

ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGIES: OPPONENT DELETION IN PLATO'S *CRATYLUS*

di Claudia Marsico

Abstract

This paper describes the strategy of 'opponent deletion', used in theoretical contexts to outline rival theses in a way that makes it easier to refute them. After characterizing this strategy, it explores a deep variant in Plato's *Cratylus*, which hides the polemic with Antisthenes about the nature of language and its link with reality.

Keywords: Plato, *Cratylus*, Opponent deletion, Antisthenes

The polemical environment of classical Athens is decisive for interpreting the so-called *sokratikoi logoi*, that curious phenomenon in which many authors made Socrates the protagonist of dialogues with very different ideas. Hints of that tension came to us biased due to the uneven text preservation. However, it is possible and relevant to reconstruct that context and its novel argumentative strategies, such as what I call 'opponent deletion'. It allows criticising opponents and producing the illusion of a solid and undisputed discourse. Some works do not mention the authors of the discussed theses, although historiographical procedures can help to identify them. The early readers likely easily recognised the rival positions, but that intertextual dimension is often lost after some time. As a result, opposing theses seem to be hypothetical statements crafted by the author himself, erasing the actual rival from the scene.

This strategy has not been formally characterised in the history of rhetoric but is nonetheless broadly used. Its effects often are perceived but confused with other resources, or worse, with a genuine claim to objectivity, which is what this strategy aims to achieve. I will characterise 'opponent deletion' as an argumentative strategy, typical -though not

exclusively- in theoretical discourse (1). I will then study the case of Plato's *Cratylus*, which reveals a dispute between Plato and Antisthenes (2), and then the features of this strategy and its effects on the illusion of the only alternative (3).

1. *Opponent deletion as the reverse of argumentum ad auctoritatem*

When the opponent is not present, sometimes it is necessary to describe the rival position at least minimally. When that happens, the absent opponent can offer no resistance, which is an excellent opportunity to introduce vital changes. In a controversial context, the arguer often does not highlight the solid points of the opposing thesis but its shortcomings. However, sometimes, the mere mention of the opponent strongly supports the rival idea. Sometimes, the statement 'this idea is absurd' is more persuasive than 'this idea, held by X, is absurd'. If X is a well-known figure, it will be harder for an impartial third party to reject his ideas. Because of his authority, the third party will demand more evidence and carefully analyse the issue. In the worst case, they can be blinded by the force behind the opponent, which can cause them to reject the alternative. For this reason, using the first statement instead of the second, when it is systematic, involves the reverse of the *argumentum ad auctoritatem*. In that kind of argumentum, the mere mention of someone prompts the acceptance of the statement; in its reversal, the argument of 'opponent deletion' blurs the author and with him/her the elements that could lead to more positive assessments of the rival thesis.

This strategy has relevant advantages. If the author of a rival thesis is deleted, there is more freedom to formulate it, that is, to introduce distortions. When the author is mentioned, the outline of the discussed thesis must be like the original idea, at the risk of being inaccurate. If not, it is possible to make changes that weaken it. In a parody, sometimes a character is attacked indirectly. The viewer or reader must connect the fictional character with the real one. For instance, Aristophanes' play *Gentlemen* is a virulent attack on the politician Cleon. One character is a slave hated for his mockery and swindling of other slaves and his

master Demos. Hence, Cleon is accused of ill-serving the people, mocking them and taking advantage of other politicians. It is comic because Cleon is not openly mentioned, but indirectly alluded to, which enables a fictional universe that the real figure would otherwise constrain. Without the direct reference to the adversary, the discourse gains independence so that it can be adapted to new contexts¹.

This strategy strengthens the proponent's position by diluting the figure of the adversary. Hence, the discourse is isolated, suspended and gives the impression of being autonomous and objective. It seems to be outside the triangle of argumentation: it neither proposes against the horizon of beliefs nor opposes another discourse but offers to the judgement of the third party simply obvious, objective ideas². Any theoretical discourse seeks this result. The more it seems to involve simple truth, the more likely it is to succeed and become an unquestionable belief.

