

Cassirer on the Syntax of Being

Wong Kwok-kui

Baptist University of Hong Kong

This paper examines the expression of *being* from the syntactic perspective in the framework of Cassirer's philosophy of language in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. It first introduces the debate about the validity of the question of *being* between the logical and ontological perspectives, represented by J. S. Mill's attempt to annul the question and Heidegger's counter argument. It then moves to the syntactic perspective by using Aquinas' statement that in every apprehension *being* should be present, and then reconsiders the function of *copula* in a sentence. The main part of this article follows Cassirer's argument by picking up the so-called "war of the giants" between the Heraclitean flux and the Parmenidean immovable *being* in the context of language in Plato's three dialogues, namely *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist*. It then moves on to Cassirer's Kantian scheme of analysis to handle the Platonic question, and argues that words and sentences are different moments of unit formation in our consciousness. It concludes with Cassirer's argument of the priority of sentence over words, and that the concentration merely on the copula is a limited approach to the question. The purpose of this paper is to show Cassirer's contribution to the problem of being by shifting the attention from semantics to the syntax and by breaking new ground from neo-Kantianism, and offers an approach to understand the role of language in our knowledge of the objective world which is neither purely nominal nor realist.

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1. Introduction

From Parmenides to Heidegger, the question of *being* has been regarded as the central question in Western metaphysics. One of the alleged reasons for this high awareness of the question is the peculiarity of the western language, particularly the meanings of the word *being* itself. The analysis of the question of *being* has thus been equivalent to the analysis of the word *being*, and much of the discussion has concentrated on the various forms and meanings of the word *being* in the major languages of western philosophical tradition, i.e., ancient Greek, Latin, English, German, and so on. The earliest example of this equivalence is Parmenides, who equates what is *being* with what is thinkable, so that the proper object of investigation is *being* (*estin*), while *not-being* (*ouk estin*) lies outside of our knowledge (Parmenides, DK 28 B 6). This analysis culminates in the different meanings of *being* in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

In modern philosophy, there has been debate about the validity of the question, which we may roughly divide into logical and ontological perspectives. On the one hand, there are attempts to annul this question by the analysis of the dual meanings and functions of the word "being": first, as a copula which links up the subject and the object, and second, its existential meaning.¹ The most prominent example is that of the modern

Wong Kwok Kui, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Department of Religion and Philosophy, Baptist University of Hong Kong; main research fields: Schelling, Nietzsche, Hermeneutics, The Problem of Time, Aesthetics.

logicians such as J. S. Mill, who argues that this so-called question is merely the result of the non-distinction between *being* as a copula illustrating the relation between subject and predicate and *being* in terms of existence as “there is” (Mill 1973, bk. 1., ch. 4, sect. 1: 78-79). He says, “Many volumes might be filled with the frivolous speculations concerning the nature of *being*, (*to on*, *ousia*, *Ens*, *Entitas*, *Essentia*, and the like) which have risen from overlooking this double meaning of the word *to be*...” Mill remarks further on this alleged confusion:

It is apt to be supposed that the copula is something more than a mere sign of predication; that it also signifies existence. In the proposition, Socrates is just, it may seem to be implied not only that the quality just can be affirmed of Socrates, but moreover that Socrates *exists*.... That the employment of it as a copula does not necessarily include the affirmation of existence, appears from such a proposition as this, A centaur is fiction of the poets; where it cannot possibly be implied that a centaur exists, since the proposition itself expressly asserts that the thing has no real existence. (1973, bk. 1., ch. 4, sect. 1: 78-79)

On the other hand, philosophers from the ontological perspective have argued otherwise by a broader understanding of the word *being* beyond mere existence. Heidegger, for example, responds to Mill’s argument by trying to justify the priority of ontology over logic in the question *being*, and argues that any alleged ambiguity of meaning is never accidental (1988, 194). He quotes Hobbes, who argues that all propositions say something about the quiddity, the whatness, or the essence of the subject (1988, 198). He then goes back to philosophical discussion about *essentia* and *existentia* by Suarez, Don Scotus, and Aquinas. The whole point is, in brief, that in a proposition the knowledge about the subject in the judgment is inextricably intertwined with the knowledge of its existence. A subject is something that exists in this or that way and not in this or that way so that the use of copula “X is ...” becomes necessary. Any judgment about this something presupposes therefore a certain understanding of the nature or essence of this thing so that judgment about it can be passed. Otherwise, we have the ridiculous situation of judging something X without knowing what this thing X is. This understanding, even in purely intellectual terms, can be stated as “there is X which exists (or does not exist) in this or that manner,” be it actual or hypothetical. Therefore, the relation between copula and existence seems to be more complicated than Mill understands it.

This debate brings about a broader question: If we look at the question of *being* from the perspective of a sentence rather than a single word, namely the copula, the problem seems to be more complicated than Mill wants us to believe. The crust of the question can be formulated by citing Aquinas’ argument about the universality of *being* in every apprehension, which Heidegger also cites in his *Zeit und Sein*: “*Illud quod primo cadit sub apprehensione, est ens, cuius intellectus includitur in omnibus, quaequumque quis apprehendit*” (1979, 3).² While Heidegger has argued that every judgment must involve knowledge about the essence of a subject, Aquinas goes further to assert that in every apprehension there must be *being*, which means not only the copula as a grammatical component, but the whole apprehension itself. What Aquinas means here by “apprehension” can be twofold: it can be understood narrowly in a grammatical sense of a sentence, that in every sentence there is a word for *being*, e.g., a verb or a copula; it can also be construed more broadly as understanding and thought. While the word “*apprehendere*” means “to grasp” either sensually or intellectually, Aquinas emphasizes the association between apprehension and judgment. He divides two types of apprehension, one of which is simple and absolute and may make judgment without deliberation.³ Therefore, apprehension in the epistemological sense means that we apprehend something, its essence and features, and then express it in a sentential form.⁴ This shows the close relation between sensual apprehension, judgment, sentence, its grammatical components

