

ARTICLE

Zhuangzi and Plato: Language and the World, the World of Language

Raz Shpeizer 

Department, Kaye Academic College of Education, Be'er-Sheva 8414201, Israel

ABSTRACT

This article inquires into the philosophies of language of Plato and Zhuangzi while placing special emphasis on the delicate and complex interplay between the ways they understand language and their worldviews and writing methods. It is argued that Plato is a linguistic realist who assumes language reflects an objective reality. Zhuangzi, in contrast, is a linguistic conventionalist and skeptic, holding that language constructs rather than reflects the world. Through a comparative philosophical lens, the paper analyzes how linguistic structures and cultural context shaped those thinkers' perspectives and uses Jacques Derrida's logocentrism critique and Chad Hansen's mass nouns theory to better explain their linguistic-philosophical views. The study employs philosophical content and linguistic-textual analysis to highlight how their different traditions influenced their understanding of language. Despite the paper's claim that Plato and Zhuangzi differ significantly in their perception of language, it also points to a shared important theme: Both philosophers use literary and rhetorical devices. This means that for the two of them, knowledge is not only captured in propositional statements but is also sculpted through style and expression. By exposing the profound interest of those major ancient philosophers in language and its relation to the world, the study shows that language and philosophy of language were already significant themes in the early days of world philosophy. By delving into a cross-cultural dialogue, the study suggests a refreshed vantage point on how language functions in various philosophical frameworks and on the discourse of the relationship between language, meaning, and reality.

Keywords: Comparative Philosophy; Philosophy of Language; Realism; Conventionalism; Plato's Theory of Language; Zhuangzi and Language

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Raz Shpeizer, Department, Kaye Academic College of Education, Be'er-Sheva 8414201, Israel; Email: razsp@kaye.ac.il

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 16 February 2025 | Revised: 20 March 2025 | Accepted: 28 March 2025 | Published Online: 31 March 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i4.8761>

CITATION

Shpeizer, R., 2025. Zhuangzi and Plato: Language and the World, the World of Language. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(4): 238–247.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i4.8761>

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2025 by the author(s). Published by Bilingual Publishing Group. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

At the start of the 20th century, language became central in Western philosophy, and the philosophy of language seemed to replace the previous prominent philosophies — those relying on metaphysical and epistemological foundations. Many considered this change to be revolutionary in the history of philosophy. However, as will be shown, its seeds were sown many years before it occurred — in the early days of world philosophy.

Plato and Zhuangzi are two philosophers who represent the early stages of the history of philosophy. They are differentiated not only by the traditions they belong to — and whose foundations they helped to build — but also by their theories positioned at the two ends of the philosophical scale. Both were also concerned with the study of language and its place in the world and worldview.

What was their approach to language, how did it align with their worldview, and what is the association between these and how they presented their ideas — the current paper will aim at answering these questions. In the background to the questions lies the fact that both were scions of different philosophical and cultural traditions, which invites conjectures about their differing attitudes as a product of language and culture and, more broadly, about the relations between culture, language, ontology, and philosophy in general.

2. Methodology

The study's methodology is comparative philosophy — a mode of inquiry that seeks to explore and understand differences and similarities between diverse philosophical traditions and cultures, enrich their philosophies, and advance cross-cultural understanding^[1, 2]. Comparative philosophy, then, not only compares thinkers from different cultures but aims to bring them into constructive dialogue, revealing potential areas of common ground as well as divergences. It can help transcend dogmatic cultural relativism by showing how different traditions share similar philosophical concerns^[3].

The study uses the comparative method along two lines:

1. Philosophical content analysis, which Examines Plato and Zhuangzi's philosophical perception of language and its relation to the world.
2. Linguistic and textual analysis, which looks into the con-

nections between their cultural-linguistic contexts and writing methods on the one hand and their views on language and meaning on the other hand^[4].

This combined approach allows for insights on two levels: first, examining both the philosophical differences and shared concerns between Plato and Zhuangzi, particularly their engagement with language and style, and second, addressing the broader question of how language, thought, and the perception of reality interact across traditions, especially the role language understanding and language structural patterns play in constructing and presenting philosophical views.

By performing this two-dimensional investigation, the study aspires to go beyond comparing two chief philosophical figures from different cultures and contribute to the ongoing probe of the relations between language, philosophy, and worldview.

3. Awareness of Language

We have already become one, so how can I say anything? But I have just said that we are one, so how can I not be saying something? The one and what I said about it make two, and two and the original one make three^[5].