The strategy of 'opponent deletion' has a superficial and a deep variant. There is a big difference between a statement like 'Some say that x' in a political diatribe referring to the opponents and the same message in a theoretical discourse where the rival's name is secondary and often deliberately avoided. The first case corresponds to the superficial variant, in which identifying the original authors is essential since the rejection of the statement aims to affect those opponents' credibility, authority and predicament. In that case, not naming the opponent implies minimisation and belittling and suggests that his ideas, and sometimes even his person, do not deserve serious consideration. In contrast, the mechanisms are more subtle in the deep variant. They seek to blur the personal aspect of the discussion to pretend to be an objective discourse.

¹ It is this adaptation that makes the original discourses very weak, as they are modified and reorganised in ways that can be violent or disruptive. Paradoxically, the key to the fruitfulness and survival of all work and thought lies at the same time in this vulnerability that all rereading entails.

² See C. PLANTIN, *L'Argumentation*, PUF, Paris 2005, pp. 94-98 and *Dictionary of Argumentation. An introduction to Argumentation Studies*, College, London 2018, pp. 496-500.

How is it possible to determine the presence of this strategy? If a defendant brings his sobbing family to court, everyone could recognize an *ad misericordiam* strategy, but how can one be sure about a kind of argument defined by absence, i.e., by what is neither said nor done? A statement like ‘Some say x’ may correspond to this strategy. Still, it may also be a simple device of discursive economy to avoid unnecessary digressions because they would not help to understand the main points or even divert attention. An author is free to be exhaustive or to reduce his quotations to a minimum. For this reason, a statement of this type is not enough to determine that opponent deletion is at stake, just as it is often difficult to determine if a quotation involves an appeal to authority or the simple, meticulous attribution of a thesis to its author, without this being of any use or benefit to the enunciator.

Given that we cannot unequivocally assess the author’s intentions, certain criteria must be established to identify the strategy. The frequency or number of similar features limits the possibility of mere chance or inconsequential use. An isolated statement that indirectly refers to an opposing thesis is insufficient to recognise this strategy. Still, the opposite happens if this occurs systematically, especially when its use is beneficial to reject the rival theory. This is the case in Plato’s *Cratylus*, which testifies the polemic against Antisthenes. Plato has systematically applied the strategy of ‘opponent deletion’ in its deep version.

2. *The goals of the Cratylus*

The dispute between Plato and Antisthenes includes cases of the two variants of the strategy of opponent deletion. This bloody polemic between these two Socratics went beyond theoretical boundaries³. Antisthenes used this strategy in its superficial variant. Thus, Athenaeus says: «And yet I do not praise Antisthenes, since after saying wickedly many

³ Testimonies about Antisthenes’ antiplatonism are collected in SSR, V.A.147-159.

things he did not turn away from Plato himself, but vulgarly calling him ‘Sathon’ published a dialogue with this title»⁴.

Antisthenes wrote an insulting dialogue, the *Sathon*, based on the phonetic resemblance between Sathon and Platon⁵. This linguistic turn succeeds if the readers recognise Plato behind the mockery. This is an example of the superficial variant of opponent deletion. In the *Sathon*, Antisthenes criticised the theory of Ideas assuming materialistic tenets to reject suprasensible realities. This is summed up in the ironic phrase «I see the horse but not the horsehood»⁶, i.e., the existence of sensible things is clear, but this is not the case of its intelligible correlate, let alone affirm that those intelligible entities are more real than sensible things.

