Investigating the Role of Greek Philosophers in Language Formation: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

This paper examines the significant influence of ancient Greek philosophers on the development of language, emphasizing their contributions to the examination of language concerning formal logic and human thought processes. It contends that the investigations conducted by these philosophers established the foundation for continuing dialogues regarding language, epistemology, and the cognitive frameworks that support human interaction. The paper also situates ancient Greek intellectual endeavors within wider cultural interactions and the anthropological proof of the early development of language, claiming a coevolutionary bond between human beings and the advancement of language.

Keyword: Language, Hellenistic Philosophy, Grammarians, Epistemology, Plato, Aristotle

دراسة دور الفلاسفة اليونانيين في تشكيل اللغة: إطار نظري

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الخلاصة:

تبحث هذه الورقة البحثية في التأثير الكبير الذي خلفه الفلاسفة اليونانيون القدماء على تطور اللغة، مع التركيز على مساهماتهم في دراسة اللغة فيما يتصل بالمنطق الشكلي وعمليات التفكير البشري. وتزعم الورقة البحثية أن التحقيقات التي أجراها هؤلاء الفلاسفة أرست الأساس لمواصلة الحوارات بشأن اللغة ونظرية المعرفة والأطر المعرفية التي تدعم التفاعل البشري. كما تضع الورقة البحثية المساعي الفكرية اليونانية القديمة ضمن التفاعلات الثقافية الأوسع والدليل الأنثروبولوجي على التطور المبكر للغة، وتزعم وجود رابط تطوري مشترك بين البشر وتقدم اللغة.

الكلمات المفتاحية : اللغة، الفلسفة الهلنستية ، النحويون ، نظرية المعرفة، أفلاطون، أرسطو

Introduction

The Ancient Greek world has been the cradle of many cultures and sciences. Great achievements in the arts, philosophy and science were made by Greeks from roughly the 6th century BC, when the first philosopher chose to observe and explain the natural and mental world with causal reasoning, to the 4th century BC, when language and logic as formal subjects were born and made sufficiently mature. Such achievements have since moved far beyond boundaries to form the foundation of future high cultures of the humankind (Frápolli, 2023). The Ancient Greeks are particularly credited with the study of language by nature of its links to formal logic and the study of human cognition. Therefore, this study is aimed to show how the intellectual enquiry of the Ancient Greek philosophers into language has subsequently never ceased to be a subject of inquiry, why language has always been connected with formal logic in the history of Western ideas, and also to epistemology as language reflects the deepest layers of cognitive structure (Ober, 2022).

Ancient Greece is defined as the period when the peoples speaking the Greek language had their culture, politics, psychology and cognition shaped by contact and exchange with the Near East and North Africa. Ancient Greek thinkers were not disinterested in the study of language. Nature important to emphasize that philosophy and linguistic science had shared intellectual background, both belonging to the high cognitive activities in the pre-industrial age. The very recent anthropological evidences indicated that language may have emerged already at least 500,000 years ago along with lineage to modern humans. Thing, idea, cognition and the word that becomes language are deeply interwoven with distinct development, so that one can claim that the human species and the origin of language were relatively co-evolutional (Margerm P.A, 1998).

Literature Review
The Pre-Socratic Philosophers and Language

The beginning of the European philosophical tradition, in ancient Greece, is conventionally dated from the Ionian scientists working in Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE. In contrast, spoken language is a far older phenomenon, the beginnings of which are lost in the mists of antiquity. The first attempts to find a form of written language in order to serve as a systematized and abstracted form of spoken language seem to have taken place somewhere in the Near East in the second millennium BCE. What seems to be agreed on is that the eastern Mediterranean was their hearth. They were followed by the further massages of this wave of information by assuring their survival in the textual form, which eventually found its center in the city of Alexandria (Freedman, 2024).

While language as communication is a very general phenomenon (and was quite uncontroversial for those ancient thinkers), theoretical engagements with the nature of language, in our abstract sense, are so to speak the privilege of few. The earliest extant evidence of towering importance for our topic is provided by the writings of linguists, and especially the Grammarians of the Alexandrian times. The earliest philosophers did not write anything themselves, but it is certain that they wrote poetry until the adoption of universally agreed writing systems (Casanova & Brownlie, 2021).

One of the philosophers that merely touched upon the topic of language, Heraclitus from Ephesus, argued that the cosmos is regulated by logos, an all-pervasive structure that in representing the intrinsic connection between dominants and subordinates regulates the world as a whole (including its cosmic, physical, and human aspects) (Neels, 2023). Among the thinkers that touched upon language, the figures of Pythagoras and his follower Philolaus received most acclaim. Both men were obsessed with the numerical structure of cosmos, which consequently made them think of everything else as structured in accordance with number. Since for these men number was everything, they thought that in the universe each sound has its parallel corresponding celestial body (Horky, 2024).

