

# NAMES, VERBS, AND SENTENCES IN ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY\*

FRANCESCO ADEMOLLO

[Ch. 2 of M. Cameron and R.J. Stainton (eds), *Linguistic Content. New Essays on the History of Philosophy of Language*, Oxford 2015, 33–54; penultimate draft. ]

My purpose here is to investigate some ancient conceptions of the composition and structure of sentences, focusing on Plato and Aristotle, with short forays into other authors and ages. I shall concern myself mainly with two mutually connected issues. First, both Plato and Aristotle hold that a minimal simple sentence consists of two expressions of different kinds, which they call ‘*onoma*’ and ‘*rhema*’; I shall try to make clear the nature and purport of this distinction, which is controversial. Secondly (but partly at the same time), I shall try to trace the emergence and early development, from Plato to the Stoics, of the idea that a simple declarative sentence has a signification of its own over and above the signification of its parts. Most individual details of what I am going to say are, I am afraid, not new; but perhaps the story as a whole deserves to be told.<sup>1</sup> As so often with stories about ancient matters, telling it will require some detailed discussion and a modicum of philological excavation.

## I.

The main subject of Plato’s *Cratylus*,<sup>2</sup> and the common thread across its various arguments, is what the dialogue’s characters call ‘the correctness of names’, i.e. the relation between a name and the thing it names. More precisely, the *Cratylus* confronts the question whether this relation is natural, i.e. is somehow grounded in the nature of the thing named, or rather conventional and arbitrary. The characters take a very generous view of what may count as a ‘name’ (ὄνομα, *onoma*), in accordance with normal Greek usage: the term is applied not only to proper and common nouns but also to pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs in the participle and infinitive mood.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one passage

---

\* My thanks to Michele Alessandrelli, Sergio Bernini, Lesley Brown, Margaret Cameron, Paolo Fait, and Michael Forster for helpful criticism and advice. A special debt of gratitude I owe to Paolo Crivelli for many discussions of these topics over the years; during one of these conversations he brought to my attention the point which here is made in the opening paragraph of Section VII.

Throughout the paper I quote existing translations of various ancient works, modifying them where that seemed appropriate: *Cratylus* (Ademollo 2011), *Sophist* (Crivelli 2012), *De interpretatione* (Ackrill 1963).

<sup>1</sup> For partly comparable and very valuable surveys, from which I have learnt much, see Nuchelmans 1973: 13–44 and Barnes 1996.

<sup>2</sup> All of my remarks on the *Cratylus* in this paper depend on my own work on the dialogue (Ademollo 2011). See especially 2011: 262–7 (on *rhema*), 293–6 (on 424e–425a), 345–50 (on 431bc).

<sup>3</sup> Pronouns: *Tim.* 50a. Adjectives: *Crat.* 416a, 417c, *Soph.* 251ab. Adverbs: Demosthenes 19.187. Participles: *Crat.* 421c. Infinitives: *Crat.* 414ab, 424a, 426c.

(385c) goes as far as to say that the *onoma* is the ‘smallest’ part of a sentence, thus suggesting that even verbs in finite moods may be reckoned among *onomata*.<sup>4</sup> In the light of this evidence we might be tempted to suppose that the term ‘*onoma*’ should actually be translated as ‘word’ rather than ‘name.’ But that would be a mistake: the Greek *onoma* has a close etymological connection with the verb *onomazein*, ‘to name’, whereas ‘word’ has no parallel connection with any transitive verb. Thus it seems that an *onoma* is essentially an expression that *names* or refers to something, and it is reasonable to adopt the translation ‘name’.

In the course of their inquiry the characters discuss various matters that are related to our topic. Two passages are especially relevant. The first is at 424e–425a, where Socrates is describing the hypothetical construction of a new language:

SO. (...) We too shall apply letters to the objects, both one to one, where it seems to be required, and many together, making what they call syllables, and then in turn combining syllables, of which *onomata* and *rhemata* are composed. And again from *onomata* and *rhemata* we shall finally construct something great and beautiful and whole: as in the former case the picture with the art of painting, so in this case the *logos* with onomastic<sup>5</sup> or rhetoric or whatever the art is. (424e4–425a5)

The language Socrates is envisaging is built up on the assumption that names should somehow imitate the nature of their referents by being made up of letters which resemble various elements of the referent’s nature. This assumption explains some features of the passage, including the final comparison with painting pictures, but it does not affect what Socrates says about the linguistic units he mentions. He arranges these units in a scale of increasing complexity: letters constitute syllables; syllables constitute both *onomata* and *rhemata*; eventually, *onomata* and *rhemata* together constitute the *logos*. In the light of Socrates’ description of the *logos* as ‘something great and beautiful and whole’ (for which cf. *Phaedrus* 264c), I suggest that we translate this term as ‘speech’, conceived of as something whose size may vary from a single sentence to something much larger and more complex.<sup>6</sup>

Now, this *logos* is said to be composed of *onomata* and *rhemata*. What are *rhemata* meant to be? This question has been the subject of lively debate, with regard not so much to our passage as to others, as we are going to see; but the debate has mostly been going on without being grounded in a thorough analysis of the evidence. In what follows I shall first open with a brief digression on the history of the word ‘*rhema*’ and then turn to what our passage can teach us about it.

---

<sup>4</sup> This suggestion is confirmed at *Soph.* 261d (see Section V) and Arist. *De Int.* 16b19–20 (see Section VII). Cf. Arist. *Poet.* 21.1457b10, 22.1458b20–4.

<sup>5</sup> Unlike rhetoric, which is mentioned immediately afterwards, the ‘onomastic art’, or ‘art of names’, is not an already existing science or practice. Socrates is applying this term to whatever discipline may turn out to be responsible for constructing the *logos* out of *onomata* and *rhemata*.

<sup>6</sup> Like a whole poem: cf. Arist. *Poet.* 20. 1457a28–30, *An. Post.* 2.9. 93b35–7, etc.

## II

The word ‘*rhema*’ (ῥῆμα) derives from an Indo-European root whose meaning has to do with the activity of *saying* something.<sup>7</sup> The same root lies behind the Latin ‘*verbum*’ and the very English ‘*word*’; in Greek it is e.g. the basis for the noun ‘*rhetor*’ (‘speaker’), the verbal adjective ‘*rhetos*’ (‘sayable’), and the passive aorist ‘*rhethenai*’ (‘to get said’). The common denominator between these various manifestations of the same Greek root has been spelt out as the notion of ‘consciously saying something important, in which both speaker and hearers are involved’.<sup>8</sup> As for the suffix *-ma*, here it presumably has one of its typical functions, i.e. that of conveying that the word in which it is included refers to the result of a certain activity. Thus ‘*rhema*’ originally and literally means ‘thing said’. More precisely, the evidence suggests that the term is applied to linguistic expressions which the speaker regards as efficacious or relevant in context. The size of such expressions may vary and appears to be irrelevant: a *rhema* may be a whole sentence (e.g. a saying or maxim: Plato, *Protagoras* 343ab, *Republic* 336a, Isocrates 15.166); a phrase like ‘aether, Zeus’s bedchamber’ or ‘time’s foot’ (Aristophanes, *Frogs* 97–100), or also ‘not large’ (Pl. *Sophist* 257b); a single word like ‘sheep’ (Aristophanes, *Pax* 929–31) or ‘this’ (Pl. *Timaeus* 49e).<sup>9</sup>

Especially interesting for our purposes, because it brings together *onoma* and *rhema*, is a passage in the fourth century BC orator Aeschines (3.72), who recalls a previous occasion on which his foe Demosthenes

said we must not (I even remember the *rhema* whereby he expressed himself, because of the unpleasantness of both the speaker and the *onoma*) ‘break away the alliance from the peace’.

