

The Absence of Reference in Hobbes' Philosophy of Language

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<www.philosophersimprint.org/015022/>

ONE OF THE GREAT ODDITIES of Hobbes' philosophy of language for contemporary philosophers working in the post-Fregean, analytical tradition lies in his conspicuous eschewal of any explicit notion of reference. Hobbes explicitly identified only two defining and basic functions performed by "names." As *marks* or *notes*, names serve as mnemonic devices that, with the aid of the copula and thanks to a dispositional mental relation established between vocal sounds and mental states, enable individuals to recall previous thought-sequences. As *signs*, syntactically ordered names serve as communicative devices, ostensibly enabling individuals to convey to others their various mental states thanks to established linguistic conventions.¹ Yet both the traditional interpretation of Hobbes's philosophy of language, prevalent prior to 1960, and the alternative interpretation that has become dominant amongst contemporary Hobbes scholars since then, impute a notion of linguistic reference to Hobbes: the traditional view simply equated Hobbes' notion of signifying with referring – with the implication that names refer to speakers' mental states – while the dominant contemporary interpretation is that, beyond marking and signifying, Hobbes at least implicitly also posited a third, irreducible semantic relation of reference between linguistic expressions and objects in the world. My purpose here is to show that both interpretations are mistaken. In reality, Hobbes never thought of names as referring to anything, whether mental phenomena, or objects in the world; signifying is not referring, and the relation between names and the things they name is analytically reducible to a composite relation comprising (a) the semiotic relation between words and conceptions, and (b) the representational relation between conceptions and their intentional objects. Once we situate Hobbes in his own intellectual context, it becomes clear that his failure explicitly to attribute an irreducible referential function to names was not a mere

1. L 4.3: 50; DC 2.1–5: 13–17. I cite Hobbes's works (abbreviation chapter.paragraph: page) as follows: EL = Hobbes (1994), but with spelling and punctuation retained from Harley MS 4235 (British Library, London); DCv = Hobbes (1983a); L = Hobbes (2012); DC = Hobbes (1839); DH = (1991). Page numbers after a slash are to the Latin text, which for DCv refer to Hobbes (1983b), and for DC and DH refer to Hobbes (1839–45), volumes 1 and 2, respectively.

oversight: he conspicuously abandoned the theory of “supposition,” which was the intellectual apparatus used in theories of language prevalent before him to express what corresponds to our contemporary notion of reference, *i. e.*, the notion of an analytically irreducible semantic relation between words and things (objects).

I. Marking (*notare*)

The most immediately obvious feature of Hobbes’ account of language is that it portrays the genesis and original function of language as purely subjective. Thus in his earliest formulation in the *Elements of Law* (1640), Hobbes simply defined the “name” — the most basic categorematic element of language, which for Hobbes includes both proper names and definite descriptions — as “the voyce of a Man, arbitrarily imposed, for a marke to bringe to his minde, some Conception, concerninge the thinge on which it is imposed.”² Humans began to use marks in this way because, without them, mental discourse suffers from an important “defect”: in pre-linguistic humans, a particular conception comes to mind only when a second conception — which the mind is already disposed to associate with the first (thanks to previous conjunctions of the same two conceptions) — has already been brought to mind. In “the Succession of Conceptions in the minde... one Conception followeth not another according to our Election, and the neede we have of them, but as it chanceth us to heare, or see, such things as shall bring them to our minde.”³ One will imagine rain, for example, only after sensing or imagining something else — such as a thick cloud — that one has previously sensed or imagined immediately before or after rain. What distinguishes human beings from animals is the ability to affect this mental process through the invention and

2. EL 5.2: 35. Hobbes was describing here the kind of private ostensive definition that Wittgenstein (1958) took to be impossible without previous linguistic training (Kenny [1973: chapter 10]).

3. EL 5.1: 34. Cf. EL 4.2: 31. See also L 3.2: 38: “as wee have no Imagination, whereof we have not formerly had Sense, in whole, or in parts; so we have not Transition from one Imagination to another, whereof we never had the like before in our Senses.”

use of language. A name *qua* mark is therefore a mnemonic device: if each time upon perceiving or imagining rain one utters the sound “rain,” then one will be disposed to remember or imagine rain simply by uttering “rain” in the future. Of course the question is what could possibly cause one to utter “rain” in the first place if nothing in the external world has already triggered one’s memory of rain.⁴ The answer is that Hobbes was not concerned to show how one could recall at will individual conceptions in *isolation*; he was concerned with how language-use could affect the *sequence*, or “Succession of Conceptions,” one after another. The genesis of language involves not just the invention of names *qua* marks, but also the invention of rule-governed ways to connect names together into sentences or propositions: not just using vocal sounds as marks, but syntactically combining names into sentences to posit relationships between the names — paradigmatically “by the helpe of this little verb is or somethinge equivalent.”⁵