In light of this account, 'sound' was the atomic constituent of the universe, and the cosmos was considered as the medium for the generation and the reception of sounds. It regulated the process in accordance with harmonious proportions, ordering the world on the basis of cognition, knowledge, and understanding, hence as reflecting the intrinsic connection between the order of cosmos and the essence of being (Kassler, 2023).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, using a theoretical and historical framework, in order to analyse the contributions that Greek philosophers have made to the evolution of language. A theoretical framework is developed by combining linguistic, philosophical, and historical perspectives in order to investigate the contributions that individuals such as Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics have made to the development of language theory and the evolution of language communication.

Theoretical Framework

1. Plato: Language as a Reflection of Reality

How do words mean what they do? Do they truly reflect the nature of the objects they refer to? Or are they arbitrary and derived from an agreement based on usage? These fundamental questions concern not only contemporary linguistics but also the ancient philosophers, particularly the Greeks, whose debates have shaped the ways of thinking about thought and language during the following centuries. This section explores how language is perceived by the most influential Greek thinkers; Apollophanês's approach to language serves both as a background and a contrast. When it comes to the oldest and most cited of philosophical inquiries, such questions have been as poignant as ever (Henrich et al.2023).

From Thales and other Pre-Socratic philosophers, to Socrates and his dialogues, and later Aristotle's systematic analyses of reasons and principles, ancient Greek philosophers have been deeply concerned with a nature of words and meanings, and their inquiries greatly influenced those of the Western philosophers after them. At the heart of these speculations, stands Plato's dualism between the visible, physical world and the world of forms, and his belief that words are able to reflect the inherent meanings of the external world that do not change. It is argued that, more than an agreement on the usage of words, for Plato, the world of forms has a profound influence on the way things are represented in language (Erkinov, 2022).

Because of the strong influence of Plato on the following generations of Western thinkers, Apollophanês's and Plato's approach come across as antithetic and are presented as such; Apollophanês's approach is political and strategic which aims to manipulate and control language; from the point of view of the broader philosophical tradition, Plato's treatment of language is foundational (Spacenko, 2012). In On Interpretation, Aristotle would take these issues further and discuss more about how language, thought, and ultimately, reality are connected.

1.1. Theory of Forms and the Role of Language

Plato's theory of forms is a central part of his metaphysics. According to Plato, all physical particulars are considered second-rate entities, mere copies of the ideal forms. Forms are the perfect incarnations of the physical world's objects, existing beyond this world. There is an infinite amount of forms, all of which are immortal, eternal, and unchanging. In contrast, physical things are corruptible, exist in a constant state of flux, and are limited in variety, being only poor copies of their corresponding form. In one dialogue, Plato even abandons the pretense that forms possess any noticeable characteristics, making them nothing more than placeholders for particular concepts. Even though forms are completely different from what they represent, it is necessary to study them more rigorously given that reality can only be known through them (Politis, 2021).

The theory of forms also influences the conception of language in Plato. Language is the medium through which forms can be grasped, comprising a resemblance of their names. The mere existence of words signifies the existence of preconceived forms. Words have a hierarchical structure, where certain words represent forms, while others represent certain states of becoming. Forms cannot be described through any demonstratives or predications, pointing to their abstract/concrete distinction.

Since forms are the most fundamental element of reality, it imprints itself on any thingamajig mimicking it. Therefore, it is of prime importance for a detective to understand how forms are symbolized by words. Due to the profound nature of this representation, words can come to carry different philosophical significance, oppressed though these truths may be. However, there is a vast circle-bound difference between the form itself and its representation. This ineluctable deficiency of language means that forms are only known 'as it were' through a glass or via riddles. The plethora of ways of knowing/being is governed by language due to its multi-dimensional role in ontology and epistemology (Seraj et al.2021).

