Introduction: First Thoughts on Language and Nature

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> quare duce natura †si, quae imposita essent uocabula
> rebus, ne ab omnibus his declina[n]tus putarent.
>
> Varro, *De lingua Latina* 8.10

One of the key questions in language studies, both ancient and modern, concerns the relationship between language and reality: how has extra-linguistic reality influenced the emergence, development, and structures of language? This question is at the core of several advances in the last century, including the development of theories arguing for the biological regulation of the structures of language (generative grammar) and the pioneering investigation of the neuro-biological mechanisms regulating language use (neurolinguistics). This question is no less productive in ancient thought, both Greek and Roman. Ancient theorists conceived of the question in terms of the relationship between language and nature (*physis*/*natura*), and the essays gathered in this volume deal with theories from the Roman world according to which linguistic facts, structures, or behaviours are in some significant sense determined by nature. We refer to such theories as instances of 'linguistic naturalism'.

Linguistic naturalism is a familiar notion in classical studies, and is perhaps most well-known from a particular theory articulated in Plato's *Cratylus*. This version of linguistic naturalism suggests that the relationship between lexical units and natural referents is non-arbitrary; it is normally contrasted with notions of 'conventionalism'.[1] Given the canonical position of the *Cratylus*, and the fragmentary status of other relevant sources, Plato's version of linguistic naturalism, and the related dichotomy *nature* vs. *convention*, have pervaded modern studies of the subject and have often obscured the variety and complexity of theories that predicated a meaningful relation between language and nature. As has been recognized

[1] See below, p. 4.

since antiquity, Greek theories of linguistic naturalism extended far beyond the Cratylan model to encompass quite distinct ideas, such as that of Epicurus, whose primary concern was to explain the historical emergence of language as a natural process.[2]

In this volume we have deliberately adopted an inclusive definition of linguistic naturalism in order both to broaden the traditionally narrow understanding of naturalist theories, and to enhance the appreciation of their variety and productivity in a neglected set of sources. Each of the essays gathered here aims to delineate one or other of the complex roles played by nature in the linguistic thought of the Classical Roman world, in both Greek and Latin sources.

Nature, as is well known, is no easy concept to pin down: it is invoked by ancient authors in numerous and diverse contexts, and the names used for it ('φύσις', '*natura*') have a bewildering variety of possible meanings.[3] While ancient discussions of nature can be underpinned by highly sophisticated systems of thought demanding close and careful analysis (e.g. Stoicism), we find just as often that 'nature' in ancient texts is little more than a buzzword, possessing just the right combination of rhetorical appeal and conceptual fuzziness to allow it to be effectively employed in argument without the backing of a consistent theoretical structure.[4] This is as true for ancient linguistic thought as it is for any other domain of inquiry: as in contemporary linguistics, questions concerning to what extent linguistic structures and behaviours may be considered natural were central to much of the most sophisticated thinking about language in antiquity;[5] at the same time, the concept of nature is sometimes deployed in linguistic discussions in ways that can seem disorganized or even inconsistent.[6] Here we seek to do appropriate justice to cases in the former category, without ignoring or excusing those that fall into the latter. Some of the papers gathered here focus on the naturalist thought of contemporary Greek writers who exerted major influence at Rome; some, focusing more directly on Roman texts, are concerned with the roles played by various conceptions of nature (including but not limited to

[2] See below, pp. 7–9.
[3] Lovejoy and Boas (1935) were famously able to list no fewer than 66 different meanings of the terms 'φύσις' and '*natura*'.
[4] See Zetzel, in this volume, for an articulation of this feature of ancient naturalist thought.
[5] For the points of contact between the concerns of contemporary linguists and the claims of ancient linguistic naturalists see Joseph 2000.
[6] See, for example, de Melo, in this volume, and Zetzel, in this volume, discussing the range of different meanings of '*natura*' in Varro's *De lingua Latina*.

those inherited from the Greek philosophical tradition) in Roman linguistic theories; others consider nature as a rhetorical motif, and ask what different rhetorical constructions of nature can tell us about the beliefs and motivations of the Roman authors who deployed them in linguistic contexts. Our concern in this introductory chapter is to set the scene, giving a (necessarily brief) overview of naturalism in Greek linguistic thought, outlining what we consider to be the most salient distinctions between naturalist theories of different types, before going on to explain how each paper fits into the volume as a whole. The following account of different forms of Greek linguistic naturalism is by no means exhaustive. We hope, however, that it gives a useful overview of several influential theories, while also demonstrating something of the variety of Greek naturalist theories that were inherited by authors in the Roman world.

