On the Disconstruction of  
(Sign) Language in the Western Tradition:  
A Deaf Reading of Plato’s *Cratylus*  

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*In the study of humanity there is a maïne deficiencie, one Province not to have been visited, and that is Gesture.*  

*Answer me this: If we hadn’t a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn’t we try to make signs by moving our hands, head, and the rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present?*  
Socrates, in Plato’s *Cratylus*  

**Introduction**  

We cannot help but wonder what were those deaf Greeks talking about. Were they, like the 18th century Parisian Deaf community described by Pierre Desloges, discussing matters of personal, political, and philosophical import?1 Were they retelling scenes from the recent play by Sophocles or Aeschylus, gleaning what they could from the dramatic gestures of the actors? Or were they were wondering what that old man, Socrates, was always talking about. What about the language that brought these signers together—what was their particular Athenian brand of sign language like?2 While this may seem like amusing speculation, such musing about the existence of a deaf signing community in fifth-century B.C. is buttressed by what we now know about sign languages and their communities. We now know that human language is not dependent upon the single modality of speech, but instead may manifest in other modes, especially through a visual channel.3 It is not too much to imagine that in such centers of Western civilization as Athens, Rome, Constantinople, and later, Paris that deaf people would have found each other and, in so doing, would have coaxed language to take on its manual modality. We also know that signing communities have evolved throughout the world as a result of a group’s genetic propensity for deafness. Sightings of such
communities have occurred in Martha’s Vineyard; Henniker, New Hampshire; Yucatan Peninsula; Bali; and among a Bedouin tribe in Israel. As Deaf leader George Veditz signed in 1913, “As long as we have deaf people on this earth, we will have signs.” Indeed, Veditz’s claim has been validated by over four decades of historical and scientific research into sign languages and their communities which have shown us a very simple, paradigm shifting fact: signed languages are not aberrations, nor mere supplements to speech; they take the form of one human language modality among others, equal to speech. In short: to sign is human.

Why did it take so long to discover this about ourselves? Speech has so thoroughly become the norm that it passes through us, often unnoticed. Is the dominance of speech and phonetic writing part of the human design? Clearly speech frees up the hands for work and allows us to communicate where we can’t see—in the dark and from behind listeners. Despite these advantages, the past four decades of linguistic and neurolinguistic research show that sign languages have their own advantages, such as their ability to convey precise visual, spatial and kinetic information, coupled with the capacity to convey abstract concepts equal to that of speech.

Or is there, as Derrida contends throughout Of Grammatology, a metaphysical and political history that has privileged speech over other non-phonetic languages and communication systems? “The system of ‘hearing (understanding)-oneself speak’ through the phonic substance” Derrida writes, “… has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin.” An untold facet of phonocentric orientation of our philosophical heritage has been the denigration of non-phonetic languages, which clearly includes sign language of deaf communities. While sign communities have never had to fight against the guns and words of imperial invaders, they have indeed been subject to a long campaign against them and their languages. Douglas Baynton has recounted in great detail the American campaign against sign language, where educators of the deaf denounced manual languages as ‘barbaric’, ‘primitive,’ proto-language’ and ‘monkey-like gestures’. In the context of this historical inheritance, we can see the global campaign against signed languages that continues to be carried out in homes, schools,
churches, hospitals, audiology clinics, and genetic counseling centers. Sign languages have historically been—and continue to be—targeted.9

As alarmist as this may seem, the repression of sign is mostly unintentional. Hearing people simply don’t know any better. Why should they? The vast majority of the earth’s 6.3 billion people are not even aware that they are “hearing.” I, for one, did not realize I was hearing until age twenty-one. Only after I began working with Deaf people did I become “hearing.” Unless we have an encounter with deafness and the Deaf-World, why would we ever bother to consider an alternative to speech? We are, after all, the speaking animal. Clearly, there is no campaign to eradicate sign here, no malicious intent to deny a deaf child a visual language. Most people are simply unaware (nor do they even care) that to sign is human. Instead, to sign is strange—foreign—unimaginable.10 Either way—intentional or unintentional—signed languages have historically been hidden from sight, overlooked for centuries.