**Figure (1) shows the relationship between Logic & Linguistics**
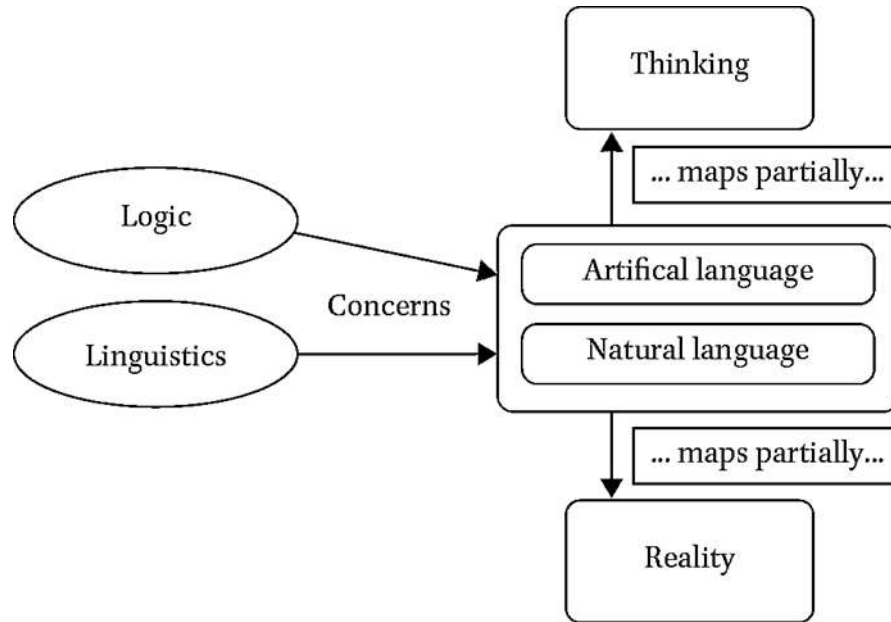
2. Aristotle: Language as a Tool for Understanding the World

In the philosophy of language, Aristotle is occasionally considered the most important ancient precursor to contemporary analytic views. Aristotle is perceived as being the starting point in the European tradition. According to a doctrine ascribed in antiquity to Aristotle, the relationship between an expression and its referent is mediated by the expression's audience; as such, this view seems closer to the modern notion of reference than its medieval counterparts. Again, it is important to bear in mind the extensive literature on the Aristotelian tradition, with translations of Aristotle lying in the background of early modern theories – especially of the relation between thought and language (Symons & VanderWeele, 2024)

Language occupies a central place in Aristotle's investigations of the human being. Unlike Plato, who conceived of language as a strictly ideal object – both in his theory of Forms and in his dialogues, where the sophists claim to be able to make weak arguments appear stronger through the manipulation of mere words – Aristotle evaluates language as a practical tool for the categorization of one's experiences and knowledge. Aristotle's philosophical tradition was to emphasize the notion of linguistic sign as an issue for speculative grammar and then for the emerging philosophy of language. In this way, language was often dealt with as purely linguistic, grammatical, or semiotic facility, and so examinations of Aristotle's work would revolve around possible worlds, indexicals, quantifiers, truthmakers, and non-existent subjects and objects (Enguehard & Spector, 2021).

Against this reading, however, it may be proposed that Aristotle's philosophy of language was examined essentially as a theory of how language is employed within a logical context – through syllogism, or how terms could be classified within his generalizing taxonomy, the categories – without due regards to the larger epistemological framework in which such views of language should be contextualized. Indeed, many of Aristotle's reflections on language may find their earliest expression in the Categories, and even where his language is most explicit, language is always used to mediate the construction of, and within, arguments pertaining to a broader theory of human cognition (Krüger, 2021).

Figure (2) depicts the interconnection among Language, Thought, and Culture.
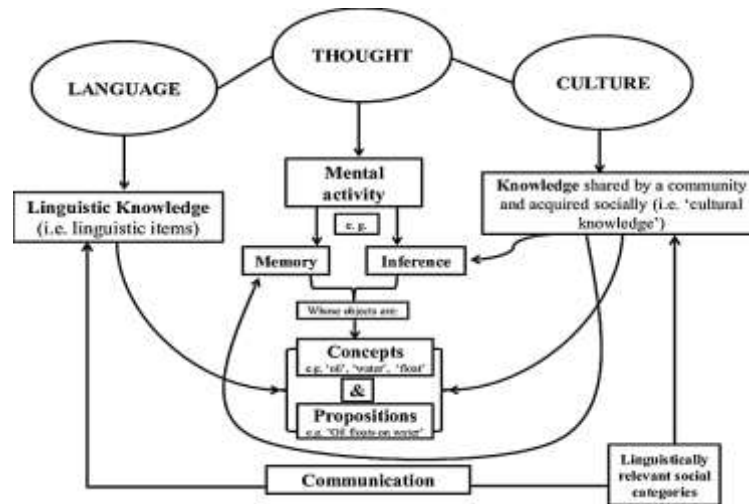
2.1. The Categories and the Structure of Language

The first philosopher who tried to analyze the nature of language is Aristotle. Aristotle's approach to language is composed of three different but intimately related perspectives. Firstly, he considered language as the instrument through which thought is put into communicable form. Secondly, he examined the inner workings of language, devising simplified grammars of his own. And, lastly, Aristotle considered the operation of language in the wider sense of what is now called semiotics. A detailed examination of the texts reveals that Aristotle's philosophy of language is an old-fashioned rationalistic philosophy of language which claims that thought precedes language, and that cognition is dependent on language (Seuren, 2006).

