Really, my young friend, this is a very difficult investigation we’re engaged in. This appearing, and this seeming but not being, and this saying things but not true things— all these issues are full of confusion, just as they always have been. 

Plato, Soph. 236 E

The first chapter of the *De Interpretatione* hinges on the relations between language, thought and the world. I prefer the term ‘world’ to the customary usage of scholars who employ here words like ‘being’ or ‘reality’ and understand them to be synonyms. The reason for my choice is that, as the example of τραγέλαφος at the end of the chapter shows, μὴ ὄντα themselves can also be expressed and thought, though, by definition, they neither exist nor are real. According to the meaning I attach to the term ‘world’, it encompasses everything that can be expressed or thought, independently of whether it exists or not (as, for that matter, is the case with things of the past or events in the future, which in fact do not exist). This does not mean that for Aristotle there exists a totality, the world, understood as a kind of super-category (as well as being is not a super-category).

In defining the relations between language, thought and world, the ‘elephant in the room’ consists of ψεῦδος, or better still, the various forms of ψεῦδος: falsity, fiction, lying. Every theory of meaning must come to terms with, and give an adequate account of, pseudomorphia, that is, the possibility of expressing things that do not exist. The theory outlined in the *De Interpretatione* is no exception to the rule.

The passage in question is well-known, frequently cited and commented on in the literature, and has assumed a pivotal position in all succeeding reflections on language. It has been the object of numerous interpretations and, while no cross-references to it or to the *De Interpretatione* in general exist in any other text by Aristotle, nonetheless it has been read in the light of the entire Aristotelian corpus. It has engaged the attention not only of specialists on Aristotle’s thought, but also of linguists, semioticians, logicians, and philosophers of language, so much so that it would be no exaggeration

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** English translations of the texts by Aristotle are mostly taken from Aristotle, *The Complete Works - the Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols., ed. by J. Barnes, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984; modifications as well as the names of the translators are quoted in the footnotes. Where an official translation is not available, I have provided one myself.
to state that its importance lies in the quantity and variety of interpretations and evaluations which it has generated. To some it appears to be extremely dense; for others it is too brief and imprecise; it has been accorded a position of fundamental historical (and not only historical) importance for the emergence of semantics, but someone argues that, together with the second and third chapters, it is «an amplified and differentiated re-elaboration of the fourth chapter».

However, rather than conducting a close examination of these various interpretations, or undertaking a minute philological analysis of the text, my brief here will be to propose a reading of the *De Interpretatione* with particular regard to the forms of ψεῦδος. Language does not guarantee any safe anchorage in being, not only because it can express what is false, but also because it can speak truly of what does not exist. It is in the light of such a possibility that the text in question should be read.

1. *A first level of understanding*

Now spoken sounds are symbols [σύμβολα] of affections in the soul, and written marks [γραφόμενον] symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of – affections of the soul [παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς] – are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses [ομοιώματα] of – things [πράγματα] – are also the same.

The general sense of the passage seems to be as follows: written marks (τὰ γραφόμενα, γράμματα) are symbols (σύμβολα) of spoken sounds (τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ, φωναί), these are symbols (σύμβολα, 16a 4), or signs (σημεῖα, 16a 6), of the affections in the soul (τὰ παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς), which are likenesses (ομοιώματα) of things (τὰ πράγματα). Aristotle thus distinguishes four types of elements (written marks, spoken sounds, affections of the soul, and things), connected by a set of relations (‘to be a symbol of’, or ‘to be a sign of’, and ‘to be a likenesses of’). The first two types of element (written marks and spoken sounds) vary according to the differences in human groups, the last two (affections of the soul and things) are, to the contrary, the same for everyone. As we shall see, the discriminating element lies in the conventional character of symbols.

What I have said so far is only apparently clear, in that it is little more than a paraphrase: for that matter, it can be found, expressed more or less in the same terms, in many texts that take the measure of the Aristotelian passage we have just cited. But a correct interpretation of the passage demands that we explain what Aristotle understands by each of the four terms and, furthermore, how the various relations subsisting between them are to be interpreted. Here we ask ourselves in fact, (I) in what way linguistic expressions are symbols of the affections in the soul, and (II) in what way

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4 *De int.* 1, 16a 3-8. The translation by J.L. Ackrill has been slightly modified: I don’t accept the translation of πράγματα as ‘actual things’ for reasons which will become clear later (see § 3.4).
the latter are likenesses of things. Yet – and this is an aspect that has often been under-valued – we also ask ourselves (III) in what sense written marks are symbols of spoken sounds. In addition, it is not clear (IV) whether the terms σύμβολον and σημεῖον are being used as synonyms or not. Finally, (V) what are we talking about when the object of our speeches does not exist? Agreement on these points is a chimera, also because whoever writes on them does so in so far as he maintains he is proposing a new hypothesis on how the text is to be read, or, at least, that he is correcting one that has already been given. It is all too easy to lose one’s way in the dark thickets of interpretations. On the other hand, given their bulk and variety – and the law of the cornucopia of interpretations undoubtedly applies in this instance –, every new hypothesis cannot but agree with previous works on a number of points while begging to differ, at time over only a number of details, in the hope that one might thus make a small contribution to the progress of research. Such an expectation is thin, but it is, nonetheless, one that has spurred me to elaborate the work at hand.

As a first step we must note that linguistic expressions – a generic term employed here to indicate both τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ and τὰ γραφόμενα – do not symbolize things, but affections in the soul. It is the latter, however, that might relate directly to things. I say ‘might’ because it is necessary to get a clear idea of the meanings of ὁμοιώματα and πράγματα, since as Plato, mindful of the eristic and sophistic experience, stated with great clarity in both the Cratylus and the Sophist, it is manifestly possible to construct arguments that appear to be true but in fact refer to nothing. Aristotle is evidently quite aware of this, as he openly acknowledges that «you can mean things which do not exist». This has led Vittorio Sainati to recognize in the De Interpretatione an «anti-Platonic implication in Aristotle’s discourse: that is, the evident disengagement
of semantics from ontology». Indeed, the text speaks explicitly of two relationships, both of which indicate a correspondence, but of a different type; nothing is said of a possible third relation subsisting between signs and things. It is precisely this kind of relationship that the *Cratylus* examines. The warning Plato raises there against the dangers inherent in language finds its consummation precisely in the *De Interpretatione*, which shall be, in this sense, difficult to read in a sharply anti-Platonic key.

2. *The conventionality of language in the Cratylus*

The central theme of the *Cratylus* is the correctness of names. At the outset of the dialogue, Plato wonders whether it is given by nature or by convention. Hermogenes maintains a conventionalist thesis («the correctness of names is determined by anything besides convention and agreement», 384 C-D)⁹, which is outlined as distinctly subjectivist:

I call a thing by the name I gave it; you call it by the different name you gave it (385 D).

On the opposite, Cratylus retains that there is a correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature (383 A).

That of Hermogenes is an extreme thesis, which anticipates by over two thousand years Humpty Dumpty’s opinion in *Through the Looking Glass*: convention consists in assigning arbitrarily (and also privately, not necessarily socially) names to things. This thesis is refuted by recourse to an objective element. Socrates introduces the distinction between true and false speech. The truth of a speech does not depend on the subject: things exist by themselves, regardless of us, and have their own essence (cf. 386 D-E). Actions, like saying and naming, are listed by Socrates as a kind of things; but then, such actions in turn do not proceed arbitrarily from us, and things must be named «in the natural way for them to be named» (387 D). Convention is not entirely dismissed, yet it may not be identified with the arbitrary choices of subjects.

Elaborating on this point, Socrates defines the name as «a tool [ὄργανον]» (388 A), through which we teach something to one another and we distinguish things: thus, names have both a communicative and a cognitive function. Naming is not a task for everyone, but one that rests with the rule-setters, who «give each thing the form of name [ὄνόματος εἶδος] suited to it» (390 A). There exists, then, a right way of naming things, which is neither subjective nor the result of an agreement among individuals:

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it is the objective way of a specialist of the science under consideration, that is, the rule-setter, who gives names to things under the dialectician’s supervision, operating with sounds and syllables, and taking care of conveying the form of name that fits each object. Such a thesis – that the correctness of names resides in displaying each entity as it is – resurfaces several times throughout the dialogue (cf. 422 C-D, 428 E).

Does it follow that Cratylus’ thesis is right? It is discussed through a long sequel of etymological investigations, by which Socrates assesses the theory of naming as imitation (cf. 422 E - 427 D): similarly to a gesture, a name is «a vocal imitation of what it imitates, and [...] someone who imitates something with his voice names what he imitates» (423 B). After successfully defending the public character of language against Hermogenes – for accepting to identify conventions with arbitrary attributions of meaning by a subject would have put in jeopardy both functions of names – Socrates must now face, against Cratylus, a significant challenge which is also found in other dialogues: the possibility of uttering something false. Cratylus’ view is that all names have been given correctly and that falsehood may not be said or expressed; in fact, he assimilates false propositions to mere sounds (cf. 429 B - 430 A). Moreover, he maintains that «if we add, subtract, or transpose a letter, we don’t simply write the name incorrectly, we don’t write it at all» (431 E - 432 A). According to Cratylus, language is transparent: he who utters a speech can do nothing but say that which is. Again, we are faced with an extreme thesis, one that undercuts issues which are «full of confusion, just as they always have been», most notably, the possibility of «saying things but not true things».

