

## Linguistic Ambiguity and Social Conflict in Hobbes

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**Abstract** In this paper I will examine the relationship between speech and social conflict in Hobbes's philosophy. I shall focus especially on equivocation, which Hobbes assumes as one of the main causes of social conflict. The paper aims to show that equivocation should be distinguished from other forms of ambiguous speech, such as metaphor and inconstancy, and, on the other hand, it tries to highlight some controversial aspects underlying Hobbes's approach to the question of equivocation.

**Keywords:** Language, Equivocation, Abuse of Speech, Controversies, Conflict

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### 0. Introduzione

Language plays a fundamental role in Hobbes's thought as it involves and connects all areas of his philosophical enterprise, from logic to civil science (Pettit 2009). It is not surprising that his political and philosophical works open by discussing origin and classification of speech (in the same way as the medieval logic textbooks), which in his mind should have laid the theoretical foundations of his philosophical system. Not only because from the right use of speech depends the acquisition of true knowledge, but – and perhaps surprisingly this time – because that very system works precisely insofar as it rests on the proper use of speech, as we shall see. It can be said therefore that language is at the core of Hobbes's philosophical enquiry. Yet this remark is only partly understood if it does not include the negative outcomes of speech, which are no less relevant at all in Hobbes' thought. Abuses of speech, in fact, have a prominent place among the causes leading to social conflict (Whelan 1981). In this paper I consider one of the main forms of abuse of speech identified by Hobbes, i.e. equivocation. The paper proceeds as follows: first, I will supply a brief overview of the role played by language in Hobbes; then I shall focus on the relationship between equivocation and the other forms of ambiguous speech, on the one hand, and between equivocation and social conflict on the other; finally, I will discuss some problematic aspects underlying Hobbes's view of equivocation.

### 1. Uses and abuses of speech

According to Hobbes human beings exceed animals because they are endowed with language, not with reason, as a long tradition from Aristotle onward claims. Even though animals communicate with each other by means of *voces* through which they express fear, joy, or hope, they cannot be said to have language because those *voces* originate from

passions and instinct, not from will – that is a voluntary act, as in the case of men. As a result, the combination of *voces* in animals does not give rise to any speech, nor can they be said to talk to each other (Hobbes 1998: DH X.1). Talking is a complex activity that requires an equally complex use of speech of which only humans are capable, such as naming things or registering thoughts by memory and expressing them to others. The power of language to *voice* our thoughts is the primary benefit of speech underlying other abilities peculiar to men, like counting and, at a more complex level, teaching or giving advice (Hobbes 1994: I.IV.3,10, Hobbes 1969: I.XIII.2,6). On speech also depends the possibility of saying something true or false, which according to Hobbes consists in putting the words of statements in the right or wrong order (Hobbes 1994: I.IV.11-12, Hobbes 1839: I.III.10).

Given such assumptions, it is not surprising that in Hobbes's view language provides the basis for our capacity of reasoning and, more generally, of attaining true knowledge. This point is specifically developed in *Leviathan* (*iv*: I.V, Pettit 2009: ch. III). Assuming that reason is nothing but reckoning (that is adding or subtracting parts of the whole) (Hobbes 1994: I.V.2), whenever our reasonings are made by words, we combine names to make statements and statements to make syllogisms in order to prove something; to put it another way, we infer the meaning of certain names from the meaning of others previously established. If the first names have an improper or ambiguous signification, or if we combine names with inconsistent or conflicting meanings (as when saying, for example, "round quadrangle"), then we draw false conclusions or meaningless statements (*iv*: I.V.5-15). Only by employing words according to their proper signification, therefore, can man acquire genuine knowledge<sup>1</sup>. I shall return on this point. Note that, while Hobbes is clearly assuming the deductive method of geometry (the science *par excellence* in his view) as a model for his definition of reason and science, this serves the purpose of claiming the superiority of language over reason (*iv*: I.IV.12-13).

