

PLATO'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE: THE ISOMORPHISM OF KOSMOS AND LOGOS IN THE *TIMAEUS**

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Abstract. *The paper considers Plato's theory of language through the prism of the Timaeus' metaphysics. It is argued that the apparent contradictions of Plato's philosophy of language are the consequence of the two-fold nature of language, and that the metaphysical scheme proposed by Plato in the Timaeus can shed a light on his coherent theory of language. The linguo-metaphysical isomorphism of the Timaeus presupposes that (1) words and material elements have their own meaning and nature respectively; (2) they can be reduced to an infinite variety of amorphous sounds and receptacle; (3) the participation in truth is possible only at the level of narrative and universe. According to this scheme the universe (κόσμος), as well as any speech (λόγος), can be explained by the reduction to its constituent elements, but it will be only necessary explanation. Whereas for Plato, the true understanding of cosmos and logos is possible only on the level of the coherent unity of the whole, which represents the ideal paradigm in the best possible way.*

Keywords: *Plato, the Timaeus, theory of language, metaphysics, language naturalism, language conventionalism*

[H]is handwriting was slovenly; he misjoined his words; he cared nothing about spelling; his one concern was for the idea
Porphyry. "On the Life of Plotinus"

Different problems concerning the nature and functioning of language are discussed by Plato in different dialogues, such as the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Theaetetus*, and the *Sophist*. Moreover, the *Cratylus* is

dedicated exclusively to the issues of language. The very fact of using the form of a dialogue implies that Plato was permanently concerned with the issues of language, broadly construed. Nevertheless, Plato's philosophy of language as an integral and consistent theory cannot be explicated from his writings.

In the discussion concerning the origin and nature of language in the *Cratylus*, Plato consistently attacks radical conventionalism of Hermogenes, and proposes extensive ety-

* The article was prepared within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) and supported within the framework of a subsidy granted to the HSE by the Government of the Russian Federation for the implementation of the Global Competitiveness Program.

mological excursus to justify the essential interconnection of words and things (*Crat.* 385a–427c). But at the end of the dialogue he notices that “we should be content to have agreed that it is far better to investigate them [e.g. things] and learn about them through themselves than to do so through their names” (*Crat.* 439b), implying that naturalistic conception cannot explain the language in use and presupposing the preference of conventionalism. Respectively, in the discussion of the role of language in the process of knowledge, language is considered a necessary and exclusive tool for the search of the truth (*Phaedo* 99e–100a), nevertheless, language inevitably presumes the mixture of the true and false (*Soph.* 259e–268d, *Phileb.* 15d–e)¹.

By the time of Plato’s life and work, numerous crucial issues about language had been raised and examined in Ancient Greece. Two opposite positions concerning the connection between things and words, conventionalism and naturalism, were developed in a broader discussion about nature (φύσις) and law (νόμος). The idea of evolutionary development of language is put forth in opposition to archaic intuition of divine or wise founder of language. Epistemological resources of language are actively absorbed by sophists and philoso-

phers within etymological studies and the so called *theory of sound symbolism*. Some particular linguistic elaborations are also introduced, such as typology of sounds and letters, words, and sentences. The situation seems paradoxical. On the one hand, the context of language studies in Ancient Greece between the 6th and the 4th centuries BCE is well known and is reconstructed in considerable detail on the basis of scarce material². On the other hand, the place and role of Plato in this context, as it follows from contradictory interpretations of his philosophy, is still not clarified, despite the generosity of history to his texts.

In this case, clarification of Plato’s ideas about language through the context of language studies in Ancient Greece is a legitimate and productive strategy. The ambiguities of Plato’s position may be considered as either his indication of insufficiency of both positions to explain the complicated nature of language, or Plato’s sceptical position concerning the very possibility of explaining the origin of language³. Nevertheless, the *Corpus Platonicum* itself can help specify Plato’s position. I argue that (a) the apparent contradictions of Plato’s theory of language are the consequence of the twofold nature of language, which Plato is surely aware of, as I will demonstrate; and that (b) the metaphysical scheme proposed by Plato in the late dialogue the *Timaeus*⁴ can shed a light on his coherent theory of language. Although the *Timaeus* is rarely