and their ontological significance. Therefore, if Aquinas is right that every apprehension, every thought should contain *being* in one way or another, then the next question is how this *being*, once it has been apprehended, is expressed by the different component parts of a sentence. There is of course a gradual process of development from sensual apprehension to intellectual judgment, which can be subject to careful analysis in different stages. Anyhow, we are justified to doubt whether the copula is the only object we should look for if we want to know how *being* is expressed in a sentential apprehension.

This syntactic approach, which has been overshadowed by the semantic approach in the history of Western philosophy, can be traced back to Plato. In *Sophists*, he tackles the problem of how we can speak about “not-being” which is not present. For Plato, while thinking as “a dialogue of the soul with itself” may be silent, a discourse (*logos*) is a judgment and must therefore about something (*ti*). For if it is about nothing, it is not a statement (*Sophist* 263c). Language must have a subject, otherwise we are confronted with the ridiculous situation of talking about nothing, ascribing predicates like unity, plurality, being, etc. to something non-existent. However, in order to resolve the problem of how false judgment comes to be, Plato picks up again the theme of “war of the giants.” Yet he argues in the third way of rejecting neither the Eleatic nor Heraclitean positions entirely, but regards the “reality” or *being (to on)* as the third thing, i.e., both movement and rest at once but yet something distinct from them (*Sophist* 250c). Here Plato defies Parmenides’ teaching of not going into investigation about “not being” (*Sophist* 258c), and argues that “what is not” is a category different from “non-existent.” Plato reiterates the argument he has put forward in *Theaetetus*—that a sensible sentence is made by the combination of names (*onomata*), verbs (*rhemata*), and different classes of words. A mere jumbling of names like “lion stag horse” or verbs like “walks runs sleeps” does not make a sensible proposition. Speech or account (*logos*) must then be a blending of different categories like difference, sameness, motion, rest, existence, etc.. A sensible discourse is a combination of one class of thing with another class, while “the isolation of everything from everything is the abolition of discourse (*logos*)” (*Sophist* 260a). So if we are to refute Mill’s argument, then any proposition with a copula must already imply a certain existence, for a proposition must be about something. Even if this something does not exist, this proposition about something must still be possible by means of blending different categories together so that “not-being” may become present between them (*Sophist* 260b).

The point of all these discussions is this: if *being* must be present in every sentence, is it contained merely in the different forms of the word *being* or the copula, or can it be seen as “spreading out” in the different grammatical components of a whole sentence? It is a topic we could call “the ontology of grammar.” Plato has shown that a sentence is a combination of different parts, for example, verb and noun, and this combination has allowed the expression of being in different forms, even not-being. What he has stopped short of doing is a comprehensive analysis of the composition of a sentence, and how our sensual apprehension evolves into a judgment so that different forms of being can be expressed. For example, we may ask further: what is the ontological role of a participle, which is not a copula but yet somehow also tells us something about the mode of being of the subject? What about other components like noun, subject, verb, gerund, substantive, nominative, subordinate clauses, etc.? These questions are not only about linguistics and grammar, but are also ontological questions about how the apprehension of a being is structured and expressed in different categories of thought, what the ontological relations and significance of these categories are, and how a sentence is formed through the operations of the different faculties of the human mind. Plato has begun this questioning, but to complete the answer is the task of modern philosophy of language.

Cassirer is one of the few modern philosophers who confront all these issues squarely and try to resolve them by putting them in the Kantian perspective, i.e., to regard words and sentence as units formed by the cooperation between different faculties of the human mind like sensibility and understanding. In his *magnum opus*, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, particularly in the chapter on language in volume one, Cassirer takes issue of the “priority of copula” in the Western metaphysics, and tries to offer a syntactical analysis of the relation between words and sentence from the Platonic and Kantian perspectives. This paper will examine Cassirer’s contribution to the solution of the question of being by picking issue with the so-called “war of the giants” between the Heraclitean flux and the Parmenidean immovable *being* in Greek philosophy, and then move to Plato’s three dialogues, namely *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophists*, where it is shown that the permanent *being* is dispersed in the structure of the speech which is in a flux and sentence, thus a moving activity in time. In the main part of this article, it will see how Cassirer provides a Kantian scheme of analysis to handle the platonic question, and concludes with his argument of the priority of sentence over words.

The unique contribution of Cassirer’s approach to our concern lies in that his view of language, though characterized as idealistic, is neither purely nominal nor realist,⁵ but, based on the neo-Kantian perspective and yet working beyond that, he regards symbols as the basic forms of man’s understanding of the world that cannot be reduced to either purely objective existence nor purely subjective construction. This will prove to be a viable alternative in the light of the logical and ontological divide by Mill and Heidegger in the modern philosophy, for such an approach may allow us to dispense with the difficult question whether *being* is merely a grammatical construction or is ontologically real. Wilbur M. Urban says, “instead of attempting to get back of the forms of thought and language to a hypothetical pure experience, it [Cassirer’s philosophy of language] assumes that experience is never pure in this sense and that intuition and expression are inseparable. It therefore proposes, not to deny, but to complete and perfect the principles of expression and symbolism” (1949, 401-42). Moreover, this article will demonstrate the significance of syntax in Cassirer’s philosophy of language. Since the publication of his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, interpretations of Cassirer’s philosophy of language focus mainly on the semiotic aspect, leaving the syntactic aspect, particularly the syntax of being relatively unattended.⁶ The purpose of this paper is to see how Cassirer engages again with the old problem of the relation between *being* and *logos* since Plato by using the Kantian scheme to analyze their relation, namely to see words and sentences as different levels of synthesis and unities of the consciousness. It will show that semantics and syntax are not entirely separate moments, but are both different moments of unit formations in the consciousness, so that the relation between words, sentence, and copula can be looked as different levels of synthesis.