It is this historical and metaphysical occlusion of sign that I refer to as a function of the phonocentric blind-spot. Blind-spots occur as a result of the tiny spot where the optic nerve attaches to the retina, leaving no space for light receptors to gather light to become vision; yet if we shift our perspective, what was previously hidden appears to our sight. Similarly, the human capacity to sign has been there all along, yet hidden from view. But once we shift our perspective away from the assumption that speech is the exclusive mode of language, this hidden dimension of the human language capacity comes into sight. Though signed languages have been eclipsed by the phonocentric blind-spot, there have been numerous sightings of sign language throughout history, too numerous and varied in their messages to recount here in depth. Among the many sightings, are those by Herodotus, Plato, Augustine, Montaigne, Leonardo da Vinci, Descartes, Rousseau, Diderot, and Condillac, all of whom have made observations about sign languages of deaf communities prior to the founding of formalized deaf education in the last half of the eighteenth century.11 Taken together, the perspectives on sign language reveal a complicated and contradictory history which has yet to be told. But there are clear patterns: sign language is often glorified as a more perfect and exact language than speech; yet it is more often seen as a primitive, proto language incapable of conveying abstract thought. Either case is inaccurate. Those who have written and mused
about manual languages have rarely known any thing about those languages. While this may seem like a political statement rooted in Deaf identity politics, it is rather recognition that our historical ignorance of manual language has actually had a profound impact on the development of our modern notions of language, literacy, and literature. This construction of manual languages throughout our history might be better described as a disconstruction of (sign) language in the Western Tradition—that is of the particular constructions of language that have been evolved within a fundamental lack, resulting in, as O’Neill describes, “muddled conclusions” and “tangled webs of ideas”. 12

In the history of the disconstruction of speech=language, Plato’s *Cratylus* occupies an important part. As one of the earliest and more significant treatises on language by the foundational father of Western philosophy, Plato’s *Cratylus* searches for the nature of names and in so doing, speculates on the language of the deaf as a viable alternative to speech. This brief sighting of sign has a more profound consequence than has yet to be explored by scholars on the *Cratylus*. In addition, Plato’s sighting of sign has often been quoted in Deaf studies publications, but has yet to be more fully elaborated. By placing the sighting in context, the implications of Sign suddenly become much greater, and extend into how we have defined language in the West.

*Cratylus*

[Or on the Correctness of Names]

The dialogue begins as Socrates joins an ongoing discussion between two men, Hermogenes and Cratylus, who are discussing the fundamental question of the dialogue: Is there such a thing as a “correctness of a name, one that belongs to it by nature”? 13 Do names (*onama*) bear a natural relation to that which they refer, or are they wholly conventional? Or, to modernize the terminology, are signifiers arbitrary, motivated, or the source of deconstructive play?

Hermogenes claims that “no one can persuade me that the correctness of names is determined by any anything besides convention and agreement” 14 while Cratylus contends that “a name that expresses a thing by being like it is in every way superior . . . to one that is given by chance.” 15 The positions taken by Hermogenes and Cratylus form two poles of contrasting beliefs, around which discussions of language have revolved for
centuries. As Thais Morgan explains, “the formation of linguistics as a discipline has involved a constant tug-of-war between resolute Hermogenists and equally determined Cratylists, or between Saussurean conventionalists who would demotivate language and intuitive mimologists who would remotivate language in relation to material and emotional realities.” Cratylus thus helps to launch one of the longest standing debates in the philosophy of language: just what is in a name, after all? Is there something rosy about the word ‘rose’? Or does a rose by another name smell as sweet? Or is a rose is a rose is a rose?

For his part, Plato never definitively answers these questions. Critics have long been debating Plato’s position relative to the conventionalist or naturalist arguments. Several claim that Plato advocates a conventionalist view of names; others contend that Plato favors a naturalist thesis and still others propose that the Cratylus is intentionally open-ended. Such divergent and highly contested views reveal a high level of ambiguity, obscurity and confusing logic in the Cratylus. Allan Silverman, for example, claims that the Cratylus “proceeds by misdirection” as it “concentrates our attention on misguided conceptions of how to understand ‘correctness’ of names. . . . That the dialogue works by misdirection is not, I think, a novel conclusion. Virtually all of the interpretations . . . agree that some parts of the discussion are to be ignored, especially the long etymological section” [to be explained below]. Though few claim that the Cratylus can be read as serious and linguistic work, most concur that the issues at stake are of greater philosophical import than the correctness of this or that individual name. Rather, the dialogue is concerned more, as Silverman suggests, with “naming in general”—which is no small matter. Naming, as Michel Foucault recognizes in The Order of Things, was a central concern in classical discourse.

One might say that it is the name that organizes all Classical discourse; to speak or to write is not to say things or to express oneself, it is not a matter of playing with language, it is to make one’s way toward the sovereign act of nomination, to move, through language, towards the place where things and words are conjoined in their common essence, and which makes it possible to give them a name.

While much of the Cratylus does seem like language play, it is most significantly a meditation on the very possibility of naming. The Cratylus is an unusual dialogue as it is at once a serious philosophical investigation of the conditions of semiosis, but the
methodologies employed are, to quote Socrates himself, “outrageous and absurd.” Herein is a source of the contradictions in the *Cratylus*: On the one hand, we witness an earnest quest for the nature of names and being, and on the other, a potentially “outrageous and absurd” set of solutions regarding the correctness of names. In other words, the (Cratylean) Platonic Ideal of names is at odds with the reality of the (Hermogenist) nature of spoken names as we know it. The result is, in Ynez O’Neill’s words, a “muddle” and a “tangled web of ideas.”