Once names are combined to form propositions and syllogisms, one’s train of thoughts comes to be governed not merely by *empirical* relations (such as constant conjunction) that have previously obtained between sensory perceptions, but also by the extended processes of reasoning made possible by the *rule-governed* relations embedded in linguistic syntax: “the Invention of names” and ways to connect them enable humans to call “to their remembrance the necessary coherence of one conception to another” in a chain of “RATIOCINATION or Reasoninge.”⁶ This is why in his more mature formulation in *Leviathan* (1651) Hobbes re-characterized the function of marks: rather than used to recall particular conceptions (in isolation), they are used for “the Registering of the Consequences of our Thoughts” — *i. e.*, for recording the results of our *ratiocination* — “which being apt to slip out of our memory, and put us to a new labour, may again be recalled, by such words as they were marked by.” The point is that “Speech serveth

4. A question like this is raised by Martinich (2005: 141–142).

5. EL 5.9–10: 37–38.

6. EL 5.13: 38, 5.11: 38.

to the remembrance" of *conclusions*, not merely through the imposition of names, but by "the imposing of *Names*, and the *Connexion* of them."⁷ Names serve as mnemonic devices, but to do so language also requires "logical devices" for ordering names.⁸

Yet even if names begin as private marks, they are eventually used intersubjectively, according to Hobbes, to communicate one's thoughts and passions to others. Hence, in his mature formulations, in *Leviathan* and *De Corpore* (1655, English translation 1656), Hobbes defined names in terms of two basic functions, not just one: while names begin as "*Markes*, or *Notes* of remembrance" used privately to "register" thoughts and "recall them when they are past," they are also used as "*Signes*" to "declare" one's thoughts and passions *to others*.⁹ Signifying remains, however, secondary to marking: names "serve for marks before they be used as signs...the nature of a name consists principally in this, that it is a mark taken for memory's sake; but it serves also by accident to signify and make known to others what we remember ourselves."¹⁰ The Hobbesian genesis of language is therefore fundamentally private, not in the Wittgensteinian sense that it cannot in principle be understood by another, but in the sense that its constitution depends on properties of a speaker in isolation.¹¹

7. L 4.3: 50; 4.5: 52, my underlining. Although Hobbes did not *define* marks in this way in the *Elements*, he nevertheless made the same point: "the Invention of names hath beene necessary for the drawing of Men out of Ignorance, by callinge to their remembrance the necessary coherence of one conception to another." EL 5.13: 38. Cf. DC 1.1: 13–14.

8. Engel (1959: vi, 77, 85).

9. L 4.3: 50; 4.1: 48. See also DC 2.1–5: 13–17. Alongside marking and signifying, which make up the "generall use of Speech," Hobbes also specified four "Speciall uses of Speech," but all four are examples of marking or signifying.

10. DC 2.5: 15.

11. For this distinction, see Goldfarb (1985). Watkins (1973: 99) concurs that Hobbes was essentially trying to show how an individual could develop a private language. A number of recent commentators, however, have followed Hungerland and Vick (1981) in denying that Hobbes posited a private origin or nature for language. A decisive retort to their misreading is given by Ross (1987).

II. Signifying (*significare*)

One of the most important questions in the philosophy of language that had preoccupied scholastic logicians at least since the thirteenth century was whether words immediately signify concepts or things. Although there were discrepancies and ambiguities over what *significare* meant for medieval writers, by the late-scholastic period, 'to signify' had come to mean for many something like representing something to the cognitive powers, *i. e.*, making something known or manifest to the mind. Some held that words primarily and immediately signify concepts, and things only secondarily and mediately through concepts; others thought that words primarily and immediately signify things, and concepts secondarily; while others held that words signify both concepts and things immediately.¹² Amongst medieval writers, John Buridan held the first view, arguing that words signify concepts, which in turn signify things; William of Ockham, by contrast, held that words signify things and not concepts — although Ockham also held that *which* thing a word signifies is determined by the concept associated with the word, such that although the word-thing relation of signification is *immediate*, it is nevertheless *conditioned* on the word-concept relation.¹³

The debate was alive and well in the seventeenth century. A typical expression of that debate is found in *Logica* — the widely used textbook by Martin Smiglecius that was originally published in 1618 and again in Oxford in 1634, 1638, and 1658 — and became one of the standard logic textbooks in seventeenth-century Oxford.¹⁴ The opening question of the book's twelfth *disputatio* introduces the debate by asking, in typical fashion, "An voces primò immediate significant res vel conceptus?"¹⁵ Smiglecius's own view was that words immediately

12. Ashworth (1981: 309–311, 322). Cf. Ashworth (1974). For the shifting uses of *significare* in the medieval period, see de Rijk (1982).