Stranger: It is rather ridiculous to assert that two names exist when you assert that nothing exists but unity.

Theaetetus: Of course it is.

Stranger: And in general there would be no sense in accepting the statement that a name has any existence.

Theaetetus: Why?

Stranger: Because he who asserts that the name is other than the thing says that there are two entities.

Theaetetus: Yes.

Stranger: And further, if he asserts that the name is the same as the thing, he will be obliged to say that it is the name of nothing, or if he says it is the name of something, the name will turn out to be the name of a name merely and of nothing else^[6].

Both Plato and Zhuangzi are aware of language and its central role in human life, and specifically in philosophizing.

They do not grasp language as a mere natural object, or – if one understands Daoism as a form of monism (e.g.,^[7–9]) – a regular portion of the holistic oneness, but rather as a special one, which relates, or at least pretend to relate to the world in a unique manner. Ergo Plato’s use of the language argument to refute Parmenides’ claim, according to which only one thing—permanent and unchangeable—exists, and the Daoist acknowledgment of the problem that language poses for those who wish to claim the unity of all things. This awareness of the special place and role language occupies in the world brings the two to inquire about the nature of language, its functions, its relation to the world, and the possibilities and hazards it carries with it.

On the other hand, the two philosophers naturally use language to address their audience. Hence, at least partially, how they express themselves and perhaps their ideas and philosophical views – including their understanding of language – are influenced by the features of the languages they use. This point will be addressed later, mainly in a section discussing some of their philosophies’ infrastructures and hidden assumptions.

It is also worthwhile to point out that Plato and Zhuangzi were by no means the only ancient Chinese and Western philosophers who studied and investigated language and its relation to the world. Thus, for example, in ancient Greece, Aristotle’s *On Interpretation* thoroughly examined the nature of language^[10], while Epicurus dealt with the issue of the origin of language^[11]. In ancient China, Confucius calls for the “rectification of names” (i.e., “the precise definition of actions and relations”^[12]), and his predecessor Xunzi continues his way and develops a complete theory of language^[3, 13]. A group of philosophers known as the “school of names” (*ming jia*) investigates the relations between language, logic, and metaphysics^[8, 9, 14].

In this sense, Zhuangzi and Plato can be understood as representatives of two of the world’s great philosophical traditions^[3], and the analysis of their language philosophy may indeed teach us about these traditions, especially in the context of language and its relation to worldviews.

4. Plato and Zhuangzi: The Relation Between Language and the World

4.1. Plato: Language as a Picture of the World

Discussions about language occur mainly in two of Plato’s dialogues: *Cratylus*^[15] and the *Sophist*^[6]. The perception of language and its relation to the world are not addressed at the same level in the two dialogues: In *Cratylus*, the discussion focuses mainly on names in their basic meaning, i.e., nouns, whereas in the *Sophist*, the focus is on sentences or statements, perceived as a composition of names and verbs (for a detailed discussion on the subject see^[16]). However, and as will be immediately demonstrated, there are strong arguments to support the claim that the two dialogues reflect a similar view of language and its relation to the world and that this view indeed expresses Plato’s own position.

In *Cratylus*, Plato examines the theory of “natural language.” This theory maintains a resemblance between the names people call things and the things themselves. Therefore, it implies that there are correct and incorrect names, depending on the degree of similarity between them and the things in the world to which they point^[17] (see also, e.g.,^[18]).

What exactly is the nature of this resemblance? Plato does not explain it, but Socrates attempts to describe how letters and syllables can mimic things through the way they are pronounced^[15]. Therefore, there is good ground to assume that when Plato refers to the correctness of names, this correctness derives from how they mimic things^[16, 18, 19]: they can mimic them well and thus are correct, or poorly and thus are incorrect. Similar to painting, which can describe an object well or poorly^[15] (see also^[16]).

Facing the natural theory of language is the theory according to which names are arbitrary: Every naming is a matter of convention, and therefore, there is no good or bad name, correct or incorrect. Each name is suitable to the same degree, provided it is acceptable to a certain cultural group.

Does Plato accept the natural language theory? The answer is not unequivocal: At the beginning of the dialog, Socrates presents arguments in favor of the theory, such as the argument which can be rephrased as follows:

- When people talk to each other and call something by a name, they distinguish between things according to their nature.
- People do not determine the nature of actions; they have a nature of their own.