If names are imitations, then they can be assimilated to paintings. Now, a beautiful painting is one that presents all that a thing is, all its colours and shapes; likewise, a name is justly ascribed when it reproduces with letters and syllables the essence of a thing, that is, when it renders all that pertains to it. Nonetheless, a name might not have all the letters which inhere to the thing, or it might have one too much, or else, a name that is unfit for a thing may be added to a sentence, and the latter to a speech. A name is a name when it expresses the character of a thing, even if it does not possess all the elements that pertain to it: if it has them all, the thing is well expressed, if it doesn’t, it is poorly expressed (cf. 432 E - 433 A). Again, we are told that «a name is correct if it expresses things by means of letters and syllables» (433 B). Such a view undermines the hypothesis that naming is imitating: were it so, those elements which constitute names, i.e. letters, should also be similar to objects; but this is not always the case. We may find, for example, a word like σκληρότης (hardness) containing the letter λ, which expresses softness. Yet, as Cratylus remarks, the term may be correctly understood «because of usage», which is the same as saying «by convention» (434 E). Therefore, convention (viz. agreement and usage) contributes to the correctness of names, and yet, it does not reduce to arbitrariness. As we may also deduce from the sequence of etymologies (cf. 392 B - 437 C), names express – though in an impure manner – our experience of the world: they express objectivity. I say ‘experience’ and not ‘knowledge’, because I mean that in the names our current knowledge is not expressed, but the one that has settled over the centuries, namely the way in which

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our distant ancestors experienced the world. In this sense, names contain, encode and transmit information about the nominated\(^{12}\).

The last point at issue concerns precisely the relation between names and things. As a consequence of his naturalistic stance, Cratylus maintains that «anyone who knows a thing’s name also knows the thing» (435 D). Now, Socrates agrees that we can avail ourselves of names in order to teach and learn, as he previously argued in his dialogue with Hermogenes; yet, another method of inquiry needs to be found, for we cannot trust names as a means for knowing things. Where does the danger lie? In a conclusion of the previous analysis, namely, that the connection between things and words is not guaranteed, since false speech is possible: therefore, investigating words is not a reliable guide to knowing things. At this point, Socrates interjects two objections that ultimately question the role of the rule-setter. To begin with, whoever gave the first names did so according to his beliefs on how things stood, but in case he did not think correctly and still gave names, those who believe him cannot but be deceived (cf. 436 B). Moreover, even if we leave aside the contrast between moving and flowing things and names that seem to freeze them, where did the first name-giver draw his knowledge from? For, as has been said, name-giving rests on the knowledge of things, which in turn are known to us by means of names, and these were yet to be given. If no other path is provided for knowing things, the first rule-setters’ knowledge is left unexplained. Likewise, we may say that, although names come through agreement, yet the latter is only possible through language. Thus, unlike Cratylus, Socrates closes that «it must be possible to learn about the things that are, independently of names» (438 E). By what means? His first suggestion is «learning them through one another, if they are somehow akin, and through themselves» (438 E). Finally, he concludes:

No one with any understanding will commit himself or the cultivation of his soul to names, or trust them and their givers to the point of firmly stating that he knows something – condemning both himself and the things that are to be totally unsound like leaky sinks (440 C).

Here, Socrates voices Plato’s critique of a method that relies on linguistic analysis as a strategy for approaching philosophical problems. Although such critique may seem to anticipate contemporary issues, it could also apply to his best disciple, who considered the analysis of linguistic forms as one possible method for studying the structure of the world. It was his master, however, who had provided him with some instruments to this effect.

3. An aside: four types of elements (written marks, spoken sounds, affections of the soul, things) and four kinds of relations (symbolization, signification, representation, reference)

In the De Interpretatione, Aristotle takes many Platonic theses and lays them out in new terms\(^{13}\). If words do not always mean an entity, and yet they mean something, given that we understand false speech, then what do they mean? What is it that we understand – one might add – when someone lies? Or when we study a theory which

\(^{12}\) Such an idea is widely argued by D. Sedley, Plato’s Cratylus, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 5, 23, 28 ff.

has been proven wrong over the centuries, such as the Ptolemaic system? Moreover: since language does not always lie, in what way does it speak about the world when it is truthful? This is where Aristotle’s inquiry sets off, as may be seen in the incipit of the *De Interpretatione*: which is why we shall now return to it.

### 3.1. Symbolizing – σύμβολον and σημεῖον

In order to answer question I above (see § 1), i.e. in what way linguistic expressions are symbols of the affections of the soul, we shall begin by addressing the relation of *symbolization* between signs and affections of the soul. Linguistic signs do not signify *per se*, by nature – in fact, given the diversity of languages\(^\text{14}\), they are not even the same for everyone\(^\text{15}\) – but they are made to signify through an attribution of meaning. However, not all written marks and spoken sounds are significant: it does not suffice to emit a sound, or trace a sign, in order for it to have a meaning.

In the *De anima*, Aristotle clearly distinguishes between sound (ψόφος) and voice (φωνή). The latter is the sound of an animate being, produced by the impact of inhaled air with the trachea; such an impact is intentional and requires the involvement of the soul. Also, not every sound produced by an animal inhaling air may be termed voice, for otherwise that would include things like cough: the sound has to signify something\(^\text{16}\). Τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ corresponds therefore to significant sounds emitted through the tongue while articulating the voice, not – as Theodor Waitz claimed – to whatever sound emitted through the tongue\(^\text{17}\).

Furthermore, a significant spoken sound is not always a symbol: as an example, Aristotle subsequently mentions the inarticulate sounds of beasts, which «do indeed reveal something [δηλοῦσί γέ τι]», yet they are not names\(^\text{18}\), unlike those sounds to

\(^{14}\) Here, in my view, Aristotle is not referring to the different voice emissions of a single sound by different individuals speaking the same language: it is well known, after all, that several phonetic inflections may converge on the same written sign.

\(^{15}\) See also *Hist. an.* IV 9, 536b 19-20; *Probl.* X 38, 895a 4-6; 39, 895a 7-14.

\(^{16}\) Cf. *De an.* B 8, 420b 5 - 421a 1; cf. also *Hist. an.* IV 9, 535a 28 ff.


\(^{18}\) Cf. *De int.* 2, 16a 28-29. Human being alone, amongst all animals, possesses and uses language (cf. *Pol.* A 2, 1253a 9-10; *De gen. an.* E 7, 786b 19-21; *Probl.* XI 1, 899a 1-2). Quite certainly, animals communicate (cf. *De part. an.* II 17, 660a 35 - b 2), and some of them are even apparently «capable of giving or receiving instruction» (*Hist. an.* IX 1, 608a 17-18; cf. also *De int.* 9, 536b 14 ff.), but the sounds they emit for that purpose are of a completely different kind from the articulated sounds emitted by man, both in structure and in function: unlike human articulated voices, they are not analysable – they are not symbols, despite being signs – and moreover, they denominate nothing; they undergo variations in quality (tone, intensity, length), but not in quantity, i.e. changes resulting from the different combination of letters and syllables. The barking of a guard dog, for example, is a sign (to man) that someone or something (man, animal, or car) is approaching, and (from the dog’s standpoint) it is aimed at discouraging the newcomers from invading the territory: it is therefore a sign – and yet, not one that can be analysed in letters and syllables like the words of human language: it is not a symbol in the same way as a name is, for it does not point at the thing, unless the latter is immediately present. On this passage see also W. BELARDI, *Filosofia grammatica e retorica nel pensiero antico*, Edizioni dell’Ateneo, Roma 1985, pp. 107-108; E. MONTANARI, *La sezione linguistica del Peri Hermeneia di Aristotele*, 2 voll., Università degli Studi di Firenze, Firenze 1984-1988, II, pp. 134 ff.; ZANATTA, *Aristotele, Della interpretazione*, pp. 13-14. Quoting *Hist. anim.* IV 9,
which a meaning is attached by convention (κατὰ συνθήκην)\(^{19}\); such meaning has previously been referred to as ‘affection of the soul’. It is only in this sense that certain signs become symbols: thus, a symbol is essentially a kind of sign, where the sign is meant to designate a general concept. Summing up: a symbol is an articulate linguistic sign, either oral or written, consisting of letters and syllables, and significant by convention\(^{20}\). A sign points at something else (cf. \textit{An. pr.} II 27, 70a 7-9); a symbol points specifically at an affection of the soul. It follows that those sounds to which no meaning is conventionally ascribed (the inarticulate sounds of animals), as well as other types of signs which are meaningful but non-linguistic, are not symbols. But then, since a sign is not always a symbol, the terms σύμβολον and σημεῖον are only partially and not perfectly interchangeable (which answers to question IV above): while it is legitimate, albeit with a loss of precision, to replace the specific term with the general one, as it is probably the case in 16a 6, the converse doesn’t hold\(^{21}\).