2. Copula and Sentence

Before we examine Cassirer’s argument, we first put the question of *being* in perspective by reconsidering the function of copula in a sentence. In grammatical terms, the copula plays the role of joining subject and predicate in a sentence. Two points can be made about this function. First, we may ask whether the so-called “subject” and “predicate” are really two distinct parts joined together by the copula; or rather that they are originally one while the division is made by the sentence structure, and is only joined together again by the copula. The actual existence of a table, a chair, a book, whether it is a hypothetical or actual existence, exists in a way without distinction between substance and accident. It is like when we see a unicorn in an apprehension, the animal and its horn are given to us in the intuition as one, while the sentence “A unicorn has a horn” divides

this intuition into substance and accident. Therefore, if the second case is true, the connecting word *is*, being a copula, only a product of the sentence forcefully dividing an original *being*.⁷

More importantly, *copula* means originally “bond.” While many words in a sentence can play the role of binding two words or parts in a sentence together, *being* has been singled out by grammarians as the necessary part of a sentence.⁸ This particular role of copula as the connecting word for a complete sentence has an important implication, namely the division between the subject and predicate, which is in turn closely related to the distinction between substance and accident in Western metaphysics since Aristotle. Thomas of Erfurt’s work *Grammatica Speculativa* deserves special attention here as it is a fundamental attempt to make sense of grammar in terms of metaphysics.⁹ He argues that the use of copula in a sentence is an affirmation of the permanence of a *being*. So he says the following about the “verb”: “*Modus significandi generalissimus essentialis verbi est modus significandi rem per modum esse, et distantis a substantia.*”¹⁰ So the use of a copula, even in form of predication, is an act of distancing an accident or predication from an unchanging substance.¹¹ It therefore presupposes the existence of a permanent subject in a sentence. This argument has two implications for the sentence structure: the subject-and-object relation becomes the abiding rule or even the “prison” of the sentence formation. A speaker has to decide in advance what the subject of his sentence is, and the sentence must serve the function of determining the relation between this subject and all the other parts of speech. He implicitly accepts that in his sentence there is some sort of a center, a permanent *being*, while all other parts of speech are only secondary predicates surrounding it. Secondly, there can only be one permanent substance in a sentence. Even another object as determinable *being* can also be a substance, as soon as it appears in this sentence not as a subject, its position makes it a predicate, an accident.¹²

This can be further illustrated by examples of the function of a participle. The term “participle” derives its meaning from “to participate,” “to take part in,” meaning a word that takes part in more than one grammatical functions, e.g., as a “verb to be” or as an “adjective.” Thomas of Erfurt defines a participle thus: “*Participium ergo pars orationis significans per modum esse indistinctis a substantia, sive uniti cum substantia, quod idem est.*”¹³ A participle therefore differs from an ordinary adjective like “this book is *red*” in that it is not a simple predicate added to the subject that can thus be taken away without fundamentally altering the essence of it. It belongs also to the “substance” in that it expresses its “mode of being,” and thus is not separable from its *being* (*substantia*).¹⁴ So Thomas of Erfurt goes on: “*Et dicitur participium, quasi partem nominis, et partem verbi capiens; non partem essentialem, id est, modum essentialem utriusque; ...*”¹⁵ Therefore, in a Greek sentence (or Latin, in the case of Thomas of Erfurt), the sentence structure must have already assumed a permanent existence through time and make it the centre of the whole sentence. The other variations of *being*, a participle in this case, while denoting the mode of being of this permanence, must be regarded as only temporary or in a flux and therefore subordinate to the latter. “*Circa quod notandum, quod modus esse in participio et in verbo ab eadem rei proprietate oritur, quae est proprietas fluxus et successionis; ...*”¹⁶

3. Plato on *Being*, Word, and Sentence

Now we will devote a few pages to Plato, which will pave the way for Cassirer’s Kantian answer. Following the discussion about copula above, it will show that this grammatical structure of copula, permanent being and its “deviation”, has its root in the nature of speaking itself. For Plato, language as spoken sentence is always in a relation of tension: on the one hand, a spoken sentence is a flux in time, while on the other hand a sentence also needs a permanent existence to which our knowledge can constantly refer to during speaking.

When we speak a sentence we need some sort of centre of gravity, while all other parts of the sentence are either addition to it, deviation from it, or even a pure flux. This conclusion has not only linguistic but also philosophical implications, as it brings about the ancient “war of the giants” between the Parmenides and Heraclitus in Greek metaphysics, whereas change and permanence are the central issues in Western ontology.