- Speech is an action.
- Calling names is part of the speaking act (i.e., part of speaking itself).
- An action is correct if it is performed according to its nature.
- Therefore, there is correct name calling – if performed according to its nature, and incorrect – if not so performed^[15].

However, later it appears that Socrates retreats from his initial position. He mentions that custom and convention add something to a thing about which people think when speaking, and the requirement for a complete resemblance between things and names is unreasonable^[15]; and afterward, he argues that people do not need words to learn what things are, and it is possible and even desirable to learn about things without the help of names^[15].

It appears, therefore, that at least according to Cratylus, Plato's position on natural language theory is somewhat ambiguous^[18–20]. Nonetheless, an in-depth analysis reveals that even if he eventually rejects it, a characteristic line of thought emerges from his discussion, which testifies to his view of the relationship between language and the world and underlies all of his philosophy. To see this line, one must return to the initial premises presented above, which state that:

- a. The world is composed of things that have their own nature, and their existence is not dependent on their relationship to people.
- b. By calling it a name, people signify something and separate things according to their nature.

In other words, Plato's position is that there are things in reality that do not depend on people or their recognition (simple realism) and that name-calling is the signification of these things, according to the order in which they exist in the world. That is to say, names are linked to reality because they signify existing things.

A strong indication that this is, in fact, Plato's fundamental position is found in the first question he raises in Cratylus^[15]: Plato does not ask whether it is true that names represent things in the world or not, but whether there is a natural correspondence (that can be called imitative correspondence) between names and things they represent. Consequently, even if the answer to this question is negative, the

view that names represent things in the world that exist independently of language remains by far the most reasonable interpretation of Plato's position. Only now, it is said that it is possible that the names given to things – the syllables from which they are built, the way they are pronounced, etc. – are arbitrary. Yet, using names means signifying things in the world, and distinguishing between names is carried out according to the state of things in the world.

This position of Plato is also apparent in his argument that the person who should supervise name-making is the one who best knows how to use language, he who "knows how to ask questions" and answer them^[15], that is, the dialectician or philosopher. It is furthermore manifested in Euthydemus^[21]; (see also^[22]), where it is claimed that speaking falsehood means talking about things as they are not, and it arises again in the Sophist.

In the Sophist, Plato addresses various issues: defining the sophist, the problem of being and non-being, and the related problem of false statements (^[23–25]). It is the latter that is relevant to the current discussion. To understand how a false statement is possible, Plato first analyses the general structure of sentences:

Stranger: For when he says that, he makes a statement about that which is or is becoming or has become or is to be; he does not merely give names, but he reaches a conclusion by combining verbs with nouns^[6].

A sentence consists of verbs and nouns (or names) combined into a general statement about the world. What are names and verbs?

Stranger: The indication which relates to action we may call a verb [...] And the vocal sign applied to those who perform the actions in question we call a noun^[6].

Names and verbs signify states of affairs in the world, and by this, they acquire meaning^[16, 25]. How is a false statement possible, and how does it differ from a true statement? Two conditions must exist for a false statement to have meaning:

1. The subject must be real (being in the world).
2. The predicate is also real in itself – it exists in the world but is not applicable in relation to the subject. Hence, the

sentence “Theaetetus flies” is false because it connects a real subject with a real predicate, although this connection does not exist. In contrast, the statement “Theaetetus sits” is true because both its subject and predicate, as well as the connection between them, are real: They signify an existing state of affairs in the world ([6]; see also, e.g., [24])

Therefore, for Plato of the Sophist, like Plato of Cratylus, words (in the present context, names and verbs) derive their meaning from the reality they are associated with and signify.” (see also [26]). Every meaningful discourse refers to and derives from the world because the words signify the same part of the world that exists separately from it.

And yet a puzzle remains: Platonic ontology, as usually understood [27], espouses that the Material world is nothing but a constant flux. How, therefore, do names signify the world while there is nothing to signify, if everything flows? The answer is found in Plato’s theory of ideas (or forms): Those abstract, perfect, and permanent beings that are the cause of everything in the world, which exist by taking part in them. Plato can hold that names signify actual things if he assumes that the names correspond with the ideas, as things in the world take part in them, and hence, through their connection to the ideas, names can signify the material world [28]. Thus, as stated above, Socrates points to the philosopher—who knows the ideas—as the one who should supervise the legislation of names, and the existence of false statements is also possible: the parts of false discourse (verbs and nouns), are true in that they signify ideas and only their combination is false.

