

Common Name and Proper Name according to Thomas Hobbes

Josep Moran i Ocerinjauregui *

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Abstract

The English philosopher Hobbes is well known in the field of political philosophy. He derived all the human psyche from sensations, which led him to conceive science in general as a synthesis of conventional elements – language – and empirical ones. In his desire to understand better the human faculties of knowledge and reasoning in order to establish a valid basis for his political science, Hobbes considered human language, and more specifically names, in accordance with his nominalist philosophical principles. In his opinion, proper names have a specific individual meaning, with the result that they differentiate a single thing, including both definite compound forms such as “this man”, “the man that wrote The Iliad”, and simple ones such as “Peter”, “Homer”. His ideas have had hardly any direct impact in the field of the history of linguistics, but they influenced other philosophers, such as John Stuart Mill, upon whose ideas some modern linguistic theories on proper names have sought to base themselves.

Introduction

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is a well-known English thinker, above all in the field of political philosophy.¹ In his desire to understand better the human faculties of knowledge and reasoning in order to establish a valid basis for his political science, Hobbes considered human language, and more specifically names, which are understood from a philosophical point of view rather than a linguistic one. Hence, the name unit understood as designating concepts depends on the conceptual unit referred to rather than the grammatical element that is used to designate the concept. For this reason, his ideas have had little influence in the field of the history of linguistics, even though they were able to influence other philosophers such as John Stuart Mill, upon whose ideas some modern linguistic theories of proper names have sought to base themselves.

Thomas Hobbes's doctrine is basically materialist and takes as its starting point man's cognitive ability, understood as a complex mechanism, derived from feelings and interpreted by means of certain conventional elements represented by language. Thus as his starting point, he takes a nominalist base insofar as universal concepts are only words that vaguely designate in a more or less confused way a specific plurality of beings; while they are of use both for everyday life and for scientific knowledge, they are not a reality in themselves (Land 1986).

Even though this philosophical approach to language is in some way present in all Hobbes's work,² he specifically studied the subject in *Leviathan* (1651), *De corpore* (1655) and *De homine* (1658), in each of which he devotes a chapter to this subject. As the question of

* Translation: Philip Banks

¹ See the article on Thomas Hobbes by Michel Malherbe, in Raymadu, Philippe and Stéphane Rials (eds.). 1996: 320-328.

² In the Catalan cultural context, the writer who has dedicated most studies to Hobbes's work, both in general terms and more specifically in linguistic aspects, is Bartomeu Forteza (1939-2000). His works include: Forteza (1999) and Forteza (2000). See also Ramírez (2000) and Monserrat (2000).

proper names is not dealt with in *De homine*, my comments will be restricted to the first two works.

Leviathan

Chapter IV of this work is entitled “Of Speech”. After considering the origins of this specific ability on the basis of the Bible, he goes on to analyse the use of language which consists of transferring our mental discourse to verbal discourse, in other words, our chain of thought to a chain of words. He also considers language abuses, such as when we make use of unsuitable words or when we want to deceive or offend another person, and he goes on to say: “The manner how speech serveth to the remembrance of the consequence of causes and effects consisteth in the imposing of names, and the connexion of them”.

He goes on to state: “Of names, some are proper, and singular to one only thing; as Peter, John, this man, this tree; and some are common to many things; as man, horse, tree; every of which, though but one name, is nevertheless the name of diverse particular things; in respect of all which together, it is called a universal, there being nothing in the world universal but names; for the things named are every one of them individual and singular”. As can be seen, Hobbes includes in the category of proper names not only “pure” proper names, that is to say, permanent designators of an individual being, such as *Peter* or *John*, but also those others occasionally referred to as *this man*, *this tree*, which from a linguistic point of view are strictly speaking not names but nominal phrases formed by an adjective and a noun, in which identification is more of an indexical and occasional nature.

He continues by specifying that “One universal name is imposed on many things for their similitude in some quality, or other accident: and whereas a proper name bringeth to mind one thing only, universals recall one of those many”. Immediately afterwards, he goes on to analyse the extent and nature of common or universal names, without further reference to personal or individual ones.

In the first instance, the limited attention paid to proper names on the part of a philosopher of an openly nominalist nature, for whom universal or common names only refer to features shared by individual elements, might seem surprising.

De corpore

Chapter II of this work is devoted to names (“De vocabulis”) and develops this philosophical doctrine of the common or universal name at greater length, but references to the proper or individual name are minimal and subordinate to the consideration of the common or universal name.

“9 [...] of names, some are *common* to many things, as a *man*, a *tree*; others proper to one thing, as *he that writ the Iliad*, *Homer*, *this man*, *that man*. And a common name, being the name of many things severally taken, but not collectively all together (as man is not the name of all mankind, but of every one as of Peter, John and the rest severally) is therefore called an universal name” (Thomas Hobbes 2010: 186).