In another testimony, Plato tries to refute Antisthenes’ thesis by pointing out the existence of non-concrete entities: «When he went to see him <sc. to Antisthenes> because he was ill, upon seeing a bowl in which he had vomited, Plato said to him ‘I see bile in there, but I do not see your arrogance’»⁷. The concrete thing can be perceived, i.e., the bile, but the abstract thing, i.e., Antisthenes’ arrogance, cannot. Arrogance is not perceived when Antisthenes is ill, but neither could it be perceived when he is healthy since it is immaterial and, hence, in Antisthenes’ view, not real. Even if it is not true, this anecdote entails this strategy’s superficial – and therefore more recognisable – variant⁸. Conversely, the

⁴ Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 11.115.29 ff.; SSR, V.A.147.

⁵ *Sathon* is an artificial derivative of *sathe*, “penis”. On the *Sáthon*, whose reconstruction includes the criticisms of the theory of Ideas, cf. DL VI 3 and 7; SSR, V.A.27 and 28, Gnom. Vat. 743,13 and 437; SSR, V.A.30; Stobaeus III 2,40; SSR, V.A.29 and the interpretation of the title in G. GIANNANTONI, *Socratis et Socraticorum Fragmenta*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 1990, 3. 328-329) and A. BRANCACCI, *Oikeios logos. La filosofia del linguaggio di Antistene*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 1990, pp. 173-175.

⁶ SSR, V.A.149.

⁷ DL 7.7.

⁸ On the analysis of the antisthenian critique of Plato interpreting Ideas as qualities, see N. CORDERO, *L’interprétation antisthénienne de la notion platonicienne de ‘forme’ (eidos, idea)* in M. FATTAL (ed.), *La philosophie de Platon*, L’Harmattan,

references to Antisthenes in Plato in the *Cratylus* are not entirely overt and resort to the deep variant. Plato confronts Antisthenes indirectly.

In the first reading, Plato's Socrates refutes two linguistic theories about the origin of names related to the correctness of names (*orthotes onomaton*). First, Hermogenes poses a radical conventionalism according to which there is no relation whatsoever between names and reality. Thus, in a sense, every name is exact⁹. In the second part, Cratylus holds an extreme naturalism, according to which each thing has its own particular name, which coincides with its particular nature. He also maintains that every name is exact. Plato seeks to refute both positions to suggest that language does not have this level of exactitude. It is an instrument that can lead to reality if it is correctly used but does not provide automatic access to the ontological level.

The second reading focuses on the polemics behind the *Cratylus*. Conventionalism is exaggerated and hides the instrumental character of language, as will be seen in *Phaedo* 99¹⁰, but naturalism is even more dangerous. Antisthenes' materialism assumed that only qualified and concrete realities (*to poion*), exist, as Simplicius states in the first testimony of SSR V.A.149: «of the ancients, some totally annulled the qualities (*poiotetas*) by affirming that what is qualified (*to poion*) exists, like Antisthenes (...)»¹¹.

This principle collides with Plato's views since it rejects any entity that is not in sight. Several controversial theses derive from this idea. According to Aristotle, Antisthenes' question was not 'what is' (*ti esti*) and disavowed the kind of definition to which it leads¹². The alternative is 'how it is' (*poion esti*) to describe the connection between terms: «It is not possible to define what it is (for definition is a long *logos*), but it is

Paris 2001, pp. 323ff.

⁹ On the example of the exchange of names, see *Crat.* 385a.

¹⁰ See the passages in *Letter VII* 342b-c which, if authentic, would point in the same direction.

¹¹ See SIMPLICIUS, in *Arist.* Cat. 8 b 25, 211, 15.

¹² See SSR, V.A.150; Aristotle, *Metaphisica* H 3, 1043b4-32.

admissible to say how something is and even to teach, for example concerning silver, not what it is, but that it is like tin». This kind of procedure is present in passages such as the discussion about the term *polytropos*, Odysseus' epithet¹³, the nature of the Cyclops¹⁴, or Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 4.5, which has strong Antisthenic echoes. In all those cases, semantic relations between a term and other related terms, either by similarity or opposition, are established. Based on the analysis of the 'semantic value', each term, which always has a real correlate, can be defined in its qualities¹⁵.