In this context, it might be worthwhile to mention Mouzala [29], who points out that according to Hamlyn [30], even proper names are “a disguised version of a collection of names of Forms.” This explains how statements like “Theaetetus flies,” which includes proper names, are still connected to the sphere of ideas.

Therefore, the Platonic position about the language-world relationship can be summarized as follows: The world and its diverse parts exist independently of human recognition, and the distinctions made in language are not random but reflect this world, which in itself reacts to the sphere of ideas. In other words, language is subject to the world and signifies its parts and their connections. Every meaningful discourse is about the world, and its meaning derives from

its relationships with what there is in the world.

4.2. Zhuangzi: Language Creates the World

The following analysis relies primarily on chapter 2 of Zhuangzi — “Discussion on making all things equal” [5], where Zhuangzi addresses the topic of language more than in any other parts of the seven “inner chapters,” which widely regarded by scholars to be the only parts of the book that were written by Zhuangzi himself (see, e.g., [8, 9, 31]). However, references to other chapters from the book will also be made when they relate to or enrich the arguments presented in Chapter 2.

Zhuangzi is hardly certain that when people say something, their words convey meaning beyond mere mumbling:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn’t there [5]?

Birds’ peeping and wind blowing are not language, at least not in the sense of representing things in the world. Is the human language different? The first part of the citation above suggests that Zhuangzi acknowledges the uniqueness of human language, at least on the communicative level. However, he remains skeptical about its ability to convey fixed truths.

Words have value; what is of value in words is meaning ([5]; for a similar saying, see [5]).

Here, again, the beginning of the section might indicate that language does have the capacity to represent reality. However, Zhuangzi immediately undermines this by stating:

Meaning has something it is pursuing, but the thing that it is pursuing cannot be put into words and handed down [5].

Thus, Zhuangzi maintains that words seek meaning but cannot articulate it; language seems too narrow to contain and convey meaning. Perhaps if words were simple representations of the world, then it would be easy to understand the meaning beyond them. However, it appears that Zhuangzi does not accept the picture theory of language, the view that words stand for real things in the world. For that reason, regarding opposites such as “right-wrong” (in the moral or the factual sense) or as the negation of something that exists [9, 32], Zhuangzi writes:

Therefore he [the sage], too, recognizes a “this” but

a “this” that is also “that,” a “that” that is also “this.” His “that” has both a right and a wrong in it; his “this,” too, has both a right and a wrong in it. So, does he still have a “this” and “that”? Or does he, in fact, no longer have a “this” and “that”? The Way (Dao) makes them all into one^[5].

The first part of the passage suggests that opposites are not absolute but depend on the frame of reference from which they are viewed: what appears as “this” from one point of view appears as “that” from another^[9, 33–36]. The last two sentences, however, go a step further: Zhuangzi offers that understanding the relationship between language and reality leads to the understanding that all distinctions are arbitrary, hence the conclusion:

A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so^[5].

It is not, then, that words only do not accurately depict reality or that sometimes they may correspond to reality and at other times they may not^[7, 37]. Rather, Zhuangzi holds a stronger position, according to which language determines how the world appears to people: how people perceive and judge the world^[13, 32, 33, 38]. This is a conventionalist theory of language and language-world relations, which espouses that knowledge is an outcome of a system of name-giving that is fundamentally random and does not necessarily correspond with reality^[9, 32, 33, 39]. People learn to distinguish between things through a language-learning process. Since People think with the help of language, it makes them feel, define, “and act in certain ways”^[39], and hence, people are governed by the language they employ and depend on what it allows them to think and do. To “know” does not mean to know something about the world but to act and react according to a language system. There is no objective truth to which language corresponds; instead, there are different languages by which different groups describe the world.

This is the ground of Zhuangzi’s language skepticism (see, e.g.,^[40, 41]): Because many types of discourse are possible, and what is conceived as correct or true in one is not necessarily correct or true in another, absolute discursive truth does not exist. “Truth,” “false,” “good, and “bad” are judgments people make within a particular language framework, and they, like the division of the world into objects, actions, and qualities, are given to differences between different languages^[9, 39].

From the outset, language places restrictions upon peo-

ple, making them perceive the world in a certain way, which does not reflect it but divides and limits it. Hence, for Zhuangzi, it is not only that language does not reflect the world as it is, but creates it for humans, and a failure to understand this process of creation gives rise to a misleading, even harmful, picture of reality:

The Way has never known boundaries; speech has no constancy. But because of [the recognition of a] “this,” there came to be boundaries. Let me tell you what the boundaries are. There is left, there is right, there are theories, there are debates, there are divisions, there are discriminations, there are emulations, and there are contentions. [...]. So [I say,] those who divide fail to divide; those who discriminate fail to discriminate. What does this mean, you ask? The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So I say, those who discriminate fail to see^[5].

