly applied names create propositions that are not simply errors but logical absurdities.¹³

In contrast to conventionalists, realists posit that truth is an aspect of reality and that names should reflect that reality accurately if they are to be correct according to nature. As Socrates argues, “…we cannot name things as we choose; rather, 

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⁹ Though not ancient, I’ve added Hobbes since his words epitomize the materialist, Epicurean attitude towards naming as conventional, which neatly contrasts with the realist view posited by ethical idealists like Plato. He also shared the view of Thucydides, whom he translated, that man’s tongue could well be a “trumpet to war and sedition; and it is said that Pericles once made thunder and lightning in his speeches and threw all Greece into confusion.” (*De Cive* 5.5, tr. Tuck).

¹⁰ Arguing that new names given to domestic slaves by their masters are just as correct as their old names, Hermogenes asserts, “…no one is able to persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention and agreement…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.” (Plato, *Crat.* 384c-d, tr. Reeve).

¹¹ “For True and False are attributes of speech, not of Things. And where Speech is not, there is neither Truth nor Falsehood…” Hobbes, *Lev.* 4.15. Following Aristotelian logic, Hobbes posits that true and false are attributes of “affirmations,” (i.e. propositions): “…truth consisteth in the right ordering of names in our affirmations.” Thus, if a name is incorrectly applied to its *nominatum*, then it is the application of the name that is false, but not the name itself.

¹² The Hobbesian sovereign, for example, is first and foremost a name maker who takes man out of the state of nature, which for Hobbes is a state of war thanks to man’s ability to name things for himself. For more on the epistemological need of a sovereign, see *Civ.* 5, *Lev.* 13, 17-18. As Ball points out, “The sovereign supplies nothing less than the common coin of political currency, the conceptual currency that makes civil society possible... Word and sword are two sides of the coin of civility.” (1985, p. 759).

¹³ According to these thinkers, only humans (but not animals) have the “priviledge of Absurdity” thanks to their ability to speak, which is their ability to reason (*Lev.* 5.20). Hobbes, for whom reason is the reckoning of names, argued the Greeks thought not that “there was no Speech without Reason; but no Reasoning without Speech...But when we Reason in Words of generall signification, and fall upon a general inference which is false; though it commonly be called Error, it is indeed an ABSURDITY, or senslesse Speech...the possibility of it is unconceivable.” *Lev.* 4.16-5.19. Cf. Cicero, *Div.* 2.119. For the requirement that words denote conceivable things, see Murphy (2005, p. 141).
we must name them in the natural way for them to be named and with the natural tool for naming them. In that way, we’ll accomplish something and succeed in naming, otherwise we won’t.”¹⁴ Both sides, however, admit that the distinctions between conventionalism and realism are not hard and fast. Hobbes, for example, tells citizens not to defer to commonly used definitions of absurd, albeit conventional, words like “transubstantiation,”¹⁵ and even the realist Socrates admits that, although in theory names ought to represent their nominata perfectly, in reality names are, like portraits, merely approximate representations, not exact replications, of their nominata. Just as a perfect replication of Cratylus would be a duplicate Cratylus,¹⁶ a perfect name would be the thing itself it names so perfection of names is just not in the cards.¹⁷ Both convention and realism play a role in the naming process,¹⁸ and the etymologies that pervade Cratylus are Socrates’ method of decoding conventional, derivative names to find their earlier, uncorrupted meanings, which would have been more accurate, i.e. names that partook of the essence of their nominata, had the early name-makers known the Forms and not have been dizzy on Heraclitean flux theory.¹⁹