\(^{19}\) Cf. \textit{De int.} 2, 16a 19, 26-27; in 4, 17a 1-2, such ‘conventional’ character is extended to discourse.

\(^{20}\) Lo \textit{Piparo}, \textit{Aristotele e il linguaggio}, pp. 71 ff., 106 ff., suggests translating κατὰ συνθήκην as ‘by convention’. As I do not wish to discuss here his complex interpretation, I shall only remark that the concept of composition is implicit in the understanding of the symbol as an articulate linguistic sign consisting of letters and syllables.

\(^{21}\) The thesis defended here is essentially that of a ‘partial’ identification of symbol and sign, as opposed to the sharp separation suggested by P. \textit{Aubenque}, \textit{Le problème de l’être chez Aristote. Essai sur la problématique aristotélencienne}, PUF, Paris 1962, pp. 108-109, then argued for by Kretzmann, \textit{Aristotle on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention}, pp. 7-8, and, more extensively, by J. Pépin, \textit{ΣΥΜΒΟΛΑ, ΣΗΜΕΙΑ, ΟΜΟΙΩΜΑΤΑ}. A propos de \textit{De interpretatione} 1, 16 a 3-8 et Politique VIII 5, 1340 a 6-39, in J. Wiesner (ed.), \textit{Aristotes: Werk und Wirkung}, Paul Moraux gewidmet, Erster Bd., Aristoteles und seine Schule, W. de Gruyter, Berlin - New York 1985, pp. 22-44, in part. pp. 34 ff. According to this view, the passage under consideration reveals a conscious distinction of two notions which may be seen as complementary, those of conventional sign (σύμβολον) and natural sign (σημεῖον). This amounts to openly disavowing a tradition dating back to Ammonius, \textit{in De int.}, 20, 6-7 and to Boethius’ Latin translation and commentary, \textit{In De int.}, II 25, 6-14, and still largely credited, according to which σύμβολον and σημεῖον are interchangeable terms in the passage at hand. As an example of natural sign, Aubenque, \textit{Le problème de l’être chez Aristote}, p. 108, mentions smoke, which is a sign of fire. A symbol, he maintains, is more than a sign, as the establishment of a symbolic relationship requires the involvement of the mind which bestows a meaning; at the same time, it is less than a sign, because symbols do not exist by nature – they only acquire their status through an arbitrary act. Pépin, \textit{ΣΥΜΒΟΛΑ, ΣΗΜΕΙΑ, ΟΜΟΙΩΜΑΤΑ}, p. 40, distinguishes names from the inarticulate sounds of animals (which are not names despite expressing something) on the basis of the aforementioned passage (16a 16-29), where Aristotle states that «no name is a name by nature, but only when it becomes a symbol» – this is how Pépin understands lines 16a 27-28; contra, Montanari, \textit{La sezione linguistica del Peri Hermeneias di Aristotele}, II, pp. 127 ff., and Lo Piparo, \textit{Aristotele e il linguaggio}, pp. 80–83, raise objections, on different grounds, concerning the correct interpretation and the proper subject of the verb γένηται. Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on the \textit{De Interpretatione}, had already referred to this passage by pointing out that «nullum nomen est naturaliter», whereas the sounds emitted by animals, despite being not names («Et dicit potius sonus quam voces»), naturally express passions («quibusdam sonis proprias passiones naturaliter significant») (\textit{In De int.}, L, I, l. iv, 46 [11]). Pépin’s avowed reference, however, is Waitz, \textit{Aristotelis Organon Graece}, I, pp. 324-325, who understands σύμβολα as being κατὰ συνθήκην,
3.2. Signification: the convention

The explicit relation of symbolization between linguistic signs and thoughts has a counterpart in the implicit relation of *signification* between thought and language, since it is the corresponding affection of the soul that turns a sign into a symbol. Words are not meaningful by themselves: they become symbols through the mediation of thought, which bestows meaning on them «by convention», drawing from the subject’s experience of the world. What does such convention exactly consist of? From a theoretical point of view, precisely of this semantic relation of signification going from the meaning (the affection of the soul) to the linguistic sign (voice or written marks), Aristotle redefines the Platonic notion of convention, which the *Cratylus* had characterized as an arbitrary attribution of names to things: we do not just give names to things, we confer certain meanings on signs. As we have seen, the anchoring of names to things is not guaranteed even for Plato, which is why he refuses to entrust names and name-givers; yet, he failed to explain what we understand when we deal with names which do not refer to things. Aristotle gives an answer: since names do not secure a solid and immediate anchoring to being, they do not symbolize things, but affections of the soul, which in turn are «images» of things. We may use names as images of things – he tells us in *Soph. el. 1*, 165a 6 ff. – but it is an approach that conceals many dangers, which can only be avoided by a competent user of language. That person, as we learn from Plato, is the dialectician; and Aristotle can only agree on this

whereas ἱστοί are «in rebus ipsis posita». Building on his argument, Pépin, *ΣΥΜΒΟΛΑ, ΣΗΜΕΙΑ, ΟΜΟΙΩΜΑΤΑ*, p. 40, states that «since only a conventional symbol may be properly called a name (and the same goes for all other language items), then inarticulate sounds, which are not entirely devoid of meaning, must necessarily be natural: they are natural signs. Summing up: the Aristotelian text seems to allow for two distinct bearers of meaning – a conventional one, viz. names and verbs, to which the term σύμβολον applies, and a natural one, consisting of inarticulate sounds (of humans and animals alike), to which the term σημεῖον applies» (ibid., p. 42). If, on the other hand, the notion of sign is understood as a general one – as I argued above – then natural events such as smoke, the inarticulate (but not completely meaningless) sounds of animals, and the meaningful linguistic expressions discussed by Aristotle, are all instances of signs; the latter alone, however, are symbols (in an Aristotelian sense), as opposed to other sorts of non-verbal conventional signs, such as winking, nodding, or similar gestures. Finally, it is worth remarking that Pepin’s interpretation – as he himself asserts – relies in an essential way upon the reading πρώτως in line 6 as opposed to πρώτων or πρῶτον (ibid., pp. 37-38), and yet, building on the conclusions of many contemporary scholars, H. Weidemann, *Aristoteles, Peri hermeneias*, übers. und erw. von H. Weidemann, in *Aristoteles, Werke in deutscher Übersetzung*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1994, Bd. 1, Teil II, pp. 141-146, has put forward reasons, which I find very convincing, to the effect that the interpretation of the passage at issue does not depend on that; on this point, see also Zadro, *Aristotele, De interpretatione*, p. 178. Even more fundamentally, it is assumed that Aristotle’s writing is a rigorous one (cf. Pépin, *ΣΥΜΒΟΛΑ, ΣΗΜΕΙΑ, ΟΜΟΙΩΜΑΤΑ*, pp. 36, fn. 44, 38); Pépin himself (ibid., p. 34), however, points out that «his way of proceeding is not completely homogeneous», whereas Aubenque, *Le problème de l’être chez Aristote*, p. 109, had previously declared that «Aristotle’s vocabulary is not always very firm». Moreover, we read in *Soph. el. 1*, 165a 7-8 that names are symbols, yet they are symbols of things, not of affections of the soul; similarly, Rhet. Ι 1, 1404a 21 states that «words are imitations» [τὰ γὰρ ὀνόματα μιμήματα ἐστίν]. Further critics of the thesis that σύμβολον stands for conventional sign and σημεῖον for natural sign include Montanari, *La sezione linguistica del Peri Hermeneias di Aristotele*, II, pp. 41-42, 54-57, and H. Weidemann, *Ansätze zu einer semantischen Theorie bei Aristoteles*, «Zeitschrift für Semiotik», 4 (1982), 3, pp. 241-257, in part. pp. 243-245; Id., *Aristoteles, Peri hermeneias*, p. 146, both of which provide relevant bibliographic references, as well as Polansky - Kučzewski, *Speech and Thought. Symbol and Likeness*, pp. 59-60, whose interpretation of σύμβολον is very similar to the one proposed here; contra, Zadro, *Aristotele, De interpretatione*, pp. 180-181.
thesis. From a practical point of view, it is uncertain whether convention for Aristotle is an intentional act of stipulation, opposite to what is «by nature [φύσει]» — were it so, he would clearly distance himself from a conception of naming as imitation, which Plato in turn criticized and refused —, or else, as it seems more likely, whether it is the result of an intersubjective communicative relation. Both hypotheses have been laid out in the Cratylus, while examining Hermogenes’ position; the notion of convention as habit, on the other hand, seems completely alien to the Aristotelian text. At any rate, the problem of the source of linguistic signs is outside the scope of the De Interpretatione: convention, far from explaining the origin of language, merely designates the semantic relation of significance between a meaning and a symbol.

Several clues legitimize the view that, for Aristotle, language does not merely possess a semantic and conventional character, but also a pragmatic one, as a tool for conveying information and deducing thought from the use of signs, that is, for allowing the listener to interpret the speaker’s thought. Semantic generality, i.e. Aristotle’s assertion that affections and things are the same for everyone, is counteracted by pragmatic relativity, whereby the symbols used by speakers or writers, while endowed with the same meaning, may differ from each other. All of this suggests a priority of thought, which adheres to things immediately, over language, whose symbolic capacity is grounded on thought itself.