Cassirer therefore rightly begins his discussion about the question of being and language with the three dialogues of Plato, *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, and *Sophist*, where this “war of the giants” boils down to the relation between a permanent being and the spoken language as a flux. In *Cratylus*, the question of expressing *being* is discussed in relation to the two motifs of movement and retention, i.e., the Heraclitean and Eleatic world view. Plato, in his attempt to combat the Heraclitean view that everything is in a flux, tries to resolve it at different levels. In picking up these two themes, Plato is making a not entirely metaphorical connection between the permanence of *being* and the action of speaking which inevitably involves the flow of time. He uses the metaphor of flux to illustrate this relation: “And can we rightly speak of a beauty which is always passing away, and is first this and then that? Must not the same thing be born and retire and vanish while the word is in our mouths?” (*Cratylus* 439d).¹⁷

Nor can we reasonably say, Cratylus, that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding. For knowledge unless continuing always to abide and exist. But if the very nature of knowledge changes, at the same time when the changes occurs there will be no knowledge, and if the transition is always going on, there will always be no knowledge, and, according to this view, there will be no one to know and nothing to be known. But if that which knows and that which is known exist ever, and the beautiful and the good and every other thing also exist, then I do not think that they can resemble a process or flux, as we were just now supposing. (*Cratylus* 440a)

So this permanent thing, this idea, or the real *being*, makes not only speech but also knowledge about it possible. This important connection can be explained like this: if names must refer to something permanent, then when we speak names, our mind and our speech are directed at something which is not changing so that even with the flow of time during the speech it can still refer to the same unchanging thing. Otherwise, we would be in a difficult situation that when we speak about something this thing itself is changing, just like we cannot know anything about an object if it changes the moment when we approach it and try to know more about it (*Cratylus* 440a). Something must abide if we are to have knowledge at all, as much as there must be something abiding in our mind in the course of speaking and thinking. The so-called “war of the giants” between *being* and *becoming* results in the context of language in the blending between the two: while speech inevitably involves time and flux, it is not entirely a flux, but must refer constantly to an unchanging *being*. *Being* is therefore like a station while a spoken sentence is in a flux.

The next question in the syntactic approach concerns the relation between this permanent idea and the flux of speech. In *Theaetetus*, Plato, in the effort to define knowledge, again combats the Heraclitean notion. He argues that knowledge is more than mere perception because it involves judgment (*Theaetetus* 187a), and false judgment is possible, while thinking and judging about nothing is impossible (*Theaetetus* 189a-c). Therefore, according to Plato, *being* is expressed by the cooperation between Idea and *logos*, and in this cooperation, though the speaker may have an intellectual grasp of an object of knowledge, he must formulate it in a *logos* by first naming it, second by deriving knowledge from this Idea, which includes expounding the relation between this Idea and the others. For simple things in themselves are not explainable but only namable, while explanation is done by the correct connection between names. Something is then explainable and knowable only when things are put together in a sentence. Explanation (*logos*) is the revelation of this process of

connection through its audio articulation. Thinking is a dialogue of the soul with itself, asking itself questions about whether this and that judgment is true or not (*Theaetetus* 189e-190a). Here Plato defines knowledge as “true belief with an account (*logos*)” (*Theaetetus* 201c 9-d1), whereas *logos* means explanation in the form of a sentence. As for this “account,” he gives again a metaphorical illustration as: “... giving overt expression to one’s thought by means of vocal sound with names (*onomaton*) and verbs (*rhematon*), casting an image of one’s notion on the stream that flows through the lips, like a reflection in a mirror or in water” (*Theaetetus* 206d). Echoing the metaphor of speech as flux in *Cratylus*, Plato offers a clearer explanation here: in speech we have in our mind a mirror image or reflection of something. Therefore, during speaking, our mind is not driven away with the flow but is constantly directed at an object. By virtue of this abiding object, although there is a flow of time in a speech, the sentence is still a unity so that the speaker will not forget the first word he has spoken when he speaks the second (memory, as Plato points out in *Theaetetus*, is also an important element in knowledge). There is therefore a centre of gravity, a station in a flux, an image in the mind so that the speaker will not lose sight of what he is speaking. This results in a forceful division and tension between identity and difference in the process of speaking. A sentence as a whole is a synthetic unity. While a part of the unit stays immovable, another part of it must deviate from this immovability and flow with the speech. There is therefore a constant deviation from and return to this centre of gravity in the process of speaking. Plato expresses this relation by a pair of terms which are also the basic elements of a sentence, i.e., names (*onomata*) and verbs (*rhemata*). The word *rhemata* is derived from *rheo*, which means “to flow, run, stream, gush,” from which the metaphorical meaning of “flow of words,” and therefore words like *rhetor* as “public speaker” or “orator,” are derived (Liddell and Scott 1992, 717). While names are only given to a thing and depart no knowledge, the verb, the “flow,” is the key of speaking and thought.

4. Cassirer: Class as Station in the Flux

These discussions lead to the main part of this article, namely Cassirer’s treatment of sentence as a synthetic unity in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Cassirer uses the Kantian scheme of analysis to pick up the Platonic question and extends it from the purely philosophical to the cultural and linguistic spheres. He opens up his discussion by first singling out the question of *being* as the starting point of Western philosophical concern and then embarks upon an examination of the process of how *being* is formed into symbols in different cultures through language, myths, and art. His contributions to our inquiry are threefold: first, he picks up the Platonic problem of the “systematic ‘community’ of pure ideas and formal concepts” (*koinonia ton genon*) in *Sophists*, i.e., the question of how the flux of *being* can be rendered into linguistic expression by participation in the common feature of classes of objects. Second, relating this to Kant’s philosophy of consciousness, he discusses how the stream of consciousness through time, as an equivalence to the motifs of flux and permanence we have been discussing, can be formed into “units” by dimensions such as space, time, and quality, and what role the human spirit plays when it inserts a phonetic determination. Third, in his discussion of the concrete forms of formation of class (*Klassenbildung*), he lists the possible bases of the unit-formation process—i.e., either according to archetypes, stuff, material, touching sensation, bodily relations, etc.—primordial means of human encounter with *being*. In this way, Cassirer has not only provided a comprehensive scheme of analysis for our question, but has broadened the perspective from the mere semantics of copula and verb to a wider ontology of grammar corresponding to the motifs of permanence, flux, and the activity of consciousness.