Diogenes Laertius states that Antisthenes «first defined *logos* by saying that it is: 'that which shows what was or is (*ho to ti en e esti delon*)'»¹⁶. This problematic phrase suggests that language can show (*deloun*) the nature of things. The features of this *logos* can be inferred from another Aristotelian passage: «Therefore Antisthenes naively believed that nothing can be said except the 'proper *logos*', one for each thing (*toi oikeioi logoi, hen eph'enos*), from which he concluded that it is not possible to contradict and almost not possible to say something false»¹⁷.

Leaving aside the impossibility of contradiction, also present in the *Cratylus*, the most relevant point is the notion of 'proper *logos*': there is one for each thing, which may mean that each name (*onoma*, neuter name which explains the term *hen* with which the phrase is taken up) refers unequivocally to a kind of thing. If so, language not only shows reality but is the unambiguous correlate of reality.

This scheme has ethical implications, as can be seen in the anecdote about Antisthenes in the theatre when some verses in one of Euripides'

¹³ SSR, V. A.187; Porphyry, *Quaest. hom. ad Od.*, 1.1.10ff.

¹⁴ SSR, V.A.189; Porphyry, *Quaest. hom. ad Od.* 1.1.30ff.

¹⁵ For a detailed analysis of these testimonies, see C. MARSICO, *Antisthenes y la prehistoria de la noción de campo semántico*, in «Nova Tellus», 23.2 (2005) pp. 70-99 and *Odysseus is not a liar. Ancient Semantic Analysis in Antisthenes' investigation of names*, in «Journal of Classical Studies», 23 (2021) pp. 45-60.

¹⁶ 6. 3 = SSR, V.A.151.

¹⁷ *Met.* 5.29.1025; SSR, V.A.152.

tragedies supported relativism: «Nor are Cleanthes' corrections (*paradiorthoseis*) and Antisthenes', who having seen the Athenians loudly celebrating in the theatre <the verse> 'what thing is shameful, if it does not seem so to those who make use of it', throwing himself unreservedly <he said>: 'what is shameful is shameful, whether it seems so or not (*aischròn tò g'aischròn, kàn dokê kàn mè dokê*)'»¹⁸. Antisthenes' method rejects relativism since it seeks to fix the objective semantic structure of language. The principle *tagatha kala, ta kaka aischra*¹⁹ shows an unalterable correspondence whose terms can be associated with different and never confusable concepts. The language as a system is organised in semantic regions, which ensure that *tagatha* are associated only with similar terms.

From Antisthenes' perspective, analysing names leads to knowledge of reality. This theory is economical and powerful and does not require suprasensible entities. Therefore, to substantiate his own theory Plato needed to challenge this linguistic access to the real. He attempts this refutation in the *Cratylus*, relying upon the strategy of opponent deletion in its deep variant.

3. *Opponent deletion at work*

The features of this strategy in its deep version must be inferred from the structure of the work. As we have seen, this figure is not fully visible since it aims to make the rival as invisible as possible. However, according to the criteria we outlined in point 1, it is possible to identify some *loci* where this strategy is present.

a. *The construction of the figure of the adversary*

Why did not Plato make Antisthenes a character in the *Cratylus*? It was not impossible, considering his age. In Xenophon's works,

¹⁸ Plut., *Quom. Adul. Poet. Aud. Deb.* 12 p. 33c; SSR, V.A.195 G.

¹⁹ DL, 6.12; SSR, V.A.134.

Antihistenes argues with Socrates. However, by choosing a horizon with another supporter of naturalism, Plato can show Socrates refuting Antisthenes' ideas and diluting his authority within the Socratic circle. Cratylus, as a character, does not match the historical figure described in other sources. He appears as a radical Heraclitean who rejects any link between language and reality. However, in this dialogue, he speaks of flux but strongly believes in the adequation of names²⁰. On the other hand, Cratylus' profile is a functional part of Plato's strategy. He is withdrawn and intervenes only when required to do so. He never attacks Socrates' argument. At the same time, he remains stubbornly attached to his ideas even when Socrates refutes his position, even accepting contradictory statements²¹. In contrast to the brutal attitude of Polus and Callicles in *Gorgias*, who defend their views against all arguments, even at the risk of preventing dialogue and forcing Socrates into a monologue, Cratylus lacks integrity and is fickle.