In De int. 4, 16b 33 - 17a 1, Aristotle asserts that «every sentence is significant», yet «not as a tool». This passage has been read as a criticism of Plato, since the Cratylus — as we have seen — defines names as tools for teaching and for distinguishing things (see § 2). Now, we may certainly speculate that Aristotle understood ‘tool’ (ὅργανον) in the same way as Plato, but this is far from obvious. On the other hand, from a pragmatic point of view, we do know that Aristotle viewed language as an instrument for transmitting information and allowing the listener to interpret the speaker’s thought, which seems to correspond to the first function of Plato’s tool (teaching); as


23 See, however, the passage from the Rhetoric cited at the end of footnote 21.

24 This conventional character would also bring to the forefront «the social dimension of language, and therefore its historicity» (Zadro, Aristotele, De Interpretatione, p. 50). As K. Oehler, Ein Mensch zeugt einen Mensch. Über den Mißbrauch der Sprachanalyse in der Aristotelesforschung, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1963, p. 24, remarked, rather than resting on some sort of agreement or arbitrary stipulation, the value of linguistic symbols descends from the communicative convention of consensus omnium, that is, a «process ofintersubjective communication» (K. Oehler, Aristoteles, Kategorien, übers. und erl. von K. Oehler, zweite, durchges. Aufl., in ARISTOTELES, Werke in deutscher Übersetzung, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1986, Bd. 1, Teil I, p. 252). According to Lo Piparo, Aristotele e il linguaggio, pp. 77 ff., a reading of κατὰ συνθήκην as ‘by composition’ would be better suited to the context and would preserve conventionality, because such composition is performed by someone, while at the same time underscoring the historical and social element.


26 I find the following passage from De sensu 1, 437a 4-16 truly enlightening in this regard: «Of the
for the epistemic function, i.e. distinguishing things or categorizing, it is also strongly emphasized by Aristotle. In this particular locus, he seems to be calling attention to the fact that meaningful discourse does not refer to things immediately, but through affections of the soul. Sounds emitted by animals are not symbols; as we have seen, they «do indeed reveal something», yet not by convention. In that respect, animals possess a natural tool; discourse, on the other hand, is not – once again – meaningful in an immediate manner, as a natural tool, but only in the conventional sense already expounded, *viz.* as a semantic relation of signification: again, what makes a sign into a symbol is the corresponding affection of the soul.

Given all that has been said so far, we can revert to some of the concepts examined above and briefly answer to question III (see § 1). According to Roy Harris, Aristotle in *De int.* 1 attempts to explain the semiological cleavage between speech and writing, that is, «*why* the written forms do not capture the thought expressed by the corresponding spoken forms?» In his view, it is peculiar to the Aristotelian approach that written signs are symbols of vocal sounds *in the same way* as the latter are symbols of affections of the soul – the alleged proof being the use of the same term in both cases. Quoting C.W.A. Whitaker, Harris points out that οὐμβόλον is a legal term, designating either part of a knucklebone, or of any other object that has been broken in half in order to seal a contract. Each contracting party would keep his οὐμβόλον, which means that the two halves are complementary: neither one is meaningful without its correlate. Thus, written signs are counterparts of vocal sounds, i.e. the former are never instantiated without the latter: even assuming (as suggested in footnote 5) that written signs may symbolize affections of the soul (over and above vocal sounds), we should admit that this is only possible because γραφόμενα presuppose the corresponding φωναί. A written name implies that the same name has been previously pronounced; in fact, due to the existence of different writing systems, it is possible that the same vocal sound be transcribed with different characters (Ἀριστοτέλης and Aristoteles).

Acknowledging the legal origin of the οὐμβόλον entails that the latter is not the object of an agreement; rather, as argued by Wolfgang Wieland, it sanctions an
agreement, i.e. requires prior consensus over something different from the symbol itself. Something becomes a symbol provided something else has been agreed upon. A sign does not become a symbol following an agreement on its meaning, because an agreement, a convention, already presupposes language: instead, it results from a need to communicate or store away the affections of the soul awakened by the things. One might object to Wieland that, although convention presupposes language (as Plato himself acknowledged), the latter does not have to be articulate. His argument, however, could support consequences quite different from those he reached: the relation of signification is both subsequent and distinct from the relation connecting the affection and the thing, one of whose terms – the thing – may well subsist without being represented. Therefore, convention is not extrinsic to the way the world is experienced: the two are related – a result reminiscent of the *Cratylus*, where the correctness of names was made to reside in how they display the essence of things. Symbols are not agreed upon; rather, they are the outcome of an agreement between our experience of the world (which translates into thought) and the world itself. If this is the case, then the agreement of thought and world produces a symbol by which it is sealed. The convention behind the symbol, however, does not rule out the relation of signification between the latter and the affection of the soul: for in what other way could a sign become a symbol? We have, then, a twofold meaning of ‘convention’: a material one and a formal one.

3.3. *Representation* – παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς

Our concluding remarks lead us straight into the analysis of the second fundamental relation (‘being an image of’): the one between thought and world. Although this relation has often been interpreted as one of similarity, I believe – as I shall argue – that it should rather be characterized in terms of *representation*. It must be acknowledged, of course, that affections of the soul, *qua* images, purport to resemble things, and yet, if we try to disengage ourselves from the visual metaphor, we will see that the kind of ‘representation’ they offer surpasses the way things are portrayed by the senses and by the representational faculty itself, and may even be wholly different from it. While it is possible that a given affection of the soul be an image (in a literal sense) of an object before me or a person whom I know, it is quite difficult for something abstract like justice or for a ‘complex object’ such as the battle of Salamis to have a corresponding image of the same kind; likewise, the concept of a man (or of a polygon with one hundred and thirty-seven sides) may hardly be an image of something in the same way as a mental representation of Socrates is actually an image of the individual named Socrates. Furthermore, if we proceed to consider propositions such as «spoken sounds are symbols [σύμβολα] of affections in the soul», speaking of similarity becomes outright impossible. As hinted above, then, «affections of the soul» (παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς) should not be understood as images (as it is commonly done), but rather as thoughts31, in a more general sense, including both concepts and judgments. This is attested by lines 16a 9-11, where Aristotle states that sometimes the soul has a thought (νόημα) which is neither

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true nor false, and sometimes one to which either truth or falsehood pertains. And it is further attested by the following chapters, dealing with names, verbs and sentences. Therefore, the issue of mental images seems to be stranger to the text.

We have left unanswered question II, i.e. how to determine more precisely the relation of representation (‘being an image of’, in Aristotelian terms) – which, once again, does not mean similarity, although such a relation may not be ruled out in some cases. Similarity is a symmetric relation, while representation is not: if A is similar to B, then B is also similar to A (think of a pair of twins, or an original and its copy), but if A represents B, B does not in turn necessarily represent A (an ambassador represents his country, but the opposite doesn’t hold; likewise, a given representation represents a thing, but not conversely). Now, in some cases – namely, when there is no such thing as a real object – it is difficult to speak of similarity, whereas we can speak of representation. By designating thoughts as παθήματα of the soul and, shortly afterwards, as ομοιώματα of things, Aristotle presumably meant to underscore the fact that thoughts are affected by the shape of things, they are even moulded upon them, but they are not mental images which things impress on the soul, as if the latter were a sort of photographic plate.

The lines we are reading are immediately followed by an explicit reference to the De anima:

These matters have been discussed in the work on the soul and do not belong to the present subject.

In the third book of this work, Aristotle explains indeed how things act on thought. The intellectual part of the soul, he states, is capable of receiving the form of objects: in other words, it is potentially identical with the form without being the form itself (cfr. De an. Γ 4, 429a 13-18). But if there is no object of the thought, there can be no thought in the soul, for thinking is always thinking of something. In the case of objects without matter, i.e. intelligible forms, the subject and object of thought are one and the same; in the case of material objects, every (intelligible) object of thought is only potentially present (cf. 430a 3-5). «Actual knowledge», Aristotle points out several times, «is identical with its object»35, as they share the same form. We can then designate the affections of the soul as «the thoughts of all that is intelligible»36, thus under-

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32 According to Zadro, Aristotele, De interpretatione, p. 181, νοήματα are in the φωναί.
33 See the objections raised by Oehler, Aristoteles, Kategorien, p. 252, and Mignucci, In margine al concetto di forma nella Metafisica di Aristotele, p. 149. As concerns the interpretation of παθήματα τῆς ψυχῆς, I agree with both authors, as well as with Weidemann, Ansätze zu einer semantischen Theorie bei Aristoteles, pp. 246-249; Id., Aristoteles, Peri hermeneias, pp. 135 ff., and Polansky - Kuczewski, Speech and Thought, Symbol and Likeness, pp. 54-56 – all of whom refer to 16a 9 ff. According to Arens, Aristotle’s Theory of Language and its Tradition, p. 30, on the other hand, «we can say that Aristotle seems to have regarded the human soul quasi as a photographic plate, on which the things leave their pictures»; the same view, which is fundamentally different from the one I defend above, is also shared by Pépin, ΣΥΜΒΟΛΑ, ΣΗΜΕΙΑ, ΟΜΟΙΩΜΑΤΑ, p. 33. Kretzmann, Aristotle on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention, p. 9, regards the assertion in 16a 7 «as applying only to mental images of actual things». A reading in terms of similarity, with mathematical underpinnings, has been offered by Lo Piparo, Aristotele e il linguaggio, pp. 171 ff.
34 De int. 1, 16a 8-9.
36 Whitaker, Aristotle’s De interpretatione, p. 17.
scoring the objectively epistemic character of thoughts – as opposed to a subjectively mental one. In this regard, they may be said to be the same for everyone.