When we read through a Deaf theoretical lens, the causes of this contradiction are magnified and the implications on Western constructions of language made explicit. We see that Plato searches for an ideal language where names embody and reveal the nature of the referent, but he fails through absurd methodologies to show how spoken names actually are capable of such a natural relation. In short, Plato’s ideal desire for a language of natural relation is at odds with the nature of spoken languages, where natural relation is difficult to detect. However, the ideal that Plato describes for language is actually much closer to the visual-spatial-kinetic properties of manual languages; it is almost as if Plato sensed that there was another medium for language and he groped for it—as one would a phantom-limb. He senses something is there but can’t quite grasp it. These claims will be explored during the course of a re-reading of the *Cratylus*.

**On the Nature of Names and the Names of Nature**

Only a few exchanges into the dialogue, Socrates establishes the metaphysical framework in which the dialogue takes place. Before discussing the properties of names, he investigates the nature of the things that names refer to. “It is clear,” Socrates observes, “that things have some fixed being or essence of their own. They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us. They are by themselves, in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature.” If a name is to be correct, then it must be correct in relation to a thing’s nature, to its *being*. The same would hold true for actions. “An action’s performance accords with the action’s own nature, and not what we believe.” If we are given a tool that is designed for cutting, Socrates proposes, we would most likely use that tool in accord with the
nature of the task at hand. “If we try to cut contrary to nature, however, we’ll be in error and accomplish nothing.” Anyone who has tried to cut a steak with a spoon or metal with asparagus would have to agree with this. If this is true of cutting, then what about speaking and naming?

Socrates: Then will someone speak correctly if he speaks in whatever way he believes he should speak? Or isn’t it rather the case that he will accomplish something and succeed in speaking if he says things in the natural way to say them, in the natural way for them to be said, and with the natural tool for saying them? But if he speaks in any other way he will be in error and accomplish nothing.

Hermogenes: I believe so.

If words are like tools, then how do we know we have the right tool for the right job? There is a natural way to use a drill, but what is the natural way to name? “What do we do when we name?” Socrates asks.

Hermogenes: I don’t know what to answer.

Socrates: Don’t we instruct each other, that is to say, divide things according to their natures?

Hermogenes: Certainly

Socrates: So just as a shuttle is a tool for dividing warp and woof, a name is a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being.

What does this mean, to divide being? Allan Silverman notes that “though the dialogue does allude to the principal conditions which any successful answer must satisfy, namely that a name must be capable of separating (oικεία) (dividing being) and be informative (giving instruction), it is left to the ingenuity of the reader to determine how these conditions relate to one another, what it would be to satisfy these conditions and how names could do so.” We may safely glean, though, that in order to be a natural and correct tool, a name must be able to instruct its users about the nature of the object to which it refers, and through this instruction, sort, categorize and identify the particular object or action so that it may be separated out from everything else that is.

Fair enough, but the question remains as to how a name is to go about doing this. Here Socrates looks toward a naming agent—the “rule-setter” or “name giver”—an Adam-like agent responsible for attaching names with their referents. How did he go about doing it? How do we know when a particular word stand in ‘correct relation with a thing or an action’s essence? What if the name-giver made a mistake? How would we
even know? For that matter, suppose the name giver could grasp the essence of, say, “tree” or “man” or “cutting”—how would he know what these essences sounded like? Perhaps the best case in point of a fundamental misnomer would be the case of language—based on the Latin lingua, or tongue, which is precisely the sort of re-naming we hope to accomplish in this essay.

Socrates speculates that just as a “carpenter must embody in wood the type of shuttle naturally suited for each type of weaving . . . so mustn’t a rule-setter also know how to embody in sounds and syllables the name naturally suited to each thing?” In positing the name-giver as a craftsman, the task cannot simply be arbitrary. Hence, “Cratylus is right in saying that things have natural names, and that not everyone is a craftsman of names, but only someone who looks to the natural name of each thing and is able to put its form into letters and syllables, . . . “ As Socrates comes to this position concerning how one might go about fashioning the correct sound to a thing’s nature, he launches into the long etymological section, testing word after word, proper name after name in search of the source of the correctness of names.

Search for the Correctness of Names

In the long etymological section, Socrates initiates a sort of absurdist dictionary of eponymical speculation. While there is no hard and fast methodology, there are some amusing possibilities. “Whereas etymology aims to trace words back to their historical origins according to laws of filiation,” Thais Morgan writes, “eponymy allows for imaginative free play. Socrates—and a host of mimologists after him—analyzes words by adding, deleting, and/or substituting letters or syllables according to nonce rules of phonetic similarity and punning. As a result Socrates eponymies initiate a potentially endless language game, limited only by the player’s ingenuity.” Take, for example, the speculation on the etymology of ‘halios’ or sun.