¹ The same ambivalence is observed in the research literature. Reviewing the history of the *Cratylus*’ studies, Grintser (1994: 189-191; 2014: 54-58) uses the metaphor of a pendulum: some scholars (e.g. Clegg 1973: 27) argue that Plato is developing a naturalistic conception of language, while others (e.g. Rehn 1982: 25) argue that Plato stands for conventionalism. Consequently, some scholars (Rehn 1982: 23; Sluiter 1990: 12) consider Plato’s etymological investigations as a mere game, unserious and ironic, while the other (Gaiser 1974: 49, 77; Sedley 2003: 23ff) see in these speculations the integral part of Plato’s theory.

² E.g., Manetti (1993: 14-35), Modrak (2006: 640-643), Verlinsky (2006: 92-269), Grintser (2014: 55-58, 62-79).

³ See Gaiser (1974: 32), Woodruff (1986: 25-30).

⁴ For the discussions about dating of the dialogue see Zeyl (2000: xvi–xx).

used for the clarification of Plato's views on language⁵, the philosopher consistently emphasizes the importance of the linguistic dimension throughout the dialogue and gives the readers unambiguous hints at the tight coupling of his theory of language and metaphysics. Thus, in the paper I explicate the language theory of Plato's on the basis of his metaphysics in the *Timaeus*.

Language Matters

From the very beginning of the *Timaeus*' introductory part, Plato deliberately emphasizes the importance of the linguistic dimension: "the main part of the discourse" (17c), "for we said" (18a), "and it was said" (18b), "we went on to say" (18c), "how we said" (18d), "so we said" (19a), "what was said" (19b), etc. As noted by Catherine Rowett, there are *thirteen* direct references to the act of speaking (λέγω) on just two of Stefanus' pages. Socrates here does not describe the institutes and practices of the ideal polis, but he recalls what *was said* about it (Osborne 1996: 181-183).

All these arguments, according to Socrates, lack vitality, so Critias proposes his story of ancient Athens to correct this deficiency (20d–26d). Now Plato's reader is captured by language even more, although not at the level of semantics, but at the level of narrative. To "vitalize" the ideal city, Critias offers a story which is literally buried under linguistic layers of generations, being retold *seven times* (20c–21e).

⁵ While there has been some important research on various aspects of Plato's theory of language in the *Timaeus* (Brague 1986; Osborne 1996; Burnyeat 2005), it is significant that there are no references to the dialogue at all in the works dedicated to the general interpretation of Plato's philosophy of language (Demos 1964; Partee 1972; Crivelli 2008).

Thus, Solon is told about ancient Athens by an Egyptian priest (1), then Solon retells it to Dropides (2), Dropides tells it to Critias' grandfather (3), the grandfather retells the story to his ten-year-old grandson (4), in his old age, this grandson mentions the story to Hermocrates the day before the dialogue takes place (5), then this story is retold by Critias to Hermocrates and Timaeus in the morning before the dialogue (6), finally, Socrates gets to hear the story in the dialogue (7).

Critias' story, more precisely his retelling of the retelling of the retelling... (*retelling to the power of six*), seems hardly sufficient for Socrates' goals. Consequently, Socrates' remark (26e) that it is "genuine history" (ἀληθινὸς λόγος) and not "invented fable" (πλασθέντα μῦθος) can be understood only as an irony and counts in favour of the latter⁶. At any rate, the whole introductory part of the *Timaeus* is implicitly concentrated on the dimension of language and dedicated to *words, words, words*. No less important is language in Timaeus' story.

Isomorphisms of the *Timaeus*

There is a similarity between the two central figures of Plato's dialogue, Timaeus and the demiurge. *First*, there is almost nothing known about both. There is only one explicit characteristic of the demiurge in the dialogue: "he was good" (ἀγαθὸς ἦν – 29e). The goodness of the demiurge, however, is not just postulated by Timaeus, but described in the whole first part of his

⁶ Timaeus' account is described as a "likely story" (εἰκὸς μῦθος – 29d, 59c, 68d), nevertheless, it does not mean a detraction of its importance (cf. Burnyeat 2005).

story, since to be good is to do good deeds intentionally⁷. The demiurge is good because he acts in accordance with the eternal and unchangeable paradigm, his acts are rational (the demiurge is a universal mathematician and dialectician), and the result of his activity is the beautiful cosmos.