“11 [...] some names are of *certain* and *determined*, other ones of *uncertain* and *undetermined* signification. Of *certain* and *determined* signification is, first, that name which is given to any one thing by itself, and is called an *individual name*; as *Homer*, *this tree*, *that living creature*; secondly that which has any of these words, *all*, *very*, *both either*, or the like added to it; and

it is therefore called an universal name because it signifies every one of those things to which it is common” (Thomas Hobbes 2010: 187).

It must be said that Hobbes is well aware that his philosophical point of view is very different from the grammatical one, and he explicitly states this to be the case:

“14 [...] there are *simple* and *compounded* names. But here it is to be noted, that a name is not taken in philosophy as in grammar, for one single word, but for any number of words put together to signify one thing; for among philosophers *sentient animated body* passes but for one name, being the name for every living creature, which yet, among grammarians, is accounted three names” (Thomas Hobbes 2010: 189).

The linguistic significance of Thomas Hobbes’s doctrine

It is not strange that this doctrine, in spite of its philosophical importance, has had hardly any direct repercussions on the field of linguistics, not even in what is known as theoretical (or speculative) linguistics. For example, it is not mentioned in the well-known book by R. H. Robins (a compatriot of Hobbes), *A Short History of Linguistics*, in which reference is made to other empirical English philosophers, such as F. Bacon, J. Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

In contrast, it has been the subject of philosophical reflections. Thus, I. C. Zarka (1989: 33-46), remarks on these differences between logic and grammar. Hence in logic, the name unit depends on the unit or identity of the point of reference, and consequently a distinction is established between those names that do not designate more than a single thing and those that designate several. According to Hobbes, the former include proper names (*Homer*), definite descriptions (*he that writ the Iliad*) and demonstratives (*this, that*); and the latter are common names, which are the only ones of universal nature because they are capable of designating a number of individual things, but in no way a different idea from the individuals that they include.

M. Pécharman (1989: 22-36) also deals with this question; in the first instance, she refers to the difficulty that we face in Hobbes’s logical theory in recognising a specific nature for proper names, because to start with it can adopt the paradoxical form of a lack of differentiation between the proper name and the general name. If Hobbes’s logic implies that every name is a proper name, in other words a name referring to an individual, such as *man*, it seems impossible to assign the slightest singularity to the proper name. The difference between an individual name and a proper name is only dependent on the fact that the former is the name, independent of each of the individual things of which it is an attribute, whereas a proper name only brings to mind one thing.

Pécharman goes on to relate this theory to the one expounded by John Stuart Mill in 1843. According to Pécharman, Hobbes did not establish the true theory of predication because it failed to distinguish between the meaning of general names and the denotation of proper names, but rather it made any name a proper name, a mark added to an individual. In contrast, according to Mill, a proper name is no more than a non-connotative name, which denotes only one subject, whereas a connotative name is a term that denotes a subject and implies an attribute. Since Pécharman adheres to the interpretation of Mill’s theory, insofar as she identifies connotation with meaning, she considers that for Mill the proper name is none other than a pure name, which does not imply any information about the thing named, and so it has no meaning.

It seems obvious that Mill developed the approach initiated by Hobbes inasmuch as he subordinated the proper name to the common name, identifying it with any determinate proposition whatsoever. However, it should be borne in mind that by reading Mill's works, it cannot necessarily be deduced that the proper name, in other words the non-connotative one, cannot have any meaning, as he states:

“A non-connotative term is one which signifies a subject only, or an attribute only. A connotative term is one which denotes a subject, and implies an attribute. By a subject is here meant anything which possesses attributes. Thus John, or London, or England, are names which signify a subject only. Whiteness, length, virtue, signify an attribute only. None of these names, therefore, are connotative. But *white*, *long*, *virtuous*, are connotative. The word *white*, denotes all white things, as snow, paper, the foam of the sea, etc., and implies, or in the language of the schoolmen, *connotes*, the attribute *whiteness*” (Mill 1973: 31).

Therefore, rather than coming to the conclusion that proper names have no meaning or sense, ultimately the interpretation of Mill's thought is in the general vein that they do not indicate any attribute, that is to say any quality common to all those individuals named with the same name (Moran 2009: 37-43).

However, the interpretation that proper names have no meaning or sense, even though it has been rejected by philosophers such as Otto Jespersen (1924) and linguists such as Marie Noëlle Gary-Prieur (1994) and Kerstin Jonasson (1994) – otherwise derived common names (deonyms or eponyms) such as *mecenes*, *Joan és un mecenes* (maecenas, John is a maecenas) could not be formed – has also been adopted by some present-day linguistic circles and scholars as if it were an incontrovertible truth. Thus, for example, Núria Martí i Girbau still states that “els noms propis no tenen cap significat propi i denoten directament un element de la realitat” (“proper names have no meaning of their own and directly denote an element of reality”) (Solà et al. 2002: vol. 2, 1290). On occasions, the uncritical repetition of a concept is taken to be the demonstration of its validity.

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Dr. Josep Moran i Ocerinjauregui
Emeritus Professor, University of Barcelona
jmoran@iec.cat