The most widely discussed part of Aristotle's philosophy of language is his statement of the fact that language can have meaning in different ways, his discussion of which of the various parts of a sentence can be meaning-carrying, and his distinction between univocal, equivocal, and denominative uses of terms. According to Aristotle, words can convey the meaning of several different things. Aristotle conceived as sets of words which were symmetric such that they could be reversed and slightly altered in form. In his view, a sentence should comprise of a subject-term and a predicate-term, and that both of them denote universals. The middle term of a syllogism must be a term of the possible four categories, that is, substance, quality, quantity and relation (Schuman2024).

3. Hellenistic Philosophy and Language

Two distinct schools of thought emerged in the wake of Antisthenes' Philosophy on language. The prevalent view is that Antisthenes was critical of the ornate style of speech typical of both poets and Sophists. The latter is attributed with merely "following the language of law courts, thereby enforcing language to obey human customs, thus 'performing a double adulteration on things.'" It is often assumed that from this critique various lines of argumentation could be drawn, the most noticeable concerns the context suitability of words (Kalouche, 2006).

The growing influence of Hellenistic philosophies during the past two centuries has served as an important impetus in reevaluating the figure of Antisthenes and his philosophy. The Hellenistic Age is often regarded as a period of significant diversification in philosophical thought, characterized by a broad range of perspectives on both traditional and novel issues, as well as a greater openness to competing schools of thought. Previous to Hellenistic times, ancient philosophy on language did not pay so much attention to the everyday language, which was not legitimate to philologists and perhaps was "neglected" by "philosophers". On this score, the Hellenistic accounts based on the golden period of Attic lack

intrinsic relevance or rather shadow the importance of ordinary language for its non-literary declension (De Vogel, 2023).

3.1. Epicureanism and Stoicism: Views on Language

One of the most vehement attacks against the Stoic doctrine of determinism came from Epicurean circles. Typically the Epicureans were more interested in grammatical studies and etymology, which were considered a part of the trivium in Hellenistic education. They paid less attention to language as such. Unlike the Stoics, they regarded language not as primarily descriptive but adaptive, intended to serve human social needs.

Therefore, more emphasis on facts like constant shifts and variations of meanings, emotional overtones, and slang words is to be found in the Epicureans. Moreover language was a tool different from others. It is not at all a legalistic medium, but the substance of human social life. It is in and through language that man enters social life (G. B. James, 1970). The Polemics and the doxographical tradition describe these notions barely casually, but they were well known among Epicureans and have influenced remarkable authors. On the other hand, language was conceived by the Stoics as an emanation of the rationality that permeates the whole universe. It pervades all the laws of the Kosmos and constitutes an element of its structure. Indeed, phonai, words and names are among the pragma of heaven. Hence to them it seems natural that the same word should be preserved and used uniformly in all the local idioms (Golf-French, 2023).

In other words, local idioms did not affect meaning. In this matter the Stoic position seems to be most consistent among the Hellenistic. The relativity of meaning became a fundamentally different notion in Epicureanism and Stoicism, and this explains why such a relatively simple and fascinating idea developed into two markedly different traditions. Such considerations have important implications for the interpretation of the concepts of meaning taking place within ancient philosophy. Until about one century ago, meaning was thought to be a stable and secure link between the signs of the language and their referents.

Language itself was regarded as a sort of reflection of an objective reality. Similarly to the Stoics, the main authors that are handed down to us by the Academics and the Peripatetics, the sophists, and Aristotelians in particular tended to fall into a relation of optimization between reality, meaning, and language. On the contrary, the tradition that comes directly from the Epicurean school and by its offshoots does not seem to stress the relationship between language and reality. At the most, a rather modern argument uses a **notion: if the relationship between language and reality existed, then it would be impossible to lie (Giovacchini** 2023).