There is not so much information about Timaeus Locrus either (Nails 2002: 293-294). It is said in the introduction that he is “inferior to none of its citizens either in property or in rank”, that he occupies “the highest offices and posts of honor in his State”, and that he had reached “the very summit of eminence in all branches of philosophy” (20a). These excellences become obvious in the course of his speech. As well as the demiurge, he grounds his story on the knowledge of the paradigm, uses evidence to justify and explain it (using the same methods of dialectics and mathematics), and seeks to maximize the accuracy and completeness of the description of the cosmos.

Second, the works of Timaeus and the demiurge are unique⁸. Plato consistently uses handicraft vocabulary to describe the process of world’s creation by the demiurge⁹, but it is important to remember that for the ancient Greeks rhetoric is a τέχνη too¹⁰. Thus, both a table produced by a carpenter and a speech pronounced by a philosopher can be considered a work product. This “technical” quality of the speech-

making is emphasized in the *Timaeus*. Thus, after his detailed consideration of human body’s affectation, Timaeus says (69a): “We have now sorted out the different kinds of cause, which lie ready for us like lumber for carpenters. From them we are to weave together the remainder of our account (λόγος)”.

Unlike Critias, Timaeus neither retells traditional stories, nor refers to the authority of predecessors, but creates the new cosmology. The demiurge also creates a unique and perfect world. Uniqueness is one of the perfections that the “product” inherits if it has a self-identical and uniform paradigm, and if it is rationally created by a virtuous creator (29a-31b). From the similarity of the two protagonists of the dialogue it follows that there is an overlap between the activity of Timaeus, i.e. the story, and the activity of the demiurge, i.e. the cosmos.

The parallel between story and cosmos is not only expected from the similarity of Timaeus and the demiurge explained above, but is emphasized by Plato himself. Firstly, in the beginning of Timaeus’ speech, when he postulates the dependence of an account on the type of described object (29b-c). Secondly, the parallelism between the story and the cosmos is reduced to synonymy at the end of his speech:

So now we may say that our account (λόγος) of the universe is at last complete, since we have explained how this world (κόσμος) of ours obtained its full complement of mortal and immortal creatures. It was created a visible living being, encompassing within itself those creatures that are visible; it was created a perceptible god, made in the likeness of the intelligible god. This universe of ours is single, the only one of its kind: there is none greater or better, none more beautiful, none more perfect. (92c, trans. by D.J. Zeyl)

⁷ E.g. *Apol.* 28b, *Prot.* 344a-347a, *Rep.* IV, 445b, etc. Cf. Pseudo-Plato, *Definitions* 411d-e. See also Anas (2008: 273-274).

⁸ For the discussions on the uniqueness of the world, see Keyt (1971), Parry (1979), Patterson (1981).

⁹ The very notion of δημιουργός has obvious handicraft connotations (Boroday 2008: 61-67).

¹⁰ *Phaedrus* 259e-262c, 265d-266c, cf. *Gorg.* 452e-454b. See also Roochnik (1996: 179-231), Yunis (2007: 77-80, 84-85).

Turning to the “contents” of the story and the cosmos, further similarities are found. *First*, there is *structural isomorphism*¹¹. The cosmos, according to Timaeus, is a system of circular motions of the heavenly bodies. The affinity of the cosmos and eternal model is reached and disclosed in the entirety of the celestial movements. As Plato writes, “the perfect number of time brings to completion the perfect year (ὁ γε τέλειος ἀριθμὸς χρόνου τὸν τέλειον ἐνιαυτὸν)” (39d) when eight planets come to the starting point of their movement all together. Yet Timaeus organizes his story cyclically: three times he begins his story “from the beginning”. For the first time, when he offers to consider the cosmos through the prism of eternal paradigm (29e). Then, when he talks about the necessity of the errant cause’s introduction (47e). Finally, when he proposes to consider the interaction of the divine and necessary causes (68e).