Here the *rhema* is the whole expression ‘break away the alliance from the peace’ (or perhaps ‘we must not break away ...’ etc.), while the *onoma* is just ‘break away’, which in Greek is a single infinitive. So here ‘*rhema*’ refers to a complex expression or phrase as opposed to the *onoma* as a single word.<sup>10</sup>

Some such contrast between expressions and words is present in several passages of the *Cratylus* featuring the term ‘*rhema*’. These belong all to the long section of the dialogue in which Socrates purports to illustrate the naturalist conception of the name/object relation by advancing a number of etymologies which allegedly aim to show that names reflect the nature of their referents.

- At 399ac Socrates claims that insofar as the name ‘*Diphilos*’ derives from ‘*Dii philos*’ (‘dear to Zeus’), and the name ‘*anthropos*’ (‘human’) derives from ‘*anathron ha opopen*’ (‘he who

---

<sup>7</sup> The contents of this section, like the fuller presentation of the same material in Ademollo 2011: 262–7, are indebted to Conti 1977–8.

<sup>8</sup> Conti 1977–8: 21.

<sup>9</sup> Here I am citing evidence from Plato and authors whose language is generally similar (i.e. his contemporary Isocrates, an orator, and the comical poet Aristophanes, active in the final quarter of the fifth century BC); but the list could be extended to other authors and ages.

<sup>10</sup> See Riddell 1867: 36. The same contrast is operating also at Pl. *Symp.* 198b; see Ademollo 2011: 263–4 for a detailed argument.

examines what he has seen’), both have ‘become an *onoma* from a *rhema*’, or ‘in place of a *rhema*’. In both places the idea is precisely that an expression has been contracted into a single word.

- At 421b the name ‘*aletheia*’ (‘truth’) is derived from ‘*ale theia*’ (‘divine roaming’) and is itself referred to as a *rhema*—presumably on account of the fact that in this case the original expression has coalesced into the name without any phonetic change at all.<sup>11</sup>
- At 421de Socrates wonders what would happen if someone tried to identify those *rhemata* of which an *onoma* is composed, and then inquired into the etymology of those *rhemata* themselves, and so on.<sup>12</sup> Here the *rhemata* are the parts of which a name is composed. They are unlikely to be whole phrases: a name may derive from one phrase, as in the examples we have just seen, but it is unlikely to derive from a plurality of phrases. But the *rhemata* may still be expressions whose identity is left indefinite (and which as a matter of fact might well be just single words), called ‘*rhemata*’ insofar as in this context they are contrasted with the *onoma*.

The interpretations I have just been setting forth are endorsed by some commentators,<sup>13</sup> but by no means by all. In particular, an alternative construal of the evidence is fairly widespread, according to which in these passages the *onoma/rhema* contrast has an essentially syntactic nature and the notion of a *rhema* is close to that of a *predicate*: ‘literally *rhēma* means only a “thing said”, and a name ... is contrasted with it as that of which things are said.’<sup>14</sup> But this interpretation goes against the evidence on several counts. (i) It ignores the normal usage of ‘*rhema*’ as ‘expression’ which I documented above by citing some passages – and more could be cited – from Plato and other authors. (ii) It overinterprets the term’s etymological reference to ‘saying’ as ‘saying something *about* something other’. (iii) It cannot explain why at 421b Socrates should characterize the noun ‘truth’ as a predicate (a predicate of what, anyway?) – also in the light of the fact that just a few lines below, at 421b7, he refers to the noun ‘falsehood’ as an *onoma*. (iv) It is also unable to explain what on earth Socrates could mean at 421de when he claims that a name is composed of *rhemata*, in the plural: a name from *several* predicates?

So I reject this alternative construal and shall henceforth stick to my earlier conclusions. This wraps up my digression on ‘*rhema*’; we must now pick up the thread of our main argument.

---

<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in the *scriptio continua* of Plato’s times the original phrase and the resulting name would have been written in the same way.

<sup>12</sup> Socrates’ answer is that this kind of etymological analysis must stop when it reaches the ‘primary names’ which cannot be analysed into other names: see Section I.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Riddell 1867: 36 and Cambiano 1981, who translates ‘*rhema*’ as ‘espressione’ in all three passages.

<sup>14</sup> Guthrie 1969: 220–1; cf. e.g. Sedley 2003: 162.

### III

Back to *Cratylus* 425a. At the end of Section I we left open the question of what ‘*rhemata*’ could mean there. The passage gives us two important clues. (i) The term must refer to linguistic units which are at the same level of complexity as the *onomata*, being directly composed of syllables: that is to say, they are individual words. This clue, which has generally gone unnoticed,<sup>15</sup> rules out the possibility that here *rhemata* may—in accordance with the passages we examined in Section II—be phrases, i.e. linguistic units intermediate between names and speech.<sup>16</sup> (ii) These words must, in combination with the *onomata*, constitute the *logos*.

These things being so, I can think of only one kind of word that could be meaningfully mentioned here, i.e. *verbs*. Therefore it seems clear to me that here *rhemata* are meant to be, not phrases or generic expressions, let alone predicates, but verbs; that the initial, very generic use of the term ‘*onoma*’ is now being implicitly restricted to make room for a distinction between names and verbs; and that ‘names and verbs’ is precisely how we should translate the phrase ‘*onomata* and *rhemata*’ in this text—as in fact is often done.

There is of course nothing scandalous (in spite of what some commentators seem to think) about the fact that ‘*rhema*’ may mean one thing in several passages and another thing here. But Plato clearly seems to presuppose that we are already familiar with the new meaning. So where did it come from? I suppose that once someone, at the dawn of the theoretical reflection on language, recognized verbs as a distinct kind of expression, it was quite natural to identify this new kind by recourse to a term that was already in use in Greek to refer to individual words, was different from the much more common ‘*onoma*’, and lacked special connotations. This process, whereby ‘*rhema*’ acquired a specific meaning besides its old, generic one, might have a close parallel in the semantic development of the cognate Latin word ‘*verbum*’ from ‘word’ to ‘verb.’ In Greek the process was especially easy if, as seems likely, ‘*onomata* and *rhemata*’ already formed a standard pair meaning generically ‘names and expressions.’<sup>17</sup>

Who was the discoverer of verbs? We do not really know. Remember, however, that the *Cratylus* passage is sketching the construction of a new language. The sketch starts at 424bc by referring to the need for a classification of sounds or letters like the one carried out by ‘those who set to work on rhythms.’ This suggests no less interesting a candidate than Democritus, who is credited by Diogenes Laertius (9.47–8 = 68A33 Diels/Kranz) with works entitled *Explanations about Sounds, On Rhythms and Harmony, On Euphonious and Cacophonous Letters*, and ... *On Rhemata*.

---

<sup>15</sup> But see Barney 2001: 186.

<sup>16</sup> Pace e.g. Denyer 1991: 149–50.

<sup>17</sup> It is so at *Symp.* 198b, and cf. Aeschines 3.72 quoted in Section II; see also Pl. *Apol.* 17bc, *Symp.* 199b, 221e, *Rep.* 601a, *Theaet.* 168bc.