5. Chad Hansen and the Theory of Mass Nouns

If Zhuangzi is a conventionalist, then he is in opposition to Plato: while the latter, as argued above, sees language as reflecting the world, the former sees it as creating artificial boundaries and distinctions. Chad Hansen presents some of the strongest arguments in favor of this view^[32, 33], basing his argument on the differences between Chinese and Indo-European languages (for a critical analysis of part of Hansen’s view, see, for example,^[4, 42]).

Hansen, who assumes a direct association between language and thought, language and worldview, argues that the Chinese language is built from nouns parallel to mass nouns in Western languages. Mass nouns are nouns such as ‘water’ and ‘rice’. They are different from common nouns in Western languages – count nouns – in that they cannot be multiplied or counted and are associated with the much-little or part-whole dichotomy, in contrast to the one-many dichotomy that developed in Western culture against the background of count nouns^[32, 33].

The mass nouns theory explains, according to Hansen, differences in Chinese and Western philosophical tendencies: In the former, an ontology of stuff-like developed according to which the world is a collection of elements penetrating one another, and “naming is just making the distinctions, and the

distinctions themselves are merely conventional – socially agreed-on ways of dividing up the world”^[26]. This ontology is different from the ontology that has dominated Western thinking since Plato, in which the world is seen as made up of separate objects with their own qualities. Consequently, according to Hansen^[32] (see also^[4, 43]), a conventionalist and nominalist view of language governed classic Chinese ontology, whereas Western ontology was dominated by a realist view of language, and mental and idealistic views developed, arising from the one/many dichotomy: How, for example, Plato asked himself, are all particulars humans call ‘dog’ connected; and thus the road was paved for the creation of another world – a world of ideas, or abstract forms.

Hansen argues, therefore, that the difference between the languages led to a difference in worldview and language-world relationships. His argument reinforces the view according to which Zhuangzi was a conventionalist, for whom there are many possible ways to divide the world, which in itself cannot be divided in an absolute or correct way, and can also be seen as reinforcing the claim about Plato’s lingual realism, which postulated that the material world is made up of things – represented through language – whose existence is possible owing to their connection to the ideas.

6. Writing, Writing Style, and Language

Both Plato and Zhuangzi engage in writing. Writing helps them express their positions and pass them on to others. If presented as a conventionalist and language skeptic, one can always ask the Daoist: Why write at all if words do not describe the world, if they are only an arbitrary social convention? In contrast, at first glance, it seems probable that Plato – as a language realist – would praise language, whether written or spoken, as a tool for understanding the world. Nonetheless, in practice, it is not so. Especially, Plato criticizes the written word^[44–46]:

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence^[47] (See also^[48]).

Unlike the spoken word, the written word allegedly produces a certain imperviousness; readers cannot ask an author what she meant or argue with her, possibilities that

only appear to exist in speech. This indeed may be the reason for Plato’s writing style, the dialogue, as a tool to maintain the spirit of speech and, generally, the philosophical spirit^[49]. Even more, if philosophy is in search of the ultimate truth, and writing does not allow for thorough investigation, raising questions, and getting complete answers, it appears that philosophy can best reach its goal by using the medium of dialogue.

For the French philosopher Jacques Derrida^[44, 50], Plato’s preference for speech over writing is a symptom of Western culture expressing simultaneously repression and hopeless aspiration. The repression is the suppression of death; death as the change and disappearance of being, and the aspiration is for an absolute, unchanging, permanent being. The immediacy of speech, the seeming continuity in every spoken act between talk and thought, creates a sense of words having a single, correct meaning. In writing, in contrast, the absence of both writer and reader is revealed, and moreover, the absence of the signified to which words appear to refer. This absence, Derrida argues, is inherent in every representative system and, in fact, enables it. The yearning for being, the attempt to correctly define things, means ignoring (or repressing) the lack of absolute meaning, the lack of separation between the signified and the signifier, and they are what underlie, according to Derrida, Plato’s writing, and his preference of the spoken over the written^[44, 50] (see also, ^[28, 51]).