Second, there is an *isomorphism of temporal organization*. Timaeus’ story, as the demiurge’s cosmos (38b-c), has a beginning (27c-d). But surprisingly, as the cosmos, it has no end, at least within the boundaries of the dialogue: the last words of Timaeus’ speech are in the introduction to the next dialogue, the *Critias*. The completeness of Timaeus’ speech is not guaranteed by the history of the cosmos from creation to destruction, since the world will not be

¹¹ This principle of isomorphism in its general form is given by Plato earlier in the dialogue (*Tim.* 29b): “The accounts we give of things have the same character as the subjects they set forth (ὡς ἄρα τοῦς λόγους, ὄνπερ εἰσιν ἐξηγηταί, τούτων αὐτῶν καὶ συγγενεῖς ὄντας)”. About typical for Plato structural organization of his dialogues which reflects the development of argumentation, see Thesleff (1967: 27-28). For precise description of parallelism between content and structural organization in case of the *Republic*, see Dorter (2006: 6-8).

destroyed. His story is complete because he exhaustively described the world in its entirety: from the world soul to particular organization of bones and flesh (30c-d; 92c; Osborne 1996: 194-196).

In different dialogues, Plato implies that language is a necessary tool of philosophy, however, insufficient and imposing some restrictions on the philosophical activity (cf. *Rep.* VI. 509d-511d, *Phaedrus* 246a-247e). For example, in the *Phaedo* (99e-100a) Socrates is looking for a path to comprehend the truth through language, nevertheless, he understands that such an approach is inappropriate (οὐκ ἔοικεν – 100a1)¹². In the *Philebus* the idea is expressed even more radically:

By making the point that it is through *discourse* (ὑπὸ λόγων) that the same thing flits around, becoming one and many in all sorts of ways, in whatever it may be that is said at any time, both long ago and now. And this will never come to an end, nor has it just begun, but it seems to me that this is an “immortal and ageless” condition that comes to us with discourse (τῶν λόγων αὐτῶν) (*Phileb.* 15d, trans. by D. Frede).

Any narrative *per se* has a limited sphere of application in metaphysical sense, since words as well as material things are only images (εἰκόνες) of forms, i.e. have the same ontological status as particulars¹³. Thus, any linguistic description of the ideal world leads to some difficulties. To use words for description of the model we can

¹² On the insufficiency of purely discursive way of philosophizing in the *Phaedo*, see Burger (1984: 145-147).

¹³ As Plato summarizes in the *Cratylus* (439a-b): “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”. Cf. the *Republic* (510c-511a), where the explanation of relations between visible and the intelligible is given.

expect only a broadly accurate description (*Tim.* 29c). So, Timaeus complains about the inaccuracy of the *language tenses* in a description of *the eternal model*:

For we say that it [*e.g. the eternal model*] was, is, and will be, when in fact only “is” truly belongs to it, while “was” and “will be” are properties of things that are created and that change over time, since ‘was’ and ‘will be’ are both changes. [...] We use other inaccurate expressions too, such as “What has been created *is* what has been created” and “What is being created *is* being created”, and also “What will be created *is* going to be created” and “The non-existent *is* the non-existent”. (37e-38b, trans. by D.J. Zeyl)

Taking into account the limiting nature of language it is useful to consider Plato’s conception of the *tettara genē*. As it was shown, there is a similarity between the demiurge and Timaeus and the parallel between the products of their activities. But what is important is that neither of the two does create *ex nihilo*: the demiurge brings into the order matter which was in disorder and chaos (30a); and Timaeus uses usual phrases and words in his story, i.e. he does not invent new language. Thus, we can assume a language counterpart of the receptacle in a row of isomorphisms of the *Timaeus*.

Matter of Language

At first glance, it is hard to imagine such a counterpart of the receptacle. Nevertheless, Plato leaves the reader a hint:

What we have to do is see what fire, water, air, and earth were like in themselves before the creation of the universe, and what happened to them then. No one before has ever explained how they were created. People talk as if it were clear what fire and so on are and take them to be the principles and letters

(στοιχεῖα), so to speak, of the universe, when in actual fact they shouldn’t even be compared to syllables (συλλαβαί). (48b-c, trans. by D.J. Zeyl)

Thus, the elements (στοιχεῖα) – fire, water, air, and earth – are not letters (στοιχεῖα) of the universe, they are even more complex than syllables (συλλαβαί). According to Timaeus’ reasoning, we cannot consider traditional elements of early Greek philosophers as the “beginnings” (ἀρχαί), because they are only manifestations of more fundamental metaphysical layer, the receptacle¹⁴.