¹⁵ For more on how common men speak “insignificantly” and how the meanings of even weighty philosophical terms like “Entity” and “Essence” are in actuality “no Names of Things” but rather moving targets or “Signes, by which wee make known, that wee conceive the Consequence of one name or Attribute to another,” see Lev. 5.19–21, 8.39, 46.
¹⁶ Crat. 432b–c.
¹⁷ Socrates, recognizing that “an image cannot remain an image if it presents all the details of what it represents,” admits that correctness in regards to naming sensory qualities can never be exact as calculating numbers is, and thus “we must look for some other kind of correctness in images and in the names we’ve been discussing, and not insist that if a detail is added to an image or omitted from it, it’s no longer an image at all.” Crat. 432a–d. By revealing the impossibility of the realist project of naming and the importance of knowing the limits of language, the “Cratylus is thus an exercise in comporting oneself correctly toward language.” Ewegen (2014, p. 144).
¹⁸ As Socrates puts it, “…both convention and usage must contribute something to expressing what we mean when we speak…I myself prefer the view that names should be as much like things as possible, but I fear that defending this view is like hauling a ship up a sticky ramp, as Hermogenes suggested, and that we have to make use of this worthless thing, convention, in the correctness of names.” Crat. 433b–c.
¹⁹ Socrates, positing that there is a “civil war among names” in regards to their claims to truth, admits that it is far better to understand things “through themselves than to do so through their names,” since the original name-givers, who, wrongly thinking that the things they named were, like everything else, “moving and flowing” and constantly “coming into being,” fell “into a kind of vortex and are whirled around in it dragging us with them…. The epistemological value of a name is thereby critically limited, “and surely no one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names, or trust them and their givers to the point of firmly stating that he knows something…” Crat.
This assumption that earlier applications of names would be more correct than later attempts, which Plato undercuts in the *Cratylus*, is characteristic of classical thinking globally. During the late 6th to 3rd centuries BCE, when philosophical and rhetorical discourse blossomed in China as it did in Greece and Rome, Legalistic thinkers, Mohist etymologists, and Confucian scholars posited in varying degrees that a rectification of names (*zheng ming*) would usher in a return to the Golden Age when Zhou *li* (rituals that actualized one’s potential *ren*, goodness) flourished and reflected the Way of Heaven. In the *Analects*, Confucius argues, like Socrates, for a realist conception of naming, i.e. that names should accord with reality/the Way as much as possible in order to foster social and civic harmony. Consider the grave socio-political ramifications of incorrect naming in the following vignette:

Zilu asked, “If the Duke of Wei were to employ you to serve in the government of his state, what would be your first priority?”

The Master answered, “It would, of course, be the rectification of names (*zhengming*).”

Zilu said, “Could you, Master, really be so far off the mark? Why worry about rectifying names?”

The Master replied, “How boorish you are, Zilu! When it comes to matters that he does not understand, the gentleman should remain silent. If names are not rectified, speech will not accord with reality; when speech does not accord with reality, things will not be successfully accomplished. When things are not successfully accomplished, ritual practices and music will fail to flourish; when ritual and music fail to flourish, punishments

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20 Scholars of classical Chinese rhetoric, positing that rhetorical traditions do exist even when they are not explicitly identified as such, argue that *ming bian* (the power of names) is, albeit different in aims and methods, comparable to the western rhetorical tradition. For this position and ways of approaching Chinese rhetoric on its own terms, see especially Lu and Frank (1993, pp. 445-463); Lu (1998, pp. 1-43, 293-303); You (2006, pp. 425-448).

21 For more on the relationship between *ren* and *li* in Confucius, see Shun (2002, pp. 53-72). For Mohist and Legalistic interpretations of *zheng ming*, see Lu (1998, pp. 203-222, 272-283). For the Neo-Mohists, whose focus shifted from ethical concerns to the nature of language itself in their project of *lei ming* (categorizing names), see Zhiming (1990, pp. 210-215).
and penalties will miss the mark. And when punishments and penalties miss the mark, the common people will be at a loss as to what to do with themselves. This is why the gentleman only applies names that can be properly spoken and assures that what he says can be properly put into action. The gentleman simply guards against arbitrariness in his speech. That is all there is to it.  