13. Ockham (1974).

14. See Yolton (1986). On Smiglecius's importance for seventeenth-century logic in England, see also Ashworth (1981).

15. Smiglecius (1634: 436). For discussion, see Ashworth (1981).

signify things, and concepts only mediately, but other seventeenth-century writers such as John of St. Thomas thought that words immediately signify concepts. (However, John of St. Thomas also thought that the primary function of words is to signify things, mediately).¹⁶

Hobbes directly intervened in this debate by insisting that since “names ordered in speech...are signs of our conceptions, it is manifest they are not signs of the things themselves.”¹⁷ He framed the argument in light of his own technical definition of the sign in terms of constant conjunction. According to Hobbes, a sign is something an observer takes as evidence for some other event or state on the basis of having previously observed the two regularly occur together: signs are “antecedents of their consequents, and the consequents of their antecedents, as often as we observe them to go or follow after in the same manner.”¹⁸ Thus to signify is to indicate or provide grounds for inferring the presence (in the past, present, or future) of something else. To cite Hobbes’ own example, thick clouds are for regular observers a sign of rain, and rain a sign of thick clouds. Clouds, however, exemplify what Hobbes called a “natural” sign of rain; although it is the observer who interprets them as a sign, the interpretation is based on observing a correlation between clouds and rain that does not depend on acts of the human will. Names, by contrast, are “arbitrary” (*arbitrium*), “voluntary,” or “conventional” (*Pactitiorum*) signs:¹⁹ the relation between vocal sounds and what they signify obtains because of human decision, which constitutes or establishes an express or tacit shared *convention*.²⁰

16. Ashworth (1974: 43).

17. DC 2.5: 17. Cf. L 4.24: 62: “all names are imposed to signifie our conceptions.” Hobbes’s intervention in this debate has been previously noted by Dawson (2007: 28).

18. DC 2.2: 14, italics removed. Cf. EL 4.9: 33; L 3.8: 44.

19. The three labels are found, respectively, in DC 2.2: 14/13; L 2.10: 36; DCv 15.16: 194/229.

20. Conventional signs are based on “*expresse, or tacite composition (ex constituto expresso, vel tacito)*” and “so appointed by the common consent of them who are of the same language with us, (as it were by a certaine contract necessary for humane society (*ita consensu communi eorum qui eiusdem sunt lingue [quasi*

In the case of arbitrary signs, Hobbes’ technical definition of signifying *qua* indicating implies (but is not implied by) the late-scholastic sense of making something known, since successfully to signify one’s conceptions in Hobbes’ sense is to make their presence and content known to others. As Hobbes himself put it, the second function of names, after marking (*notare*), is “to signify and make known to others what we remember ourselves (*significandis, demonstrandisque iis rebus quas memoria tenemus*).”²¹ Thus when Hobbes insisted that words signify conceptions and not things, his point was that when one uses words to signify, one provides evidence to others that one has such-and-such internal thoughts or passions, but not necessarily evidence for the presence of any external objects: “for that the sound of this word *stone* should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this, that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone.”²² The proper sense of *significare* (like *notare*) therefore specifies a relation between words and conceptions. To say that the name signifies some external thing or physical object – and Hobbes wrote in this way throughout his writings, including in Latin (*De Corpore*) and in English (*Leviathan*) – is merely a non-literal manner of speaking: it is simply *shorthand* for saying that it is the sign of a conception of that object. Hobbes was rather clear about this shorthand: the relation between words and things is necessarily mediated, on his account, by our conceptions.²³

pacto quodam societati humanæ necessario]).” DCv 15.16: 194/229; 18.4: 253/283. See also EL 27.13: 170; L 31.38: 570; DC 5.1: 56.

21. DC 2.3: 15/13–14. See also DCv 15.17: 196/230: “there is no sign but whereby somewhat becomes known (*innotescit*) to others.” For the distinction between the “making known” and the “indicating” traditions, and further discussion of Hobbes’ sense of ‘signifying,’ see Ott (2004: chapter 1). As Ott points out, “every act of indicating *x* might also be an act of making *x* known (or revealing or expressing *x*), but the converse is clearly false” (p. 14).