#### IV

We can now turn to the second of the two passages of the *Cratylus* that are especially relevant for our inquiry, 431bc. There Socrates is arguing against Cratylus, who has endorsed the sophistic paradox that it is impossible to speak falsely (429ce). For strategic reasons, Socrates' refutation still proceeds on the assumption, which Cratylus accepts, that names imitate their referents and to that extent can be compared with pictures. At 430a–431b he argues, and gets Cratylus to acknowledge, that, just as it is possible to assign or apply to a given object either a picture that imitates it or a picture that fails to do so, likewise it must be possible to assign to a given object either a name that imitates it (in which case the assignment is 'correct' and 'true') or a name that does not imitate it (in which case the assignment is 'incorrect' and 'false'). Then Socrates rounds off his argument, and extends its conclusion, as follows:

SO. (...) We want to call one of these two situations 'speaking truly' and the other 'speaking falsely'. And if this is so, and it is possible to distribute names incorrectly and not to assign to each thing the appropriate ones, but sometimes the inappropriate ones, then it should be possible to do this same thing to *rhemata* too. And if it is possible to consider *rhemata* and names in this way, necessarily it is possible to consider *logoi* in this way too. For it is to *logoi*, I suppose, that the combination of these elements amounts. (431b1–c2)

Socrates is not only insisting that names can be assigned to objects either correctly and truly or incorrectly and falsely; he is also arguing that the same holds of *rhemata* and *logoi*, which are a combination of names and *rhemata*. Clearly, here *logoi* are meant to be (declarative) sentences which can be either true or false. What about *rhemata*? In the light of the previous passage, which is obviously relevant to the present one, there is a natural presumption that here too *rhemata* should be verbs. This presumption is now confirmed by Socrates' claim that sentences are a combination (σύνθεσις) of names and *rhemata*, which strongly suggests that names and *rhemata* are heterogeneous kinds of expressions and that it takes at least one *onoma* and one *rhemata* to make up a sentence. The claim would make little sense if *rhemata* were phrases, which normally contain names and hence cannot be meaningfully said to be 'combined' with them. Nor would it make much sense if *rhemata* were instead predicates, which may themselves be or contain names: 'names and predicates' looks like an odd and ill-assorted pair.<sup>18</sup> Note also that Socrates' argument has been centred on the possibility of assigning to a particular man either of two general terms, 'man' and 'woman'; if *rhemata* here were meant to be predicates rather than verbs, then in this context we might have expected Socrates to refer to 'man' and 'woman' as '*rhemata*' rather than '*onomata*'.

---

<sup>18</sup> Unless, of course, you are ready to back it up with a theory along the lines of Frege's 'On Concept and Object'. But I assume that nothing like that can be ascribed to Plato.

So far so good. Now let us add some complications. It has been rightly pointed out<sup>19</sup> that Socrates here seems to be gesturing towards a dubious account of the falsehood of sentences. It is all very well that he, in order to defend the possibility of speaking falsely, should first of all focus on what can be regarded as the basic case of falsehood, i.e. the case in which the wrong name is attributed to a given object.<sup>20</sup> It also makes sense that he should treat verbs on a par with names (though it is unclear whether he assumes that a verb too is assigned to a given object or to some activity of a given object). But the way in which Socrates expresses himself in this passage may suggest that he is also treating sentences on a par with names, as though a sentence were to be assessed as true or false *in relation to an independently given object*. This is not how sentences really work. If you want to claim that Callias is wise, it is not the case that you first have to identify Callias as a subject of discourse and then go on to utter the sentence ‘Callias is wise’; it will be enough to utter the sentence. For what is distinctive of sentences is precisely that they, in virtue of containing different parts endowed with different tasks (roughly, a subject term and a predicate term), are by themselves able to perform the twofold function of referring to an object and saying something true or false about it.

So the *Cratylus* passage suggests that Plato may lack a clear and sound conception of the structure of sentences. Indeed, this suggestion is borne out by two other passages from the same dialogue, which for reasons of space I cannot discuss in any detail: 385bd, where Socrates argues that the names of which a sentence is composed are true or false like the whole sentence; and 432d–433b, an extremely difficult passage where Socrates contends that a false sentence about something, like a bad picture of something, is a sentence which contains enough appropriate names to preserve the thing’s ‘general character’ (τύπος), but not so many as to be true.<sup>21</sup> There is, I suspect, no way of making these passages offer a single, consistent account of what it is for a sentence to be false. They should rather be viewed as successive attempts to grapple with a difficult problem, all affected by various forms of the same misconception according to which sentences are essentially akin to names or noun phrases.

Ironically, that misconception lies also at the basis of at least some versions of the sophistic paradox which Plato here is out to solve. If you assume that a sentence is nothing more than a noun phrase or a string of names, then you are likely to go on to make the further assumption that making a statement is analogous to naming. And if you make that further assumption (which some of the sophistic arguments make<sup>22</sup> and Plato in the *Cratylus* is striving to eschew), you are likely to run into trouble. For there seems to be nothing that a false sentence, thus conceived, could successfully name; and if this is so, then the act of making a false statement will appear to be as unsuccessful, and impossible to carry out, as the act of naming something that is not there to be named.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> See McDowell 1973: 236.

<sup>20</sup> See Kahn 1973: 161.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed discussion of these passages see Ademollo 2011: 49–72 (on 385bd), 369–79 (on 432d–433b).

<sup>22</sup> *Euthyd.* 283e–284a and *Crat.* 429d can be interpreted along these lines; but the clearest occurrence is at *Euthyd.* 285d–286c (on which see Section VI).

<sup>23</sup> This criticism stems from Wittgenstein (see Russell 1956: 187–8). You could escape it if you accepted Frege’s doctrine that all true sentences name the True and all false sentences name the False.

Now, if this is so, does the fact that Plato is not clear about subject/predicate structure in sentences conflict with our earlier conclusion that he is distinguishing between names and verbs? Not at all. Names and verbs are two distinct word-classes; you may distinguish between them on the grounds of some differences (e.g. names have cases, verbs have persons; verbs have tenses, names do not: cf. Aristotle's *Poetics*, 20. 1457a14–15) and yet fail to see other differences. You may even come to believe that any sentence must contain at least one name and one verb without yet realizing that names and verbs perform different syntactic functions within a sentence. Thus the syntactic confusion which I am ascribing to Plato in the *Cratylus* might actually consist in assimilating a sentence like 'Callias walks' to a structureless string of names and verbs like 'Callias, walks.'

## V

We now leave the *Cratylus*, to plunge into the midst of a manhunt: a pair of investigators, a philosopher and a talented young mathematician, are chasing that elusive scoundrel, the sophist, trying to pin him down with a definition. They are now considering a new proposal, according to which the sophist is a kind of imitator. But the notion of imitation carries with it those of falsehood and not-being, and the sophist is likely to seek refuge in the contention that those notions have nothing to do with sentences and beliefs, i.e. that there is no such thing as a false sentence or a false belief. Therefore the investigators now set to inquire into what a sentence and a belief are and how they can possibly be false.

The Eleatic Stranger starts off at *Sophist* 261d by getting Theaetetus to agree that among *onomata* some 'fit with one another' and some do not. He makes what he has in mind more explicit thus:

ES You mean perhaps this, that those of them which, when spoken in succession, indicate something fit together, whereas those which signify nothing by their succession do not fit together. (*Soph.* 261d9–e2)

So the 'fit' between 'names' is a matter of their being capable of indicating or signifying<sup>24</sup> something when they are uttered in succession. On the most natural interpretation (already advanced by the fifth-sixth century AD commentator Ammonius in his work on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*),<sup>25</sup> this seems to mean that it is a matter of different names' being able to constitute some sort of semantic unity in virtue of being uttered in succession. Yet Theaetetus is puzzled. To dissolve his puzzlement the Stranger makes a fresh start:

---

<sup>24</sup> Here there is clearly no difference in meaning between the two verbs 'to indicate' (δηλοῦν) and 'to signify' (σημαίνειν). This is so again at 261e–262a, where also the two corresponding nouns, 'indicator, means to indicate' (δῆλωμα) and 'sign' (σημεῖον), appear to be equivalent to each other. Indeed, the same equivalence is tacitly assumed in other relevant texts: Pl. *Crat.* 394bc; Arist. *Cat.* 3b10–13; Diogenes of Babylon as cited by Diogenes Laertius 7.58 = *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 3.22. See Ademollo 2011: 173 and n.66.

<sup>25</sup> See *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* IV.5, ed. A. Busse, 48.25–9, and Blank 1996 for a translation.



ES (...) We have, I suppose, a double kind of vocal means to indicate being.  
 TH. How so?  
 ES One called *onomata*, the other *rhemata*.  
 TH. Tell me about both.  
 ES The one which is a means to indicate applied to actions we call, I think, *rhema*.  
 TH. Yes.  
 ES The other, the vocal sign imposed on those that perform them, we call *onoma*.  
 TH. Certainly. (261e4–262a8)

There are a number of interesting points to be made about these lines before we move on.