(Confucius, *Analects* 13.3, tr. Slingerland)

Many of the assumptions made by Greco-Roman philosophers – for example, that the ordering of names affects moral character, is constitutive of socio-political structures, and is thus a prescriptive and not merely descriptive process – are shared by Confucius. Plato separates dialectic as a *technê*, or craft, aimed at truth and knowledge from rhetoric, a *tribê*, or knack, aimed at persuasion and belief.²² Likewise, Confucius distinguishes between the good speech of gentlemen (*junzi*), which reflects the Way, versus glib speech of base people (*xiaoren*) whose words exceed their actions.²³ And like Plato and Aristotle, who posit that the misuse of words like “equality” leads to civic upheaval, for Confucius, misapplied names divert the human Way from the universal Way of which humans are just a part. Improper naming dooms civil society to confusion and social anarchy.²⁴ One’s words (*ming*), which ought to correspond to one’s actions (*shi*),²⁵ are really bearers of the human social order and, if mixed up, will lead that order astray from the heavenly one it should mirror.²⁶ There are differences

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²² Because rhetoric is merely irrational flattery that can give no account of the real nature of the things it is discussing, it is a knack. Cf. *Gorg.* 463a-466a.

²³ The gentleman, whom Confucius fashions as an ethical rather than martial ideal, guards against bombastic speech, while petty people take delight in their “predeliction for petty cleverness” via empty conversation. Cf. *Analects* 4.22, 4.24, 14.4, 14.27, 15.17, 15.23. For more on the inherent link between good speaking and good character in Confucius, see Lu (1998, pp. 157-165, 294-298).

²⁴ Distinguishing between verbs like “taking” vs. “borrowing” (Social superiors can only take, but never borrow, from their social inferiors) and proper names such as “lord” vs. “minister,” Confucius admonishes his listeners to use names correctly to ensure political stability: “Certainly if the lord is not a true lord, the ministers not true ministers, the fathers not true fathers, and the sons not true sons, even if there is sufficient grain will I ever get to eat it?” *Analects* 12.11. Cf. *An.* 12.17, 13.14, *Exoteric Commentary* 5.33.

²⁵ Although such a “one-to-one” correspondence might seem logically impossible, considering that one has varied *li* to discharge in multiple social roles (e.g. as father/son/husband), for Confucius, as for Panaetius and Cicero, the self is social, “relational,” and defined by how it navigates the various relations in which it finds itself. Cf. Zhiming (1990, p. 207).

²⁶ For more on how the “language-world relationship in the classical conception of language is analogous to the doctrine of the unity of Heaven and man,” and how man’s words are of a piece with the reality they describe and therefore need to be correct to ensure harmony, see Zhiming (1990, pp. 195-219).
between Confucianism and Platonism: the Confucian Way is more in flux than the forms, Confucian chiastic style treats opposites more as complements than binaries, and Confucius seeks restoration, while Plato aims at re-direction. Still, both posit that careful, non-arbitrary communication builds character and community, while empty, or arbitrary, eloquence destroys them.

Faulty communication leading to a lack of community is a key theme in Thucydides. His famous Corcyrean *stasis* description is the *locus classicus* of semantic instability:

So the condition of the cities was civil war, and where it came later, awareness of earlier events pushed to extremes the *revolution in thinking*…

*And in self-justification men inverted the usual verbal evaluations of actions.*

Irrational recklessness was now considered courageous commitment, hesitation while looking to the future was high-styled cowardice, moderation was a cover for a lack of manhood, and circumspection meant inaction, while senseless anger now helped to define a true man, and deliberation for security was a specious excuse for dereliction…those who managed to accomplish something hateful by using honorable arguments were more highly regarded…In this way every form of viciousness was established in the Hellenic world on account of the civil wars, and the simplicity (*to euêthes*) that is especially found in noble (*to gennaion*) natures disappeared because it became ridiculous…The weaker in intellect were more often the survivors; out of fear of their own deficiency and their enemies’ craft, lest they be defeated in debate and become the first victims of plots as a result of the others’ resourceful (*ek tou polytropou*) intellects, they went straight into action…With public life confused to the critical point, human nature, always ready to act unjustly even in violation of the laws, overthrew the laws themselves and gladly showed itself powerless over *passion* but stronger than justice…