To a large extent, it appears that both Zhuangzi’s writing style and content are close to Derrida’s position (e.g., ^[52, 53]). Regarding style: A mix of short stories, dialogues, allegories, and myths that are presented without any apparent order. Regarding content: Ambiguous themes and ideas that can be interpreted one way or another^[8, 38, 53–55], such as the fragment presented above: Does Zhuangzi want to say that words have no other meaning than birds peeping or that they do? According to Zhuangzi’s view of language demonstrated here, it is only natural for him to present an argument and contradict it, to seek the meaning of words, but to play with the assumption that such meaning does not exist^[8, 9, 38].

The understanding that words do not have an absolute meaning, that they do not describe reality itself, does not concern Zhuangzi. On the contrary, the variety of possible interpretations and meanings, or, put differently, the metaphoric level of language, attracts him. Zhuangzi sees

language as a game, that change and flux are its rules, and the pleasure derived from it is not from winning an argument or reaching a final conclusion but part of the game itself^[53, 56]. It is exactly the aspiration for precise and clear-cut saying, for language absolutism – and therefore, moral and philosophical absolutism – which confuse and interrupt the flux of life:

Those at the next [historical] stage thought that things exist but recognized no boundaries among them. Those at the next stage thought there were boundaries but recognized no right and wrong. Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured^[5].

7. Conclusions

This paper has explored and compared Plato's and Zhuangzi's perspectives on language and its relation to the world. Based on this analysis, several important conclusions can be drawn. First, the philosophical concern with the relationship between language and the world is by no means a characteristic feature of modern philosophy alone but already existed in the early stages of world philosophy, or at least Chinese and Western philosophies. To be sure, it is — and should be — an essential part of any discipline that aspires to investigate the world to thoroughly examine its own tools. Philosophy, in particular, as a discipline that aims at understanding the structures and infrastructures, the possibilities and boundaries of human knowledge, should examine the knowledge tools used by all disciplines, including, of course, itself. As has been demonstrated, this understanding is already present in the work of the ancient philosopher's study of language — as a knowledge tool.

Second, when philosophical (and other) views are presented, it is important to be sensitive not only to the content but also to the style of writing or speaking. In other words, language is not only about content but also about its form of use. The form of use expresses the philosopher's overall position. As was made evident in the cases of Zhuangzi and Plato.

An important point that might easily be overlooked is that neither Plato nor Zhuangzi used the standard, objective-like, non-dramatic, formal, and impersonal style of writing that is common in philosophy today—especially in analytic philosophy. That is, both use literary and rhetorical tech-

niques to explore and express philosophical ideas. This suggests that both held that knowledge could not be obtained—or, at the very least, transmitted—by language without its stylistic dimension.

Notably, Derrida, as well as other Continental and postmodern philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze, also use literary means when philosophizing, which indicates their conception of language as a diverse, ever-changing, and open-ended integral part of both philosophy and reality. This shows that despite philosophical and cultural differences, the use of literary and rhetorical techniques in philosophy is not restricted to a particular tradition, era, or school of thought.

Third, language customarily used in a particular culture influences its philosophical discourse and, more generally, the worldview of thinkers who are members of this culture. This influence—as arises from both Hansen's and Derrida's views—is, to a large extent, unconscious. Furthermore, even when philosophers are aware of language's influence on cultural and philosophical discourse and belief systems, they remain bound to a certain degree by the structures and infrastructures of language itself. Hence, the tactics and strategies used to overcome—at least partly—these chains.