22. DC 2.5: 17. Cf. Dawson (2007: 28).

23. Although Hobbes’ explanation of this non-literal shorthand has been invariably overlooked, the fact that for him names signify conceptions (and not things) is well-established in Hobbes scholarship – on the basis not merely of his explicit statements to that effect in DC 2.5 and L 4.24, but also his

None of this is to say, however, that for Hobbes *conceptions* signify objects. That one conceives something in memory or imagination does not indicate the thing's presence. Conceptions *represent* rather than signify things; they are directed on intentional objects that they represent as having certain properties. This is precisely why, for Hobbes, words do not even mediately signify things via conceptions (as they do for Buridan, for example).²⁴

Nor, in turn, is any of this to say that names *refer* to or are *about* conceptions of the mind. Hobbes' definition of 'signifying' in terms of providing evidence for something's presence makes clear why it is a mistake to equate — as modern readers of Hobbes prior to 1960 were inclined to do — Hobbesian signification with reference.²⁵ To refer to something in speech would not be to provide evidence for its presence, but to speak *about* it, to use linguistic expressions to stand for the referents in speech. But neither Hobbesian nor, indeed, late-scholastic usage equated *significare* with referring. The medieval terminist logicians — who were called terminists because they considered the proposition, rather than isolated words, to be the basic unit of meaning, and hence focused on terms (words in propositions) as the basic unit of logical analysis — developed a theory that ended by attributing two distinct semantic properties to terms: if *significatio* is the power of terms to make something known to the mind, then *suppositio* is the

definition of 'sign.' A recent challenge comes from Duncan (2011). See note 48 for criticism of Duncan.

24. As Hobbes put it in *Leviathan*, "the Thoughts of man...are every one a Representation or Appearance, of some quality, or other Accident of...an Object." L 1.1: 22.
25. For this traditional reading, prevalent prior to 1960, see, e.g., Mill (1974: book 1, chapter 2, paragraph 1, page 24), who speculated that Hobbes "seems" to take names to be of "ideas," not of things; Oakeshott (1946: xxiv), who wrote of giving "names to images"; Watkins (1955: 139), who wrote that names "denote" mental images; and Peters (1956: 134), who had names "*standing for* the private phantasm." Watkins (1973: 101–103) subsequently changed his mind on this. For a more recent defence of the traditional reading, see Ross (1987: 38–40), who insists that for Hobbes "all names refer to thoughts." See also Ross (2009: 38).

power of terms in a proposition to stand for or pick out something.²⁶ Thus although, especially in the early medieval period, there was sometimes overlap in the use of the terms *significare* and *supponere*, the scholastic treatment of reference fell to the theory of *suppositio* — and this, well into the seventeenth century.²⁷ Ockham, for example, who defined a sign as what brings something else to mind, and claimed that words signify things rather than concepts, outlined three types of supposition: words supposit "personally" when referring to what the word signifies (e.g. "Every man is an animal"), they supposit "materially" when referring to the word itself (e.g. "'Man' is a three-letter word"), and they supposit "simply" when referring to a concept (e.g. "Man is a species").²⁸

What is immediately apparent about Hobbes' account of language, in the light of this intellectual background, is that Hobbes, while retaining the vocabulary of signifying, completely abandoned the apparatus of supposition.²⁹ Hobbes' conspicuous desertion of *suppositio*, in combination with the fact that his explicit account of the function of names is restricted to marking and signifying, provides combined contextual-textual evidence that his philosophy of language eschewed the notion of linguistic reference. To be sure, this evidence is suggestive, not decisive, but it serves to increase the burden of proof carried by anyone who wants to claim that Hobbes nevertheless implicitly articulated a notion of reference. It remains possible that Hobbes dropped the apparatus of supposition while retaining and reworking

26. de Rijk (1982); Ashworth (2009); Zupko (2011).

27. Ashworth (1969); Zarka (1988).

28. Ockham (1974: chapters 1 and 64). However, Ockham also took one sense of *significare* to be equivalent to *supponere* (chapter 33).

29. It is true that Hobbes continued to use the terms *supponere* and *suppositum*. But he used them in the rather different, but now familiar, sense of provisionally granting a proposition (including a proposition that something exists) for the sake of discourse or reasoning. DC 3.3: 32–33; see also EL 6.5: 42; DCv 18.4: 253. For the relevant seventeenth-century context, see Zarka (1988). See also Pécharman (2004).

a notion of reference, and used different vocabulary to express it.³⁰ I show in the next section, however, that this suggestion fails to meet the required burden of proof.