Plato clearly distinguishes the receptacle and material elements (Sallis 1999: 130-138). In this case, it is logical to assume that the receptacle is a kind of “alphabet” of the world: all parts of speech are composed of letters, however, the letters themselves have no meanings (cf. *Crat.* 393c–394d; *Theat.* 203b). But probably more properly and more heuristically promising would be understanding of receptacle as a phonetic basement of every element of language (from letters to spoken words and texts)¹⁵, and elements as a kind of graphically fixed alphabet. Thus, in the *Philebus*, for example, Plato explains the interrelation between the infinity of sound (φωνή) and numerical definitude of the alphabet (*Phileb.* 17b, 18b-c). Different people have different ways of pronouncing sounds and in this variability

¹⁴ This idea is echoed in the works of Aristotle. Discussing the relation of form and matter, Aristotle often proposes the analogy between sounds and meaning of words to explain it (*De gen. animal.* V 7, 786b 21; *Met.* VII 12, 1038a 7). It seems that the conceptual source of the analogy, as well as a more broad theorizing on the connection between sound and meaning in *De interpretatione* (I, II, IV), could be the *Timaeus*.

¹⁵ Cf. Manetti (1993: 60-61).

the knowledge about letters is impossible. This infinity of sounds has to be “systemized” by reduction to some finite state, i.e. numerically expressible, which allows us to see the unity beyond the variability. As Plato states it, “if we know how many kinds of vocal sounds there are and what their nature is, that makes every one of us literate” (*Phileb.* 17b). The infinity of sounds preceding alphabetical formedness resembles the receptacle of the *Timaeus*, constantly changeable and fluid, not having its own meaning or content, but giving birth to all things in the world¹⁶.

It is important to notice that while the opposition of στοιχεῖον–γράμμα was not articulated by the time of Plato, the tendency to use στοιχεῖον to designate the phonetic feature of a letter is usual in his writings, as well as in Aristotle’s (Burkert 1959: 171). Thus, it is reasonable to understand Plato’s words that four elements are even more complicated than syllables in the following way: there is (a) “graphically fixed alphabet” of basic triangles (*Tim.* 53d–57b), which underlies the realm of elements, and (b) there is “phonetic infinity” of receptacle, the metaphysical necessity of the cosmos. The demiurge of the *Timaeus* is ordering *receptacle/phonetic infinity* by means of the *regular triangles/alphabet* to the state of *cosmos/text*.

It is significant that the description of the receptacle faced the same difficulties (49a-b) as the description of the model. Both the model and the receptacle exist *before* the creation of the cosmos. Therefore, while the narrative corresponds to the world in

the ontological hierarchy, it cannot be used for the accurate description of the model, since it is *meta-discursive*, or for the correct description of the receptacle, since it is *pre-discursive*. Thus, metaphor (50a-51a) and apophaticism (51a-b) are only ways to speak about the receptacle (Derrida 1993: 91-94, Boroday 2008: 134-135).

Matter and Reason

In the beginning of the “new account of the Universe” *Timaeus* characterizes the receptacle purely negatively. Nevertheless, he explains later that the very mode of existence of the receptacle presupposes exposure of material elements, i.e. a kind of mechanical self-ordering. Plato explains this quasi-ordering as follows (52d–53b): before the demiurge starts to order the universe, receptacle is in a state of constant and erratic shake and concussion, the primordial state of chaos. While there is still no intervention of divine reason, the four elements are revealed themselves in this chaos by their general powers, i.e. moistening, heating, etc. This condition of the third kind can be called proto-elemental, because, at this stage the elements, as Plato writes, “displaying [only] certain hints of their true natures (ἴχνη μὲν ἔχοντα αὐτῶν ἄττα)”. On the one hand, receptacle is shaking because it is affected by the powers of proto-fire, proto-water, proto-air and proto-earth; on the other hand, these proto-elements are concussed because of the shaking of the receptacle. Since, the powers of the four proto-elements are neither congruent nor balanced, receptacle is extremely unstable and unsustainable: as soon as some configuration has accidentally emerged it is instantaneously changed into another,