In this sense, one can argue that there is a symmetry between the philosophies of different cultures and, more specifically, between Plato and Zhuangzi. Nonetheless, this claim is not accurate. Distinct from Plato, Zhuangzi discusses words with more profound skepticism, and it appears that he seeks to neutralize the effect of language on people's worldviews and the ways they act. It is not that Zhuangzi wishes to be silent, and Plato seeks to speak, but rather that Zhuangzi wishes to emphasize the limitations of words, whereas Plato is asking to arrange the world through them. And perhaps this is the difference between the Platonic sage who searches for the absolute constant and the Daoist sage who follows the chaos.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Li, C., 2016. Comparative philosophy and cultural patterns. *Dao*. 15(4), 533–546. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11712-016-9519-5>
- [2] Balslev, A., 1997. Philosophy and cross-cultural conversation: Some comments on the project of comparative philosophy. *Metaphilosophy*. 28(4), 359–370. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9973.00065>
- [3] Scharfstein, B.A., 1998. A comparative history of world philosophy: from the Upanishads to Kant. SUNY Press: Albany, NY, USA.
- [4] Fraser, C., 2007. Language and ontology in early Chinese thought. *Philosophy East and West*. 57(4), 420–456. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2007.0045>
- [5] Zhuang, Z., 1968. The complete work of Zhuangzi. Watson B, translator. Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA.
- [6] Plato, 1921. *Sophist*. In: Plato in twelve volumes, Vol. 12. Translated by Fowler HN. Harvard University Press: London, UK.
- [7] Coutinho, S., 2014. Conceptual analyses of the Zhuangzi. In *Dao companion to Daoist philosophy*. Springer: Dordrecht, Netherlands. pp. 159–192.
- [8] Graham, A.C., 1989. *Disputers of the Tao*. Open Court: Chicago, IL, USA.
- [9] Graham, A.C., 2001. *Chuang-Tzu: The inner chapters*. Hackett: Indianapolis, IN, USA.
- [10] Aristotle, 1984. *On Interpretation*. Translated by Ackrill JL. In: Barnes, J., ed. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. 1. Princeton University Press: Princeton, UK. pp. 25–38.
- [11] Kotzia, P., Chriti, M., 2014. Ancient philosophers on language. In: Giannakis G, Bubenik V, Crespo E, et al., editors. *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Language and Linguistics*. Brill: Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston, USA. pp. 124–133.
- [12] Needham, J., 1956. *Science and Civilization in China*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.
- [13] Botz-Bornstein, T., 2022. Zhuangzi, Language and Gender. *Philosophy Now*. 150, 36–39.
- [14] Fraser, C., 2024. School of Names. In: Zalta EN, Nodelman U, editors. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Internet]. Stanford University: Stanford, CA, USA.
- [15] Plato, 1921. *Cratylus*. In: Plato in twelve volumes. Translated by Fowler HN. Harvard University Press: London, UK.
- [16] Ademollo, F., 2015. Ancient Greek Philosophy. *Linguistic Content: New Essays on the History of Philosophy of Language*. 33, 33–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198732495.003.0003>
- [17] Robinson, R., 1969. *Essays in Greek philosophy*. Clarendon Press: Oxford, UK.
- [18] Sedley, D., 2003. *Plato's Cratylus*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK.
- [19] Roupá, V., 2020. Naming as technē in Cratylus. In: Baracchi C, editor. *The Bloomsbury Companion to Plato*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland. pp. 23–41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-52127-1_2
- [20] Barney, R., 2001. Names and nature in Plato's Cratylus. Routledge: London, UK.
- [21] Plato, 1967. *Euthydemus*. In Plato in twelve volumes, Vol. 3. Translated by Lamb WRM. William Heinemann Ltd.: London, UK.
- [22] Scolnicov, S., 2006. Language and dialogue in Plato. *Classica-Revista Brasileira de Estudos Clássicos*. 19(2), 180–186. Available from: <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/6017/601770884002.pdf>
- [23] Foley, S., 2022. Sophistic speech and false statements in Plato's Sophist. *Illinois Classical Studies*. 47(2), 383–405. Available from: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/916493>
- [24] Bluck, R.S., 1957. False statement in the Sophist. *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*. 77(2), 181–186. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/629356>
- [25] Frede, M., 1992. Plato's Sophist on false statements. In: Kraut R, editor. *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge University Press: New York, USA. pp. 397–424.
- [26] Wiggins, D., 1971. Sentence, meaning, negation, and Plato's problem of non-being. In: Gregory, V., ed. *Plato, collection of critical essays: 1: Metaphysics and epistemology*. Anchor Books: New York, USA. pp. 268–303.
- [27] Hunt, D.P., 2003. Form and flux in the Theaetetus and Timaeus. *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 359. Available from: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1358&context=sagp>
- [28] Griffith, J., 2017. From leaky pots to spillover-goblets: Plato and Zhuangzi on the responsiveness of knowledge. *Dao*. 16(2), 221–233. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-017-9548-8>
- [29] Mouzala, M.G., 2019. Logos as “weaving together or communion of indications about ousia” in Plato's