(i) When at 261e5 the Stranger introduces *onomata* and *rhemata* as vocal ‘indicators of being’, or ‘means to indicate being’, ‘being’ (οὐσία) is used as a collective noun which stands for anything that there is in a most general sense, any object whatsoever. The special Platonic sense in which ‘being’ is contrasted with ‘becoming’ as the world of changeless forms with the world of changing sensible particulars (as at *Rep.* 525b, c, 526e, 534a) is out of the question here. And this is just as well; for the *Sophist* seems to reject that contrast in favour of a generous ontology in which being includes ‘all changeless things and all changing things’ (249d).<sup>26</sup>

(ii) The definition of *rhema* as a sign for actions, inadequate as it may be,<sup>27</sup> suggests that *rhemata* are verbs. This harmonizes with our previous conclusions and will be further confirmed in what follows.

(iii) It now turns out that two uses of ‘*onoma*’ are in play. Here we are encountering a specific use whereby *onomata* are contrasted with *rhemata*; but besides this there must also be a generic use according to which *onomata* instead include *rhemata*, as was (implicitly) the case at 261d, where ‘*onoma*’ appeared to refer to any kind of word.

(iv) Theaetetus’ initial failure to understand has suggested to many commentators that the Stranger’s distinction is being put forward as a novelty. This, however, need not really be so. At 262a1–4 the Stranger claims that we have two kinds of expressions, ‘one called [κληθέν] *onomata*, the other *rhemata*’, and that ‘we call’ (λέγομεν) ‘*rhema*’ the sign for actions; he does not say ‘I propose to call’ or ‘let us call.’<sup>28</sup> So it is at least possible that the emphasis on the distinction does not mean that it is completely new: conceivably, it might be a way of stressing its importance rather than its novelty. And this is just as well, if *rhemata* are verbs and I was right that names and verbs were already distinguished in the *Cratylus*.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Crivelli 2012: 95, who cites the relevant literature.

<sup>27</sup> To mitigate the inadequacy of this definition we may point out that the Greek ‘*praxis*’ (πράξις) can sometimes mean ‘state, condition’ instead of ‘action’: see Herodotus 3.65.7 and Sophocles, *Ajax* 790, *Antigone* 1305.

<sup>28</sup> See Szaif 1998: 461 n.157.

Thus far it has not yet become clear what Socrates meant when, at 261de, he said that some ‘names’ (generic sense), but not others, indicate or signify something when spoken in succession. Let us read on.

ES Now, a sentence [*logos*] never consists of names alone spoken in succession, nor yet of *rhemata* spoken in succession without names.

TH. I didn’t understand this.

ES **[262b]** Clearly you had something else in view when you agreed just now. For this is what I wanted to say, that these, spoken in succession in this way, are not a sentence.

TH. In what way?

ES For example, ‘walks runs sleeps’, and all the other verbs that signify actions, even if one speaks them all in a row, do not, for all that, produce a sentence.

TH. How could they?

ES Again, when ‘lion stag horse’ is spoken, and all the names that have been given to those who perform actions, [**c**] in virtue of this succession no sentence yet results, either. For neither in this way nor in that do the sounds uttered indicate any action or inaction or being of what is or of what is not, until one blends *rhemata* with names. Then they fit and the first interweaving immediately becomes a sentence, the first and smallest of sentences.

TH. What do you mean thereby?

ES When someone says ‘Man understands’, do you say that this is a shortest and first sentence?

TH. **[d]** I do.

ES For it, I suppose, already indicates something about the things that are or are coming to be or have come to be or shall come, and does not merely name but accomplishes something, by interweaving *rhemata* with names. For this reason we claim that it does not merely name but *says* something, and we gave the name ‘sentence’ to this interweaving.

TH. Rightly so.

ES Thus, as some objects turned out to fit with one another and others not to, so, also with vocal signs, some [**e**] do not fit, whereas those of them that fit produce a sentence.

TH. By all means. (262a9–e3)

A string consisting just of *rhemata* (the examples are, tellingly, all verbs), or of names, is not yet enough to yield a complete declarative sentence (λόγος). It is only when you combine items from these two heterogeneous kinds of expressions that the resulting unity is a sentence: thus one name and one verb are enough to constitute the minimal form of sentence. Indeed, the Stranger appears to think that there is some sense in which a name or verb (or for that matter a string of names or verbs) alone is

incomplete. This is revealed by his claim that a sentence, or the speaker who utters it, ‘does not merely name’ but ‘accomplishes something’ or ‘brings something to completion’ (τι περραίνει, 262d3–4).<sup>29</sup>

Another way in which the Stranger draws a distinction between complete sentences and their components is by claiming that a sentence, or someone who utters it, ‘does not merely name ... but says [λέγειν] something’ (262d4–5). Here the idea is that a sentence has a special semantic job of its own to carry out, different from that of its components and referred to by a pregnant use of the verb ‘to say’<sup>30</sup> as equivalent, roughly, to ‘to state.’ But *what* exactly are the components whose function is being contrasted with that of the whole sentence? The Stranger’s claim that the sentence/speaker ‘does not merely name’ reveals that he is at least contrasting sentences with names: names name, whereas sentences say or state. Now, it is often supposed that the function of the verb is, instead, especially relevant to that of the whole sentence and is precisely to say something about that which the name names. It is also sometimes supposed that this special role of the *rhema* is somehow reflected by the etymology of the word ‘*rhema*’ as ‘thing said’ (see Section II).<sup>31</sup> The latter supposition seems dubious: although we happen to use the single verb ‘to say’ in connection with both terms, in fact the noun ‘*rhema*’ and the verb ‘*legein*’ derive from two completely different roots; moreover, ‘*rhema*’ was not a new word, but was commonly used to mean ‘expression’, as we saw in Section II, and this would have made it difficult for it to be invested with this special etymological significance.<sup>32</sup> As for the former, more generic supposition, I suspect that it is ultimately unwarranted: verbs are, after all, reckoned among *onomata* in the generic sense of this term (261d), and it is presumably true by definition that whatever is a name names something. Indeed, later on we shall encounter a further reason for questioning the former supposition: see Section VI.

So, absent other evidence, we should suppose that in a minimal sentence both name and verb name something—respectively an agent and an action—and that only the sentence as a whole ‘says’ something. This may strike some as a philosophically unfortunate outcome because it threatens, after all, to reduce a sentence to a mere list of names.<sup>33</sup> In mitigation we should compare Frege’s view that ‘Callias walks’ consists of two referring expressions or names: a singular term, ‘Callias’, which refers

---

<sup>29</sup> It is unclear, and controversial, whether the subject of ‘indicates’, ‘names’, and ‘accomplishes’ at 262d2–4, and then the referent of the demonstrative ‘he’ (αὐτόν) at d5, is ‘someone’ (c9) or ‘the sentence’ (which can be easily supplied from the same line). The participle ‘interweaving’ (d4) may seem to tell in favour of the former construal (cf. c4–5); on the other hand, at c4 the subject of ‘to indicate’ is ‘the sounds uttered’ (cf. *Crat.* 393a, 394bc, 433e), and at 263b4–9 the subject of ‘says’ is unambiguously a sentence. Henceforth I shall proceed on the assumption that the text is intended to admit of both construals and that in any case the claim that speakers, by uttering a kind of expression *E*, perform speech act *A* is intended to be equivalent to the claim that *A* is the function of *E*: e.g. the claim that with names speakers name things is intended as equivalent to the claim that names name things.

<sup>30</sup> There is an obvious etymological connection, which goes lost in my translation, between ‘*logos*’ (‘sentence’) and ‘*legein*’ (‘to say’). To mirror it we could render ‘*logos*’ as ‘saying’ as suggested by Barnes 2007: 2 n.3, 180 (cf. n.32).

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Ackrill 1963: 118, Frede 1992: 413–14, and cf. Crivelli 2012: 228–9.

