Theories of language
(The history of linguistics in Europe)

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Practical points about the course

- web site with syllabus, recommended readings, slides uploaded (under my personal page)
- exam: a few paragraphs to write on two or three questions, based on topics covered in class

What is this course about?

- the history of linguistics — actually a series of chapters from intellectual history
- Ancient Greeks, Romans, Medieval Europeans, Humanists, Early Moderns, 19th century scholars, early 20th century
- with occasional connections to related fields such as philosophy, literature, rhetoric

What is this course about?

studying Language *as such*,

that is, Language as a general human and cultural phenomenon (biological? cognitive? social? historical?)

studying Language *in and for itself* is LINGUISTICS

(with potential practical applications, of course)

The beginning: Ancient civilisations

- Having language (=speaking) has been a universal experience for a very long time

- Also meeting speakers of other languages or varieties

- The "powers" of language (one can make someone happy or sad or angry, impress others, convince someone of one's point, one can invoke deities, God/gods can create by uttering certain words...)

The beginning: Ancient civilisations

→ the *performative* aspect of language very clearly present in several ancient civilisations (creation narratives in Bible, also India, Egypt)

For Jews, names are of great importance:
  – new names given by God (Jacob → Israel)
  – explanation of names (site of Jacob's dream of the ladder & God's promise → Bethel)

Both stories in Genesis, 32:22–32 and 28:10–19, resp.

The beginning: Ancient civilisations

Also, writing appears in the 3rd–2nd millennia in some places (China, Mesopotamia, Egypt) → *some* sort of reflection on language (words, sounds, meanings)

Phonographic writing (= the marking of sounds rather than words) involves an unconscious phonological analysis!
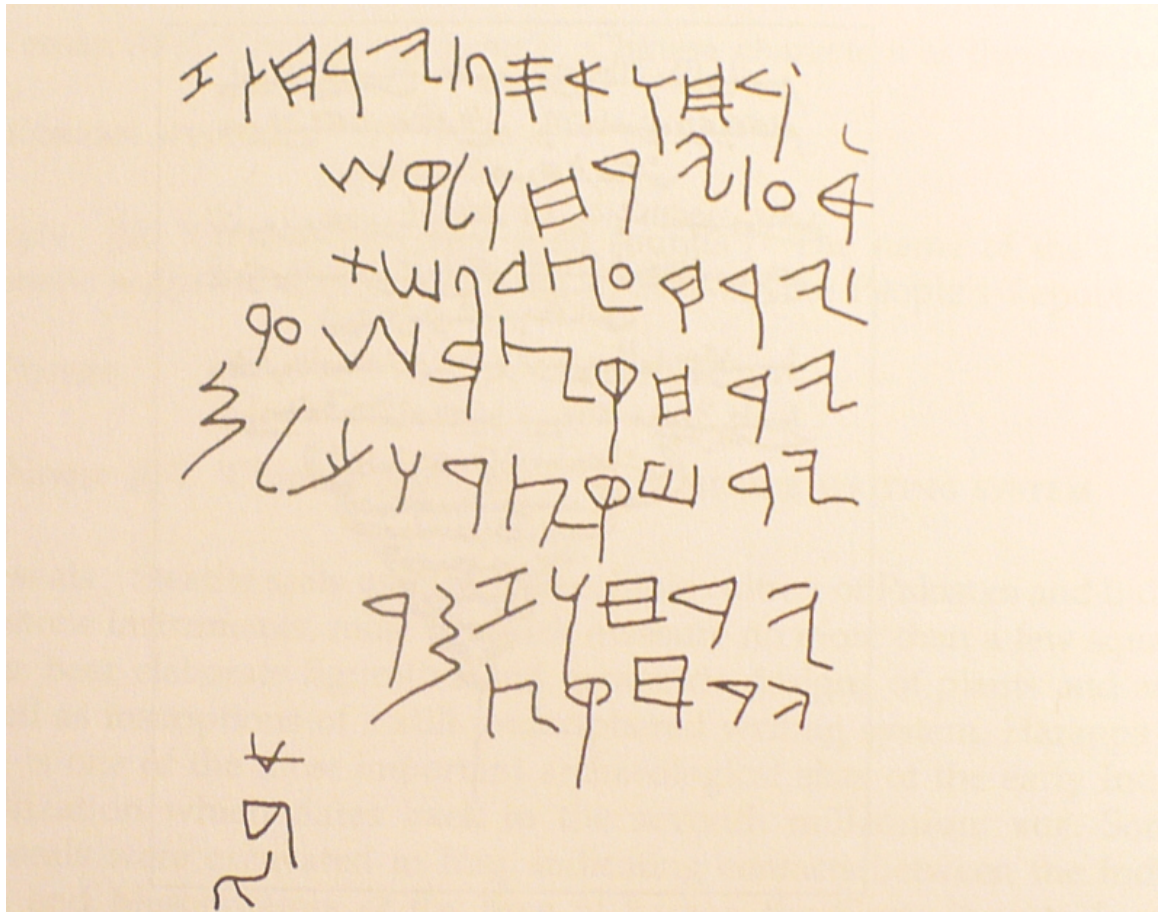
The beginning: Ancient civilisations