If we use the Doric form of the name, I think matters will become clearer, for Dorians call the sun ‘halios’. So halios might accord with the fact that the sun collects (halizein) people together when it rises, or with the fact that it is always rolling (aei heilein ion) in its course around the earth, or with the fact that it seems to color (poikilei) the products of the earth, for ‘poikilein’ means the same as ‘aiolein’ (‘to shift rapidly to and fro’).
Does such speculation shed any greater light on the sun (*halios*)? Which is it? Gathering or rolling or coloring? Perhaps it could be a little of this and a little of that. But what about the shifting rapidly to and fro? “Ultimately,” Morgan writes, “*Cratylus* leaves us torn between philosophical doubts about language and the sheer fun of playing with words.” But if we are looking for the *correctness* of a name, it makes a difference which root gave rise to *halios*.

In this method, Socrates pursues the correctness of a name through investigating the names from which they derived; hence they are referred to as *derivative* names.

While pursuit of a word’s history often reveals instructive insights and metaphors, we soon find ourselves lead into a giant tautology, a sort of house of mirrors where words refer to other words which refer to others and so on. Where does it stop?

**Naming in the First Place**

After an exhausting (and nearly exhaustive) search on the correctness of particular names, Socrates realizes that derivations can only go so far.

**Socrates:** If someone asks about the terms from which a name is formed, and then about the ones from which those terms are formed, and keeps on doing this indefinitely, the answerer must finally give up. Mustn’t he?

**Hermogenes:** That’s my view at any rate.

**Socrates:** At what point would he be right to stop? Wouldn’t it be when he reaches the names that are as it were the elements of all the other statements and names? For if these are indeed elements, it cannot be right to suppose that they are composed out of other names. Consider *‘agathos’* (‘good’), for example; we said it is composed out of *‘agaston’* (‘admirable’) and *‘thoon’* fast. And probably *‘thoon’* is composed out of other names, and those out of still other ones. But if we ever get hold of a name that isn’t composed out of other names, we’ll be right to say that at last we’ve reached an element, which cannot any longer be carried back to other names.

Socratic dialogue has followed the chain of signifiers into what is perhaps the original Gordian knot: *how is naming possible?* Here, Socrates makes a crucial distinction between *derivative* and *primary* names. Socrates contends that “there is only one kind of correctness in all names, primary as well as derivative, and that considered simply as names there is no difference between them.” However there is a difference yet to be explored: while derivative names are based on the correctness of primary names, we are
not so sure what the correctness of primary names is based on. This question leads Socrates to the very limits of signification:

Socrates: And if the primary names are indeed names, they must make the things that are as clear as possible to us. But how can they do this when they aren’t based on other names?  

Indeed, this is the twenty-thousand drachma question: how do we get to “the place where things and words are conjoined in their common essence, and which makes it possible to give them a name”? Nearly twenty-three centuries after Plato, Jean Jacques Rousseau came to a similar observation when he notes that “words would have been necessary to establish the use of words.” As Michael Corballis plainly asks, “How on earth could speech have evolved?” Indeed, “how were links formed between those arbitrary sounds we call words and the stuff of the real world—a real world made available to us largely through vision and touch, rather than through sound?” To which Corballis answers: “It seems almost inevitable that those links involved gesture.”

Sighting Sign

We have finally arrived at a point where we can appreciate the relevant context in which Socrates sighting of gestural language occurs—at the crucial moment where he ponders what is perhaps the most provocative question of the entire dialogue. Here is the question again, but this time in the context of what follows it.

Socrates: And if the primary names are indeed names, they must make the things that are as clear as possible to us. But how can they do this when they aren’t based on other names? Answer me this: If we hadn’t a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn’t we try to make signs by moving our hands, head, and the rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present?
Hermogenes: What other choice would we have, Socrates?
Socrates: So, if we wanted to express something light in weight or above us, I think we’d raise our hand towards the sky in imitation of the very nature of the thing. And if we wanted to express something heavy or below us, we’d move our hand towards the earth. And if we wanted to express a horse (or any other animal) galloping, you know that we’d make our bodies and our gestures as much like theirs as possible.
Hermogenes: I think we’d have to.
Note the abrupt turn, leaving the unanswerable question hanging. Having followed the
dialectical path into spoken names as long as it could take him Socrates glimpses the
possibility of a completely human alternative to speech at work in the hands, heads and
bodies of Greek signers at the margins of the Athenian society. Socrates seems here to
have sensed the plasticity of language—had we no voice, language would find some
other route. Such a realization could provide an answer to the question just asked. Sign,
as we will be discussed below, offers a model, a way for signs to bear a primary relation
to the world.