Summing up: unlike linguistic expressions (graphic and phonic alike), what they symbolize, viz. affections of the soul (and what these symbolize in turn, things themselves) are the same for everyone. It does not follow that different terms used by different people, e.g. to say ‘father’ (‘Vater’, ‘padre’, ‘père’) or ‘God’ (‘Gott’, ‘Dio’, ‘Dieu’), perfectly overlap and convey the very same thought, especially if such terms are connected to different subjective experiences: vagueness, it could be objected, is an essential component of the semiotic relation between speaker and interpreter. Yet, such concerns are completely alien to the text under review. Aristotle’s intention is rather to emphasize the universal character of the semantic function both of symbols and affections of the soul. Again, these are not to be understood as (private) subjective mental states, but – conversely – as (public) objective contents of thought, arising from cognitive processes. In other words, precisely on account of the diversity of languages, the sameness of affections of the soul warrants the possibility of mutual understanding, since any expression of a given language admits of an equivalent in another language – albeit not in terms of perfect correspondence, as translators know all too well –, pointing at the same content of thought: that is, both expressions refer to the same thing or state of affairs, regardless of any possible circumstance involving subjects or communicative processes. This is true of translations between different languages as well as of synonymous expressions within the same language.

I said in the beginning that every theory of meaning must take a stand on pseudomorphia, i.e. the possibility of saying that which is not. Thus, in the case of the word ‘goat-stag’ (τραγέλαφος), which has to mean something – as Aristotle points out –, what is the corresponding affection of the soul an ‘image’ of? Can affections of the soul be ὁμοιώματα without being grounded on something? If their being a meaning consisted of being an image of something, the absence of their object should entail an absence of meaning; but this is not the case. Maybe it is not a coincidence that Aristotle speaks of πράγματα, and not of ὄντα. It is now time to answer question V, and I shall do so by arguing for the following thesis: objects are not necessarily real, and while including ὄντα, πράγματα do not exclude μὴ ὄντα. (In the process, I will refer to ‘images’ in the sense that has been clarified in this section.)

3.4. Reference – πράγματα

So far we have examined two explicit fundamental relations, i.e. those of ‘symbolization’ and ‘representation’, whereas ‘signification’ has been taken to mean ‘convention’, or rather, one of the senses in which a convention may be understood. Nonetheless, once a relation is established between affections of the soul and things, another one is implicitly acknowledged, namely, the relation of reference between language and world: being symbols of the contents of thought, which are in turn images of things, words are also symbols of such images, and therefore of things themselves, albeit in an indirect and non-natural way. More precisely, a linguistic expression con-

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A similar view is endorsed by Oehler, Aristoteles, Kategorien, p. 255, who likens the affection of the soul to the Stoicists’ λεκτόν, construing the whole Stoic philosophy of language as an accurate rewording of Aristotelian distinctions (ibid, p. 256).
veys a meaning (i.e. symbolizes an affection of the soul) in the first place (πρώτων\(^38\), 16a 6), and secondly it provides a reference to a thing through this meaning: the resulting picture is – so to speak – a sort of hierarchical priority of symbolization/signification over reference. Against this traditional thesis\(^39\), it has been held that «precisely because they are symbols of these images of things, their semantic reference to images exonerates them [sc. the symbols] from referring to things, establishing them as substitutive symbols of things»\(^40\). Before proceeding to elaborate on this point, two important remarks are in order: (a) ‘images’ presuppose something which they are images of; (b) this ‘something’ – as I shall argue below – need not be real.

As I mentioned earlier, in Soph. el. 1, 165a 7 ff. Aristotle describes names as symbols instead of things (where a symbol is clearly to be understood as ‘something which stands for something else’), then he goes on to warn against a use of language that takes the meaning of symbols to imply directly an instantiation of the corresponding objects. We know that language may say that which is not, either by uttering something false, or by speaking truthfully of a non-being. It follows that, besides dictating which relation is logically prior, the hierarchy outlined above could possess a further meaning: words are ‘in the first place’ symbols of affections of the soul, and ‘secondly’ of things, because they are always symbols in the former sense, but not always in the latter\(^41\). This is consistent with the interpretation that sees πράγματα as temporal objects, and hence real ones. Yet, widespread as it is\(^42\), such a reading does not fully account for the Aristotelian theory outlined so far. If the thing, or the fact, which a given affection could be an image of, does not exist (in the sense explained above) – as when we speak hypothetically, make plans for the future, relate imaginary, possible, or unreal events, or again when we are wrong or deliberately lie –, then the affection of the soul will not exist in turn; consequently, the corresponding term cannot be significant. And yet, even in those cases, we speak and understand each other. We must therefore either dispense with empty expressions, or else interpret the term πράγμα so as not to undermine the Aristotelian theory; the former, however, doesn’t seem to cor-

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\(^38\) But on this point see footnote 21 above.

\(^39\) The view has been strongly endorsed by WEIDEMANN, Ansätze zu einer semantischen Theorie bei Aristoteles, p. 242; Id., Aristoteles, Peri hermereias, pp. 141-142, but dates back to AMMONIUS, in De int., 17, 24-26, and BOETHIUS, In De int., I 40, 12-24; II 33, 27-33; 40, 30 - 41, 7; contra, KRETZMANN, Aristotle on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention, p. 5. WHITAKER, Aristotle’s De interpretatione, pp. 22-23, shares Ammonius’ thesis, but departs from it to the extent that he does not regard thoughts as intermediate entities between words and things, but as identical to things in terms of form. Hence, the passages at issue from De int. 1 and Soph. el. 1 are consistent with each other.

\(^40\) SAINATI, Storia dell'«Organon» aristotelico. I. Dai «Topici» al «De interpretatione», p. 208; cf. also ZANATTA, Aristotele, Della interpretazione, p. 143.

\(^41\) On exegetical issues concerning the logical primacy between the relations designated here as ‘symbolization’ and ‘reference’, see MONTANARI, La sezione linguistica del Peri Hermeneias di Aristotele, I, pp. 126-132; II, pp. 45-57, who introduces and discusses the theses of ancient and modern commentators.

\(^42\) The view that construes πράγματα as nothing but actual things is upheld, among others, by ACKRILL, Aristotle’s Categories and De Interpretatione, p. 43; KRETZMANN, Aristotle on Spoken Sound Significant by Convention, pp. 4, 9; POLANSKY - KUCZEWSKI, Speech and Thought, Symbol and Likeness, pp. 52 and passim. Cf. also MODRÁK, Aristotle’s Theory of Language and Meaning, p. 20: «Pragma is Aristotle’s term for the actually existing object, event, or situation that a word, a sentence, or a belief refers to or describes». 
respond to Aristotle’s intentions, as shown by the example of the τράγελαφος which he proposes at the end of De int. 1.

According to a different interpretative thread, πράγματα (as well as ‘affections of the soul’) must be understood in a wider sense, namely, as encompassing on one side individual spatio-temporal entities, perceivable through the senses, and on the other side facts, actions, qualities, genera, species. In fact, the term seems to admit of an even more general meaning. According to Wolfgang Wieland, it has – just like σύμβολον – a legal origin; it designated the focus of a dispute, the object over which a trial was held. Πράγμα is therefore that which is being discussed, but on whose objective existence nothing has yet been ascertained: if this is the case, then Aristotle must not have understood it in a restricted sense, as an actual entity, but rather as «what one means from time to time with a word or speech, that is to say, what is spoken about». In other words, πράγμα refers to the object of speech, but entails no commitment concerning its existence or non-existence, its possibility or even impossibility. From the point of view of language, all meaning implies a convention, therefore we may also speak of things which do not really exist (cf. An. post. I 8, 92b 29-30), and we may inquire about goat-stags, for ‘goat-stag’ does mean something (cf. De int. 1, 16a 16-17). In Wieland’s view, the fact that Aristotle speaks of the goat-stag is a clue in favour of the function of speech in intersubjective communication. Yet, the assessment on the actual existence of something is often a task for empirical research, whereas it pertains to language to speak of it as if it were a thing, even when this is not strictly the case (as with space, time, movement – and the goat-stag).45