III. Referring

It is true, of course, that Hobbes wrote of the names *of* things. In fact Hobbes identified four types of names: names of things (bodies), of accidents (properties), of conceptions (mental phenomena), and of names (linguistic expressions).³¹ On Hobbes' account, 'Socrates' marks or signifies a conception of Socrates, but it is the name of Socrates, the human being, not the name of anyone's conception of Socrates. Thus in the paragraph of *De Corpore* immediately following the assertion that names signify conceptions rather than things, Hobbes went on to contrast "the names of the things themselves" and the names of our "phantasms of things":

For as these, a *man*, a *tree*, a *stone*, are the names of the things themselves, so the images of a man, of a tree, and of a stone, which are represented to men sleeping, have their names also, though they be not things, but only fictions and phantasms of things.³²

Passages such as this have led more recent commentators not only to reject the traditional, pre-1960s equation of signifying with referring, but also to conclude that Hobbes must have been positing an irreducible semantic relation between a name and what it is the name of — a thought strongly encouraged by Hobbes' remark in the very same

30. Zarka (1988).

31. L 4.14–20: 58–60; DC 5.2: 57–58.

32. DC 2.6: 17. Cf. EL 5.3: 35. In defending the traditional, pre-1960s reading of Hobbes, and his claim that all names are "of thoughts, not of things," Ross (1987: 40) argues on the basis of considerations stemming from the nature of Latin syntax that this passage of *De Corpore* is not in fact "saying that names are of things." But Ross' argument passes over Hobbes' explicit assertions both in English and Latin that names can be of things, accidents, conceptions, and names. L 4.14–20: 58–60; DC 5.2: 57–58.

paragraph that "every name has some relation to that which is named (*autem nomen omne ad aliquod nominatum relationem habeat*)."³³

Many recent commentators take their lead from the influential commentary on Part I of *De Corpore* by Hungerland and Vick, who assert that Hobbes made a "careful" and "basic distinction" between the concept of signifying, which links names to conceptions, and the concept of naming, which links names to things. They argue that in *De Corpore* the "verb *significare* is consistently employed as a term for the first concept," while "the verb *denotare* and phrases containing the noun *nomen* and the verb *appellare* are employed in expressing the second concept."³⁴ Thus Hobbes is supposed to have assigned *three*, not two, basic functions to names: *marking* conceptions, *signifying* conceptions, but also *naming* things, in the sense of *referring* to or *denoting* them. Almost all more recent commentators take the same view, and equate the name-thing relation with referring or denoting. If marking and signifying are the two basic relations that Hobbes posited between words and conceptions, then, on the dominant contemporary interpretation, he is supposed to have also posited a basic, irreducible semantic relation of reference between words and things.³⁵

33. DC 2.6: 18/16.

34. Hungerland and Vick (1981: 15). The authors originally published their claims in Hungerland and Vick (1973).

35. The claim that Hobbes "says that names denote objects and connote (or signify) concepts" was made, prior to Hungerland and Vick, by Törnebohm (1960: 69). The view was also advanced by Watkins (1973), in the same year as Hungerland and Vick's original article. Subsequent commentators have followed suit, often citing Hungerland and Vick, and explicitly equating naming (and denoting) with referring. See, e.g., Martinich (1981: 354–355; 2005: 144); de Jong (1986, 1990); Zarka (1988, 1989); Eco (1989); Soles (1996); Biletzki (1997: 26–28); Pettit (2008: 31). Eco goes so far as to equate Hobbesian naming to scholastic *supponere* (p. 68). The notable exception to the dominant contemporary view is Ross (1987), who defends the traditional, pre-1960s reading. (An anonymous referee suggests that Hungerland and Vick can be read as refraining from equating Hobbesian naming with referring in the irreducible contemporary sense. It is true that they do not explicitly use the term 'referring' to interpret Hobbesian naming, but they equate naming to denoting — including denoting items in classes and non-existent things — and understand denoting in an "extensional" sense.)

The disagreement in recent commentary lies in whether this linguistic-reference relation is (a) indirect or direct and (b) conditional on or independent of the mental realm of conceptions. According to so-called indirect accounts of reference, linguistic expressions refer to their referents, on each occasion of their use, only in virtue of positing some descriptive condition, which to be their referent an object must satisfy; according to direct accounts, linguistic expressions can refer without positing any such descriptive condition. (In contemporary philosophy of language, an indirect account is given by the description theory of names associated with Russell and Searle, a direct account by the causal theory of names associated with Kripke and Putnam.³⁶) If a name refers directly to objects, then it does so independently of mental conceptions; but if a name refers indirectly, then it does so conditionally on some mental state or conception if the required descriptive condition must be the representational content of some conception of the language user. To put this in Fregean language: according to Hobbes, a name would refer indirectly, and conditionally on mental conceptions, if he took the name's reference (*Bedeutung*) to be determined by its sense (*Sinn*) and its sense to be provided by the mental conception that it signifies.³⁷ Commentators such as Martinich and Zarka take Hobbes to have defended an indirect notion of reference conditioned on mental states,³⁸ while others, such as de Jong and Soles, take him to have defended a direct and conception-independent notion of reference.³⁹ But even those who attribute to Hobbes a notion

36. Russell (1905); Searle (1958); Kripke (1980); Putnam (1975).

37. Frege (2003) himself, of course, did not take reference to be mind-dependent in this way since he did not associate sense with private mental states.