Yet, this was not Socrates intent. This brief sighting is like a quick flash of light
into the phonocentric blindspot, illuminating sign for a moment, but quickly returning it
to darkness. For in the dialogue following, we see that the discussion of deaf sign
language was intended only to discuss the nature of imitation and speech, rather than as a
valid mode of human language all its own:

Socrates: Because the only way to express anything by means of our body is to
have our body imitate whatever we want to express.
Hermogenes: Yes.
Socrates: So, if we want to express a particular fact by using our voice, tongue,
and mouth, we will succeed in doing so, if we succeed in imitating it by means of
them?
Hermogenes: That must be right, I think.
Socrates: It seems to follow that a name is a vocal imitation of what it imitates,
and that someone who imitates something with his voice names what the imitates.
Hermogenes: I think so.
Socrates: Well, I don’t. I don’t think this is a fine thing to say at all.
Hermogenes: Why not?
Socrates: Because then we’d have to agree that those who imitate sheep, cocks, or
other animals are naming the things they imitate.
Hermogenes: That’s true, we would.
Socrates: And do you think that’s a fine conclusion?
Hermogenes: No, I don’t. But then what sort of imitation is a name, Socrates?40

While he has Hermogenes shaking his head ‘yes’ throughout, agreeing to the correctness
of signed names, Socrates takes an abrupt turn, noting that speech does not imitate as
does the sign language of the deaf. Indeed, it is not a fine thing to say that speech is
onomatopoeic, because, for the most part, it is not. Thus, by the time Hermogenes asks,
“what sort of imitation is a name?” it is clear that the category of name has been fully
inscribed as ‘spoken name.’ Plato securely locks in place the tongue and mouth as the
exclusive organs of language—the default mode of human being, thus casting the hands, head and rest of the body into another non-linguistic realm.

At this point, we wish to break into this dialogue, as Bertold Brecht might do, to disrupt the drama and offer a new perspective. This philosophical aside offered 2500 years later will take center stage for the following two sections.

**Shedding Light into the Blind-Spot:**
**Sign as a ‘Natural’ Language**

Now suppose Socrates, Hermogenes, and Cratylus befriended those ‘dumb people’ at present in Athens. Suppose also that among these signers was a hearing person, say a child of deaf parents whose first language was an evolving Athenian Sign Language who could have interpreted between the signers and speakers. Socrates would undoubtedly have posed many questions. What would he have found? Perhaps he may have found what he was looking for all along—names that are “naturally suited to the thing”, names that effectively “instruct and divide being” and even more importantly, he may have found the place in which name and word conjoin to making naming possible in the first place. He may also have come to realize that the occlusion of sign may have a hidden part in the contradiction between his ideal of motivated signifiers and the reality of arbitrary speech.

Socrates would have been pleased to find that his speculation on the signifying properties of sign is accurate. While it is impossible to know what the signs for “lightness,” “heaviness,” and “galloping horse” was in 5th century BC Greece, a brief survey of sign languages indicates that signs do often embody the visual, spatial and kinetic nature of a thing. Upward motion, for example, is an omnipresent movement in conveying lightness, just as Socrates assumes.

And downward movement is central feature in conveying heaviness.

In a gravity-filled world, lightness may be logically conveyed through upward gestures and heaviness through downward gestures. These signs literally make sense as
they take place in accord with every embodied experience of lightness and heaviness that cuts across cultural divides. Despite the fact that each sign has different handshapes and locations, each engages in a movement that reveals a sort of primal embodiment of our body’s being-in-the-world. In short, each name instructs or reveals an aspect of what it refers to.

In addition, the sign for HORSE GALLOPING also embodies aspects of the object and action represented.

The American Sign Language (ASL) sign, HORSE derives from a horse’s ear, and therefore embodies a degree of metonymical correctness. Further, the very motion of galloping is embodied in the sign, GALLOPING as both handshapes (upside down V’s) convey the four legs of a horse, replete with bending of the finger-legs, galloping forward.

It must be emphasized at this point that these signs and sign language in general are not a species of mime or picture writing in the air. A non-signer would not be able to automatically decode these signs. To be sure, no horse’s ear flops directly forward as do the fingers in the sign, and certainly no horse could gallop with both sets of legs in unison; yet, due to the manual and neurological constraints of the language, front and hind handshapes move in tandem. Despite these discrepancies between sign and referent, there is little doubt that sign is far more rich in its ability to embody the world through motivated signifiers. Isn’t this, after all, what Socrates has been searching for when he speaks of a name which stand in ‘natural relation’? As such, signs reveal something fundamental about the thing they refer to, thus dividing their being accordingly.

In such a search for the correctness of names, iconicity becomes a valued commodity; but in the history of thought on language in the West, iconicity has most often been associated with primitive languages. Indeed, the long-standing prejudice against iconic dimensions of language has lead many to assume that signed languages are not real languages. The history of disconstruction, which we are beginning to follow,
may help to account for the disconstruction of the debate on the arbitrariness vs. the iconicity of the signifier. As Sarah Taub writes,

Unfortunately, the intense prejudice against iconic forms led to prejudice against signed languages. People claimed for many years (some still do) on the basis of the iconic aspects of signed languages that they were merely mime, playacting imitations—not true languages at all, and incapable of expressing abstract concepts. This is wholly untrue, as linguists from Stokoe (1960) onward have shown. . . .Signed languages, created in space with the signer’s body and perceived visually, have incredible potential for iconic expression of a broad range of basic conceptual structures (e.g. shapes, movements, locations, human actions), and this potential is fully realized.42

If Socrates has been searching for a means for language to operate “in accord with nature”, he may have been better off by looking toward sign. Signed languages have a special advantage in the deployment of visual, spatial, and kinetic properties that may exist in a homological relationship with the visual, spatial, and kinetic properties of the real world. As a result of correspondence of signs and the world, we may have an answer to the question Socrates posed directly before citing the sign language of the deaf Athenians: “What are primary names based on?” Which is to ask, where is the “place that makes names possible”?