This interpretative line – which I regard as the most plausible – branches off into a number of different streamlets. I will focus on a few of them, in order to underscore both the theoretical questions they raise, and the aporetic position entertained by Aristotle himself, who seems to point at several possible paths – a clear sign of the difficulties inherent in the subject matter. While Wieland places the πράγματα within a linguistic horizon, L.M. De Rijk regards them as «things qua being conceived of in a certain state», independently of their existence, although the term may also be used to refer to actual things. More specifically, πράγμα means ‘[x]’s being so-and-so’, and it may either refer epistemically to an object conceived as being in a certain state, or ontologically to an object existing in the outside world. Therefore, it designates that which underlies an affirmative or negative assertion, i.e. a state of affairs, which may or may not obtain in the outside world. As for Aristotle’s reference to merely possible πράγματα in De int. 9, 19a 33, all difficulties disappear – in De Rijk’s view – «provided we take him to talk of πράγματα as the mental contents of a true λόγος, not as things being part of the outside world». If, on the other hand, we conceived πράγματα as real states of affairs, we

43 Cf. Oehler, Aristoteles, Kategorien, p. 256. H. Maier, Die Syllogistik des Aristoteles, 3 Bde., Verlag der H. Lauppischen Buchhandlung, Tübingen 1896-1900, I, p. 115, fn. 3, argues that λευκόν in De int. 12, 21b 28 is called a πράγμα precisely on account of such an extensive interpretation of the word.
44 Wieland, Die aristotelische Physik, p. 171; his view is shared by Weidemann, Aristoteles, Peri hermeneias, pp. 138-139.
47 Ibi, 1, p. 110; see also I, p. 290.
would be forced to accept the occurrence of non-existent states of affairs. However, one might object to De Rijk that, if πράγματα (i.e. states of affairs qua conceived) are mental contents, and the latter are ‘images’ of πράγματα, then mental contents are ‘images’ of other mental contents, which would trigger an infinite regress.

Investigating how Aristotle uses the term πράγμα in other works, De Rijk argues that it must refer to that which the act of knowledge is about, «i.e. not the thing taken by itself, but qua being conceived of»; were it not so, he remarks, thought and reality should coincide. In De gen. et corr. I 8, 325a 17-18, πράγματα are opposed to theoretical views (λόγοι); in Phys. III 8, 208a 15-16, they are contrasted with thinking (νόησις); and in Top. VI 7, 146a 13-15, they are distinguished from the content of the definiens formula (τὸ κατὰ τὸν λόγον). In all these cases, De Rijk maintains, πράγμα does not stand for anything in the outside world. As decisive evidence for his view, he cites Poet. 14, 1453b 2-5 and 1454a 13-14, where τα πράγματα are the events that constitute a story, the ‘plot’. This is right. But then, since πράγματα are not real, they are either mental – which brings us back to the infinite regress – or they belong to yet another sphere. The expression ‘qua conceived of’ will not suffice to eschew this conundrum.

According to De Rijk, Aristotle makes a distinction between ‘being’ and ‘existing’ – a distinction that we can find in modern authors such as Bolzano, Meinong and Twardowski. The fact that the goat-stag is a μὴ ὄν (cf. An. pr. I 38, 49a 24) does not qualify it as ‘a non-being,’ but only as ‘non-existent’; it follows «that this term signifies something that has no real ontic value, rather than that this thing is non-existent. To Aristotle, Homer is non-existent, but not a non-being»49. If this is the case, then the goat-stag does not belong to the sphere of being: it is, as Meinong would have it, außerseiend. This is an interesting point of view, especially given the assumption that πράγμα means ‘[x]’s being so-and-so,’ for then the goat-stag could possess some properties despite being non-existent – yet another analogy with Meinong. However, it seems that De Rijk does not ascribe ontological independence to Homer or to the goat-stag; as πράγματα, they are things ‘qua being conceived of’. But then the dilemma exposed above recurs.

Elaborating on the interpretative thread initiated by Wieland, Franco Lo Piparo puts forth an alternative definition of πράγμα as «that which is correlative to an operation of the human soul»50, then he takes a further step and outlines a view which only apparently agrees with De Rijk’s. First, he points at Rhet. I 1, 1354a 26-28, where Aristotle says that the purpose of a judicial trial is to ascertain whether the πράγμα «is so or is not so, that it has or has not happened»; consequently, we may as well speak of something (a fact) that does not exist or did not occur, viz. of a false fact (πράγμα ψεῦδος). Now, in Metaph. Δ 29, 1024b 18–26 – which we shall come back to in due time – Aristotle speaks precisely of πράγμα ψεῦδος: «therefore, a fact may correspond to something which does not exist»51 – it may be a μὴ ὄν. Wherever there is a πράγμα, Lo Piparo argues, there must be a mind; although it does not produce the πράγμα, the mind can apprehend it and

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48 Ibi, I, p. 112.
49 Ibi, I, p. 177.
50 Lo Piparo, Aristotele e il linguaggio, p. 167.
51 Ibidem.
inquire about its existence. A πράγμα is posited within the compass of a cognitive act of the mind, yet it is not in turn a mere cognitive reality.

Again, the question is in order whether πράγματα are mental entities – at least the pseudomorphous ones, which are related to some falsity, fiction, or lie. If they are, in what way are they different from affections of the soul? And if they are not, do they enjoy an independent existence even when they are the πράγματα of a fictional tale? Lo Piparo hints at a «level of reality where language (λόγος) and world (τὰ ὄντα) are similar», then goes on to assert that «despite not belonging to the same natural genus, operations of the soul and facts compose a unified domain by virtue of their analogical similarity». Hence, facts are not mental contents – which is why παθήματα and πράγματα are mutually independent –; yet, he eventually claims that they are simultaneously mental and extra-mental:

Insofar as they may only be attained by logico-cognitive operations of the same nature as themselves, πράγματα are cognitive realities. Insofar as they make up the infinite totality of facts that precede knowledge and lay the grounds for it, they lie without the domain of cognition. They are mental facts, yet at the same time they are the facts that precede knowledge and that mental facts refer to.

Thus, being a πράγμα, the goat-stag is both a mental fact, and a pre-cognitive fact, which the mental fact, points at. But the goat-stag is nowhere (cf. Phys. IV 1, 208a 29-31); hence, as a pre-cognitive fact, it must belong to a third sphere, one which is neither mental nor physical. Is this Aristotle’s thought?

Holding to the idea that πράγμα does not always refer to something real, C.W.A. Whitaker had already endorsed a point of view sharply opposed to De Rijk’s, building on an idea which Lo Piparo only hints at. Commenting on the passage in De an. Γ 4, 429a 13 ff. examined above (see § 3.3), Whitaker asks «how is it possible for the mind to take on the form of something which does not exist». He answers in the affirmative, upon condition that non-existing things have a form. As evidence for his thesis, he quotes Metaph. Z 4, 1030a 17-27, where Aristotle apparently asserts that being can be ascribed, «in a sense», even to that which does not exist. In other words, even an entity like the goat-stag is something, «at least in a distant sense»; but then, Whitaker argues, it possesses an intelligible form which the mind may conceive. This means that things which are intelligible but not perceptible also have a form, and when they become objects of knowledge, that form is common to the mind and the thing which is thought. It follows that, if the word ‘goat-stag’ is significant, there must be a thing corresponding to it: only, in the case in point, it will be a fictional thing rather than a real one. Still, it is important to possess a criterion for identifying something as a πράγμα, else the latter would be a sort of summum genus, or super-category – a view which

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52 Cf. ibi, pp. 170-171.
53 Ibid, p. 179.
55 Ibid, p. 182.
56 Cf. Whitaker, Aristotle’s De interpretatione, p. 16.
does not belong to Aristotle. In fact, such criterion consists in the thing being a single unity\textsuperscript{57} (which does not mean it has to be an individual\textsuperscript{58}).

We know that Aristotle uses the term πρᾶγμα even for false things or false facts. In *Metaph. Δ 29*, 1024b 17-26, he introduces two different meanings for πρᾶγμα ψεύδος: a thing or fact which does not exist, or else one which exists but does not appear as it is, or appears as it is not. As examples of the former case, he cites the commensurability of the diagonal, which is always false, and the fact ‘that you are sitting’, which is sometimes false; as an example of the latter, he considers dreams, which do exist even though the things they represent do not. Hence Lo Piparo’s deduction that a πρᾶγμα «may correspond to that which does not exist»; while De Rijk, commenting on the same passage, argues that the fact that a dream is a falsehood does not concern its real occurrence *qua* sign (a dream is a mental entity), but the thing it refers or claims to refer to. Thus, «a falsehood is a mental state of affairs that is not actually the case in the outside world»\textsuperscript{59}. Once more, we are faced with the thesis that a πρᾶγμα is a state of affairs in the mind. Yet, in what terms may the latter be distinguished from the thought which is directed at it, and which is also (obviously) mental? Sure enough, on De Rijk’s interpretation truth and falsity would always be semantic concepts, concerning our thought on the world rather than the world itself – as is stated in *Metaph. E 4*, 1027b 25-27 –, but only at the expense of calling one and the same thing sometimes a ‘thought’, and sometimes a ‘state of affairs’. The solution to our problem may not lie in a name.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle maintains that truth and falsity concern union and separation: he who has the truth regards what is united as united and what is separate as separate, while he who thinks otherwise is in error\textsuperscript{60}. He also reiterates his realistic stance, that is, the priority of the world with respect to thought and language:

It is not because we think that you are white, that you are white, but because you are white we who say this have the truth\textsuperscript{61}.