As discussed earlier, Plato argues in *Sophist* about the impossibility of knowing things in their isolated

state such as “good as good” or “man as man,” wherein the isolation of everything from everything else is an abolition of *logos*. One must know things in terms of “one and many.” In a like manner, *being* is “one” unity in which all things take part in, including movement and rest. The dialectics between motion and rest, “is” and “is not,” in which *being* must take part, has left for philosophy a puzzling riddle which, for Cassirer, “has remained alive throughout the history of philosophy” (1970, 95). Cassirer takes up this issue here and offers a Kantian solution. In the spirit of Kantian schematism, the “unities” in the flux of sensual perception and consciousness can be formed in different moments: quality, modality, space, time, and so on. The consciousness of different qualities of an object which occupies the same particular space must be regarded as changes of the quality of the same object in time. A single object must in turn be regarded as a whole, a unit in consciousness, containing predicates as its parts. However, as to how these objects are to be grouped together based on their common features to form a genus or a class, Kant has little to say in his schematism chapter, remarking only that it is “an art concealed in the depths of the human soul” (Kant 1929, 183, A141/B181). The transition from the recognition of a single object to that of a class demands, within the Kantian scheme, a specific explanation about the arrangement and functioning of these moments, which Cassirer believes to be insufficiently provided in Kant’s first *Critique*.

Cassirer picks up this problem and says that it can be done in many dimensions which may also differ among different cultures. He starts off with the paradox of the unity-formation in the traditional metaphysics of essence, where the essence is the determining substance for the formation of a single object or a class in the consciousness. Essence is supposed to be independent of the “accidents” and is therefore permanent. However, an object or a genus, when it is stripped off of these accidents, leaves us with nothing to know. The concept of essence becomes then only a product of “empty formalism.” To solve this paradox, Cassirer argues that essence and accidents should not be viewed as independent moments, but as one dependent on the other. Such a process of unity formation must be a cooperation between the two directions in the flow of our consciousness, namely the flux of disordered primordial sensual impressions through time and our tendency to capture this flux in units through the medium of time, space, or self-consciousness, or in other words, the cooperation between sensibility and thought in classical Kantian terms. As for language and other cultural process of symbol formations, Cassirer says:

In every linguistic “sign”, in every mythical or artistic “image”, a spiritual content, which intrinsically points beyond the whole sensory sphere, is translated into the form of the sensuous, into something visible, audible and tangible. An independent mode of configuration appears, a specific activity of consciousness, which is differentiated from any datum of immediate sensation or perception, but makes use of these data as vehicles, as means of expression. (1970, 106)

Cassirer calls this cooperation a “twofold nature of formation” (*Doppelnatur der Gebilde*), namely a boundness to the sensible on the one hand and yet freedom from the sensible on the other. In the product of speech and language, the spirit (*Geist*), by making use of the sensible as material for its unit-formation, produces from it a complex of signification. On the level of naming or class formation (*Klassenbildung*), as we designate a certain sound to a certain sensible stuff, this intervention of spiritual freedom produces a new content or character in our consciousness. Cassirer argues that when we represent the world to ourselves, we are already making differentiations and determinations in the consciousness, though this differentiation has not yet been expressed and has not yet acquired a permanent form. Therefore, the moment when the spirit assigns a certain sound to a certain class of sensible stuff, this spiritual act not only repeats these differentiations and determinations we are already making, but also posits them and makes them recognizable, or is what Cassirer

calls “molding of being” (*Prägung zum Sein*). Therefore, the chaos of sensible impressions begins to acquire a durable form. Signs and symbols are therefore not only a copy (*Abbild*) of the reality, but involve an ideal process in which the reality is understood in the relation of “one-and-many”, i.e., “many” in its dimension and direction, yet “one” in its totality of meaning (*Sinnesganzen* [Cassirer 1970, 106]).

Here Cassirer’s debt to Wilhelm von Humboldt is obvious, for it is the latter who puts forward the theory of “*innere Sprachsinn*”—that our use of linguistic devices such as vowel and consonant is not only of linguistic significance, but indicates that the spirit is using these devices to classify our sensual impressions. It differs however from Plato’s onomatopoeic theory in that it is not about the correctness of names expressed by certain sound, but, by virtue of Cassirer’s idealistic approach, it attempts only to explain how our consciousness orders and arranges our sensual impressions into intellectually reasonable and linguistically expressive forms by means of our phonetic devices which are at our easier disposal.

As an illustration of how this classification works, Cassirer draws attention to the question whether there is a basic principle in the formation of classes which is present in every language in the chapter entitled “Basic Trends in Linguistic Class Formation” (*Grundrichtungen der sprachlichen Klassenbildung*) in his symbolic forms book. He soon comes to the conclusion that this is a task only to be accomplished by linguists by means of detailed analysis of the individual languages. However, there is a basic point of departure one may take in this question, i.e., the comparison and ordering of the objects in terms of the similarity between the sensible impressions (*die Vergleichung und Zuordnung der Objekte lediglich von irgendeiner Ähnlichkeit des sinnlichen Eindrucks* [Cassirer 1970, 295]). There is, therefore, at the most “primitive” level, as examples taken from the Melanesian and American aboriginal languages show, less distinction between the moon and the human ear, but they are rather grouped together by virtue of their sensual impression of being round in shape, so that prefixes which owe their origin from the meaning of human nose and tongue are used to represent something of elongated shape. In the unity of consciousness, what takes the lead is therefore not the “essence” or “substance” of the object itself, but the similarity of sensual impressions, i.e., its shape. Cassirer characterizes this means of classification as one that is not according to certain theoretical principle or logical comparison and connection, but based on what he calls “language fantasy” (*Sprachphantasie*), in which the formation of series is not done by the *objective* similarity of the individual content, but it follows the flow of the *subjective* imagination (*Einbildungskraft*).