Yet Hobbes is far from an idealized view of language – embraced, for example, by the early humanists of the 15th century (Rico 1993) –, as speech, from being the most powerful means for the development of man, can easily turn into a powerful means of his own ruin. This happens when well-uses of speech are replaced by its ab-uses. Hobbes identifies different forms of abuse of speech. The first one consists in giving wrong or no definitions of the names in our statements, provided that in their right definition «lies the first use of speech; which is the acquisition of science» (Hobbes 1994: I.IV.13). Abuses of speech also take place in the case «men register their thoughts wrong, by the inconstancy of the signification of their words», or when words are used metaphorically, or to declare «that to be their will, which is not», or

to grieve one another, since, seeing nature hath armed living creatures, some with teeth, some with horns, and some with hands, to grieve an enemy, it is but an abuse of speech, to grieve him with the tongue, unless it be one whom we are obliged to govern; and then it is not to grieve, but to correct and amend (*iv*: I.IV.4).

We should not be surprised, then, that in *De homine* Hobbes assumes the capacity of command and understand commands as the greatest benefit of speech, without which «there would be no society among men, no peace, and consequently no disciplines; but first savagery, then solitude, and for dwellings, caves» (Hobbes 1998: DH X.3). Just as through speech men establish and agree to civil covenants, which bring us out of the condition of beasts, so its abuse can break those covenants; and just as speech serves to acquire and

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<sup>1</sup> I assume here "signification" and "meaning" as synonyms, although in Hobbes they are not always the same thing (Duncan 2011).

communicate knowledge or our thoughts to others, so it can be (mis)used to deceive or harm other persons. From this point of view, the fact that man is the only animal equipped with language is not *eo ipso* beneficial to him. Rather, it should simply be taken as the clearest evidence – however important – of the difference between man and the rest of animals. In this sense, Hobbes argues that «by speech man is not made better, but only given greater possibilities» (Hobbes 1998: DH X.3, Hobbes 1994: I.IV.13, Hobbes 1969: I.V.13).

Language is a neutral means available to human beings: whether good or harmful, it depends on how they use it. In Hobbes's works, however, abuses of speech appear to expose men to greater risks than its right use is able to prevent. This should not be surprising, as the historical events of the 17th century bring him to believe that men are more inclined to confusion and self-destruction – in which language plays a relevant role – than to order and self-preservation (Whelan 1981). «Man's tongue is a trumpet of war and sedition», we read in *De cive* (Hobbes 1998: DC V.5). In the next section of the paper I will examine in more detail how abuses of speech lead to social conflict.

## 2. Equivocation, controversies, social conflict

Among the ways in which speech can be abused, a prominent place belongs to equivocation, namely that names have a changing meaning and not a fixed one. This is the case of the universal names, which, being common to many things, are not given univocally, but can designate this or that object depending on the speech context or subjects involved (Hobbes 1969: I.V.7). The class of common names is far more extended than that of the singular or particular ones (Hobbes 1839: I.II.9, 11-12), as «there is scarce any word that is not made equivocal by divers contextures of speech, or by diversity of pronunciation and gesture» (Hobbes 1969: I.V.7). This means that anyone can easily fall into the trap of equivocation. Although in the last part of that passage Hobbes is clearly referring to the art of rhetoric, which he repeatedly attacks in his works, it must be noted that equivocation is primarily a linguistic phenomenon, as seen, and does not depend on the speaker's disposition or skills. To put it another way, common names are equivocal by nature, not by human will. Indeed, Hobbes himself does not help in making that point clear. In *De corpore*, for example, he maintains that the distinction between univocal and equivocal names «belongs not so much to names, as to those that use names» (Hobbes 1839: I.II.12). Yet since equivocation exists as a result of the existence of the universal names, one may ask how equivocal names can originate from the will of the speaker, while the property of referring to different things naturally belongs to common names. The same must be said of metaphor, which Hobbes defines as equivocal «by profession» (Hobbes 1969: I.V.7): words are equivocal not because they are employed metaphorically, but, on the contrary, metaphor is possible because words are inherently equivocal. Accordingly, rhetorical speech must be distinguished from equivocation, even though of course there are a lot of circumstances in which they prove to be closely related to each other.