(It must be kept in mind that thinking and saying are interchangeable in this passage.) When a truth is uttered, the thing which is expressed must subsist, yet the utterance does not in any way provide a grounding for it, because the status of the thing is independent of its linguistic expression:

For clearly this is how the things are even if someone did not affirm it and another deny it\textsuperscript{62}.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibi, p. 24.  
\textsuperscript{58} Cf. *De int.* 8, 18a 12 ff.  
\textsuperscript{59} *De Rijk, Aristotle. Semantics and Ontology*, II, p. 127.  
\textsuperscript{60} Cf. *Metaph. Γ 7*, 1011b 26-28; *E 4*, 1027b 18-28; *Θ 10*, 1051b 2 - 1052a 4. Cf. also *De an.* Γ 6, 430a 26 - b 6.  
\textsuperscript{62} *De int.* 9, 18b 37-38. Cf. also *Cat.* 12, 14b 11-22: «For of things which reciprocate as to implication of existence, that which is in some way the cause of the other’s existence might reasonably be called prior by nature. And that there are some such cases is clear. For there being a man reciprocates as to implication of existence with the true statement about it: if there is a man, the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, and reciprocally – since if the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, there is a man. And whereas the true statement is in no way the cause of the thing’s existence, the thing does seem in some way the cause of the statement’s being true: it is because the thing exists or does not that the statement is called true or false». The translation by J.L. Ackrill has been slightly modified according to footnote 4 above and to the arguments I maintain in this § 3.4.
That the world exists independently of thought and language is unquestionable for Aristotle: textual evidence for this goes back to his early writings. In fact, there are many things that await to be known, and others without a name (cf. Eth. Nic. II 7, 1107b 1-2; IV 13, 1127a 14), or whose name still has to be coined (cf. Cat. 7, 7a 5 ff.). As for truth and falsity, Aristotle claims that they are «not in things […] but in thought».

Conversely, Whitaker denies that conjunction and separation are exclusively cognitive processes: rather, he sees them as modes of being of things themselves, which occur in the world. This is how he reads Metaph. E 4, 1027b 18-25: truth consists of regarding as separate that which is separate, or as conjoined that which is conjoined, while falsity is the failure to recognize the separation or conjunction of things. Insofar as truth includes the acknowledgment of separation, such separation constitutes a non-entity (μὴ ὄν). Whitaker then places two strong claims: (a) «There are thus real nonentities in the world», (b) truth and falsity are features of the world. He supports these claims precisely through a reference to Metaph. Δ 29, 1024b 17-26: false things mentioned by Aristotle in that passage are non-entities (οὐκ ὄντα), and include divided things as well as things which ‘are not’; individual things, on the other hand, may not be either true or false. The truth and falsity of thoughts or propositions depends on the truth and falsity of things in the world, and may only concern compound objects. From here, however, Whitaker does not infer that the goat-stag is complex, and that its non-existence amounts to the fact that nowhere can the stag and the goat be found united. According to him, the goat-stag is not a non-entity because it is a complex whose alleged parts are not composed together: «it is merely a non-existent thing».

We have seen that, within the same interpretative line, the authors discussed above ultimately reach fairly distant positions, all of which are paradigmatic for our purposes: De Rijk conceives non-entities as mental, Whitaker as belonging to the world, and Lo Piparo as mental and extra-mental at the same time. The divergence stems from ontological decisions, which result in different readings of the Aristotelian passages, yet somehow it also reveals the cultural milieu from which these proposals have originated: Wieland writes in the midst of the linguistic turn, while De Rijk and Lo Piparo witness the flourishing of cognitive sciences. For every one of them, the difficulties arise primarily when accounting for pseudomorphiae (goat-stags, false facts, non-entities). We obviously cannot hold firm to all theses, even though each of them helps us

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63 Cf. Cat. 7, 7b 24-33; 12, 14b 11-22.
64 Metaph. E 4, 1027b 25-27. Here, ‘thought’ should be understood as ‘discursive thought’, because individual terms are neither true nor false: I will come back to this point shortly. MAIER, Die Syllogistik des Aristoteles, I, p. 102, translates διανοίᾳ with ‘diskursives Denken’.
65 Cf. WITAKER, Aristotle’s De interpretatione, pp. 26 ff.
66 Ibi, p. 27.
67 Cf. Metaph. E 4, 1027b 28-29; Θ 10, 1051b 17 ff.
68 WHITAKER, Aristotle’s De interpretatione, p. 31. D. CHARLES, Aristotle on Meaning and Essence, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 87 ff., raises an argument which may be brought to bear against Whitaker, and in favour of de Rijk: ‘goat-stag’ is a compound name, which has a meaning on account of its components, even though nothing in the world corresponds to such a compound thought; while individual thoughts must signify an object in the world, this is not required of compound names. If that is the case, ‘goat-stag’ may signify something, albeit not an object. Unfortunately, the assumption at the onset of Charles’ argument is completely invented: Aristotle has never affirmed, either in the Analytics or elsewhere, that «“goatstag” signifies a kind of animal, which is the offspring of goat and stag» (ibi, p. 87).
shed some light on our problem. It is now time to take one last step, at the expense of some repetitions, and bearing in mind that – as I said above – it might be a mistake to look for a definitive view on pseudomorphia in Aristotle: to him, ψεῦδος and μὴ ὄν are open questions, about which he contents himself with suggesting some possible approaches, consistently with his aporetic style.

4. Pseudomorphia and language – the τραγέλαφος

Summing up: if we assume the first interpretation of πρᾶγμα as ‘real object’, the possibility that Aristotle regarded the word τραγέλαφος as a significant name seems to contradict the whole structure of passage 16a 3-8. As we have seen, if there exists nothing which the corresponding affection of the soul may be an image of, there exists no affection either, and therefore the corresponding term may not be significant. On the other hand, ‘the goat-stag is an imaginary animal’ or ‘there is no goat-stag’ are true propositions; yet, in what way are the word ‘goat-stag’ or the propositions at issue ‘images’ of something, given that there are neither goat-stags nor, evidently, imaginary animals? Problems of this kind have been (and still are) at the heart of heated controversies in our own times, the most notable of which was perhaps the dispute between Meinong and Russell on the acceptance of non-existent objects as possible genuine subjects of propositions with a claim to truth; remaining committed to Aristotle, the issue we are dealing with is not merely one of textual coherence. Before getting into more details about the goat-stag, however, let us revert to the text of De int. 1, and consider lines 16a 9-18.

Here, Aristotle states that some affections of the soul (i.e. individual thoughts taken in isolation, or things that are said «without combination») are neither true nor false, and that the same holds for vocal sounds. Although the examples he puts forth (‘man’ and ‘white’) only concern names, the argument might be extended to verbs. A name or a verb, used as a symbol, is a bearer of meaning; when taken «without combination», although it has a meaning (as Aristotle subsequently points out), it «does not yet signify whether [its object] is or not»: neither names nor verbs, taken individually, imply the occurrence of the objects they designate (thing, action, or determination). Even the verb ‘to be’ is no exception to the rule: since it is not «a sign of the thing», i.e. has no specific object to refer to, what it «additionally signifies» (προσσημάζει) is «some combination» – the copula – «which cannot be thought of without the components». Precisely because individual names are neither true nor false — pace Plato’s
arguments in the Cratylus — not only ‘man’ or ‘white’, but even ‘goat-stag’, which might well be regarded as false,
signifies something but not, as yet, anything true or false – unless ‘is’ or ‘is not’ is added (either
simply or with reference to time)\textsuperscript{75}.

Truth and falsity pertain to specific affections of the soul, whose counterpart in lin-
guistic terms is the assertive or apophatic speech (λόγος ἀποφαντικός), that is – as
we saw above (§ 3.4) – the conjunction or separation of name and verb\textsuperscript{76}, or – as we
have just seen – the ascription of ‘is’ or ‘is not’ to a name, either straightforwardly or
according to a temporal determination.

According to Wolfram Ax, Aristotle did not merely introduce the example of the τραγέλαφος to lay out a thesis, but also to refute a possible objection, i.e. that there
exist words «without combination» which are false per se, regardless of whether they
are connected to the verb ‘to be’ or to a predicate (by a copula). Words have a meaning
and, if they are symbols, refer to certain things, but this doesn’t imply that such things
(the object of speech) exist. Assessing whether they do requires other procedures: lan-
guage may not warrant its own truth, because it can as well be a bearer of falsehood\textsuperscript{77}.
Therefore, the word τραγέλαφος does not fail to designate an existing object because
the goat-stag does not exist, but because existence is not attained through significa-
tion. In fact, I may well ignore the circumstance that the object of a certain speech is
non-existent, as when I am told a lie which I believe.