5. Intellectual and Sensual Faculty of *Being*

Having looked at how this unit of *being* is formed, the next question is then if *being* can be expressed by way of unit-formation, what role does copula still have to play in the expression of *being*? Now we come to the key section of this article, namely the relation between words and sentence in the expression of *being*, particularly the role of copula. Cassirer’s central position is a Kantian one, i.e., our conception and expression of the experience of *being* is closely related to the unity of consciousness, either in the formation of concept or in judgment. A decisively significant insight is offered by Cassirer here: by means of his theory of unit formation, Cassirer’s Kantianism urges us to regard not only words and concepts, but also the whole sentence, as units, so that the relation between words and sentences can also be regarded as one between different levels and moments of unit formation, corresponding to the operation of our consciousness in terms of sensibility, understanding, and reason, etc.. The significance of this analysis for the role of copula will become clear.

First of all, this theory can be understood by looking at Cassirer’s turn from Plato to Kant in his

Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. In his account of the history of the question of *being* from the pre-Socratics onwards, a decisive development took place in Plato. For the latter, this question is no longer an investigation of the object in terms of “beings” (*Seiende*) like the discussion by the pre-Socratics, but *being* (*Sein*) itself becomes a problem expressed in language, which is especially clear in *Sophist*. In this respect, the pre-Socratics become a mere narrative account (*mythos*) of *being*. In modern philosophy since Leibniz, the question of being becomes that about sign as copy (*Abbild*) of *being*. Cassirer says that in theory of abstraction (*Abstraktionstheorie*), where words are regarded as merely copy of being, “... it is forgotten that before a represented object can be resolved into its particular characteristics, judgments are required whose predicates must be general ideas (as concepts are ordinarily called)” (1970, 279). Therefore, he argues that *being* should not only be expressed merely in symbols which correspond to abstract thought like mathematical symbols do, but in the process of concept and symbol formation, the spiritual power of intuition and synthesis should also have taken part. In this process, symbol is not only an abstract copy of individual objects in the world, but may also be a medium facilitating general logical judgment and universalization. The following passage definitely expresses Cassirer’s central position and explains his turn from Plato to Kant in his reflection on the problem:

Instead of starting from the object as the known and given, we must begin with the law of cognition, which alone is truly accessible and certain in a primary sense; instead of defining the universal qualities of being, like ontological metaphysics, we must, by an analysis of reason, ascertain the fundamental form of judgment and define it in all its numerous ramifications; only if this is done, can objectivity become conceivable. According to Kant, only such an analysis can disclose the conditions on which all knowledge of being and the pure concept of being depend. But the object which transcendental analytics thus places before us is the correlate of the synthetic unity of the understanding, an object determined by purely logical attributes. (1970, 78)

This insight has significant implication for the putative relation between words and sentence, especially the function of the copula and the question of *being*. First, as shown in Cassirer’s discussion about Plato above, a concept can be regarded as a station in the Heraclitean flux. This station is formed by the recurrence of something seemingly the same among the different impressions in the flux of the consciousness. This concept must be on the one hand referable to the object itself and can on the other hand also facilitate logical judgment in general terms. So Cassirer asks, “How does language succeed in escaping from that Heraclitean river of change, in which no content which recurs is truly identical—how does language place itself, as it were, in opposition to this flux, and abstract determinate forms from it?” (1970, 280). Therefore, predication is done both linguistically and logically. He says, “on our own initiative we draw certain dividing lines, effect certain separations and connections, by virtue of which distinct individual configurations emerge from the uniform flux of consciousness” (1970, 280).

Furthermore, according to Cassirer, a sentence, though itself in flux, is thought of first and foremost as a unit, as much as the formation of a concept and a word is a unit. The relation between words and sentence is one about part and whole, in which the whole is not simply a summation of the parts. In this sense, rather than having entirely different functions, words and sentence play different roles in the process of the unity formation by the consciousness. Clauses in a Greek sentence, for example, are not simply the succession of one after another, but “stones of an arch which support each other” (Cassirer 1970, 310). Here Cassirer argues for the “priority of sentence over words” in the investigation of language formation. He quotes Humboldt, who says, “We cannot possibly conceive of language ... as beginning with the designation of objects by words and thence proceeding to their organization. In reality, discourse is not composed from words which preceded it, on the

contrary, words issued from the whole of discourse.”¹⁸ This position is preceded by Aristotle, who defines an organism as a unity in which the whole precedes the parts. In the process of linguistic formation, the whole is always earlier than parts, i.e., one thinks of the whole sentence as a “total expression” (*Gesamtausdruck*) and then goes into the individual units of words and concepts in the sentence (Cassirer 1970, 280-81).