Similar to, but still different from, equivocal names are “inconstant” names, namely «the names of such things as affect us, that is, which please, and displeases us, because all men be not alike affected with the same thing, nor the same man at all times» (Hobbes 1994: I.IV.24). For example, one may call “wisdom” or “justice” the same thing that another, or he himself at different times or situations, calls “fear” or “cruelty” and *viceversa*, because such names have a signification «of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker» (*Ibidem*)<sup>2</sup>. Inconstancy can thus be considered as a particular form of equivocation (even though commentators do not always distinguish them clearly, see for example Pettit 2009:

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<sup>2</sup> A careful and detailed analysis of this passage is in Duncan 2019.

50-51, Whelan 1981: 62), in which the meaning of names changes due to our passions. Metaphor, rhetorical speech, inconstancy: they all ultimately depend on equivocation. In whichever fashion they occur, however, equivocal names give rise to semantic confusion that, on the one hand, makes it impossible for man to attain science, as only well-fixed and shared definitions can be the ground of true reasonings, as seen; and, on the other, it leads to controversies about what is just and unjust, useful and useless, mine and yours: in other words, about all that is necessary to a stable and peaceful commonwealth. As Hobbes puts it, «all disputes arise from the fact that men’s opinions differ about “mine” and “yours,” “just” and “unjust,” “useful” and “useless,” “good” and “bad,” “honourable” and “dishonourable,” and so on, and everyone decides them by his own judgement» (Hobbes 1998: DC VI.9). This is the first and fundamental way in which linguistic confusion – rooted in equivocation – turns into social chaos. The fact is that equivocal names are beyond the control of the community of speakers because nothing in them prevents one from disagreeing with the way they are employed. Each way is made possible by anyone’s private will, affections, or conceptions.

Despite that, Hobbes makes room for the possibility of recovering «those conceptions for which the name was ordained» (Hobbes 1969: I.V.8, Pettit 2009: 40-41). Indeed, this is the most important task for anyone who seeks true knowledge, even though it is made very difficult by the domain of equivocation. It is hardly surprising, thus, that Hobbes defines “understanding” as the «ability in a man, out of the words, contexture, and other circumstances of language, to deliver himself from equivocation, and to find out the true meaning of what is said» (Hobbes 1969: I.V.8, Hobbes 1994: I.IV.22). Among these circumstances there is of course eloquence and, more generally, the rhetorical use of speech, whose purpose is to «to make the *Good* and the *bad*, the *useful* and the *useless*, the *Honourable* and the *dishonourable* appear greater or less than they really are, and to make the *unjust* appear *Just*, as may seem to suit the speaker’s purpose» (Hobbes 1998: DC X.11). Knowledge, on the contrary, requires that the signification of names stands in a non-contingent relationship with the things they refer to. This point is extensively developed in *De corpore* (1839: I.II.3-12). We need in the first place to recall to memory the original significations of names, which consist of the conceptions or thoughts we form in our mind on the basis of senses. Once the proper meaning of names is found, we can settle the analytic connections between them in order to obtain true propositions: being “man” the same as “living creature,” for example, the statement “men is a living creature” is necessarily true (Hobbes 1998: DC XVIII.4, Hobbes 1994: I.IV.11-12, Hobbes 1839: I.III.10). Propositions of this kind correspond to definitions, which ultimately provide the firm foundations for the chain of deduction (i.e. for reckonings) that bring us to authentic knowledge, according to the geometrical method of deduction<sup>3</sup>.