Linguistic naturalism is an omnipresent notion in Greek thought. Its origins may arguably be traced back to Homer and Hesiod, with their distinction between divine (natural) and human (corrupted) language,[7] as well as to Pythagoras and his belief in the magical power of words.[8] Linguistic naturalism became a specific object of enquiry with the Sophists and pre-Socratics, before passing through a key stage of development in Plato's *Cratylus*; from there it went on to influence the philosophers of the Hellenistic age and beyond. Central to ancient expressions of linguistic naturalism was the slogan 'names are by nature', which, as ancient authors were well aware, could be used to refer to a wide variety of distinct theses. The fifth-century philosopher Proclus (AD 412–485), in his commentary on Plato's *Cratylus*, constructed a typology of potential meanings borne by the phrase 'by nature', relating different meanings to different ancient linguistic theories.[9] He was followed in this by his pupil, the Aristotelian commentator Ammonius (AD *c.* 440–*c.* 520), who includes a similar

[7] Cf. Gera 2003: 49–57.

[8] Cf. Garcea, in this volume.

[9] *In Cra.* 17: 'The term 'natural' can be understood in four ways: (1) as both the whole essences of the animals and plants and their parts; (2) as their activities and powers, like the lightness of fire and its heat; (3) as the shadows and reflections in mirrors; or (4) as fabricated images which are similar to their archetypes. Epicurus, in accordance with the second [*deuteron* Usener; *proton* MSS] sense, thought that names are natural like the principal functions of nature, i.e. the faculty of speech and sight, and as is the activity of seeing and hearing so too is that of naming. Thus the name is natural as a function of nature. Adopting the fourth sense, Cratylus says that the name of each thing is proper, because it was appropriately put by those who first put names skilfully and knowledgeably. For Epicurus used to say that these men put names not knowledgeably but when they were naturally moved like those who cough, sneeze, moo, bark and sigh. Socrates says, in accordance with the fourth sense, that, while names are natural as products of knowledgeable thought and not of natural appetite, but of the imagining soul, they are assigned to objects as properly as possible at the beginning' (transl. Duvick 2007).

(albeit simpler) typology, showing the clear influence of Proclus,[10] in his commentary on Aristotle's *De interpretatione*.[11] This concern to distinguish between different forms of naturalism, or different meanings of 'by nature', was shared by authors as varied as Sextus Empiricus,[12] Demetrius Lacon,[13] and Origen.[14] Not only did there exist numerous distinct theories of linguistic naturalism, but not all such theories were mutually compatible: certain fundamental features of Epicurus' linguistic naturalism, for example, were strictly at odds with certain fundamental features of the Stoic naturalist theory.[15]

While, as pointed out above, Plato's *Cratylus* was neither the beginning nor the end of Greek naturalism about language, its considerable scope and influence make it a good place from which to begin an overview of the field. In the dialogue, the Heraclitean philosopher Cratylus defends the thesis that each thing has a correct name, which belongs to it by nature. Names are natural, according to Cratylus, insofar as they are descriptions of the natures of their referents, and this descriptive property of names is rooted in the mimetic properties of the elementary sounds and letters out of which they are composed. The practice of etymology (examples of which occupy the long central section of the dialogue) enables us to decode the description hidden in each name, and so to rediscover the thought of those early language-users who first assigned names in each language. According to Cratylus, this primordial, natural language had a divine origin and quality, and its close association with nature granted it a strong epistemic function: saying a name equated to knowing and 'capturing' its referent. Hermogenes, Cratylus' disputant, opposes this naturalist theory with two arguably distinct claims combined into one position: the correctness of names, according to Hermogenes, is determined not by nature, but by individual choice, and, furthermore, by agreements between different members of a linguistic community (384c–e).[16]