Sign and the Origins of Language

A possible answer to Socrates’ question can be found, some 2400 years later, in Amos Kendall’s address at the inauguration of the National Deaf-Mute College (later, Gallaudet University) in 1864:

If the whole human family were destitute of the sense of hearing, they would yet be able to interchange ideas by signs. Indeed, the language of signs undoubtedly accompanied if it did not precede the language of sounds . . . We read that Adam named the beasts and birds. But how could he give them names without first pointing them out by other means? How could a particular name be fixed upon a particular animal among so many species without some sign indicating to what animal it should thereafter be applied?43

An increasing body of literature now suggests that Adam or any of the rest of us would have to have gestured before we spoke. The theory of gestural origins was popularized during the late 18th century by French philosopher Etienne Bonnet de Condillac who
originally posited the “langage d’action” as the original language that allowed for the initial connection between object and its name. Both Jean Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot also explored the likelihood of gestural origins of language, which subsequently became a central philosophical preoccupation of the French Enlightenment. More recently Gordon Hewes, William Stokoe, David Armstrong, Sherman Wilcox and Michael Corballis have all published various articles and books that put forward convincing theories as to the role of gesture in language development. Michael Corballis writes “The growing recognition of signed languages as true languages with all of the expressiveness and generativity of spoken language, has provided a powerful boost to the idea that language originated as a gestural system, and may even have evolved to a fully grammatical system before being overtaken by speech.”

It was William Stokoe who first proved the fully grammatical nature of manual languages; he then turned his insight into questions of the origin of language. Stokoe notes that the modality of sign makes it a logical pathway for signification to occur:

Visible language movements . . . can stand for things directly. Direct pointing, natural resemblance, and actions that replay other actions are effective in linking language signs to their meanings. This difference between spoken language signs and signed language signs takes the original idea forward—and backward as well. In its present form, the idea visualizes a signed language as the first language ever—in use as much as a million years ago.

Human physiology supplies reasons for thinking that visible signs rather than speech first expressed language. Human vision automatically sorts images and compares them for us. Working with vision and the perceptions it brings, human hands can point to things and imitate them. Furthermore, visible, manually produced signs with obvious meanings provided a context in which vocal sounds can carry meaning, simply by being produced at the same time as the gestural signs . . .

How else could spoken words could have become attached to particular objects? This is a tree, those are leaves, and that is a branch. Indeed, try speaking for a day without gesturing; try to pick out a particular piece of meat at the butcher or fish at the fish counter without pointing.

But more importantly, gesture points the way to a larger direction—toward the direction in which we all have become human—to the direction of language. It is perhaps in gesture and sign language then that we came to the “sovereign act of
nomination, to the place where word and thing are conjoined in their common essence, which makes it possible to give things a name” 48

It seems that Socrates was on the precipice of this insight when he asked the question about the source of primary names, and then switched to “Answer me this.” This is a crucial moment in the history of disconstruction of sign language, when philosophy hung in the balance between speech and sign. But Socrates, Hermogenes and Cratylus never befriended the deaf signers; they never seriously considered the signifying properties of sign in light of their discussion on naming. This sighting was short lived, as the flow of dialogue returns to an almost quixotic attempt at attaching sounds to things and actions.

The Return of the Phonocentric Blind-Spot

Primary names are no different: Correctness is still a function of corresponding Socrates returns to speech as the source of imitation; only now in the case of primary names, Socrates looks toward the letters and syllables of sound to correspond with a thing’s nature directly. If a sheep is not named ‘baaaa baaa” then how can sound correspond to a thing’s nature? “Since an imitation of a thing’s being or essence is made out of letters and syllables,” Socrates responds, “wouldn’t it be most correct for us to divide off the letters or elements first, just as those who set to work on speech rhythms first divide off the forces or powers of the letters or elements, then those of syllables, and only then investigate rhythms themselves?” 49 Socrates does provide a number of examples where a sound corresponds to the nature of a particular referent.