He had learned from others, which suggests that he is a low-skilled disciple of a true naturalist. Socrates addresses him as follows: «I should not be surprised if you could say something better than this, for I have the impression that you have studied it personally and have learned from others» (428a-b). Therefore, Plato depicts Antisthenes' position through a follower who contributes to the distorted description because of his ineptitude. Cratylus is a rather foolish character who does not give solid explanations, but neither does he accept that he has been refuted. His position fails several times, and yet he asserts it again. In 431a, he accepts Socrates' objection about the impossibility of saying something false. In 433b he admits that the name is the image of the thing. Still, in 433d he suddenly claims that the name manifests the essence of the thing, and consequently, in 435d, affirms that he who knows names also knows things without giving any reason other than mere personal conviction. He then has to admit the contradiction between flow and rest;

²⁰ See ARISTOTLE, *Metaphisica* 1010a.

²¹ Thus, at one point, he comes to accept a formulation of the theory of Ideas (439d), only to retract it later.

in 438b, he accepts that knowledge of primary names is impossible, and in 438e and 439b he admits that reality must be known from something other than names, so that in 439d he accepts the existence of ‘things in themselves’.

However, after all this, he disavows everything and returns to the idea of flux. Again, in 440a, he accepts that without something fixed there is no knowledge, but finally in 440d-e, towards the end of the dialogue, he still maintains the thesis of flux and dismisses Socrates contemptuously. Cratylus is erratic and inconsistent, fitting in with some of the accusations against Antisthenes and his followers. If so, he is a caricature of the typical Antisthenic philosopher²².

b. The horizon of the theories to be refuted.

In the *Cratylus*, theories are extreme. Radical naturalism has as its opposite extreme conventionalism. Any speaker can create language in this polar framework in which the extremes touch (*Crat.* 385a). These theories appear as mere working hypotheses rather than ideas of concrete adversaries. Something similar occurs in the passage about the materialists and the friends of Ideas (*Sophist* 246a-248e). Plato’s strategy was successful. Many interpreters tried to identify the groups, i.e., whether the materialists refer to Aristippus, Antisthenes, Democritus, or all of them. The same happens with the friends of Ideas. Are they

²² In this vein, the denial of the ontological level could have produced the sense of naivety of Antisthenes’ views in Plato and Aristotle. This accusation is attested to in the mention of the rudeness in *Metaphisica* 8.3.1043b5; SSR, V.A.150, their ingenuity in *Metaphisica* 5.29.1024b6; SSR, V.A.152, although it is possible that this reading is influenced Aristotle’s view. Indirect testimony is, at the same time, the collection of passages around the Antisthenic critique of the theory of Ideas in which the supposed Platonic response to the objection ‘I see the horse but not the horsehood’ is summed up in the counter-accusation that this is the result of Antisthenes’ inability and not a flaw in his own position. Thus, in SSR, V.A.149, Plato answers the objection thus: that with which you see the horse you have it, but that with which you see the horsehood you have never had it».

referencing Plato's mature dialogues, dissident members within the Academy, or other Socratic groups?²³ The theories are presented simplistically, almost as caricatures, without serious discussion. In the previous passage, Plato had discussed Parmenides' perspective (*Soph.* 244e-247e), but in that case he named him. He described his doctrine carefully, including quotes from the poem and scrupulous analyses. On the contrary, in the *gigantomachia* the opposite theories seem to be logical possibilities that are by their very extremism unacceptable and must be combined by someone who can grasp the true nature of reality, as Plato's spokesman, the Stranger, will do.