<sup>32</sup> As an analogy, suppose we decided to render ‘*rhema*’—both in its common broad use as ‘expression’ and in its narrow use as ‘verb’—with the (now obsolete) English noun ‘speak’, ‘*legein*’ as ‘to say’, and ‘*logos*’ as ‘saying.’ If we then claimed that a saying says something by being composed of a name and a ‘speak’, such a claim would not necessarily have to be understood as conveying that the function of ‘speaks’ is especially relevant to that of sayings.

<sup>33</sup> See Denyer 1991: 164–7.

to an object, and a concept-word, ‘walks’, which refers to a function or concept. It has to be said, however, that Frege strongly emphasizes the difference between object and concept, and in particular what he calls ‘the predicative nature of the concept’,<sup>34</sup> in a way which has no parallel in Plato.<sup>35</sup>

So far I have been ascribing to the Stranger a concern with ‘minimal’ sentences, without explaining what these are exactly meant to be. We must now be more precise on this issue. The Stranger calls a sentence of the ‘name + verb’ form both ‘first’, or ‘primary’, and ‘smallest’ (262c6–7). The former term means ‘elementary’ or ‘simple’ and conveys the suggestion that more complex sentences are composed of ‘first’ ones, while the latter term refers to the fact that even among simple sentences some are larger than others. This is because, if *rhemata* are verbs, not all simple sentences consist of just one name and one verb like ‘Callias walks’: some comprise more elements, like ‘Callias is wise’ or ‘Callias loves Coriscus.’ The Stranger is probably hinting at copula sentences at 262c2–5, where he implies that a sentence indicates an ‘action or inaction or *being of what is or of what is not*’—which I regard as a compendious and somewhat loose formulation intended to cover also such sentences as ‘Callias is wise’ and ‘Callias is not wise’ among others. The Stranger does not say how he would parse such sentences, but in the light of the evidence we have been examining so far it seems that he should regard ‘Callias is wise’ as consisting of two names, ‘Callias’ and ‘wise’, and one verb, ‘is.’

These lines are interesting also in that they seem to lend some content to the claim, made by the Stranger at 261de and still unexplained, that only some ‘names’, but not others, signify something in virtue of being spoken in succession.<sup>36</sup> What is said here suggests that a sentence indicates an ‘action or inaction or being of what is or of what is not’:<sup>37</sup> thus ‘Callias walks’ indicates the walk or walking of Callias.<sup>38</sup> This is consistent with what Socrates will say later on, namely that, as he puts forward an example of minimal sentence, he is ‘combining an object and an action by means of a name and a verb’ (262e13–14). In the Greek text the participle ‘combining’ (συνθείς) has a close etymological relation to one of the terms used to refer to the ‘combination’ of name and verb (σύνθεσις, 263d3: we encountered the same term at *Crat.* 431c2). This suggests that there is some correspondence between the combination of name and verb and the combination of object and action. But how far should this correspondence be pressed? Does Plato believe that, as the former combination constitutes a new linguistic unity which is the sentence, so the latter combination constitutes some sort of new unity, a compound entity which is signified by the whole sentence?

---

<sup>34</sup> See especially ‘Über Begriff und Gegenstand’ (1892), in Frege 1967: 167–78 = ‘On Concept and Object’, in Beaney 1997: 181–93.

<sup>35</sup> It also has to be said that it is unclear whether Frege really believes that the relation between a singular term and its referent is *the same* as the relation between a concept-word and its referent. See Furth 1968.

<sup>36</sup> At 262d8–e2 (‘Thus, as ... produce a sentence’) the Stranger concludes the passage with a back-reference to that initial claim, apparently taking himself to have, at last, provided a satisfactory explanation.

<sup>37</sup> I cannot accept Crivelli’s contention (2012: 227, cf. 229–30) that here the Stranger ‘might be implying that only within sentences do verbs and names signify, respectively, actions and objects’. Names and verbs have been introduced as expressions whose signification is independent of their being included in a sentence: see especially 262b5–6, b10–c1.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Hoekstra/Scheppers 2003: 70–1.

The Stranger says nothing on this score, and Plato is unlikely to be willing to push the correspondence to such an extreme; for that would land him in philosophical trouble. First, it would then become impossible for him to account for the difference between the sentence ‘Callias walks’ and the noun phrase ‘Callias’ walk.’ Secondly,<sup>39</sup> a sentence like ‘Callias walks’, if it were false, would have to signify a *nonexistent* object-action complex; and this is precisely the sort of situation that the *Sophist*’s investigation of not-being has come to regard as extremely problematic (see 258d–259b).<sup>40</sup>

So the Stranger’s explanation is not much of an explanation after all; we still have to read on to find out what he really means. But before doing that, there is one more remark I wish to advance about this passage. It is about the claim that a sentence (or a speaker who utters it), besides ‘bringing something to completion’ and ‘saying’ something, also ‘indicates something about the things that are or are coming to be or have come to be or shall come’ (περὶ τῶν ὄντων ἢ γιγνομένων ἢ γεγονότων ἢ μελλόντων, 262d2–3). This must involve a recognition of the fact that sentences have present, past or future *tense*. More precisely, it is tempting to suppose that when the Stranger speaks of indicating something ‘about the things that are’ he is thinking of those present-tense sentences which we might want to consider as timeless (e.g. ‘Cats are felids’, ‘2 + 2 = 4’), whereas when he speaks of indicating something ‘about the things that ... are coming to be or have come to be or shall come’ he is thinking of sentences respectively about the present, past or future time.

## VI

At 262e4–10 the Stranger gets Theaetetus to agree that any sentence has two further features: it must be ‘of something’ (τινός) and it must be ‘of a certain quality’ (ποιός τις). As becomes evident in what follows, ‘of something’ means ‘about something’, and the former feature amounts to the fact that the sentence must have a subject matter, whereas ‘of a certain quality’ means ‘either true or false.’

At 262e11–263d5 the Stranger and Theaetetus consider two minimal sentences, ‘Theaetetus sits’ and ‘Theaetetus flies’, both composed of a name and a verb, both ‘of’ and ‘about’ (περὶ) Theaetetus, but one true and the other false. These two sentences bring out, just in virtue of their being juxtaposed and without the Stranger stating it explicitly, that the name which they have in common is responsible for the fact that they are both about Theaetetus, whereas the two different verbs are responsible for the fact that they are one true and one false. Thus it comes to light that besides the lexical distinction between name and verb there is also a syntactic distinction, between subject and predicate, to be drawn. The two distinctions coincide in minimal sentences, in which the name is the subject and the verb is the predicate; but they do not coincide in general, and it is possible to draw one without the other, as we

---

<sup>39</sup> See Crivelli 2012: 249–51.

<sup>40</sup> Plato would be able to avoid these difficulties, while holding that a sentence signifies a compound entity, if he identified such a compound entity as a *proposition*, whose existence did not entail its truth. But Plato does not seem to take any serious theoretical notice of such items.

saw with regard to the *Cratylus* in Section IV.<sup>41</sup> This is actually a further, weighty reason for being suspicious of the interpretation, which I discussed in Section V, according to which the *rhema* is meant to be the ‘saying’ part of a sentence: it would be inconsistent of Plato to think so, if he recognizes that this is not the function of the *rhema* in some relevant kinds of sentence.