Socrates: . . . the letter ‘r’ seemed to the name-giver to be a beautiful tool for copying motion, at any rate he often uses it for this purpose. He first uses this letter to imitate motion in the names ‘rhein’ (‘flowing’) and ‘rhoe’ (‘flow’) themselves. Then in ‘tromos’ (‘trembling’) and ‘trechein’ (‘running’) and in such verbs as ‘krouein’ (‘striking’) and so on. . . He saw, I suppose, that the tongue was most agitated and least at rest in pronouncing this letter and that’s probably why he used it in these names. 50

In addition to the primal relation of ‘r’ and motion, Socrates proposes that the name giver “observed that because the tongue glides most of all in pronouncing ‘l’, he uses it to
produce a resemblance in ‘oligisthanein’ (‘glide’) itself. He was also partial to ‘o’ to express roundness along with a host of other letters and correspondences.

But one must wonder, if ‘r’ bears a natural relation to motion, is it used exclusively in motion words or can it arise in other words as well? What does it refer to then? For if ‘r’ imitates the very nature of motion, why does it figure so prominently in words opposite of motion, as in the modern English ‘rest’ and ‘relaxation’. Sounds do indeed carry an emotive, evocative quality, which is foregrounded in poetic language. But if the question concerns the relation of a name to its being, Socrates’ skewed methodology betrays the very limitation of speech. How can we be sure about the correct relation of sound and being given the multitude of languages that cannot even agree on onomatopoeias, such as the English “bow-wow” and the French “ouaoua.” Further, one would think that the multiplicity of arbitrary words from other languages attached to the same idea would discount the ability of particular sounds to correspond to a thing’s fixed essence. Anticipating the inevitable question concerning the multiplicity of signifiers across languages, Socrates surmises,

And if different rule-setters do not make each name out of the same syllables, we mustn’t forget that different blacksmiths, who are making the same tool for the same type of work, don’t all make it out of the same iron. But as long as they give it the same form—even if that form is embodied in different iron—the tool will be correct, whether it is made in Greece or abroad. Isn’t that so?

Hermogenes: Certainly.

While Hermogenes readily agrees, Socrates provides no further explanation as to how an enduring form could be constituted of radically different material.

Further testimony to the contradictory desire for a motivated language and the realities of speech is the haunting persistence of visual analogies used to describe the relation of speech to the world. When describing his methodology of breaking down speech into letters and syllables to imitate a things essence, Socrates claims,

It’s just the same as it is with painters. When they want to produce a resemblance, they sometimes use only purple, sometimes another color, and sometimes, for example, when they want to paint human flesh or something of that sort—they mix many colors, employing the particular color, I suppose, that their particular subject demands. Similarly, we’ll apply letters to things using one letter for one thing, when that’s what seems to be required, or many letters together, to form what’s called a syllable, or many syllables, combined to form names and verbs. From names and verbs, in turn, we shall finally construct
something important, beautiful, and whole. And just as the painter painted an animal, so—by means of the craft of naming or rhetoric or whatever it is—we shall construct sentences.\(^{53}\)

Through this analogy, Socrates hopes that we can see what he is talking about. But given the nature of vision and visual arts and languages, the ability to represent is far greater than the ability of speech. Painting, as it appears throughout is like the supplement to speech, filling in where it lacks, haunting its primacy.

Socrates does admit that “Perhaps it will seem absurd, Hermogenes, to think that things become clear by being imitated in letters and syllables, but it is absolutely unavoidable. For we have \textit{nothing better} on which to base the truth of primary names.”\(^{54}\) So deeply buried in the phonocentric blind spot, sign language would not see the light of day in pursuit of the nature and origins of language. We now know that there \textit{may be} something better on which to base the truth of primary names, as has been shown by the gestural theory of language origins. There is perhaps no better medium to represent motion than motion itself. Compare the phonemic constituents of the sign, FLOW, in comparison with the sound “R”:

[Insert 7.9-11 here; these should appear together in a row]

This sign demonstrates how sign language offers a kinetic model of the larger world. Sign language instructs in very precise ways, so precise as to be infectious, where the body of the viewer engages in the revelation of meaning through the signer’s body and facial expressions. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his”.\(^{55}\) As our bodies are intimately familiar with the worlds they inhabit, they are particularly adept at communicating a particular embodied experience—a linguistic reciprocity in Sign that results in a sense of being in the presence of the event, object or action cited.

\textbf{Conclusion: the Legacy of Disconstruction}

In light of the revelation that \textit{to sign is human}, we may now reread the history of thought regarding language. In Plato’s \textit{Cratylus}, we can see a pattern emerge: a pronounced yearning and speculation for a ‘perfect language’ in which names have a
“natural relation” to the world. Umberto Eco’s *The Search for a Perfect Language* and Gerard Genette’s *Mimologics* both document the ubiquity of the search for an alternative to conventional speech. In an introductory essay to Genette’s expansive *Mimologics* entitled “Invitation to a Voyage in Cratylusland,” Thais Morgan writes, “Determining language’s connection to the phenomenal world is an important enterprise because it bears upon the extent and accuracy of our knowledge about that world. At the same time, thinkers tend to use their imaginations quite freely when they discuss language, inventing clever—and sometimes ridiculous—explanations of how words imitate things.” In the *Cratylus*, we see, a search for a perfect language and a grasping toward language’s phantom-limb—gesture. Yet we see that language is so fully bound to speech that there is fundamentally something “other” and strange about sign language.