Hobbes’s main concern is clearly to reduce, until eliminating, the domain of rhetoric about equivocation and replace it with the *geometry of speech* – so to say –, that is a system in which true names serve as the axioms for true propositions, and true propositions as axioms for true reasonings. One may ask, however, what are the implications of such an operation. I address this question in the last section of the paper, to which I now approach.

### 3. The ideal of unequivocal speeches

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<sup>3</sup> Although Hobbes elsewhere argues that words’ true meaning depends on common use and consent, this must be understood in the sense that names chosen to signify our conceptions and perceptions of things become accepted by the community of speakers (Hobbes 1998: DC XVII.28, XVIII.4). It is in this sense that proper definitions are established by common consent, which does not mean that Hobbes’s position is merely conventionalist. See Hoekstra 2005: 34-36.

The fundamental benefit of definition is to eliminate ambiguity and hence equivocation (Hobbes 1839: I.VI.15, Hobbes 1994: I.IV.12). By fixing the proper signification of names, definitions establish as well the right way to use words. In Hobbes's perspective, those entitled to establish correct definitions are the philosopher and the sovereign: the former, because is all devoted to the acquisition of the truth and possesses the knowledge of the basic principle of sciences; the latter, because he has the power to decide over those controversies arising from equivocation (Hoekstra 2005: 34-35). While philosophers have the intellectual authority to discern genuine from improper definitions, they clearly lack the civil authority to make them accepted by people. And Hobbes was well aware that the first kind of authority without the second is ineffective, especially where the foundation and preservation of civil society is at stake. Moreover, it occurs that philosophers often deceive themselves upon the use of names, giving rise to controversies and false doctrines that hinder knowledge, create a state of confusion and mutual hostility, and that, as a result, require a higher power to be resolved. This is why Hobbes points to the sovereign as the ultimate judge of definitions<sup>4</sup>.

This raises the question of whether the sovereign can decide over equivocal names by totally arbitrary judgments. As Hobbes assumes the rediscovery of the primitive significations of names as the fundamental remedy for controversies and confusion, however, it is hard to believe that the sovereign can completely ignore this moment (Hoekstra 2005: 34-35). True words turn out to be words of truth: how can the sovereign impose his seal on names such as "right," "wrong," "good," "evil" with no consideration for their truth? If this were the case, moreover, the sovereign could establish names on the basis of his own passions or particular affections, with the result of eliminating equivocation while not completely resolving inconstancy<sup>5</sup>. (This furtherly proves that equivocation and inconstancy are not the same thing). These questions are not directly addressed by Hobbes, however, and the fact that the sovereign may not be concerned with the true signification of names, does not seem to interfere with his power to decide over inconstant names. Simply, he must exercise such power.

To cast light on this point, we must recall that Hobbes distinguishes different types of names (Hobbes 1994: I.IV.15-24). While names such as "body" or "sensible" refer to material things, inconstant names like "good" or "evil" entirely depend on the person using them, «*there being nothing simply and absolutely so*» (*ivi*: I.VI.7, my emphasis). Even though man's appetites or desires, from which good and evil originate, are addressed to *an* object, they arise from internal motions of our body, not directly from the external world (Hobbes 1969: I.VII.1-3). For this reason, no «common rule of good and evil» can be taken from «the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man (where there is no commonwealth); or (in a commonwealth), from the person that representeth it; or from an arbitrator or judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the rule thereof» (*Ibidem*). Most commentators focus on the fact that inconstant names depend on the subjects' will without considering the fundamental cause of that, i.e. that such names do not originate directly from objects. This means that the sovereign cannot establish the common rule of good and evil, mine and yours, right and wrong on the basis of their proper signification because they have no object in reality, *hence* no proper meaning (a different understanding of this issue is in Biletzki 1997: 86-91). For this reason he has to create – in a sense – the objects that can serve as absolute

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<sup>4</sup> Hobbes 1998: DC VI.16, XVII.12. See also Hobbes 1994: I.V.6-7, I.VIII.27, Hoekstra 2005: 37-39.