[10] Sheppard 1987. [11] *In Int. CAG* 4.5.34.10–35.12. [12] *Math.* 1.142–3.
[13] *PHerc.* 1012 col. 67.1–10 Puglia. [14] *Cels.* 1.24 = Epicurus, fr. 334 Usener; *SVF* 2.146.
[15] See Verlinsky, in this volume.
[16] Socrates, at 385a and 385d, likewise combines a claim about whatever a polis chooses as a name, with a claim about whatever an individual chooses as a name; the same slide is made again, later in the dialogue (435a), when Socrates moves from a discussion about interpersonal linguistic understanding to talk about Cratylus 'making a convention with himself'. There has been considerable discussion, well beyond the scope of this introduction, of whether or not such a combination of views is justifiable (the case against: Kahn 1973: 158–9, Williams 1982: 80, Baxter 1992: 18–19; the case in favour: Barney 2001: 24–30, Sedley 2003: 51–4, Ademollo 2011: 40–8). One thing that should be quite clear is that a regularity in a person's idiolect (what Socrates calls a 'convention with oneself'), while arguably similar to a convention (Lewis 1983: 182), is not a convention *stricto sensu*, conventions being necessarily interpersonal (Lewis 1969).

For Hermogenes, then, there is no natural correctness of names; rather, the principles guiding the use of names are arbitrary and, what is more, conventional.

Cratylus' thesis is the most well-known example of a type of linguistic naturalism according to which there is, or can be, a natural connection between a name and its referent. Debates concerning this 'referential' form of naturalism appear to extend back into the sixth and fifth centuries BC: Proclus, in his commentaries on *Cratylus* and *First Alcibiades*,[17] attributes to Pythagoras a naturalist theory which rejects the possibility of arbitrary naming and asserts that names in fact imitate the 'forms of the intellect'.[18] In his commentary on the *Cratylus* he also relates four arguments of Democritus against the thesis that the connection between names and referents is natural.[19] The wider issue under discussion in *Cratylus* – the correctness of names – is there associated with the sophists Prodicus (at 384b) and Protagoras (at 391c), although there is little evidence on the basis of which to ascribe to either of them a naturalist theory of the correctness of names.[20] The mimetic form of referential naturalism defended by Cratylus seems to have later influenced the Stoics, who, according to Origen, believed that the first names were imitative of the things to which they referred.[21] Other theories of referential naturalism – theories that do not have description or resemblance at their heart – survive from the ancient world. According to Galen, for example, Chrysippus held that certain Greek pronouns, in being spoken, caused the head and lips of the speaker to 'point' in the direction of the pronoun's referent.[22] This is a theory of referential linguistic naturalism (positing as it does a natural connection between word and referent), rooted not in description, or mimesis, but rather in deixis. This theory was later adopted and adapted by the Roman Pythagorean philosopher Nigidius Figulus, whose version of it is explored in Garcea's contribution to this volume. Yet another form of referential naturalism emerges from certain accounts of etymology, according to which the derivational relation between a secondary word and a primary word reflects an analogical relation between the referents of each word. One version of such a theory postulates that the connection between a word and its referent is natural insofar as the

[17] *In Cra.* 16; *In Alc.* 259. [18] On which theory see Duvick 2007: 114–15. [19] *In Cra.* 16.
[20] Everson 1994a: 3; for an attempt to demonstrate the naturalism of Prodicus see Baxter 1992: 151–6.
[21] *C. Cels.* 1.24 (*SVF* 2.146): μιμουμένων τῶν πρώτων φωνῶν τὰ πράγματα. See Long 2005, Verlinksy, in this volume, Blank, in this volume.
[22] Gal. *PHP* 2.2.10–11 = *SVF* 2.895; see further Garcea, in this volume.