(Sumerian cuneiform writing, c. 3000 BC)

Figure 18   Archaic Sumerian clay tablet of the Uruk III stratum detailing the allotment of malt to a number of people and with stock accounts of barley on the reverse (photograph courtesy Margret Nissen)

The beginning: Ancient civilisations

The Gezer Calendar, an ancient Hebrew record of the agricultural cycle, 10th c. BC

(images taken from F. Coulmas *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*)

The beginning: Ancient civilisations

But none of these actually led to the emergence of anything like linguistics!

The systematic study of language (though not always in and for itself) emerged only in **India** and **Greece**.

(Of these, India will not be discussed here.)

Ancient Greece

4th–5th centuries BC exceptional period in Western intellectual history:

- inquiry into everything in ways not seen in other contemporary cultures (Near East, Egypt)

  – the structure of the material world, human nature and the nature of society, the origins of knowledge etc.

- in three generations, the agenda is set for future European science, philosophy and arts

Ancient Greece

Interest in language manifests itself in two directions:

- Language as a key to knowledge & truth
  → philosophy
- Language as effective speech
  → rhetoric

Ancient Greece: Plato (429–347 BC)

Important issue for him: where does our **knowledge** come from? what are its foundations? how do we know that it is reliable? how does it relate to truth?

And: what is the **role of language** in acquiring and passing on knowledge?

Ancient Greece: Plato (429–347 BC)

This is discussed in the context of the
 physis–nomos dichotomy: are things the
 way they are by nature or by convention?
Physis: innate, inevitable, intrinsic
Nomos: externally imposed, arbitrary

(social organisation, ethical norms, even
 religion)

Ancient Greece: Plato (429–347 BC)

Kratylos: dialogue on the "rightness" of names

Why do words mean what they mean? Do they have a necessary inner connection to what they denote?

The underlying agenda: is language a reliable path to knowledge and wisdom?

Ancient Greece: Plato's Kratylos

Two extreme positions between which Socrates mediates:

Words intrinsically connected to reality

vs.

Words arbitrary, like naming a slave

Ancient Greece: Plato's Kratylos

Socrates points out that both are untenable
if taken to logical extreme:

If words were strongly connected to reality,
one cannot say anything untrue (**physis**)

If this relation was arbitrary, chaos would be
inevitable (**nomos**)

Ancient Greece: Plato's Kratylos

But Socrates initially appears to favour the **physis** view:

If a sentence can be true, then words must have the same property

(Later Plato confines truth to sentences)

Instruments must be *intrinsically* appropriate for the goals of their use

Ancient Greece: Plato's Kratylos

So what is the rightness of names?

Socrates: sounds show the original elements of meaning, e.g. *r* : motion, e.g. *trekhein* 'run', *tromos* 'tremble', *rhymbein* 'whirl'...