Note the “we” in the passage where Socrates discusses the sign language of the deaf. “Suppose we hadn’t a voice or a tongue.” Here, this is very likely the first hearing ‘we’ in philosophy. For this brief moment the boundary that holds the “we” in and the other out is drawn by the act of hearing and speaking. It would take centuries to find out that “those deaf people at present” have actually brought something present—the human capacity for sign language. It has taken this long to see that “those people are actually a part of the ‘we.’” Particular sign languages indeed belong to the communities which have developed them, but the human capacity to sign belongs to us all, whether hearing or Deaf.

Notes

I wish to thank my students in DST 705 Sign and the Philosophy of Language Fall 2005 for their discussion and comments on an earlier draft. David Armstrong also read and commented on an earlier draft. I assume all responsibility for the contents.

1 Pierre Desloges was the first deaf person known to have authored and published a book—in 1779—that defended the use of sign language against oralist educators. Of particular significance is Desloges description of a signing deaf community prior to formalized deaf education, begun by the Abbe de l’Epee. Desloges wrote that “there are congenitally deaf people, Parisian laborers, who are illiterate and who have never attended the abbe de l’Epee’s lessons, who have been found so well instructed about their religion, simply by means of signs, that they have been judged worthy of admittance to the holy sacraments, even those of the eucharist and marriage. No event—in Paris, in
France, or the four corners of the world—lies outside the scope of our discussion. We express ourselves on all subjects with as much order, precision and rapidity as if we enjoyed the faculty of speech and hearing.” Desloges, Pierre. “A Deaf Person’s Observation about An Elementary Course of Education for the Deaf”. In Deaf Experience: Classics in Language and Education. ed. Harlan Lane. Trans. Franklin Philip. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 36.

Further speculation on the nature of ancient sign languages is prompted by the cinematic nature of manual languages. If manual languages tend to exhibit close up, distance shots, editing and camera techniques, did the ancients tell cinematic narratives 2500 years prior to the advent of moving images in film? Or to what extent has cinematic techniques influenced signed languages in the 20th century? For further reading on the cinematic qualities of signed languages, see Bauman, H-Dirksen L. “Redesigning Literature: the Cinematic Poetics of American Sign Language Poetry” Sign Language Studies 4:1 (2003): 34-47 and Bahan, Ben. “Face-to-Face Tradition in the American Deaf Community: Dynamics of the Teller, the Tale, and the Audience.” In Signing the Body Poetic: Essays in American Sign Language Literature, eds. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer Nelson, Heidi Rose. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).


9 For further discussion of the systemic nature of oppression of deaf persons, see Lane, Harlan. Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1992). While sign languages have been targeted, there is good cause to think that they will not, like so many other languages, experience language death. See Padden, Carol. “Folk Explanation in Language Survival” In Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook. (New York: New York University Press, 2001: 104-115.


14 Ibid., 2.

15 Ibid., 85.


17 It is Plato, not Socrates, that is the focus of discussion here, for Cratylus is a later dialogue, and hence primarily the work of Plato given voice through the character of Socrates. While the content of the Cratylus is clearly Plato’s rather than Socrates’ there has been considerable debate regarding the actual date of composition. For further inquiry, see Luce, “The Date of the Cratylus, American Journal of Philology 85 (1964) and Mackenzie, “Putting the Cratylus in its Place” Classical Quarterly, 36/1 (1986): 124-50.

18 Allan Silverman offers the following classification of readings of the Cratylus, with the caveat that this breakdown obscures the finer points made by all. Silverman, Allan. “Plato’s Cratylus: The Naming of Nature and the Nature of Naming” Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 10 (1992), 25-71. Those who feel Plato advocates the naturalist

19 Silverman, “Plato’s Cratylus, 26-27”
21 Plato. Cratylus, 72.
22 Ibid., 5.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 6.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 10.
27 Silverman, “Plato’s Cratylus, 27.
29 Ibid., 15. Emphasis mine.
30 Morgan, “Voyage” xxiv.
31 Plato. Cratylus, 44-5.
32 Morgan. “Voyage” xxiv.
33 Plato. Cratylus, 66.
34 Ibid.
37 Rousseau quoted in Micheal Corballis. Hand to Mouth, 42.
38 Ibid., 43.
40 Ibid., 68. Emphasis mine.
42 Taub, Language from the Body, 3.
44 See Rosenfeld, A Revolution in Language.

Corballis. Hand to Mouth, 43.
Stokoe. Language in Hand, 11.
Foucault 116-7.
Plato. Cratylus, 70.
Ibid., 73
Ibid.
Ibid., 13.
Ibid., 70-1.
Ibid., 72. Emphasis mine.