<sup>5</sup> Similar difficulties, though differently approached, are raised in Duncan 2019: 175-176. Such an issue involves the question of counsel, that is a speech free of passion or interests addressed to the ruler for his own benefit (Hobbes 1994: I.LXXV). Yet such a speech is ultimately impossible, as we read in *The Elements of Law*, because no counsel can be entirely free of passion or particular interests (1969: II.V.4, Whelan 1981: pp. 67-68).

and stable referents for inconstant names. Consider, for example, this passage from *De cive*:

*Just* and *unjust* did not exist until commands were given; hence their nature is relative to a command; and every action in its own nature is indifferent. What is *just* or *unjust* derives from the right of the ruler. Legitimate kings therefore make what they order just by ordering it and make what they forbid unjust by forbidding it (1998: DC XII.1)

As “just” and “unjust” *derive* from, and are *made* by, the king’s orders, what he commands turns out to be the object of those names, and likewise for “just,” “unjust,” “mine,” or “yours.” This means that the sovereign establishes the truth of inconstant names at the very moment he establishes what they stand for (Holden 2016). Note, however, that even in this case the problem of the arbitrariness of such names is only partly resolved, because their objects remain a product of the sovereign’s will and escape the natural process of imposition of names.

Having distinguished here between equivocal and inconstant names, the question arises as to whether the sovereign decides over the entire class of equivocal names. This question is not directly addressed by Hobbes; yet the answer seems to be negative (a slightly different reading on this issue is in Whelan 1981). When he deals with the sovereign’s power to resolve linguistic controversies, in fact, only those arising from inconstant names, or in any case harmful for the commonwealth, are mentioned (Hobbes 1998: DC VI.9, XII.1, XVII.12, Hobbes 1969: II.I.10). But if controversies stem from equivocation arising when words are not employed according to their proper signification, they pertain to speculative sciences (*ivi*: DC XVII.28). So, for example, the question of whether «the same thing can be wholly in several different places at the same time», depends «on a knowledge of men’s common consent about the meaning of the word *Wholly*» (*Ibidem*); likewise, it depends on the contexture of speech whether the word “faith” means “belief,” or «particularly that belief which maketh a Christian», or «the keeping of a promise» (Hobbes 1969: I.V.7). As Hobbes states in *The Elements of law*, in order to eliminate such ambiguities we should pay attention to the «drift, and occasion, and contexture of the speech, as well as the words themselves» (*ivi*: I.V.8, I.XIII.8). A difficult task indeed, so difficult that Hobbes defines “understanding” as the ability to carry it out, as seen; yet it does not require a sovereign’s decision, unless it has dangerous implications for the stability of the commonwealth.

However, although both the sovereign and speculative sciences aim at the same result, that of eliminating equivocation, it must be noted a relevant difference between them. Once the signification of names such as “mine,” “yours,” “good,” or “evil” are fixed, controversies about them would turn into an attack against the sovereign’s will. In other words, linguistic disobedience to the sovereign’s imposition of names turns into social and political disobedience, which can and must be punished as such.

Apparently, those cases in which equivocation is related to the rhetorical (ab)uses of speech fall entirely within the domain of the sovereign, as Hobbes repeatedly stresses the pernicious effects of the persuasive techniques of speech: metaphor, *pronuntiatio*, and other tropes of speech rooted in equivocation affect the audience in ways that can be dangerous for the commonwealth (Skinner 1996: 278-279). However, a number of commentators have shown that, from *Leviathan* onward, Hobbes mitigates his polemical tone against rhetoric (Skinner 1996, Silver 1996, Johnston 1986). Not because he exhibits less hostility towards its dangerous effects, but because he realizes that eloquence can be profitably put in the service of science. Metaphor, for example, can be used innocently «for pleasure or ornament», as indeed Hobbes himself does (Hobbes 1994: I.IV 3); it ceases to be

inherently seditious because it can be employed without the intention to deceive, and so for the rest of the rhetorical techniques. As a result, equivocation due to the rhetorical (ab)uses of speech fall under the domain of both the sovereign and speculative sciences. The difficulty in this case lies in drawing a line between such domains, that is in determining when speeches no longer serve the acquisition of knowledge and become dangerous to civil peace.