However, what exactly is a τραγέλαφος? I have previously argued that the term πράγμα
should be interpreted in an extensive way, one that includes μὴ ὄντα. The word τραγέλαφος would then have a meaning, as it refers to a μὴ ὄν. Apparently, this
was also Aristotle’s thesis, whereas his Greek commentators generally regarded it as
an imaginary entity, to which they ascribed a strictly mental character\textsuperscript{78}. Nevertheless,
Aristotle thoroughly refrains from specifying the identity of the goat-stag, and spell-
ing out the properties which might allow to identify it, so that, even if someone should
claim to have seen it, one could still legitimately question whether it is the very same
animal the Stagirite was thinking of. Aristotle’s caution seems to be consistent with
his statement in An. post. II 7, 92b 4 ff.: whoever knows what a certain thing is, also
knows that it is, and conversely, if he doesn’t know that it is, he will not know what it
is. Then, referring specifically to the τραγέλαφος, he adds:

You may know what the account or the name means when I say ‘goat-stag’, but it is impossible
to know what a goat-stag is\textsuperscript{79}.

\textsuperscript{75} De int. 1. 16a 16-18. On the literary fortune of the τραγέλαφος, see G. SILLITI, Tragelaphos. Storia
di una metafora e di un problema, Bibliopolis, Napoli 1980, which will be our reference for this aspect of
the problem.
\textsuperscript{76} Cf. De int. 1, 16a 12-13; 4, 16b 28-30, 17a 2-3.
\textsuperscript{77} Cf. Ax, Zum isolierten ῥῆμα in Aristoteles’ de interpretatione 16b19-25, p. 274.
\textsuperscript{78} Cf. SILLITI, Tragelaphos. Storia di una metafora e di un problema, pp. 11-12, 32, and, for specific
Aristotelian loci, An. pr. I 38, 49a 24; An. post. II 7, 92b 7; Phys. IV 1, 208a 29-31.
\textsuperscript{79} An. post. II 7, 92b 6-8. On this passage, see De Rijk, Aristotle. Semantics and Ontology, I, pp. 672-673,
Should we say, then, that the question on the goat-stag may not be asked? First of all, it must be remarked that Aristotle’s argument is set at the epistemological level, viz. the level of knowledge, not at the ontological one: hence, it does not necessarily imply that the τραγέλαφος has no properties. On the other hand, how can one possibly understand the meaning of a name such as τραγέλαφος, if not by conceiving something which possesses at least some properties? If I understand the term ‘man’, I am thinking of something which is an animal, and is two-legged, featherless, and rational. Could I understand the term ‘goat-stag’ without knowing that it concerns an animal having something in common with a goat and something in common with a stag? If Ross and Mignucci are right in pointing out that the theses of An. post. II 7 are dialectical in character, and do not express the author’s ultimate viewpoint, then we must conclude that Aristotle does not engage in the claim that the goat-stag is undefinable. How could I assess whether something exists, if I have no knowledge of what I am looking for, and therefore I can’t provide a definition, or at least a description?

Moreover, τραγέλαφος must be distinguished from entries which are articulate but devoid of meaning – Ammonius provides the example of βλίτυρι. Also, the word τραγέλαφος does not designate a mere nothing, because absolute nothingness – following Plato – may be neither told nor opined. Philoponus endorses the same view, arguing that, if something can be said, opined or imagined, then «it would not be absolutely non-existent» – even though he maintains that the goat-stag may not possibly be. Finally, according to An. pr. 138, 49a 24, the τραγέλαφος is knowable despite being a non-entity, even though such knowledge is limited to its non-being; however, it cannot be the knowledge of a thought, because the thought of the τραγέλαφος exists. We are thus led to accept that μή ὄντα are both extra-mental and different from absolute nothingness.

To corroborate this thesis, one can read the passages in which Aristotle distinguishes three senses of μὴ ὄν: as potential, as false, and according to categories. The goat-stag is neither a potential μὴ ὄν nor is it false. If, as Aristotle explicitly states, the categories apply to μὴ ὄν, this is not absolute nothingness nor something exclusively mental. The same holds for the fact that Socrates is not sitting. Since Socrates is dead, the proposition which asserts ‘Socrates is not sitting’ is true, but his not sitting is not his potential sitting, precisely because he is dead; the separation between Socrates and his sitting is then an objective fact.
But then, what of our previous claim that the πράγματα are acknowledged as such by thought, and for every πράγμα there must be a mind which thinks of it? Apparently, we are risking to project Kant on Aristotle, as if the whole world were a kind of indistinct matter, which evolves into a set of πράγματα through perception, subsumption under categories and transposition within a rational discourse. And yet, all scholars cited above agree in recognizing Aristotle’s realism, which gives priority to the world with respect to thought and language. Perhaps, a comprehensive account could be as follows: although πράγματα exist independently of any subject, they are ‘cut out’, or brought in the foreground, in accordance with certain choices which the subject makes as he formulates a judgment, as in Aristotle’s example ‘you are sitting’. Of someone who is sitting, we could as well predicate something other than his position, such as quality, quantity, or his being in relation with other objects. The mind calls attention on one aspect of the subject, so that a certain πράγμα emerges while another one doesn’t. Given that – as I said above – language is constituted in connection with the subject’s experience of the world, it follows that the structure of language is akin to the structure of the world – in a sense, the former even moulds itself upon the latter –, which makes it possible and comprehensible to speak of the ὁμοιώματα of πράγματα.

The view that μὴ ὄντα are extra-mental becomes even more plausible on account of the following remarks. Instead of ‘goat-stag’, Aristotle could have used the word ‘Medea’, or ‘Argonaut’; at any rate, the theory must explain these terms as well. Now, by telling events which did not happen, but which are probable, tragedy introduces us to the world of human beings, and this knowledge – Aristotle says – may reach the same degree of universality and necessity which sciences like mathematics and physics enjoy in their own fields. These stories, which are a figment of imagination, tell us something about our world, about men and their doings, even though the characters that act them out have never existed. This means that the reference does not have to be direct (one-to-one): it may as well be more complex, and involve degrees of truth-likeness in representing the world – as Plato himself said. Thus, affections may sometimes represent events unfaithfully, just as art may represent its objects, and even resemble them, in different degrees. We can then suppose that the relation ‘being an image of’, which connects things and affections of the soul, admits of a range of degrees, so that, besides being indirect, the reference may be more or less blurred. Moreover, we can retrieve another teaching from the Cratylus: language opens us to the knowledge of the world, for it is certainly constructed through convention, yet at the same time bears a trace of the subject’s experience of the world. The order (τάξις) of the world shapes up thought and is reflected within language through the process of signification, or convention.

I shall add one last remark. Granted that language doesn’t come without thought, does thought come without language? Aristotle does not deal explicitly with this point, but his argument could be developed in this direction: if symbols are bearers of meaning, i.e. are the concrete display of thoughts, then – based on what has been said above – which language symbolizes thought is accidental to thought itself, but it is not accidental that there is such a language. This analogy echoes the relation between sub-

87 Cf. Poet. 9, 1051a 36 ff.
stance and accident: it is accidental that a given accident inheres to a given substance, but (apart from the prime mover unmoved) there exist no pure substances, absolutely devoid of accidents. It appears, then, that the logical priority subsisting between thought and language is weaker than that which connects the world on one side, and thought or language on the other: while the world exists regardless of whether it is said or thought, thought and language entertain a relation of partial mutual dependence\(^{89}\): thought bestows a meaning on linguistic signs, and constitutes them as symbols; words are signs of whatever is happening in the soul of the speaker, and convey that information to the listener – provided that the latter can interpret them correctly, \(viz\) that he knows what those signs are symbols of.

With no intention to diminish the great contribution given by Aristotle to our understanding of language, we must not forget, however, that Aristotle’s arguments are restricted to articulate language; it is well known that there exist other kinds of language, which also express thought, and that there are unexpressed thoughts, which may not be voiced, and do not find an outlet in language.

Abstract

Aristotle’s theory of language is studied with regard to the possibility of saying what does not exist, either because one can express falsity, or because one can truthfully speak of non-existent. According to Aristotle, symbol and sign are not the same: the symbol is a kind of sign, an articulated linguistic sign. Convention is, in a formal sense, the relation of significance from the meaning to the sign, in a material sense, it is the result of the agreement between our experience of the world and the world itself. The relationship that links thought to things cannot be similarity, because if the object is not there, thought cannot look like anything, it should rather be a relation of representation. \(Πράγματα\) include entities, but do not exclude non-entities. Taking the example of \(τραγέλαφος\), it may be argued that \(μὴ ὄντα\) are both extra-mental and different from absolute nothing.

Keywords: Aristotle, Language, Signs, Fictions, Non-Existent Objects

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\(^{89}\) At the end of a lengthy argument, Lo Piparo, Aristotele e il linguaggio, pp. 66-67, concludes that the «articulations of the human voice and the logico-cognitive processes of the human soul are different and complementary […]]. Should either dimension be suppressed, verbal reasoning would collapse at once». I obviously agree with the claim that the expressions \(τὰ ἐν τῇ φωνῇ\) and \(τὰ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ παθήματα\) stand for different ‘things’ — I believe no interpreter has ever objected to this — and that they are complementary and occur together. However, I think it needs to be stressed that, while it is necessary for an affection of the soul to be accompanied by an articulation of the voice, correspondence with a specific articulation (that is, with a specific language system) is contingent. This is why I prefer to speak of ‘partial mutual dependence’, rather than ‘complementarity’.