structure of that part of the lexicon to which the word belongs resembles the structure of that part of nature in which the referent resides. Traces of such a theory are found, for example, in Varro, whose notion that the relationships between words mirror the relationships between things is discussed in Blank's contribution to this volume. Trypho's concept of 'συμπάθεια between signifier and signified', explored by both Chahoud and Garcea in this volume, clearly concerns a form of referential naturalism.[23]

The earliest theory of linguistic naturalism to survive from antiquity, however, is of a quite different character. Towards the beginning of the second book of his *Histories*,[24] Herodotus relates a story about the Egyptian king Psammetichus, which he ascribes to the priests of the temple of Hephaistos at Memphis. Seeking to find out which was the oldest people on earth, Psammetichus devised the following experiment: two newborn children were to be isolated in a shepherd's hut. There they would be cared for, in silence, with the expectation that they would grow up to speak the language of the earth's oldest people. When the children, after a while, came to say the word '*bekos*' while gesturing for food, Psammetichus concluded that the Phrygians were the oldest of all peoples, '*bekos*' being the Phrygian word for bread. Psammetichus' experiment was underpinned by certain assumptions about the naturalness of language: not only does he assume that the language faculty is innate in human beings, he also assumes that humans are born with latent dispositions to speak a certain language in particular (this naturally spoken language being the oldest of all languages). On Psammetichus' view, some (but, we must assume, not all) linguistic behaviour is purely natural, requiring no input whatever from culture or instruction. Accordingly, Psammetichus' linguistic assumptions may be called naturalist.

Psammetichus' naturalism is the first explicit evidence from antiquity for what (following Proclus)[25] we shall call 'functional' linguistic naturalism – the thesis that language is a function of human behaviour. Functional theories and referential theories (like that of Cratylus) are quite distinct from one another: it is possible to hold to a referential theory without also holding to a functional theory – the natural fit between names and their referents posited by a referential theory may be thought to have its origins not in natural human behaviour but rather in the intervention of

[23] See Chahoud, in this volume, pp. 56–9, Garcea, in this volume, pp. 98–101.
[24] Hdt. 2.2.
[25] *In Cra.* 17; see above.

a being with superhuman knowledge.[26] Likewise, it is possible to hold to a functional theory without also holding to a referential theory: compare *De interpretatione* 16a27–8, where Aristotle emphatically rejects referential naturalism ('no name is a name by nature but only when it has become a symbol'), with *Politics* 1253a9–10, where humans are said to possess rational language (λόγος) by nature – a clear statement of a weak sort of functional naturalism.[27]

Proclus (*In Cra.* 17) cites the linguistic theory of Epicurus as an example of functional naturalism. While we believe this to be quite correct, it does not tell the whole story. In Epicurus' theory, functional linguistic naturalism is limited to the first stage of human development, and governs in particular the original assignments of names to things. Early humans, according to Epicurus (*Ep. Hdt.* 75), naturally and compulsively assigned names in response to sensory impingement from objects in the external world. The first acts of naming, therefore, were regulated both by internal human nature and by external, natural reality.[28] These original names were later refined and expanded upon by human reason (*Ep. Hdt.* 76). Epicurus, therefore, subscribed to an evolutionary model of functional naturalism, according to which the first names were not freely chosen but fully determined by nature: natural linguistic behaviour automatically regulated the first steps of the evolution of language, which was only later overtaken by the developing powers of reason and convention, freeing language from natural determination. Epicurus' functional naturalism, then, is both limited, insofar as it applies only to a certain stage in the evolution of language, and extreme, entailing as it does that the linguistic behaviour of early humans was not only natural, but was fully determined by the mechanistic processes of nature. The linguistic determinism inherent in Epicurus' theory is by no means a necessary feature of functional naturalist theories: Aristotle, for example (who, as we have seen, believed humans to possess rational language by nature), would no doubt have rejected it.