c. Presenting the opponent's theory

Cratylus advocates for naturalism. For this reason, it would be expected for him to present this position. However, even though he is present, Hermogenes, his opponent, describes it at the beginning of the dialogue (383a-384a). Cratylus remains hermetically and incomprehensibly silent even when Hermogenes dismisses the principles of naturalism as inconsistent. Only in the final part of the dialogue does Cratylus intervene, but he does not outline his theoretical position either. Since Socrates rejects Hermogenes' conventionalist thesis by appealing ostensibly to naturalism, Cratylus judges that they are in agreement. When Socrates raises objections, it is Socrates himself, not Cratylus, who summarises the principles of naturalism. On the contrary, Cratylus uses naturalistic slogans closely linked to Antisthenes' ideas, which have no argumentative strengths in isolation. Cratylus only recites platitudes without being able to prevent Socrates from distorting the theory.

In the 'descriptive passage' (428e-430a), Socrates outlines naturalism. First, the rightness of names is said to be «that which shows us what the thing is» (428e). Second, that «names are said in view of instruction» (428e). Third, that since name-givers are infallible (429a-c), it is impossible to speak falsely (429d-e). Everything else is a discussion – and

²³ On these positions, see the *ad loc.* commentary by Cordero *cit.*

in many cases a misrepresentation – of these three theses, which can indeed be found in Antisthenes. The first thesis is a parallel text of the definition of *logos* as «that which shows what the thing was or is»²⁴. In the *Cratylus*, *orthotes* also involves showing. The second thesis recalls the investigation of names, the *episkepsis onomaton*, which was for Antisthenes the principle of education²⁵. Cratylus attaches great importance to it in 427e, because knowledge begins there. In 435d, it is repeated that the function of names is to teach because «he who knows names also knows things». Hence, the investigation of names is the beginning of education because it gives access to the real.

The third thesis ensures this link. The name-giver is infallible. He gives each thing one name according to its nature. Hence, nobody can speak falsely, and it is impossible to contradict²⁶. Cratylus advances these Antisthenic ideas. These arguments assure the correspondence between name and thing and therefore the coherence between the structure of language and reality. This coherence, however, is doubtful. The passage describes the theory as extravagant.

The origin of this adequate language is the product of the activity of the name-giver. It is first mentioned in *Crat.* 389a, when conventionalism is criticised through naturalistic elements and assumptions shared by Platonism, such as consistent realities in 385e. As a result, the most extreme thesis on the impossibility of falsehood and contradiction emerges²⁷: Whoever says, says something; whoever says something, says what is, and whoever says what is, says the truth. This formulation is attributed to Antisthenes and put into the mouth of Cratylus in the same terms²⁸.

²⁴ Diogenes Laertius 6.3; SSR, V.A.151.

²⁵ Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.17.11-12; SSR, V.A.160.

²⁶ See SSR, V.A.152-156. In fact, the affirmation of the impossibility of contradicting coincides with the impossibility of falsely speaking, since in both cases the argumentation rests on the fact that he who says something, says something; he who says something, says what is, and he who says what is, says the truth.

²⁷ See SSR, V.A.152-156.

²⁸ See the testimony of Proclus (in *Plat. Crat.* 37; SSR, V.A.155). Indeed, it is

If so, Plato uses the strategy of ‘opponent deletion’ since the challenge rests on the careful misrepresentation of certain traits of naturalism based on the absence of the name of its real proponent. Plato’s rebuttal is based on two points. First, against the descriptive passage, Plato changes the *logos* that shows into the *logos* that imitates. Thus, Plato focuses on the criticism of *mimesis*, which is not among the four original theses. Secondly, Plato introduces another Antisthenes’ thesis, the ‘use of names’ (*khresis onomaton*), to stress that custom is incompatible with the descriptive passage in 428e-430a. Let us look at the argument in detail.