Cassirer puts forward the so-called “rule of congruence” (*Regel der Kongruenz*) between the formation of *nomina* and the synthetic form of judgment, where the sensible perception and logical judgment are intertwined with each other just at the moment of perception. In perception, a universal concept is formed not only to refer to this particular object itself, but also in order to make judgment about it possible. He says, “Once again language, with all its involvement in the sensuous, imaginative world, reveals a tendency towards the logical and universal ...” (1970, 302). In this congruence, sensible intuition and thought are not separate from each other. So Cassirer says, “The function of simple sensation and perception is not merely ‘connected’ with the basic functions of intellection, judgment and inference; it is itself such a basic function” (1970, 303).

One way of achieving this, according to Cassirer, is the inflection of the word forms according to the syntactical structure. This is related to what Cassirer calls “inner articulation” (*innere Gliederung* [Cassirer 1970, 308])¹⁹ of a sentence, which is for Cassirer the real carrier of meaning rather than words. There are two opposite forces at work, i.e., the analytic and the synthetic. Different but yet not entirely unrelated to Kant’s distinction between analytic and synthetic judgment, these two forces are present in a sentence at the same time, working against but also cooperating with each other by means of separation and unification. While the analytic force separates individual words to make them into units with self-sufficient meaning, the synthetic force loosens their independence so that they can be fused into the grammatical structure of the sentence as a unit. Therefore, the stronger a sentence is conceived of as a unit, the more sophisticated is the “inner articulation” in the way that the individual words relate stronger to each other according to grammatical rules by means of changing its inflections and forms. Since the form of the words must make sense in the grammatical context of a whole sentence, each word must remain as a unit but yet is not entirely independent of the others. To do this, the words can change their form so that judgment about them in a sentence becomes possible. This is shown in strongly inflected languages such as Greek and Latin where there are grammatically identifiable subject, verb, gerund, substantive, nominative, etc., up to the subordinate clauses in forms like *genitivus absolutus* of Greek or *ablativus absolutus* of Latin. Moreover, these two forces are also at work within a “word unit” by means of “inner tension which it also resolves and overcomes” (Cassirer 1970, 309). In children’s speech or an aboriginal language, on the other hand, we often see the simple aggregation of words where the form of the sentence is not clear. In this way, words and sentence are different levels of unit formations, in which one depends on the other in different degrees.

This discussion then leads to the ultimate question of the role of copula and the question of *being* in language. Going back to the Kantian position, Cassirer argues that every act of judgment is a “unity of action,” “by which the predicate is referred to the subject and linked with it to form a whole meaning, to form the unity of an objectively subsisting and objectively constituted relationship” (1970, 313). Since, according to Kant, our unity of experience is the basis for the possibility of experience as such, it follows that, given the fact that we are now having experience, we are actually making judgments at every moment. Therefore, the copula “to be” is only a logical-linguistic expression of an act of synthesis which we are already making at every moment. The concept of *being*, therefore, rather than being an abstraction from our logical-linguistic activities, originates

from an even more primordial unity of experience as such. This leads to Kant's second edition of "transcendental deduction" or B-deduction, which Cassirer rightly refers to. Unlike in the A-deduction, where the logical judgment only gradually emerges after the first and second stages of intuition and imagination, Kant begins with his B-deduction with the argument that "I think" is the necessary component to accompany all representations. An important point here is Kant's distinction between subjective association of representations belonging to reproduction imagination, i.e., "whose synthesis is entirely subject to empirical laws, the laws, namely, of association" (Kant 1929, 165, B151), from the objective unity of representation made possible by the use of copula which is the basis of the transcendental unity of apperception. Kant illustrates this in this way: "If I support a body, I feel an impression of weight" is an example of the first, whereas "body is heavy" is an example of the second. He explains: "Thus to say that 'The body is heavy' is not merely to state that the two representations have always been conjoined in my perception, however often that perception be repeated; what we are asserting is that they are combined *in the object*, no matter what the state of the subject may be."²⁰ Thus Cassirer concludes that the so-called history of the problem of *being* from Parmenides to Plato as "pure concept of relation" (*reiner Relationsbegriff*) is only a history of what Brugmann calls "degeneration of the verb into a copula" (*Herabsinken des Verbums zur Kopula* [Cassirer 1970, 317]). Rather than looking at the sentence as a synthetic whole and the cooperation between name and verb, the singling out of one particular function of verb as a copula is therefore a narrowing, or even misapprehension of the question of *being*.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, two remarks can be made. Following Cassirer's argument about the so-called "degeneration of the verb into a copula," we may ask whether the copula "to be" is an absolutely necessary component of a sentence as many philosophers on the question of *being* have supposed. That many languages do not need copula is a proof of this.²¹ It seems that if we go back to the question whether every thought involves *being*, we are returning to Parmenides' position. However, the present question differs from that of Parmenides in that it is not about actual existence so that non-being cannot be thought of, but that every thought, as long as it is directed to an object, it is thought of "being as..." If Aquinas' argument about the universality of *being* in every apprehension is still to be upheld, then we should look at the sentence as a whole as a "totality of meaning" (*Sinnesganzen*) rather than single out the copula and its different forms as expression of *being*.

Secondly, however, there are of course limitations to the Kantian scheme adopted by Cassirer. Kant attempts to limit the use of reason only to possible experience where the faculty of synthesis and judgment are called to action. What lies outside the judgment about possible experience in our consciousness also lies outside the Kantian scheme. However, on the other hand, the question of *being* in Western philosophy is a metaphysical one in so far as it is a question about the "first principle," the *arché*, from which all other individual objects of experience are derived. The Aristotelian notion that all different meanings of *being* should find ultimate unity in *being*, which necessarily lies outside of particular spatial and temporal form, comes down to the Western metaphysics as *ousia* or substance. Kant is critical to this tradition of first principle or first cause in the Western metaphysics. One may conclude then that the scheme of analysis provided in Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* may not be sufficient to answer the "metaphysical" question handed down from the Greek tradition. All these are however complicated issues, involving for example the interesting debate between Cassirer and Heidegger,²² which yet lies outside the scope of the present article.