The Epicurean theory (or part of it) underpins what is perhaps the most well-known expression of linguistic naturalism in Roman literature. Lucretius sums up the origins of language in two terse lines, followed by a brief (and, as he admits, loose – *non alia longe ratione*) analogy (5.1028–32):

[26] A thesis defended by Cratylus at *Cra.* 438c. See further Ademollo 2011: 34–5.
[27] Οὐθὲν γάρ, ὡς φαμέν, μάτην ἡ φύσις ποιεῖ· λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων·; on which see Kullmann 1991: 99.
[28] See further Brunschwig 1994, Everson 1994b, Atherton 2005, 2009, Reinhardt 2008.

> At uarios linguae sonitus natura subegit
> mittere et utilitas expressit nomina rerum
> non alia longe ratione atque ipsa uidetur
> protrahere ad gestum pueros infantia linguae,
> cum facit ut digito quae sint praesentia monstrent.
>
> And nature compelled them to utter the various sounds of the tongue, and *utilitas* expressed the names of things. Not much different from how speechlessness itself seems to draw children to gesture, when it makes them point out what is present with a finger.

This passage (together with the 58 lines of *comparanda* and further arguments that follow) presents a particularly thorny example of Roman naturalist discourse. The meaning of *utilitas* at 1029, and, especially, the nature of the relationship between the two clauses in 1028–9, has been the subject of significant disagreement, in particular with regard to the number and nature of distinct processes at play here.[29] Most modern readings understand the two clauses of 1028–9 to be referring to two distinct aspects of the first, natural stage of linguistic development on the Epicurean model (as seems to be demanded by the analogy with infant gesture, as well as by the following *comparanda* drawn from animal behaviour), rather than reading the second clause as referring to Epicurus' second, rational stage. According to one reading, it may be concluded from this passage that Lucretius, unlike Epicurus at *Ep. Hdt.* 75–6, seeks to suppress the role played by convention and arbitrariness in the history of language, stressing instead the power of nature.[30] If correct, this would demonstrate a desire by a Roman philosopher not only to replicate Greek linguistic naturalism in his own work, but also to enhance its significance relative to conventionalist alternatives.

Following 5.1028–32 we find 58 further lines of *comparanda* and supporting arguments: first (1033–40), a comparison of early human utterance and infant gesture with the behaviour of young animals who possess apparently instinctive knowledge of the use of their natural faculties; then (1041–55) a sequence of arguments against the possibility of an original name-giver (on whom see more below); finally (1056–90), an *a fortiori* demonstration that the expressive power and variation of animal cries renders the denotative power of the human race, *cui uox et lingua*

[29] The salient points are summarized and treated by Campbell 2003 ad loc., Verlinsky 2005, and Reinhardt 2008.

[30] Snyder 1980: 22 for 'Lucretius' rather single-minded emphasis on the natural origins of language and his consequent neglect of his master's ideas about *logismos*'.

uigeret, unsurprising. This final argument has proved particularly problematic for the Epicurean theory, with one significant treatment questioning whether the quasi-linguistic processes envisaged by Epicureans as taking place in the first stage of linguistic development should be counted as communication at all.[31]