During the conversation with Hermogenes, the name-giver is said to imitate the essence of each thing with letters and syllables (423e). He appears again in 427c, concerning the primary names: «It is evident that the lawgiver also reduced the other notions to letters and syllables (*kata grammata kai kata sullabas*), creating a sign, i.e., a name (*semeion te kai onoma*) for each being (*hekasto ton onton*), and, from here, he composed the rest by imitation (*suntithenai apomimoumenos*) with those same elements» (427c). Thus, the *onoma* established by name-giver is the result of *mimesis*. This assumption is a Platonic reworking. The ‘descriptive passage’ and Antisthenes’ testimonies point out that the *logos* shows (*deloi*) what it is, without imitation. As in modern linguistics, the name refers to and does not imitate what is named. Therein lies an important point of Plato’s strategy. He associates correctness (*orthotes*) with imitation (*mimesis*) to reject two important Antisthenic assumptions about the impossibility of falsely speaking and the correspondence between language and reality.

Given Antisthenes’ view on the exact link between name and thing, *hen eph’henos*²⁹, Plato makes Cratylus say that there are no misplaced names and that those that appear to be misplaced are not names but mere noise (429c). Therefore, *pseudein* is impossible. Still, he affirms

useful to compare this text with *Crat.* 429d.

²⁹ See SSR, V.A.152.

that this reasoning fails because the *onoma* is an image of the thing (430b)³⁰. This characterisation allows him to claim that the name, since images have no essential relation to its model, can be wrongly attributed, i.e., the name-giver can fail (436c-e). Inadequacy arises from the nature of the image, i.e., the ontological difference between model and copy. That is why language is imprecise with respect to reality, and the strict correspondence between the two levels does not exist (432a-e).

The argument about the name as imitation depends on the primary names, which are the elementary notions used by the name-giver to construct the derived names. Plato has in mind the scheme of the letters that make up words. The primary names are somehow the semantic correlate of the phonemes. Plato ridicules this idea in two steps. First, he objects that «things are revealed by letters and syllables» (425d), i.e., language is suited to shape the image of names. Secondly, he argues that the thesis of primary names, i.e., the attribution of meaning to phonemes, without which there are no secondary names, is inconsistent («what I have heard about primary names seems to me utterly insolent and ridiculous (*hubristika einai kai geloia*)», 426b). Despite this negative judgement, Socrates discusses what these primary names should be.

Shortly afterwards, this idea reappears: «Cratylus often puts me on the spot, as I said before, by affirming that there is a rightness of names (*orthoteta onomaton*), but without saying clearly what kind (*etis d' estin ouden saphes legon*). In this way, I cannot know whether, every time he speaks on the subject, he makes it so unclear voluntarily or involuntarily (*ekon e akon*)». (427d-e) Hence, the naturalists do not make their assumptions explicit. Strictly speaking, no source conveys something like the theory of the primary names, nor does it attribute it to any author contemporary with or prior to Plato, so everything rests on an argument *ab silentio*. Still, even under these circumstances, some hypotheses are admissible.

³⁰ See *Crat.* 430 A ff.: *oukoun kai to onoma homologeis mimema ti einai tou pragmatos*.

If, as we believe, Plato refers to Antisthenes in the *Cratylus*, he attacks his theory, noting its poor theoretical basis. Antisthenes could have held something similar to the theory of primary names, which would explain the statement in 426b about having heard about this topic. The connection between this passage and the criticism of the obscurity of the assumptions of this view suggests that Plato underlined this lack and supplemented it with outcomes that could follow from the principles of *orthotes*. It is more likely that Antisthenes did not postulate a theory of primary names but a general naturalistic perspective underpinning the method of semantic analysis. He did not need primary names since the thesis of the *oikeios logos* does not require them. Antisthenes' *orthotes* rests on the principle *hen eph'henos*³¹, whose confirmation, as is often the case in linguistics, arises from its application to concrete examples and not from its origin, as Plato tries to suggest. In sum, Plato seems to introduce the theory of primary names to strengthen the approach³², but he really sought to refute it. Antisthenes' theory, originally applied to names, is extended to phonemes to create a rather crude effect.