4. Interrelationship between Theories of Grammar and Philosophy:

Various theories of grammar may be traced back to their initial philosophical concepts, which can be found in earlier, more traditional theories of grammar as well as more contemporary views of grammar. A summary of significant grammar theories and the philosophical foundations upon which they are based is listed as follows:

Table (1) illustrates the different types of Grammar Theories and their Philosophical Roots

No.	Theory of Grammar	Philosophical Origin	Key Thought
1.	**Traditional Grammar**	**Logicus Aristotelica (Logicus Classica)**	Grammar as we know it is Aristotelian; it tries to make language formal and is very static, it tries to force language into boxes (by forcing language into discussion about the subject, predicate, noun, verb, etc. It has the doctrine that there is a "correct" way to use language, which reflects philosophical preoccupations with order and universality.

			The approach derives from the philosophy of logic, which stresses order, categorization, and formalized structures in language. The Aristotelian syllogisms and logical classifications inform grammatical classification of parts of speech and sentence structure.
2.	**Structuralism**	**Saussurean Structuralism (Relational Concepts)**	At its most fundamental level, structuralism, and Ferdinand de Saussure especially, is grounded in the philosophy of relational thinking — the notion that meaning in language assembly is derived from the relation (respective differences) of elements in the construction, rather than any intrinsic quality of those elements.
3.	**Generative Grammar**	**Rationalist Epistemology**	Generative grammar is based on the philosophical tradition of rationalism, especially the belief that knowledge is inborn. The central concept relates back to the rationalist philosophical idea of a priori knowledge — that certain information structures (like grammar) are hard-coded into the brain before we experience things.
4.	**Generative Semantics**	**Philosophical Naturalism**	Semantic Content as Mental Representation. This theory suggests that grammatical structures are fundamentally tied to the mental representations of meaning, giving a central role in grammar semantics.
5.	**Interpretive Semantics**	**Hermeneutics and Pragmatism (Meaning)**	It draws on the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation (especially from philosophers such as Gadamer and Schleiermacher) and the pragmatic perspective of language as (in the end, most of the time) as something that one uses to accomplish things, vis-à-vis the real world, vis-a-vis empirically relevant goals.
6.	**Cognitive Grammar**	**Cognitive Science (Embodied Cognition)**	Also known as Construing developed by Ronald Langacker, and closely related to cognitive science and the philosophy of mind, especially embodied cognition. This view argues that language reflects general cognitive processes and is intimately connected with perception, action, and experience. It also introduces a style of analysis that distances itself from formal, rule-governed descriptions of the grammar (for example, those found in Chomskyan generative grammar) and advocates for a more psychologistic and embodied representation of how people tend to form categories and conceptualize with language.
7.	**Formal Logic Based Grammar**	**Formal Logic and Set Theory (Mathematical Logic)**	Formal grammar is based on the principles of mathematical logic; supporting the notion that language can be modeled using a formal, rule-based structure. It has something in common with philosophy's development of formal systems for theses and reasoning (for example, symbolic logic).

Every grammar, in short, expresses a philosophy, whether that philosophy be the elementary, mental, and embodied categories of traditional grammar or the disembodied, formal linguistic theories of contemporaneous grammars. These recent developments reflect a growing sophistication in models of how language functions, from structural to cognitive and contextual models where meaning is articulated in process and interpretation.

Conclusion and Implications for Modern Linguistics

From this perspective, the exploration of the language and thought relationship in ancient philosophers shows that there are constant and lasting debates about what language is and how language formulates thought in ancient philosophy. The investigation of the language and thought connection in ancient Greek philosophers reveals the intellectual curiosity about how language works and dictates thought already in ancient intellectual traditions. Also, it is demonstrated that language is not only a medium or nomenclature of thought but also a powerful instrument of thought that defines the boundaries of one's cognitive experience. In that sense, Greek philosophers believed that verbal thinking should be fruitful and meaningful just as much attention is paid to the proper use of language and logical consistencies that apply to it.

As shown in this review, the link between ancient Greek philosophy and modern linguistics may offer two possibilities:

A. *To set up criteria to interpret the language and thought relationship and then*

B. *To apply the selected criteria to the works of Greek philosophers and modern linguistics*.

Therefore, the exploration of how language is formed and how it functions in thought reveals the fundamental questions that have affected humanity and have not changed in essence over millennia, as well as the development of various thinking on the matters of linguistics and philosophy. The results of this study are presented in two parts:

1. *First, how language is thought to be formed is consulted to ancient philosophers who can be seen as proto-linguists in ancient philosophy.*

2. *Second, the formation of the language and thought, which is scholarly discoursing, possible review of the philosophical thinking on the same matter of modern linguistic theory is demonstrated.*

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