38. "Names are able to stand for or refer to things, because speakers use them to signify their thoughts. Signifying is logically prior to referring" (Martinich 1981: 355). See also Zarka (1989: 36). I take Hungerland and Vick to endorse the indirect reference account, but in light of their Gricean interpretation of signifying itself, they seem to consider naming to be independent of the representational content of speakers' mental states: names instead denote things "in virtue of an agreement (that may be tacit) among persons belonging to a linguistic community" (Hungerland and Vick 1981: 19, 57).

39. Hobbes posited "a direct relation between the level of words and that of

of indirect reference — conditional on the signified conception — nevertheless take him to have a genuine and basic notion of reference: that is, a semantic relation between words and things that may be *conditional* on, but is not analytically *reducible* to some other relation or set of relations (such as linguistic signification and mental representation). (An analogy from metaethics: claiming that something is good in a genuinely normative sense in virtue of, or conditional on, it being pleasant is not the same as claiming that it being good is analytically reducible to, or just amounts to, it being pleasant.⁴⁰)

My thesis is that, while the dominant contemporary interpretation is quite right (1) to reject the traditional view that for Hobbes names invariably refer to conceptions and (2) to reject the reduction of Hobbesian naming to signifying, it is wrong (3) to hold that names refer to things. Hobbes simply did not have a notion of linguistic reference; he did not posit a third, irreducible semantic relation, between names and things. Instead, he explained away the apparent fact of reference via an analytical reduction: the relation between names and things is, on Hobbes' account, wholly reducible to the relation of signification between names and conceptions on the one hand, and the relation of representation between conceptions and things on the other. In virtue of their representational content, *conceptions* do of course refer to their intentional objects, but that is precisely the point: on the reading of Hobbes defended here, intentionality is an attribute of mental states, not words, and speakers use language to communicate their conceptions to others, not to refer to things. The relation between names and things is not even *indirectly* referential, in the sense posited by contemporary description theories. Names do not stand for or pick out anything — conceptions do that — and all we can do with names is to use them to raise conceptions in the mind

things," namely "the relation of *nominare* or *denotare*," and contrasted this "direct relation of *nominare*" to a second "indirect relation between words and things generated by the mediation of conceptions" (de Jong 1990: 73–75). See also Soles (1996: 94)

40. Parfit (2011).

that represent, and therefore refer to or stand for, the objects that ordinarily cause those conceptions.⁴¹

We can discern the strength of this interpretation in the light of the several weaknesses that plague the dominant contemporary one. An initial problem facing the contemporary reading is that it is unclear why Hobbes would have introduced a third, supposedly pivotal and basic semantic notion of reference without drawing any attention to it in the course of adumbrating the other two basic functions of names – much less without arguing for any such notion.⁴² The problem is compounded by the fact that, given his eschewal of the vocabulary of supposition, Hobbes' contemporary readers might have expected him to make explicit his new account of reference, if he had one. The latter problem is perhaps not insurmountable: one may reasonably reply that Hobbes frequently made substantive philosophical innovations without explicitly noting the fact (such as when he seemingly abandoned traditional natural law theory even as he continued to use its vocabulary).

The most conclusive problem, however, is that Hobbes did not in fact – not even in *De Corpore*, to which Hungerland and Vick restrict their claim – consistently distinguish between *significare* and *denotare*. Consistency in the use of these two terms is absolutely crucial to the dominant contemporary reading because it provides the central putative textual evidence for attributing to Hobbes a third, irreducible semantic relation between names and things that amounts to denoting or referring. A preliminary difficulty lies in the fact that the 1656 English translation of *De Corpore*, which Hobbes himself supervised and authorized, does not hesitate to render *denotare* as “signify” and *significare* as “denote.” Hungerland and Vick of course insist that the translation is mistaken on this count, but in doing so are forced to claim, somewhat implausibly, that Hobbes was profoundly careless in his edits and revisions to the English translation on an issue that they

41. I am attributing to Hobbes an account similar to what Ott (2004: 28, 33, 93, 136, 139, 142) ascribes to Locke.

42. For a similar point with respect to Locke, see Ott (2004: 27).

claim is central to his thought. The decisive and even more damaging fact is that, even in the original, Hobbes himself used *both* expressions interchangeably to characterize the word-conception relation *and* the word-thing relation.