The Stranger’s claim that any sentence is ‘of’ something, and that his two sample sentences are ‘of’ Theaetetus no less than ‘about’ Theaetetus, confirms that the subject-predicate distinction is the central point of these lines. For this apparently peculiar formulation probably alludes to a kind of argument which we can read at *Euthyd.* 285d–286c.<sup>42</sup> According to this argument, it is impossible for two speakers to contradict each other (and hence for either of them to speak falsely), because one of three alternatives must obtain: (a) both say ‘the *logos* of the same object’ and hence say the same thing, (b) neither says ‘the *logos* of the object’ and hence neither so much as mentions the object, (c) one says ‘the *logos* of the object’ whereas the other says the *logos* ‘of something other’ and hence does not speak of the object at all. This argument can be regarded as running together the notion of a *logos* as a sentence *about* something and the notion of a *logos* as a description *of* something. And it seems fairly clear that Plato in the *Sophist* is appropriating the talk of a *logos* ‘of’ something precisely in order to stress that he is countering this sort of argument.<sup>43</sup>

At 263b4–d5 Plato has the Stranger set forth his famous analysis of the truth and falsehood conditions of sentences.<sup>44</sup> According to this analysis, the true sample sentence ‘Theaetetus sits’

says of the things which are that they are about you [λέγει ... τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν περὶ σοῦ],

i.e. ascribes to something, saying that they hold of it, things which actually hold of it. The false sentence ‘Theaetetus flies’, instead, says

of things different from the things which are [ἕτερα τῶν ὄντων] (*sc.* that they are about you),

i.e. it

says the things which are not as things which are [τὰ μὴ ὄντα ... ὡς ὄντα λέγει].

In yet other words, the false sentence says

things which are different from things which are about you [ὄντων ... ὄντα ἕτερα περὶ σοῦ].

---

<sup>41</sup> On the two distinctions cf. Szaif 1998: 459–62.

<sup>42</sup> And which might have something to do with the philosopher Antisthenes: cf. Arist. *Metaph.* Δ 29.1024b32–4.

<sup>43</sup> See Frede 1992: 414–6.

<sup>44</sup> This is a controversial passage; I am assuming the correctness of the text and interpretation which I find most convincing (for an excellent discussion see Crivelli 2012: 233–59). The gist of what I am going to say, however, is compatible also with other possibilities.

That is to say, the false sentence ascribes to something, *X*, saying that they hold of *X*, things which, while perfectly real in themselves, are actually different from everything which holds of *X*. Generally speaking, the ‘things’ ascribed to the subject will be properties; in the case of a minimal sentence like ‘Callias walks’, they will more specifically be what the Stranger called ‘actions.’

For our present purposes these definitions are important in two respects. First, they continue to stress the distinction between what a sentence is about and what the sentence says about it. Secondly, they contain, I think, the final answer to our questions about a sentence’s signification. Let us make the straightforward hypothesis that there is a close connection between what a sentence ‘says’ and what it signifies or indicates. Then it follows that a minimal sentence like ‘Callias walks’ ‘combines an object and an action’, and signifies ‘an action or inaction or being of what is or of what is not’, not by bearing a simple relation of signification to an action-object complex, but rather by bearing a complex relation of signification to *two* entities, an action and an object, i.e. by signifying an action *as* the action of some object (remember 263b9: the false sentence ‘says the things [i.e. the properties] which are not *as* things which are’). So, when we say that ‘Callias walks’ signifies the walk of Callias, what this really means is that ‘Callias walks’ signifies the walk as Callias’, as holding of Callias.<sup>45</sup>

## VII

There is progress in philosophy. When it is Aristotle’s turn to address the issues which Plato had dealt with in the *Cratylus* and the *Sophist*, the possibility of falsehood has ceased to be a live philosophical issue: Plato has laid it to rest once and for all.

The main place where Aristotle concerns himself with matters of sentence structure is the treatise *De Interpretatione*, which in chapters 2–3 gives an account of *onoma* and *rhema* before moving on to consider more complex linguistic units, i.e. the *logos* and especially its declarative variety, which is the subject of the remaining chapters. Chapter 2 is about the *onoma*, which is defined thus:

A name is a spoken sound significant by convention, not involving time, none of whose parts is significant in separation. (*De int.* 2.16a19–21)

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to elucidating various aspects of this initial definition and adding some qualifications. Two points are important for our present purposes: (i) Aristotle gives proper and common nouns as examples of names; (ii) although Aristotle is not explicit about this here, he seems to believe that another distinctive feature of a name is that it can serve as subject term in a sentence. This is his reason for regarding nouns in cases other than the nominative not as ‘names’ proper but as ‘inflexions of names’:

---

<sup>45</sup> This suggestion bears some resemblance to the account of judgement and belief advanced by Russell 1912, ch. XII.

‘Philo’s’, ‘to-Philo’, and the like are not names but inflexions of names. The same account holds for them as for names except that an inflexion when combined with ‘is’, ‘was’, or ‘will be’ is not true or false whereas a name always is. Take, for example, ‘Philo’s is’ or ‘Philo’s is not’: so far there is nothing either true or false. (*De Int.* 2.16a32–b5)

Then, in chapter 3, Aristotle turns to the *rhema*. Here is his famous definition:

A *rhema* is what additionally signifies time, no part of which is significant separately; and it is always a sign of the things said of something other. It additionally signifies time: e.g. ‘recovery’ is a name, but ‘recovers’ is a verb, because it additionally signifies the thing’s holding now. And it is always a sign of the things which are said of something other, i.e. are said of a subject or in a subject. (*De int.* 3.16b6–10)<sup>46</sup>

Here Aristotle is, first of all, implicitly claiming that a *rhema* has the normal features of a name: as he puts it later on (16b19–20), ‘When spoken just by themselves, *rhemata* are names and signify something’—i.e. *rhemata* are names in the generic sense, as in Plato. But he is also claiming that the *rhema* has another additional feature: it signifies time (cf. *Poet.* 20. 1457a14–15) by locating, as it were, in time<sup>47</sup> the item it signifies. Thus ‘recovers’ signifies something—indeed, presumably the very same item as the name ‘recovery’ does, as Aristotle’s example suggests; but it also signifies that there is some recovery now, that recovery holds of someone now.

Aristotle here states also an explicit connection between *rhemata* and predication: a *rhema* always signifies something that is predicated of something other (ἔστιν ἀεὶ τῶν καθ’ ἑτέρου λεγομένων σημειῶν, 16b7). Part of what this means is that a *rhema* signifies a predicate in the ontological sense—an attribute or property, like recovery in the example (cf. e.g. *An. Pr.* 1.27. 43a25–43). Thus Aristotle’s claim concerns (also) the ontological status of the referents of *rhemata*.

But while this is undoubtedly part of the point here, there is more to it, as Aristotle’s use of the adverb ‘always’ suggests:<sup>48</sup> Aristotle means also that a verb always, i.e. in every context of use, signifies an item which gets predicated of (i.e. predicatively ascribed to) something in that context. In other words, a verb always occurs in predicate position in a sentence. This is a genuinely distinctive characteristic of the verb, which distinguishes it, in particular, from general terms, which do signify predicates in the previous, ontological sense, and do occur in contexts where they signify an item that

---

<sup>46</sup> I am translating and citing the passage’s text as reported by the majority of witnesses and edited by Waitz 1844 and Montanari 1984 and 1988. The text of the standard Oxford edition (Minio-Paluello 1949) is different at various points, but none of these differences is very relevant to our present concerns. Weidemann’s (2014) new edition was published too late for me to be able to consult it.

This and the ensuing paragraphs, down to the end of Section VI, recur almost identical in Ademollo (in preparation), where, however, among other things I add a discussion of the variant readings in *De Int.* 16b10–11.

<sup>47</sup> I am drawing the phrase ‘locating ... in time’ from Frede (unpublished).

<sup>48</sup> This is clearly seen by Ammonius in his commentary (cf. n. 25 above), 48.10–13, 49.7–14 Busse. Cf. Stephanus, 14.16–20 Hayduck (*Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* XVIII.3).



gets predicated of something ('Some animals are *cats*'), but which also occur in contexts where they signify something of which an item gets predicated ('Some *cats* are grey').

Indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that Aristotle takes a *rhema* to signify also *that* such an item is getting predicated of something other—i.e. to signify not just a predicate, but also predication itself.<sup>49</sup> This further notion is already presupposed when Aristotle says of 'recovers' that it 'additionally signifies the thing's holding now' (προσσημαίνει ... τὸ νῦν ὑπάρχειν, 16b9). Though, in context, the emphasis of this lies on 'now', it conveys also an implicit commitment to the view that the *rhema* additionally signifies a predicate's now *holding*.