Notes

1. See Kahn, 1966.
2. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II, qu. 94, art. 2. "For that which, before aught else, falls under apprehension, is being, the notion of which is included in all things whatsoever a man apprehends." *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica*, vol. 2, 1948, 1009.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 2 d. 24 q. 3 a. 1 co.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* I, q. 85 a. 5. *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica*, vol. 1, 1948, 437. Aquinas also notices that the development from a mere sensual apprehension to a judgment is a process of reasoning (*ratiocinando*), and sensual apprehension is the necessary first step towards an intellectual one. "For since the intellect passes from potentiality to act, it has a likeness to things which are generated, which do not attain perfection all at once but acquire it by degrees: so likewise the human intellect does not acquire perfect knowledge by the first act of apprehension; but it first apprehends something about its object, such as its quiddity, and this is its first and proper object; and then it understands the properties, accidents, and the various relations of the essence."
5. Wilbur M. Urban understands Cassirer's philosophy of language by putting him in the opposition between rationalism and empiricism in modern philosophy from Descartes and Leibniz, and suggests that Cassirer is proposing "idealistic minimum." See Urban, 1949, 401-42.
6. The basis of such emphasis can be explained by Cassirer's own approach of the problem, namely, that men are by nature "*animal symbolicum*." Examples of interpretations which follow the semantic and semiotic aspect are like John M. Krois (1984, 433-44); Heinz Paetzold (1978); Gert Wolandt (1964).
7. Compare Friedrich Hölderlin's essay "Urteil und Sein," where he plays with the etymological meaning of the German word for judgment, i.e., *Urteil* as *Ur-teilen*, the primordial division of a Being which is originally one given to the intellectual intuition (1995, 364-65).
8. We may look at the meaning of the word "copula." As a linguistic-logical term it is derived from the Latin word "*copulo*," meaning "to connect," "to link together," and refers to guilds, associations, or marriage. Taken purely in its literal meaning, in a sentence, many other grammatical expressions can play the role of connecting two words together, e.g., prepositions (A *for* B, A *with* B, A *as* B, etc.), or conjunctions (A *because* B, A *therefore* B, A *although* B, *despite* A *yet* B, etc.). However, in traditional Western logic and linguistics, the term "copula" is applied solely to cases of predication "A is B," which differs from the above "connecting words" in that it becomes the essential part of a complete sentence. A mere preposition or a conjunction cannot form a complete sentence, though they can give us certain knowledge about the subject and predicate. For a sentence to be a sentence, it must be a judgment (for the word "sentence" in Latin, *sententia*, is derived from "*sensus*," which means in turn "judgment") so that this use of copula in the form of "A is B" is necessary. Grammarians and linguists thus conclude that a "verb-to-be" is required for a sentence to be complete.
9. See Heidegger, 1972.
10. *Grammatica Speculativa*, ch. XXV, sect. 44, English: "The general essential mode of signifying of the verb is the mode of signifying the thing by means of the mode of being and separation from the substance" (1972, 208-09).
11. There are, of course, other views from modern linguists who would disagree, holding that copula and a "verb-to-be" is not as omnipresent as it is supposed to be. Some regard a verb or a gerund as a "verbal adjective." See Bloomfield, 1983, 68, 122.
12. For example, when we say "A white horse is a horse" though the predicate, the second "horse," is itself a *being*, an idea with definite essence that "a white horse" shares or takes part in, it cannot be understood as a permanent substance in this particular sentence, but, in Aristotle's term, a "homogene," or for Thomas of Erfurt, a larger genus or class deviating or distancing itself from the essence of "a white horse." There can never be two permanent substances, at least in the sentential form.
13. "Therefore the participle is the part of speech signifying by means of the mode of being and non-separation from the substance, or of union with the substance which is the same thing" (Thomas of Erfurt 1972, ch. XXXIII: 65, 240-41).
14. This can be explained by going back to the Greek ontology, namely the distinction between *to on* (being) and *ousia* (substance). While in the Latin translations of *esse* and *substansia* the etymological relation is lost, in Greek the concepts of substance (*ousia*) and *being (to on)* stem from the same root, i.e., *einai (being)*. The inseparability of a participle from substance means therefore that it is inseparable from its *ousia* which is in turn simply another variation of *being*, i.e., *being* as permanence through time.
15. "It is called participle because it subsumes, so to speak, both part of the noun and part of the verb; it is not the essential part, that is, the essential mode of the both ..." (Thomas of Erfurt 1972, 241).
16. "With reference to this, it must be noted that the mode of being in the participle and the verb is derived from the same property of the thing which is the property of flux and succession ..." (Thomas of Erfurt 1972, 238-41).
17. Plato, *Cratylus*, 1961, 473. All English quotations from Plato in this article are from this version.
18. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Einleitung zum Kawi-Werk* W. VII, 1, 72 f. Quoted by Cassirer, 1970, 303-04.
19. The original German term Cassirer uses, "*innere Gliederung*," expresses the aspect of division of a sentence into units better. See Cassirer, 1977, 286.
20. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (B142), quoted by Cassirer, 1970, 314.
21. See Bloomfield, 1983, 68, 122 and Verhaar, 1967-73.
22. See Heidegger, 1951, 255-311.

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