Consider *denotare* first. In spite of what is supposed to be a “basic distinction” in *De Corpore*, in the sixth chapter of that work Hobbes wrote that “every universal name denotes the conceptions (*conceptus denotat*) we have of infinite singular things.”⁴³ Hungerland and Vick try to explain away this passage by saying that Hobbes was once again careless and that, in any case, he did not use *denotare* as a technical term – which of course undermines their initial claim that the term marks a “basic” and “careful and consistent” distinction in Hobbes' thought. Alternatively, one may reply on behalf of Hungerland and Vick that although names always mark or signify conceptions, they can *also* sometimes refer to conceptions (when they are the names of a conception). Imagine that I, having yesterday painted a triangle in art class, say to you, “The triangle that I drew is blue.” On Hobbes' account, the definite description ‘The triangle that I drew’ qualifies as a name, to wit, the name of the triangle that I drew, and it signifies my conception of that triangle; on the dominant contemporary reading, moreover, the name refers to the triangle. Now imagine that you, having heard my utterance, immediately form a vivid image of the triangle in your mind and, surprised at how vivid your conception is, form a second conception, about the surprising vividness of your first conception. When you say to me with delight that “My conception of the triangle is very vivid,” then the name ‘My conception of the triangle’ signifies the second conception you have, to wit, the conception of your vivid conception of the triangle; on the dominant reading, moreover, the name refers to your first conception, to wit, your vivid conception of the triangle. Therefore, one might conclude on behalf of the dominant contemporary reading that when writing, in chapter 6 of *De Corpore*, that some names denote conceptions, Hobbes was being

43. DC 6.11: 80/70.

perfectly consistent with the alleged basic distinction between *significare* and *denotare*: after all, as Hobbes clearly asserted, some names are names of things while others are names of conceptions.

The problem with this reply is that it provides a wholly implausible interpretation of the passage in question when it is read in context. The context is this: Hobbes had just been contrasting reasoning with and reasoning “without any use of words,” in order to argue that, without words, we will continuously forget our reasoned discoveries (*inventioni*), so that all our discoveries will soon “perish.” (Indeed, even in one sitting we will not be able to go on “beyond a syllogism or two.”) By contrast, when we engage in linguistic reasoning, the words “may serve for marks” by which the conclusions of our reasoning “may be recalled to memory.” Hobbes then illustrated the point with someone who, “considering a triangle set before him, should find that all its angles together taken are equal to two right angles.” The problem, Hobbes argued, is that if he does this without the benefit of words to mark his conceptions, then when in the future he confronts a new triangle in a “different situation,” he would be forced, “by reason of the weakness of memory,” to rediscover the same property through a fresh act of reasoning, which — and here is where the passage in question appears — “he would have no need to do if he had the use of names, for every universal name denotes the conceptions we have of infinite singular things.”⁴⁴ The reply we are considering on behalf of the dominant reading wants the universal name in question to be the name of a conception or conceptions rather than the name of a thing. But the context rules out any such reading: the universal names in question here are names such as ‘triangle,’ ‘angle,’ and ‘right angle.’ ‘Triangle’ is the name of any item in a series of things: the name of triangles. It is not the name of anyone’s conception of triangles; the name for that is ‘so-and-so’s conception of triangles.’ The same holds for ‘angle’ or ‘right angle.’ The only plausible reading therefore is that *denotare* here corresponds to Hobbes’ technical use of *notare* (in the subjective

44. DC 6.11: 79–80.

case) or *significare* (in the intersubjective case): a universal name like ‘triangle’ “denotes the conceptions we have” of individual triangles in the sense that it *marks* (when privately thinking) and *signifies* (when communicating to others) those conceptions. Hobbes used *denotare* interchangeably with *notare* and *significare* — which is presumably the reason why he approved an English translation that fails to mark the difference in usage that Hungerland and Vick take to be basic. (It is of course precisely this feature of Hobbes’ account, and the related passages, that provided the textual basis for the traditional, pre-1960s interpretation of Hobbes’ philosophy of language.⁴⁵)

Next consider *significare*. On numerous occasions Hobbes also wrote of names signifying *things*, such as when he contrasted “names, that signify things (*res significant*) as have some conceivable cause” to “names as signify things of which we can conceive no cause.”⁴⁶ Indeed, immediately after stating that names signify conceptions, not things, Hobbes did not merely go on to say that words *name things*; he also identified names’ relation to things as a relation of marking and *signifying*: “it is no less necessary that they [phantasms] have names to mark and signify them, than the things themselves [have names to mark and signify them] (*nominiibus eas non minus quam res ipsas notari et significari oportet*).”⁴⁷

I take it that Hobbes cannot plausibly be read as having flatly and obviously contradicted himself in close proximity in this way, both

45. See Watkins (1973: 101–102), and the defence of the traditional reading in Ross (1987).

46. DC 6.13: 81/71. Hobbes used similar locutions in the *Elements* (e.g. “a Singular name is limited or restrayned to one of the many things it Signifieth” EL 5.6: 36), *De Cive* (e.g. “For men, by giving names, doe usually, not onely signifie the things themselves, but also their own affections [*Solent enim homines per nomina, non res tantum, sed & proprios affectus... unâ significare*]” DCv 7.2: 107/150), and *Leviathan* (e.g. “The Word *Body*...signifieth that which filleth, or occupyeth some certain room, or imagined place” L 3.34: 610). See Duncan (2011).