Plus there are composite words, e.g. *anthrōpos* 'man, human' ← *anathrōn ha opōpe* 'who looks up on what he has seen'

Ancient Greece: Plato's Kratylos

But there are many counterexamples, e.g.
sklērōtēs 'rigidity' — why?

The original "name-giver" (*nomothetēs*, a
demi-god or superman, who had access to
higher reality, *ideas*) may have made
mistakes; also, changes were later
introduced out of laziness, etc.

Ancient Greece: Plato's Kratylos

Thus both *physis* and *nomos* play a part in how words mean: originally created in harmony with reality, they were subsequently changed by convention

Ancient Greece: Plato's Kratylos

Conclusion:

- language is not a reliable way to truth & knowledge, though it can give hints;

- words are inferior imitations of reality;

- it is better to have immediate access to reality to achieve knowledge without the mediation of words

After resolving this **epistemological** question, language is no longer interesting!

Ancient Greece: Aristotle (384–322)

Like Plato, Aristotle was not interested in language in itself

He discusses language in various contexts:

- rhetoric
- logic
- poetics

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and rhetoric

Why was rhetoric important?

Unlike nowadays, in Athenian direct democracy government and public business was conducted orally in public assemblies; there were no trained judges and lawyers in law courts

→ power of persuasion was crucial for success!

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and rhetoric

Before Aristotle: speech-writers (*logographoi*), sophists (professional teachers of rhetoric & logic)

Some also write short treatises, handbook-like treatment

Originally *rhetor* anyone who makes a public speech

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and rhetoric

Skills needed:

- construction of syllogisms
- knowledge of character & emotions
- appropriate expression

Only the last concerns language directly; discusses prose style, metaphor, mistakes in prose composition

Language is an instrument wrt a goal

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and poetics

Treatise on poetics, poetic style, devices like metaphor

but also includes list of linguistic elements (*merē tēs lexeōs*) — the first listing of something like parts of speech

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and poetics

- stoikheion (letter/sound)
- syllabē (syllable)
- syndesmos (~ conjunction, preposition?)
- arthron (~ pronoun, article?)
- onoma (noun in nominative)
- rhēma (verb)
- ptōsis (inflected forms)
- logos (sentence [also certain phrases])

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and poetics

Formal definitions given, e.g.:

rhēma: has meaning, parts have no meaning, has time [=tense]

onoma: has meaning, parts have no meaning, does not have time [=tense]

logos: has meaning, parts also have meaning

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and poetics

But again language not in focus, it is a means to an end, scil. the composition and analysis of poetry

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and logic

Six books collected under the (later) title
Organon

Aristotelian logic is propositional logic, i.e. it
is basically an analysis of how statements
can relate to each other

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and logic

Premises:

> Every man is mortal
>
> Socrates is a man

Conclusion:

> Socrates is mortal

→   valid syllogism

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and logic

Faulty syllogism:

Premises:

Every man is mortal

Socrates is mortal

*Conclusion:

Socrates is a man

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and logic

Faulty syllogism:

Premises:

    Some men are mortal

    Socrates is a man

*Conclusion:

    Socrates is mortal

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and logic

Ultimately it all boils down to the analysis of statements into a subject phrase and a predicate phrase — unfortunately also called *onoma* and *rhēma*, resp.

Lot of discussion of what can be predicated — is Aristotle listing categories of being or linguistic categories of predicates?

Analysis of sentences into subject and predicate not incorporated into grammar until late Middle Ages

Ancient Greece: Aristotle and logic

Place of language in his intellectual universe:

world (out there)

impressions (in soul)   universal

spoken signs (in lang.)   particular

written signs (in lang.)

cf. no level of concept

relation conventional bw signs & impressions!

Ancient Greece: Aristotle — summary

Aristotle studied language in different contexts, but always as a means to a different end

Instrumental view of philosopher/scientist (also in Plato): what do we use language for? why is it important?

→ to convince

→ to please

→ to argue