This casts an interesting light on Hobbes's approach to the question of equivocation, on which, in conclusion, I would like to draw attention. Since Aristotle's *Elenchi*, equivocation has been considered as one of the main sources of fallacious reasonings, and has generally been associated with the rhetorical abuses of speeches. The same perspective was embraced by medieval logic textbooks from the 13th century onward, in which the section on fallacies occupied a prominent place (Kretzmann, Kenny, Pinborg, Stump 1982, Castaldo 2018). Hobbes implicitly agrees with this tradition in assigning to equivocation a negative role. But while scholastic logicians developed complex strategies in order to identify and resolve fallacious reasonings, Hobbes relies exclusively on definition to that end<sup>6</sup>.

What is peculiar to his position is that he aims not simply to *resolve* disputations arising from equivocal uses of speech, as scholastics sought to do, but to *eliminate* the root of equivocation itself. Hobbes's implicit question is: what is the point of letting linguistic controversies arise if, once that has happened, our only concern is to resolve them? Much better would be that they do not arise at all. Indeed, this is one of the main goals of his theory of language we have earlier sketched.

The immediate outcome of such a view is to flatten the inherent polysemy of words – from which depends the richness of a language – for the sake of the *geometry of speech*. It was by claiming the richness of classical Latin, to make a significant example, that 15th-century Italian humanists vehemently attacked medieval scholastics and, in some cases, aimed to rebuild the basis of philosophy and logic<sup>7</sup>. It is true that Hobbes does not deny that names' meaning changes due to the contexts of speech, but this remains a problem in his view that he aims to resolve by appealing to the common use of speech – the genesis of which, moreover, remains ultimately unclear in his works (see for example Whelan 1981: 70-71).

One may ask what kind of conversations men can be engaged in, if language has to be used univocally, i.e. with a meaning that should necessarily be identical for everyone. Moreover, under the domain of univocity men are expected as well to have the same thoughts – which rest on speech –, and hence the same opinions: if two men disagree with each other on a given issue, in Hobbes's view this must ultimately happen because one of them is speaking improperly, namely is mistaken.

The point is that Hobbes does not admit any middle ground between the intrinsic polysemy of names and errors in speculative sciences, on the one hand, and between equivocation and social conflict on the other. He seems to assume as a necessary development of speech the fact that equivocation leads to linguistic ambiguity, linguistic ambiguity to controversies, and controversies to social conflict (Hobbes 1994: I.V.20). Where equivocation arises, in other words, there is always a potential war: the polysemy of words and the variety of speeches and thoughts turn out to be the ruin of man. Hobbes does not allow any positive application of equivocal words, nor any strategy for handling linguistic controversies, which necessarily arise in everyday speech. In his view, disputes are handled

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the schools' logic *curriculum* in the early modern age, see Pécharman (2016).

<sup>7</sup> The most ambitious attempt was Lorenzo Valla's *Dialectica* (1439), in which the polysemy of Latin language, displayed by the rhetorical principle of *loquendi consuetudo* or *usus*, is seen as the most reliable means, and not a barrier, to attain truth in metaphysics and logic, which is always rooted in speech (Castaldo 2020).

to the extent that they are eliminated; but, of course, this means that they are not handled at all. In order for something to be handled, in fact, it must exist. But this would have implied for Hobbes to accept and maintain the domain of equivocation. On the contrary, ambiguities must be replaced by the science of definition and reckoning; if names can be cleaned from their equivocal meanings, they must be. His point seems to be that, if sometimes equivocation causes conflict, then this can always happen. And he seems unwilling to change this belief despite his reconsideration of rhetorical speech.

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