¹⁶ This “materiality” of sound can explain why Plato emphasizes that the process of thought (διάνοια) is a conversation of the soul with itself *without sound* (οὐδὲ φωνῆ – *Theaet.* 190a; ἀνευ φωνῆς – *Soph.* 263e).

and so forth. Nevertheless, it seems that bits of proto-air are most of all congruent with other bits of proto-air, and congruent least of all with bits of proto-earth. That is why even during the pre-cosmic state proto-elements are localizing in different regions of receptacle, like the shaking of a sieve helps to separate needed elements from unwanted material.

This explains, of course, how they came to occupy different locations (χώρον) even before they had become the constituents of the orderly universe that came into existence. Not only were they disproportionate and erratic (ἄλόγως καὶ ἀμέτρως), however, before that event, but even when the organization of the universe was first taken in hand, fire, water, earth, and air, despite displaying certain hints of their true natures, were still wholly in the kind of state you'd expect anything to be with no god present (53a-b, trans. by D.J. Zeyl).

It is important to notice, when the elements are “winnowed by the sieves”, they have already had their own nature (φύσις – 54a), even before the demiurge acts upon them. What constitutes this nature is the geometry of elements (54a-55c). The geometric form (μορφή) determines positioning of the elements in the pre-cosmic chaos, and guarantees the production of “non-uniformity” (ἄνωμαλότης) in the cosmic state (58a-c). The pre-cosmic formedness, on the one hand, provides a possibility of “intelligent” interaction between the demiurge and matter (48a), but on the other, puts limitations upon the demiurge’s work. For example, the material body of cosmos is organized by the demiurge to be spherical, because the sphere is the most perfect shape (33b); nevertheless, because of its materiality the body of cosmos can be only dodecahedral (55c).

As Plato notices, material elements participate in the organization of human senses, defining the specificity of their functioning (61c-68e). For example, the human body consists of water, fire and earth, and the water involved in the flesh is of the smallest particles (74b-d). The water around the human body is of larger particles, and when it penetrates into the body, it displaces “small-particle” water, which has already been there. Due to the fact that “outside” water has not enough space in the flesh, it compresses other elements in the flesh, and the body reacts trying to return to its former state. “And the name given to this resistance and this vibration is ‘shivering’ or ‘ague’, while both the experience as a whole and the cause of it are called ‘cold’”, – Timaeus sums up (62b).

According to the fact that there is a correlation between body organization and sensation, we can assume that there should be sustainable ways of articulation of sounds, dependent on the material, which constitutes organs of speech. While in the Timaeus Plato does not consider the organization of organs of speech in detail, we find an example of such correlation in the *Cratylus*. Trying to explain the dependence of the meaning of word on letters or sounds which constitute it, Socrates argues that the letter “rho” (ῥῶ), for example, is a great instrument for expressing motion, because the tongue, when pronouncing this letter, is in constant motion (*Crat.* 426c-427d).

The idea of dependence of language ability and the constitution of organs of speech could be traced back to Empedocles. As Theophrastus noticed, Empedocles mistakenly defines some cognitive abilities through the material constituents of parts of the body ‘responsible’ for it. As Aristotle’s pupil notices:

His idea is odd that the special abilities of men are due to the composition of the blood in their particular members, – as if the tongue were the cause of eloquence [...] and as if these members did not have the rank of mere instruments! Indeed one might better for this reason assign the shape of the organ as the cause [of talent]; rather than ascribe this to the composition of the blood [in the organ], – which really has nothing to do with understanding (*De Sensibus*, 24, trans. by G.M. Stratton).

According to Theophrastus, Empedocles failed to distinguish the tongue as the cause (αἰτία) of speaking and the tongue as means (ὄργανον) of speaking. It is widely recognized that Empedocles' natural philosophy is an important resource for Plato's *Timaeus*¹⁷, but what is more interesting, is that Theophrastus tends to equate Plato's and Empedocles' theory of perception (Volf 2014: 36-37; also Thphr., *De Sensibus*, 7-24; 91).