- Sophist. Platonic Investigations. 10(1), 35–75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25985/PI.10.1.03>
- [30] Hamlyn, D.W., 1955. The communion of forms and the development of Plato's logic. *Philosophical Quarterly*. 5(21), 289–302.
- [31] Hansen, C., Summer 2024. Zhuangzi. In: Zalta EN, Nodelman U, editors. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Internet]. Edition. Available from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/zhuangzi/>
- [32] Hansen, C., 1983. *Language and logic in ancient China*. The University of Michigan Press: Michigan, USA.
- [33] Hansen, C.A., 1992. *Daoist theory of Chinese thought: A philosophical interpretation*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, New York, USA.
- [34] Moeller, H.G., 2004. *Daoism explained: From the dream of the butterfly to the fishnet allegory*. Open Court: Chicago, IL, USA.
- [35] Vrubliauskaitė, A., 2014. Language in Zhuangzi: How to say without saying? *International Journal of Area Studies*. 9(1), 75–90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ijas-2014-0005>
- [36] Ziporyn, B., 2009. *Zhuangzi: The essential writings with selections from traditional commentaries*. Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.
- [37] Yang, G., 2008. Names and words in the philosophy of Zhuangzi. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. 3, 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11466-008-0001-2>
- [38] Porat, R., 2022. Language in the Zhuangzi. In: Chong, K.C., ed. *Dao companion to the philosophy of the Zhuangzi*. Vol. 16. Springer Nature; pp. 237–267. Available from: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-92331-0>
- [39] Yearly, L., 1983. The perfected person in the radical Chuang Tzu. In: Mair VH, editor. *Experimental essays on Chuang Tzu*. University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu, HI, USA. pp. 125–139.
- [40] Kjellberg, P., 1996. Sextus Empiricus, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi. In: Ivanhoe PJ, Kjellberg P, editors. *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*. State University of New York Press: Albany, NY, USA. pp. 1–26.
- [41] Raphals, L., 1996. Skeptical strategies in the Zhuangzi and Theaetetus. In: Ivanhoe PJ, Kjellberg P, editors. *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*. State University of New York Press: Albany, NY, USA. pp. 26–42.
- [42] Berger, D.L., 2011. Did Buddhism ever go east? The Westernization of Buddhism in Chad Hansen's Daoist historiography. *Philosophy East and West*. 61(1), 38–55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2011.0003>
- [43] Moody, P., 2016. Word and Tao: Thoughts on an attempt at conceptual translation. *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*. 19(2), 100–126. Available from: https://www.pdcnet.org/logos/content/logos_2016_0019_0002_0100
- [44] Derrida, J., 1981. Plato's pharmacy. In: Derrida, J., ed. *Dissemination*. Translated by Johnson B. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Illinois, USA. pp. 61–171.
- [45] Dickinson, G.L., 1931. *Plato and his dialogues*. Gregory Allen & Unwin Ltd.: London, UK.
- [46] Havelock, E.A., 1963. *Preface to Plato*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, USA.
- [47] Plato. Phaedrus. 1925. In *Plato in twelve volumes*, Vol. 9. Translated by Fowler HN. Harvard University Press: London, UK. Available from: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/searchresults?q=plato&target=en&collections=Perseus%3Acollection%3AGreco-Roman>
- [48] Plato. Letter 7. 1966. In: *Plato in twelve volumes*, Vol. 7. Translated by Bury RG. William Heinemann Ltd.: London, UK. Available from: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0164%3Aletter%3D7%3Asection%3D344c>
- [49] Gadamer, H.G., 2004. *Truth and method*, 2nd Revised ed. Translated by Weinsheimer, J., Marshall, D.G. Bloomsbury Academic: London, UK.
- [50] Derrida, J., 1978. *Writing and difference*. Translated by Bass A. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, UK.
- [51] Jasper, N., 1988. *Plato, Derrida, and writing*. Southern Illinois University: IL, USA.
- [52] Olson C., 2020. Playing in the non-representational mode of thinking: A comparison of Derrida, Dōgen, and Zhuangzi. *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*. 12(1), 30–43. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2020.1709684>
- [53] Wang, Y., 2004. The strategies of “goblet words”: Indirect communication in the Zhuangzi. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*. 31(2), 195–218. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6253.2004.00150.x>
- [54] Chiu, W.W., 2015. Goblet words and indeterminacy: A writing style that is free of commitment. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*. 10(2), 255–272. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3868/S030-004-015-0019-3>
- [55] Wilson, P.L. Aimless Wandering – Chuang Tzu's Chaos Linguistics. Available from: https://www.thing.de/projekte/7:9%23/chuang_tzu_linguistics.html#text2 (cited 16 March 2024).
- [56] Wu, K.M., 1990. *The butterfly as companion: Meditations on the first three chapters of the Chuang-Tzu*. New York Press: Albany, NY, USA.