Several criticisms of the method of linguistic analysis complement this procedure. In 414d, it is said: «And if once again one is allowed to introduce and suppress whatever one likes in names, it will be very easy to adapt any name to anything». The indiscriminate application of association stresses the lack of seriousness of Antisthenes' semantic analysis³³.

Plato refers to Antisthenes also in the most accurate attack on *orthotes* in 434e. Socrates gets Cratylus to appeal to custom: «Soc. - (...) As we speak now, we do not understand each other if one says *skleron*, and you do not know what I mean now? Crat. - Yes, my dearest friend,

³¹ SSR, V.A.152.

³² This is clearly stated in 425b where the primary names procedure is linked to a type of approach 'in accordance with the technique'.

³³ See, for example, the associations between *hyperphialos*, *hyperoche*, *hyperoptes* and *hyperephanon* in SSR, V.A.189.

but out of habit (*dia ge to ethos*). Sóc. - And when you say custom, do you think you mean something other than convention (*ethos de legon oiei ti diaphoron legein sunthekes*)». This notion of *ethos* is related to the notion of *khresis*, which is fundamental in Antisthenes's view³⁴. It is quite possible that Plato refers, out of context, to Antisthenes' *khresis* to underline the strange place attributed to usage in a naturalistic framework. Plato polarises conventionalism and naturalism. He demands Hermogenes an extreme conventionalism in which each individual could create language and asks naturalism to deny any function to usage. However, Antisthenes gives usage a specific function since the original task of the name-giver does not imply exact survival after some time. On the contrary, time produces changes and gradual wear and tear, although it is possible to grasp the intrinsic logic of language based on the principle of *hen eph' henos* through proper analysis³⁵.

4. Conclusion

The strategy of 'opponent deletion' in its deep version allows Plato's *Cratylus* to ignore Antisthenes and outline the rival's profile, the horizon, and the presentation of the opponent's theory to ensure his refutation and the projection of his own discourse as unique, silencing the polyphony of the underlying polemic.

The strategy of 'opponent deletion', often used by Plato, seeks to monopolise the discourse. In its deep version, the rival is lost behind the

³⁴ See SSR, V.A.187.

³⁵ It should be added, however, that we know from the surviving testimonies that the Antisthenes' emphasis was not on the phonetic but primarily on the semantic level. It also explains why the changes in the phonemes are not decisive and why the system remains intact in spite of circumstantial changes. What is banished in advance in the scheme of Antisthenes is the possibility of a diachronic structural semantics which would account for the transformations in the structure of semantic fields with their consequent creation, transformation and disappearance of lexemes and their reciprocal relations. Antisthenes' *orthotes* ensures the stability of the semantic structure of the language.

arguments, which appear to be pure ideas, detached from the argumentative dispute. It is a powerful tool to create the illusion of aseptic thought unaffected by the context. In this aseptic fiction, contrasting theories appear as ideas of the author himself, who pretends to be scrupulous and contemplate all possibilities, far from the desire to gain the theoretical field in dispute. An effective polemic in a concrete historical situation becomes, through the deep version of this strategy, a monolithic reflection that dismisses other perspectives to show itself as the only alternative. The emphasis on the unfeasibility or even absurdity of rival perspectives creates a climate of lonely objectivity. This is why the deep version of this strategy silences the names of the adversaries, who would introduce into this closed universe the disruptive element of the vivid polemics of the outside world.

The figure of ‘opponent deletion’ erases the rival so that his authority is not an advantage for the thesis to be attacked. Counting on the incomplete preservation of Antisthenes’ works, the *Cratylus* is taken for an exercise in the framework of Platonic solipsism. Only at times we can glimpse the fierce dispute behind it, which is a striking, extreme and successful example of the strategy of ‘opponent deletion’.