At the end of the passage Aristotle explains what he means by 'things which are said of something other'. He does so with a phrase that is transmitted by almost all witnesses as 'i.e. those which are said of a subject or in a subject' (οἷον τῶν καθ' ὑποκειμένου ἢ ἐν ὑποκειμένῳ, 16b10–11). This must refer to the well-known distinction advanced in *Categories* 2 between items which 'are said of a subject' and items which 'are in a subject'. It is a thorny distinction, but this much seems to be clear: if *X* 'is said of a subject', then *X* is an essential attribute of something, whereas if *X* 'is in a subject', then *X* is a non-essential attribute of something. Therefore in *De interpretatione* 3 the phrase means that verbs are always signs of something that gets predicated *either essentially or non-essentially* of something.

## VIII

Unlike the *Sophist*, the *De Interpretatione* pays explicit attention to copula sentences of the form '*S* is *P*.' Indeed, such sentences are especially important for Aristotle in view of their role in his syllogistic. Aristotle, however, omits to make explicit how they are to be parsed and how the distinction between *onomata* and *rhemata* is relevant to them. Here are some considerations.

(i) Aristotle recognizes that 'There is no difference between saying that a human being walks and saying that a human being is an item that walks',<sup>50</sup> as he puts it at *De int.* 12.21b9–10 (cf. *An. Pr.* 51b13–16, *Metaph.* 1017a22–30). That is to say, the phrase 'is *P*' in a sentence of the form '*S* is *P*' plays a role analogous to the role played by the verb '*Ps*' in a sentence of the form '*S Ps*.' Nevertheless, 'is *P*' cannot constitute a *rhema*; for Aristotle plainly takes *rhemata* to be individual words, and 'is *P*' fails to satisfy one of the conditions stated in the definition of *rhema*: it is not an expression 'no part of which is significant separately'.

(ii) Aristotle regards the copula as a *rhema*. This is very clear in chapter 10, where he says that

---

<sup>49</sup> Frede (unpublished). Cf. Ackrill 1963: 118–9, and Whitaker 1996: 58.

<sup>50</sup> Or '... is walking' (βαδίζοντα εἶναι); but the Greek periphrasis has nothing to do with the English present continuous.

Without a *rhema* there will be no affirmation or denial. For ‘is’, ‘will be’, ‘was’, ‘becomes’, and the like are *rhemata* according to what was laid down, since they additionally signify time. (*De Int.* 10.19b12–14)

Granted, the immediate subject matter of these lines is ‘to be’ in its complete use, equivalent to ‘to exist’; thus Aristotle immediately goes on to say ‘So a first affirmation and denial are: “A human being is,” “A human being is not”’ (19b14–16). But a few lines below we do come to ‘is’ as a copula, without the slightest indication that this is an essentially different ‘is’ or that what has been said before does not hold here:

But when ‘is’ is predicated additionally as a third element, there are two ways of expressing opposition. (I mean, e.g., ‘a human being is just’: here I say that ‘is’ is a third component, name or *rhema*, in the affirmation.) (*De int.* 10.19b19–22)

In fact Aristotle’s claim that the copula ‘is a third component, name or *rhema*, in the affirmation’, or ‘is a component in the affirmation as a third name or *rhema*’ (τρίτον ... συγκεῖσθαι ὄνομα ἢ ῥῆμα ἐν τῇ καταφάσει), is almost invariably<sup>51</sup> interpreted as expressing either uncertainty or indifference towards the question whether the copula should be reckoned a name or a *rhema*. I for one do not see how Aristotle could be uncertain or indifferent. He has just said that ‘is’ is a *rhema* on the grounds that it signifies time; now he is adding that ‘is’ ‘is predicated additionally’ in a sentence, i.e. that ‘is’ and ‘*P*’ in ‘*S* is *P*’ are joined together in being predicated of ‘*S*’—which is exactly what we should expect in the light of (i) above.<sup>52</sup> Therefore Aristotle is actually implying that the copula is a *rhema* and giving us two good reasons for doing so, the first of which also rules out the possibility that it may be a name. (It may be unclear whether the copula has any basic signification, and we would wish that Aristotle told us more on this; but in fact that unclarity is, if anything, first of all a further argument against interpreting the copula as a name.) The claim that the copula ‘is a component in the affirmation as a third name or *rhema*’ need mean no more than this: that the copula is the third element among names and *rhemata* counted together, i.e. the third *word*.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Even by Barnes 2009: 31–2 (within a thorough discussion of the Aristotelian copula).

<sup>52</sup> Both expressions and the items they signify can be said by Aristotle to be predicated in a sentence.

<sup>53</sup> A kindred but unnecessarily strained suggestion (‘name-or-*rhema*’ used as a generic term for ‘word’) is advanced by Montanari 1996: 354–6.

A passage often cited in connection with the copula is *De Int.* 3.16b23–5, where Aristotle, immediately after stressing the distinction between isolated verbs and complete sentences, says of ‘to be’ or ‘not to be’ that ‘by itself it is nothing, but it additionally signifies some combination, which cannot be thought of without the components.’ This is usually interpreted as meaning that the copula lacks any basic signification and is a mere link between the subject and the predicate term. I cannot properly discuss the passage here, but I doubt that this standard interpretation is correct; for there is no reason why Aristotle should suddenly refer to the copula in this context. I rather incline to the view (for which see (b) in Ackrill 1963: 123) that Aristotle is speaking of the existential ‘to be’, which has been repeatedly mentioned in the previous chapters; that ‘by itself it is nothing’ in the emphatic sense that it does not constitute a complete sentence; and that ‘it additionally signifies some combination’ in the sense that, as Ackrill puts it, ‘it calls for the addition of a subject-term.’

(iii) Aristotle cannot regard the subject complement ‘*P*’ in ‘*S* is *P*’ as a *rhema*. In fact there is an ancient and influential interpretation—advanced already by Ammonius in his commentary—<sup>54</sup> according to which this is what Aristotle does. But that interpretation cannot be right. To be sure, ‘*P*’ refers to the extralinguistic item that gets predicated in ‘*S* is *P*’; indeed, the *Analytics* would call it precisely the predicate *term* (*An. Pr.* 1.1.24b16–18). But ‘*P*’ lacks both of the distinctive features of a *rhema* according to Aristotle’s own definition in chapter 3: it does not signify time and does not *always* signify a predicate, because it can also signify a subject of predication (‘Every *S* is *P*’ converts to ‘Some *P* is *S*’).

Ammonius’ interpretation has been thought to receive some support from three passages of *De Interpretatione* (1.16a13–15; 10.20a31–3, b1–2) where Aristotle makes a claim that is meant to apply to both *onomata* and *rhemata* alike, but then exemplifies it only with names and adjectives—as though adjectives could count as instances of *rhemata*. Just by way of example, here is the third of these passages:

If names and *rhemata* are transposed they still signify the same thing, e.g. ‘a human being is white’ and ‘white is a human being’.

Here Aristotle has been taken to be thinking of the sentence ‘A human being is white’ and regarding ‘white’ as the *rhema* in such a sentence, insofar as ‘white’ is the predicate term in it. Now, this construal is attractively economical, as long as we focus on these three passages alone. But once you have the larger picture in view and are aware that general terms cannot satisfy the definition of *rhema*, what is really economical is rather to suppose that in this and in the two other passages Aristotle is misleadingly offering two examples of *onoma* and none of *rhema*.<sup>55</sup>

So, to sum up, the *De interpretatione*’s distinction between *onoma* and *rhema* is, as in Plato, essentially a lexical distinction between name (including proper and common nouns as well as adjectives) and verb. Thereby the *De Interpretatione* turns out to be consistent with Aristotle’s brief remarks in the *Poetics*, 20.1457a10–18 (which clearly include the adjective in the *onoma* and distinguish it from the *rhema*), and with later grammatical wisdom.<sup>56</sup> Aristotle’s distinction, however, takes fully into account, more explicitly and deeply than even Plato’s *Sophist* does, the syntactic function of both word-classes.