Thuc. 3.82-4; tr. Lattimore

Although there is debate among commentators whether Corcyrean revolutionaries deliberately changed the meanings of names as in Orwell’s *1984*, or whether they merely exploited the valences of existing names, or, if lacking the concepts of “the good” and “the noble” in their degenerated state, they were obliged to apply the vocabulary of goodness to bad things and vice versa, the passage nevertheless shares

27 For a discussion of these varying viewpoints, see Wilson (1982, pp. 18–20). Employing both hyper-
the Confucian belief that the disintegration of language is both the effect and the cause of political stasis. Whether it be Greek “courage” and “moderation” or French liberté, égalité, and fraternité, as Dickens later lamented, names, slogans, and the values behind them in a violent world are readily radicalized to the point of reversal of meaning, or even meaninglessness. Excess (pleonexia), a natural tendency within human nature and language, breeds further excess which eventually leads to the silencing of voice and self. Indeed, Thucydides presents Athens’ own self-destruction as a result of her ever-growing inability to communicate effectively with the Greek community (e.g. her Persian-like verbal assault on the Melians) and with herself (the disastrous Sicilian expedition). Athens’ self-annihilation can be blamed on her hubris, but, as Thucydides intimates, it may also be due to the inevitable corruption that is inherent in the very words by which Athens herself is made. Just as ancient scientists thought that the seeds of destruction were inherent in things (e.g. rust was inherent in iron), so they thought that language was both constitutive and destructive, hence the need for a rectification of terms. If only the Greeks could restore, rather than laugh at to euêthes, “ancient simplicity,” a stable, traditional value, and if only they could reject, rather than admire, the novel and clever sophistry that revels in shifting words and values, they could resist corruption and save their social order. Thucydides nicely terms the new ethos that was in fashion in Corcyra to polytropon, “being of many faces,” the adjectival form of which Homer had applied to Odysseus, another role shifter and name changer.

Names, however, have many valences that are easily exploited and tend towards entropy. “Freedom,” for example, can be confused with “dominion” since it means both “freedom from” and “freedom to.” As Hobbes argued, the Greeks and Romans overly stressed the “freedom to” valence of the term, and in doing so transformed the meaning of “freedom” to “dominion.” The Western parts, as he puts it, paid dearly for learning Greek and Latin since their “specious name of Libertie” threw them...
into a state of nature, another Corcyra, where since everyone has freedom to everything, including naming, no one has freedom to anything. For Hobbes, for whom “subjects” and “citizens” denote the same thing, and the vaunted term “tyrannicide” really means “regicide,” true freedom is removing oneself from the state of nature and submitting to a sovereign who regularizes names. Of such rectification Herbert Hoover would have approved, who himself became victim to a semantic reversal of the very same word. Before FDR, the valence of the word “liberal” that was emphasized was the “freedom from” part, and “liberalism” meant what today is called “conservatism,” i.e. freedom from big government. After FDR, however, who emphasized the “freedom to” valence, “liberal” became associated with liberality, the New Deal, and big government. Hoover, none too pleased about this semantic shift, gave up the word “liberal” altogether and famously said, “They have nested in this word until it stinks. Let them have the word. It no longer makes sense.”

Is a rectification of terms the best way to deal with the political threat that semantic instability poses? Does semantic instability even pose such a threat? Indeed, there are two points of view that contrast with the ones we have met so far. First, is the Daoist position here represented by Lao Tzu, Khongzi’s teacher in legend who liked to shock his student with dirtiness and other deliberate breaches of ritual conduct as a way to teach Khongzi, whose Jesuit name, Confucius, means “to bathe,” to be natural. For the Daoists, Confucianists were degenerate Daoists who, in an effort to accommodate and rationalize human reality, had in their reliance on rites slipped away from the universal Way (Dao), an indivisible unity of which humans are a

31 “And by reading of these Greek, and Latine Authors, men from their childhood have gotten a habit (under a false shew of Liberty,) of favouring tumults, and of licentious controlling the actions of their Soveraigns; and again of controlling those controllers, with the effusion of so much blood; as I think I may truly say, there was never any thing so dearly bought, as these Western parts have bought the learning of the Greek and Latin tongues.” Lev. 21.111.