In formulating his evolutionary theory of functional naturalism, Epicurus explicitly rejects what he sees as the alternative: the notion that the first names emerged not by nature but rather by imposition (*Ep. Hdt.* 75). In so doing, he is rejecting a widespread theory according to which names were imposed at a specific time in the past by the deliberate choices of enlightened individuals (*onomathetai*). This theory of imposition (*thesis*) can be traced back to Pythagoras, is taken for granted by all speakers of the *Cratylus*, and was apparently an important tenet of the Stoics. One can therefore also postulate a dichotomy between *physis* and *thesis*, with *physis* understood in a determinist, evolutionary sense. This dichotomy also parallels a contrast between different theories about the historical development of language: proponents of *thesis* tend to believe that language degenerated from an original natural state, to be recovered through the work of linguists and poets (cf. de Melo, in this volume); conversely, Epicurus seems to hold a progressive view, according to which language evolved from a simple to a more elaborate and rational form. As is shown by Blank in his chapter, a particularly complex version of *thesis* is found in Philo's exegesis of Genesis, where the creation of man by God coincides with man's endowment with the power of naming (and thus possessing) things. While Adam's acts of naming (*theseis*) are deliberate rational choices, which distinguish them from the first acts of naming on Epicurus' evolutionary model, they are nonetheless said by Philo to be carried out spontaneously (ἵν' ἀπαυτοματίσῃ τὰς θέσεις), as Adam 'acts under the self-moving rational nature given him by God'.[32] We have in Philo, then, a naturalist account of the origins of language that combines the notion of natural, spontaneous behaviour with the notion that the first names were imposed by deliberate human choice. The variety and flexibility of theories under discussion in this brief introduction make it clear that linguistic naturalism is a 'liquid' notion, varying according to different philosophical and theological Weltanschauungen and their particular notion of what exactly *natura* is. The label 'linguistic naturalism' therefore needs constant qualification, as it can evoke discrete and independent theories.

[31] Atherton 2005. On this passage see also Stevens 2008.

[32] See below, pp. 123–4.

The scope of this volume is by no means limited to philosophical and grammatical texts, but extends to include any domain of inquiry that may be said to implicate linguistic thought (e.g. rhetoric, stylistics, poetics). This methodology is informed by the variety and complexity of the object of inquiry: because Roman linguistic thought was developed and expressed across several disciplines, it cannot be confined to any one modern disciplinary framework. Throughout the period under consideration, for example, nature was invoked in discussions of correct literary style, with the 'natural style' often being understood to approximate to, or imitate, ordinary language. While such notions of natural style are, on one level, distinct from more obviously philosophical claims of the sort outlined above, one of the aims of this volume is to highlight possible points of contact and areas of interpenetration between stylistic norms and linguistic theories (see here in particular De Jonge's chapter).

The first chapter begins our journey into linguistic naturalism at Rome by dealing with an important figure in the history of Roman Stoicism. Alexander Verlinsky addresses the linguistic theory of Posidonius of Apamea (135–51 BC), as it related both to Stoic orthodoxy and to the naturalist theories found in Plato's *Cratylus* and Epicurus. A former student of Panaetius,[33] Posidonius taught philosophy in Rhodes, where he was visited by highly influential Roman figures, including Pompey (twice),[34] and Cicero;[35] he was familiar also with Publius Rutilius Rufus,[36] and visited the city of Rome on at least one occasion.[37] Verlinsky argues that Posidonius combined elements from both Cratylan and Epicurean naturalist theories in order to develop Stoic linguistic naturalism in such a way as to render it impermeable to the traditional accusation that it could not account for the existence of different languages. Besides recalling important archetypes of Greek linguistic naturalism, Verlinsky's paper illustrates two of its main varieties, the functional (Epicurus) and the referential (*Cratylus*, Stoics), as well as an original attempt to combine them. The Greek philosophical background adumbrated in this first chapter is of central importance to the volume as a whole, given the major role played by Stoic linguistic theory in several of the papers that follow.

[33] *Suda* s.v.; Cic. *Off.* 3.8, *Div.* 1.6 (= *test.* 1a, 9, 10 Edelstein–Kidd).
[34] For Pompey and Posidonius see Strabo, 11.1.6, Pliny, *Nat.* 7.112, Cic. *Tusc.* 2.61, Plut. *Pompeius* 42.5 (= *test.* 35–9 E.–K.).
[35] For Cicero and Posidonius see Plut. *Cicero* 4.5, Cic. *Fat.* 5–7, *N. D.* 1.6, 123, 2.88, *Fin.* 1.6, *Tusc.* 2.61, *Hort.* fr. 50 Grilli, *Att.* 2.1.2 (= *test.* 29–34 E.–K.).
[36] Cic. *Off.* 3.10 (= *test.* 13 E.–K.).
[37] *Suda* s.v.; Plut. *Marius* 45.7 (= *test.* 1a, 28 E.–K.).