---

<sup>54</sup> Ammonius, 28.5–9, 52.32–53.8 Busse (cf. n. 25 above). Cf. Weidemann 2002: 155.

<sup>55</sup> See Montanari 1988: 69–70; Whitaker 1996: 53–4.

<sup>56</sup> See the *Art of Grammar* ascribed to Dionysius Thrax, §§12–13.

Frede (unpublished) comments that ‘there is something deeply unsatisfactory’ about the fact that Aristotle is working with a basic distinction between names and verbs as two word-classes instead of a more appropriate distinction between noun-phrase and verb-phrase or between subject and predicate. Frede also plausibly suggests that Aristotle’s emphasis on word-classes is due to the influence of the *Sophist*.

## IX

There is one final issue I wish to broach. A recurring theme of our discussion of the *Sophist* passage has been that the Stranger there suggested that the right sort of combination between names and verbs should succeed in signifying something not signified by names or verbs alone (see Sections V–VI). I should now like to say something about how that idea is developed by Aristotle.<sup>57</sup>

*Metaphysics* Δ 29, a chapter devoted to charting the various uses of the term ‘false’, opens up by identifying the notion of a false *pragma*, ‘object.’ One variety of false *pragma* is false

by not being combined or by its being impossible for it to be composed. This is how we speak of the diagonal’s being commensurable or your being seated; for one of these is false always, the other sometimes; for these things are non-beings in this way. (*Metaph.* Δ 29.1024b18–21)

What sort of ‘objects’ could Aristotle be talking about here? He refers to them by means of *infinitive* clauses (τὸ τὴν διάμετρον εἶναι σύμμετρον and τὸ σὲ καθῆσθαι) which can be translated respectively as ‘that the diagonal is commensurable’, or ‘the diagonal’s being commensurable’, and ‘that you are seated’, or ‘your being seated’. This suggests that the ‘objects’ at issue are items of a propositional nature, like propositions or states of affairs. These items, Aristotle says here, can be said to be false, or ‘non-beings’, in virtue of their not being combined—i.e. in virtue of the fact that the (extralinguistic) subject and predicate of the corresponding sentence are not combined in reality: in fact the diagonal is not commensurable (*sc.* with the side of the square) and you are not seated.

Aristotle seems to be talking about the same *pragmata* in other places. One is the beginning of *Metaph.* Θ 10, 1051a34–b9, a very difficult passage where he mentions a sense of ‘being’ and ‘not being’, and of ‘true’ and ‘false’, which holds ‘in the case of the *pragmata*’ and consists in their being ‘combined or divided.’ Indeed, according to one possible construal of that passage, Aristotle might even be claiming that the ‘being’ or ‘not being’ of these *pragmata* constitutes the strictest sense of being true or false, in that *pragmata* are the primary bearers of truth and falsehood.

Aristotle’s conception of *pragmata* as states of affairs is no fully-fledged theory; it is rather something we can reconstruct on the basis of a few passages. But its aftermath might have been momentous. After Aristotle, Stoic semantics and logic centred on the notion of a (complete) *lekton*, ‘sayable’, conceived of as the *pragma* said and signified by a (complete) sentence, and even more specifically on the notion of those *lekta* that were called ‘*axiomata*’, or propositions, and regarded as the primary bearers of truth and falsehood (see Diog. Laert. 7.57–65, Sext. Emp. *Adv. Math.* 8.11–12). Thus Aristotle’s *pragmata* seem to have been forerunners of the Stoic ones and might even have played some role in their genesis. But the Stoic theory is another story.

---

<sup>57</sup> On the following remarks on Aristotelian *pragmata* see Crivelli 2004: 46–62.

## REFERENCES

- Ackrill, J. L. (1963), *Aristotle: Categories and De Interpretatione*, Oxford.
- Ademollo, F. (2011), *The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary*, Cambridge.
- (in preparation), ‘Pseudo-Plato on language’.
- Barnes, J. (1996), ‘Grammar on Aristotle’s Terms’, in M. Frede, G. Striker (eds.), *Rationality in Greek Thought*, Oxford, 175–202. Reprinted in J. Barnes, *Logical Matters. Essays in Ancient Philosophy II*, ed. by M. Bonelli, Oxford 2012, 147–71.
- (2007), *Truth, etc. Six Lectures on Ancient Logic*, Oxford.
- (2009), ‘Notes on the Copula’, *Dianoia* 14, 27–62.
- Barney, R. (2001), *Names and Nature in Plato’s Cratylus*, New York and London.
- Beaney, M. (1997) (ed.), *The Frege Reader*, Malden (MA), Oxford, and Carlton.
- Blank, D. (1996), *Ammonius: On Interpretation 1–8*, London.
- Cambiano, G. (1981), *Platone: Dialoghi filosofici*, vol. 2, Turin.
- Conti, C. (1977–8), *Storia di una parola greca: ῥῆμα*, Università di Firenze (unpublished thesis).
- Crivelli, P. (2004), *Aristotle on Truth*, Cambridge.
- (2012), *Plato’s Account of Falsehood: A Study of the Sophist*, Cambridge.
- Denyer, N. (1991), *Language, Thought and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, London.
- Frede, M. (1992), ‘Plato’s *Sophist* on False Statements’, in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Cambridge, 397–424.
- (unpublished), ‘Aristotle on Nouns and Verbs in *De Interpretatione*’, paper presented at the 13th Symposium Aristotelicum (Pontignano, 1993).
- Frege, G. (1967), *Kleine Schriften*, ed. I. Angelelli, Hildesheim.
- Furth, M. (1968), ‘Two Types of Denotation’, in *Studies in Logical Theory*, American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph Series, 2, Oxford, 9–45.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. (1969), *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3, Cambridge.
- Hoekstra, M., and Scheppers, Fr. (2003), ‘Όνομα, ῥῆμα et λόγος dans le *Cratyle* et le *Sophiste* de Platon. Analyse du lexique et analyse du discours’, *L’Antiquité Classique* 72: 55–73.
- Kahn, C. H. (1973), ‘Language and Ontology in the *Cratylus*’. In E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument: Studies in Greek Philosophy Presented to Gregory Vlastos*, Assen, 152–76.
- McDowell, J. (1973), *Plato: Theaetetus*, Oxford.
- Minio-Paluello, L. (1949), *Aristotelis Categoriae et Liber De Interpretatione*, Oxford.
- Montanari, E. (1984), *La sezione linguistica del Peri hermeneias di Aristotele. Volume primo: il testo*, Florence.

- Montanari, E. (1988), *La sezione linguistica del Peri hermeneias di Aristotele. Volume secondo: Il commento*, Florence.
- (1996), ‘ONOMA H PHMA nel X capitolo del «Peri hermeneias» aristotelico’, in M.S. Funghi (ed.), *ΟΔΟΙ ΔΙΖΗΣΙΟΣ - Le vie della ricerca. Studi in onore di Francesco Adorno*, Florence, 345–56.
- Nuchelmans, G. (1973), *Theories of the Proposition. Ancient and medieval conceptions of the bearers of truth and falsity*, Amsterdam and London.
- Riddell, J. (1867), *The Apology of Plato*, Oxford.
- Russell, B. (1912), *The Problems of Philosophy*, London 1912.
- (1956), ‘The Philosophy of Logical Atomism’, in his *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. R. C. Marsh, London, 57–281.
- Sedley, D. (2003), *Plato’s Cratylus*, Cambridge.
- Szaif, J. (1998), *Platons Begriff der Wahrheit*, 2nd edn, Freiburg and Munich.
- Waitz, Th. (1844), *Aristoteles: Organon graece. Pars prior*, Leipzig (reprinted Aalen 1965).
- Weidemann, H. (2002), *Aristoteles: Peri hermeneias*, 2nd edn, Berlin.
- (2014), *Aristoteles: De interpretatione*, Berlin and New York: De Gruyter.
- Whitaker, C.W.A. (1996), *Aristotle’s De interpretatione: Contradiction and Dialectic*, Oxford.