32 Since that which our atoms are attracted to we call “good,” whereas that by which our atoms are repulsed we call “evil,” for Hobbes a tyrant is simply a monarch that somebody does not like; the only correct term for denoting an illegitimate leader is a hostis (public enemy); hosticide, but not tyrannicide, is licit. cf. De Civ. 7.3, 12.3. According to Hobbesian semantics, freedom under a monarchy is no different from that under a democracy, and the Aristotelian division of good vs. bad regimes based on rulers’ aims is mistaken: “The ancient writers on Politics have introduced three other kinds of commonwealths in opposition to these: in opposition to Democracy is Anarchy, or confusion; to Aristocracy, Oligarchy, i.e. government by a few; to Monarchy, Tyranny. But these are not three further kinds of commonwealth, but three alternative names, which have been bestowed by people who were annoyed with a government or its members.” De Civ. 7.2. cf. De Civ. 10.8, Lev. 21, 29, 46.

33 Public Statements, 1945, Hoover Papers.
The Confucian attempts to manifest the Way of humans (ren dao) through rituals (li), working from the outside in, while the Daoist focuses on manifesting the Way of heaven (tian dao) through spontaneous (wu wei) action, working from the inside out. In contrast to Confucius' rectification of names (zheng ming), which Daoists saw as actually widening the gulf between humans and the Dao, Daoists emphasize namelessness (wu ming) to avoid distorting the Way:

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way/A name that can be named is not a constant name/Nameless, it is the beginning of Heaven and Earth... These two come forth in unity but diverge in name/Their unity is known as an enigma. 

In ancient times, the best and most accomplished scholars were...Honest, like unhewn wood. 

The Way is forever nameless/ Unhewn wood is insignificant yet no one in the world can master it...When unhewn wood is carved up, then there are names/ Now that there are names, know enough to stop!

In short, Daoists reject the name game altogether since names, which inherently classify and divide things into binaries, can never capture the essence of a reality that is a unity. All the binaries that characterize the western texts in this talk such

34  As Lao Tzu puts it, “Those who are ritually correct act, but if others do not respond, they roll up their sleeves and resort to force/And so, When the Way was lost there was Virtue/When Virtue was lost there was benevolence/When benevolence was lost there was righteousness/When righteousness was lost there were the rites/The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and trust, and the beginning of chaos.” DJ 38.

35  For a comparison of Confucius' emphasis on ritual as a means of self-cultivation and realizing ren with Lao Tzu’s reliance on natural action as manifesting the dao through de (virtue), see Coombs (2005, pp. 17-21, 30-31); Li (1998, pp. 225-233). For Lao Tzu’s advice to depend on one’s “belly,” or instinct, rather than on one’s mind, or reason, see DJ 3, 12.