Nevertheless, while the permanent presence of Empedocles' thought in the *Timaeus* is obvious, it seems to be more like an object of criticism than an intellectual alliance. Plato, while he recognizes some explanatory potential of Empedocles' doctrine, tries to overcome it. In other words, Plato moves from Empedocles-like *mechanical* explanations to the *teleological* one. In the context of the *Timaeus* the explanation of *logos* by reduction of speech to words and words to letters and sounds, the so called *theory of sound symbolism*, is possible. Nevertheless, it is only necessary (ἀναγκαῖος) explanation, from Plato's point of view, i.e. explanation through material cause. But there is

a divine (θεῖος) reason as well (*Tim.* 68e–69a). Eventually, the divine reason is the most important, since it governs the matter. It has been already said that matter puts limits on intelligent activity, but intelligence is the most important and determinant force in the universe. The ultimate example here is the organization of the human body in order to maximize his intellectual abilities:

For any part whose creation and development are governed by necessity cannot possibly have dense bone and a lot of flesh at the same time as acute sensitivity. [...] But as things are, the craftsmen-gods who made us weighed up whether they should create a worse but longer-lived race, or a better one that didn't live as long, and decided that the shorter life was in every conceivable respect better than the longer one. [...] For all these reasons, then, every man's head is more vulnerable than the body to which it is attached, but more sensitive and intelligent (75a-c, trans. by D.J. Zeyl).

Extrapolating Plato's argument to language issues, we can say that the meaning of the narrative cannot be understood on the basis of how it sounds, but it is understood even in spite of it in some sense. The linguo-metaphysical isomorphism in general can be interpreted as follows. Words and material elements have their own meaning and nature respectively; however they can be reduced to infinite variety of amorphous sounds and receptacle¹⁸. The participation in truth is possible only at the level of narrative and cosmos, in other words, in a coherent unity of the whole (cf. *Soph.* 259e-263c). Coher-

¹⁷ From Taylor's (1928: 18) radical thesis that the dialogue "is an attempt to graft Empedoclean biology on the stock of Pythagorean mathematics" to moderate acceptance of Empedoclean influence on some parts of the *Timaeus* by Cornford (1997: 57, 104, 152, etc.).

¹⁸ Contemporary linguists notice that sounds (but not syllables) of all languages, even alien for European languages click sounds of some African dialects, can be identified in vocal plays of infants. This plastic and varying range of sound accessible to infants can be considered a basic matter or substrate for forming meaningful vocal structures (Menyuk and Brisk 2005: 8-10).

ence and unity are properties guaranteed by the accurate and complete expression of the ideal model, and not dependent on the material in use.

Thus, Plato's theory of language is based on a quite radical thesis: any saying can be the story only when it is committed to the truth. Without having a *telos*, any saying is merely a mechanical organization of language elements, but not a living organism. It is appropriate to recall the fact that in the *Phaedrus* (264c) Plato states that any speech (λόγος) should be organized as a living organism (ζῷον), parts of the body of which are subordinated to the tasks of the whole (τό ὅλον)¹⁹.

Conclusion

In the light of the proposed interpretation of Plato's theory of language, I would like to conclude with some considerations about Plato's place in the context of linguistic investigations of his epoch. The first can be named "institutional" and deals with the status of philosophy as one of the types of wisdom, along with other types of wisdoms²⁰. The second concerns Plato's relationship to the theory of sound symbolism, such an important and controversial issue of *the Cratylus*.

First, traditionally, in the research literature Plato is considered the philosopher *par excellence*, in contrast with, for example,

rhetorician Isocrates or historian Thucydides. This disciplinary oriented focusing is much more due to contemporary academic reality, not an authentic intellectual landscape of the studied period. Such a distinction is largely justified and in some sense even necessary. Nevertheless, it should stay the subject of constant critical self-reflection. Ancient Greek philosophy was not isolated from other types of wisdom (poetic, rhetorical, historical, sophistic, etc.), but in cooperation and competition with them acquired its own special status. Analysis of the differences of particular theoretical objectives of ancient Greek philosophy and rhetoric²¹, or philosophy and history²² quite often becomes an object of research interest. But an equally important role is played by the metaphysical and epistemic background, which allows us to carry out demarcation lines on the heterogeneous intellectual space of ancient Greece.