36  For more on Daoist wu ming as a corrective to Confucian zheng ming, see Li (1998, pp. 233-238).

37  Daodejing of Laozi, tr. Ivanhoe.

38  The text repeatedly admonishes that those who know the Way do not talk about it, whereas those who talk about it do not know it. For more on the need for practice in lieu of words, see DJ 2, 23, 41, 43, 56, 81. Both Confucians and Daoists posit that in a perfect state of being, there is no need for words: “Would that I did not have to speak! ...What does Heaven ever say? Yet the four seasons are put in motion by it, and the myriad creatures receive their life from it. What does Heaven ever say?” Analects 17.19, cf. An. 2.1, 12.3, 13.27, 15.5.
as Being vs. Non-Being, Nomos vs. Physis, and Reason vs. Passion dissolve in the
yin yang symbol, which treats seeming opposites as interdependent complements:
one (e.g. light) cannot exist without the other (dark). To manifest the Dao naturally,
one need be like nameless, unhewn wood.\(^39\) If one carves up reality into words, like
turning wood into a bookcase, let’s say, or a doorframe, then one has created unnatu-
ral divisions and has limited and thereby distorted meaning. The “closed fists”\(^40\) of
Platonic dialectic, Confucian rectification, and Hobbesian standardization, all aim
to remedy rhetorical instability by closing off meaning. In contrast, Daoists, like
many postmodern theorists, favor the “open hand,” which allows for a free play of
signs but only so long as the process is natural and spontaneous (\emph{wu-wei}). Daoist
semiotics are thus not open ended, as these shifting signs reflect the eternal flux of the
Dao’s state of being \textit{and} constant becoming.\(^41\) Lao Tzu’s text manifests this flux, and
the rhetorical figures of speech and thought known for changing words’ meanings
that are favored by sophists like Gorgias and that so worry Western thinkers – for
example, paradoxes,\(^42\) oxymorons, and metaphors, which Hobbes calls “fools’ fires,”\(^43\)
– pervade Lao Tzu’s poetical text, which itself demonstrates the paradox that art is
a lie that tells the truth. This text’s reversal of norms inspires students to struggle
to understand its meaning,\(^44\) and of all the ancient theories on semantic instability,
students respond most to Lao Tzu’s and deeply engage with his enigmatic words, which brings us finally to the student point of view.

All the ancient texts here, including the Daoists, share this thread in common: They consider language normative, constitutive for better or worse, and prescriptive, not descriptive, in nature. The fact that names constitute, rather than just present, our reality, may be a good thing or not depending on which thinker you consult, but all agree words matter and affect the here and now. A shift in language means a shift in self and society. This is what scholars have termed the “strong view” of rhetoric that Isocrates’ famous *laudatio eloquentiae* espouses:

…there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish…It is by this (speech) also that we confute the bad and extol the good…for the power to speak well is taken as the surest index of a sound understanding, and discourse which is true and lawful and just is the outward image of a good and faithful soul. With this faculty we both contend against others on matter which are open to dispute and seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown…in all our actions as well as in all our thoughts speech is our guide, and is most employed by those who have the most wisdom...the kind of art which can implant honesty and justice in depraved natures has never existed and does not now exist…But I do hold that people can become better and worthier if they conceive an ambition to speak well…the man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary, he will apply himself above all to establish a most honourable name among his fellow citizens: for who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud…? Therefore, the stronger a man’s desire to persuade his hearers, the more zealously will he strive to be honourable

Isocrates, *Antidosis* 254-7, 274-8; tr. Norlin

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Tzu’s opacity, see Lu (1998, p. 237). The paradoxical Beatitudes, the Messianic secret, and the idea that parables are meant to confound rather than illuminate (*Luke* 8:10) are similar methods whereby the New Testament encourages experiential learning of its teachings.

45 As White eloquently says about responding to semantic instability in general, “When we discover that we have in this world no earth or rock to stand or walk upon but only shifting sea and sky and wind, the mature response is not to lament the loss of fixity but to learn to sail.” (1984, p. 278).

46 Whereas the “strong defense” of rhetoric treats words as deeds that construct, rather than just describe, reality, the “weak defense” of rhetoric divorces form from content, substance from style. Cf. Lanham (1993, pp. 154-194); Leff (1998, pp. 61-88).
Isocrates’ words represent the extreme of the “strong view” that posits that our words make us; without words, there is no reason, morality, society, or humanity; words are the *sine qua non* of being human. Unlike Lao Tzu, Isocrates has been less appealing to students as each year passes, and due in part to the fact that they espouse the “weak view” of rhetoric, which treats a name as a convention, a mere instrument or tool controlled by its user. According to this view, a name can’t change one’s moral character; word is distinct from deed. To what extent we encode words rather than being encoded by them is a matter of scholarly debate, but my students for the most part assume that we have power over language not vice versa. To them, semantic instability is neutral, and not a problem at all since a word shifting its meaning (for example, a slang word like “cool”) does not necessarily result in a societal shift or social upheaval. Believing they have more control over their environments than the ancients did and more power to self-define thanks to technology, they don’t see rectifying names as a boon or a necessary evil. While the ancients view rectification as either an act of hope or fear, two sides of the same coin in Pandora’s box, these students don’t use the same currency. They value diversity of meaning and linguistic autonomy on the assumption that the sum of meanings will be greater than its parts.

As a postscript, in recent years there has been a revival of the “strong view” of rhetoric, albeit a less deterministic version than that posited by the ancients. From movies like 2016’s *Arrival*, which explores the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that shared language leads to shared perceptions of concepts like time, to politics, where the subject of rectification is at a fever pitch, to the world of science, where epigenetics is imploding the nature/nurture distinction and thereby the debate about language’s impact on thought, the debate about the extent to which words influence one’s respective worldview is very much alive. Whether it be Rudolph Giuliani contending that Barack Obama does not really “love” his country the way other Americans do, or Hillary Clinton, having previously attacked Obama’s “empty” rhetoric, ar-

47 Consider, for example, the debate about the role of nature versus nurture in language acquisition. While Chomsky emphasized the role of nature in forming vocabulary via an innate “language acquisition device,” Skinner stressed the importance of experiential learning. Cf. Chomsky (1959, pp. 26-58).

48 The consensus on this is, of course, not unanimous, and students often argue that the deliberate changing of a name (e.g. from “freedom fighter” to “terrorist”) does impact socio-political realities. Deliberate shifts notwithstanding, most student papers nevertheless argue that style cannot “make the man” since character is determined by other factors such as spirituality, family, and personal choice whereby one has the autonomy to choose one’s identity.

49 For more on how the relationship between nature and nurture is more cyclic than binary, see Pinker (1997, pp. 3-58).

50 At a Feb 8, 2015 event for Governor Scott Walker, Giuliani contended, “I do not believe, and I
guing against Trump that words do indeed matter; or Frank Bruni worrying that the current administration has cheapened rhetoric to the point of making words like “transparency” meaningless, America is in the midst of re-considering and re-calibrating her own attitudes towards the importance of naming. Our students are similarly re-evaluating their own views, and we can help them learn to navigate a semantically unstable global community by sharing with them the lesson the ancients teach us today: Knowing one’s linguistic limits also means knowing one’s opportunities.

know this is a horrible thing to say, but I do not believe that the president loves America. He doesn't love you. And he doesn't love me. He wasn't brought up the way you were brought up and I was brought up through love of this country... with all our flaws we're the most exceptional country in the world. I'm looking for a presidential candidate who can express that, do that and carry it out."

Clinton, who repeatedly attacked Obama for relying on words rather than on actions, posited that the 2008 campaign was about “talk versus action, rhetoric versus reality” and that the “best words in the world aren't enough unless you match them with action.” (Wisconsin Primary Speech, 2/19/08). The sophisticated divide of the mind from the tongue is a persistent theme of her campaign rhetoric: “I don’t want to just show up and give one of those whoop-dee-do speeches and get everybody whipped up. I want everyone thinking.” (Wynnewood, PA Speech, 4/19/08). In her 2016 response to Donald Trump’s campaign, Clinton then advocated the strong view of rhetoric: “Words matter, my friends, and if you are running to be president or you are president of the United States, words can have tremendous consequences.” (Des Moines, IA, 8/10/16).

For Bruni, Trump radically redefines the norms of political ‘transparency’: “It’s not merely that this emperor has no clothes. This emperor has no camouflage, at least none that’s consistent and effective. Syllable by syllable, he traffics in fantasy.” (2018, p. 3).
Works Cited


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