Plato's philosophy of language gives compelling reasons for a critique of forms of wisdom competing with philosophy in the intellectual landscape in the 5th-4th century BCE. Neither historical, nor rhetorical narrations can claim to be true, because neither accurate description of the past events (or retelling tales), nor masterful composition of speech have truth conditions in themselves. Since language elements have the same ontological status as the object they described, any concentration on them becomes an intentional reduction of language abilities to the copying of copies. In fact, the speech of Timaeus is a kind of history and a kind of rhetoric. But it is neither historical, nor rhetorical work, because it describes not the cosmos as it *was, is and will be*, but

¹⁹ An extravagant interpretation of the *Timaeus* belongs to Brague (1986). According to him, the *Timaeus* is an illustration of this requirement of the *Phaedrus*. In a manner, different sections of Timaeus' story correspond to different parts of the human body. This allows us to consider some of the traditional problems of the dialogue in a new light.

²⁰ For the general review of intellectual and cultural context, different types of wisdom in Ancient Greece with extensive bibliography, see Lloyd (1995: 50-108), Nightingale (2004: 17-21, 29-35).

²¹ E.g. Cooper (1985), Sipiora (2002), Balla (2004).

²² E.g. Davis (2000), Mara (2008).

how it has *to be* in accordance with reason. In this sense, it is philosophy.

Second consideration, in fact, is connected with the first one, but deals with the sophisticated relationship between philosophy and mythology in Plato's dialogues²³. The sound symbolism, a particular theory in a row of naturalistic theories of the origin of language, seems to be an archaic and emblematic way of reflection about language. Belief in the interconnection of particular letters or sounds with particular qualities or meanings inherent in various cultural traditions, such as Vikings runes, the Hebrew Kabbalah, the Arab Abjad, and Indian Upanishads²⁴. This idea is not alien

²³ Cf. Murray (1999), Morgan (2000: 132-289).

²⁴ For the brief history of the theory of sound symbolism with extensive bibliography see Magnus (2013).

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to ancient Greeks as well: some scholars associate it with names of early Greek philosophers (first of all, Democritus), and its developed variant is found in Plato's dialogues (Verlinsky 2006: 235-242).

Plato's theory of language in the *Timaeus* clarifies his position concerning sound symbolism. Apparently, Plato examines a naturalistic view of language, pointing out that the language articulation is determined by the structure of vocal organs. However, Plato provides a kind of demystification of naturalism: the knowledge of the nature of language elements cannot and does not guarantee the truth of speech. When composing speech, it is useful to understand the capabilities of language and its elements, but it is not enough for philosophy as the love of wisdom.

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PLATONO KALBOS TEORIJA: KOSMO IR LOGO IZOMORFIZMAS *TIMAJUJE*

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Santrauka. Straipsnyje per *Timajaus* metafizikos prizmę aptariama Platono kalbos teorija. Teigiama, kad Platono kalbos filosofijos tariamas prieštaravimas kyla iš dvilypės kalbos prigimties ir kad Platono *Timajuje* pasiūlyta metafizinė schema gali nuskaidrinti jo nuoseklią kalbos teoriją. *Timajo* kalbos ir metafizikos izomorfizmas numato, kad (1) žodžiai ir materialieji elementai atitinkamai turi savo reikšmę ir prigimtį; (2) jie gali būti redukuoti į begalinę amorfinių garsų įvairovę; (3) dalyvavimas tiesoje įmanomas tik pasakojimo ir visatos lygmeniu. Pagal šią schemą, visata (*κόσμος*), kaip ir bet kuri kalba (*λόγος*), gali būti paaiškinta per redukciją į sudarančius elementus, tačiau tai tebus būtinas aiškinimas. Platonui tikrasis kosmo ir logo supratimas įmanomas tik koherentiško visumos vienumo lygmeniu, geriausiai reprezentuojančiu idealią paradigmą.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Platonas, Timajas, kalbos teorija, metafizika, kalbos natūralizmas, kalbos konvencionalizmas

Įteikta 2016.10.1

Priimta spaudai 2017.02.15