47. DC 2.6: 17/15. A more straightforward translation would be: “it is necessary that they [phantasms], no less than the things themselves, have names to mark and signify them.”

denying and affirming that names signify things. I take it instead that, having clearly asserted that, strictly speaking, names signify (and, by extension, mark) our conceptions of things, Hobbes went on to use the non-literal shorthand he had explicitly flagged in the very same paragraph: “that the sound of this word *stone* should be the sign of a stone, cannot be understood in any sense but this, that he that hears it collects that he that pronounces it thinks of a stone.” To say that a word signifies a thing is just a manner of speaking, a non-literal shorthand for saying that the word signifies a conception of the thing.⁴⁸ Conversely, saying that names mark or signify conceptions is to speak literally, and hence to specify the irreducible word-conception relation. Hobbes used *denotare* in precisely the same way (albeit ambiguously between *notare* and *significare*): to say that words are used to denote things is simply shorthand for saying that they are used to mark or signify conceptions of those things, while to say that words denote conceptions is to say that the words mark or signify conceptions. Accordingly, for Hobbes to write that “every universal name denotes the conceptions we have of infinite singular things” is for him to say that each universal name marks or signifies a conception of *any* of the particular things grouped together into a single, named class.⁴⁹

As for *nomen*, its literal usage is equivalent to the non-literal usage of *denotare*: to say that words like “*stone*, are the names of the things themselves (*ipsarum rerum nomina sunt*)” is also to use a kind of shorthand. It is shorthand for saying that such names are used to mark or signify conceptions of those things (as opposed to marking or signifying

48. DC 2.6: 17. Duncan (2011), who notices the discrepancy between Hobbes’ official theory (names signify conceptions) and Hobbes’ locutions (that such-and-such a name signifies such-and-such a thing), concludes that Hobbes is simply muddled. But that conclusion assumes without warrant that Hobbes’ locutions reflect an implicit *theory* of signification, contrary to Hobbes’ explicit stipulation (at DC 2.5) that such locutions (if they are to have any sense) are simply a non-literal shorthand. Duncan’s reading not only ignores DC 2.5, it also violates a minimal principle of interpretive charity: by ignoring Hobbes’ stipulation, he has Hobbes contradicting himself not just in remote passages but in immediately adjacent ones like DC 2.5 and 2.6.

49. For a sketch of the historical uses of *denotare*, see Eco (1989).

conceptions of phantasms of those things, such as one’s memories of a dream about them). Hobbes did not use *nomen* interchangeably with his literal uses of *notare* or *significare*: as I said, ‘Socrates’ is the name of the human being, not of anyone’s conception of him. But the naming relation just consists in the two-fold composite relation that is analytically reducible to the word-conception relation of marking or signification on the one hand, and the conception-thing relation of representation on the other.

In Hobbes’ account of language, there is therefore no relation of reference, much less of direct reference, between name and thing: names perform two functions, marking and signifying; they do not also perform a third, irreducible semantic function, distinct from marking and signifying. To impose a name on a thing is simply to begin to use a vocal sound as a mark or sign of a conception of the thing. Intentionality, for Hobbes, accrues to the mental, not linguistic, level: conceptions represent and therefore refer to things, while words mark or signify (communicate / indicate the presence of) conceptions.

The traditional reading of Hobbes equates signifying with referring; the dominant contemporary reading equates naming with denoting understood as referring. Both interpretations, I have argued, are mistaken. The interpretation defended here accounts for four key elements of Hobbes’ view. It accurately interprets (1) his notion of signifying as equivalent to providing evidence for the presence of something; it can consequently explain (2) Hobbes’ claim that names signify conceptions (they do so literally); it explains (3) the many occasions in which Hobbes wrote of names signifying and denoting things (they do so non-literally); and it accounts for (4) Hobbes’ use of *denotare* interchangeably with *notare* and *significare*. The dominant contemporary interpretation, by contrast, succeeds with respect to the first two elements, but has difficulty with the third and, insofar as it equates naming with *denotare* and these with referring, decisively fails with respect to the last element. And the traditional reading, while it can account for both (2) Hobbes’ claim that names signify conceptions and for why he said that (4) names denote conceptions (in both cases he

is supposed to have meant that names refer to conceptions), it fails on the other two counts. It wrongly interprets (1) *significare* to mean referring, and it fails to account for (3) what Hobbes meant when he wrote of names signifying things: even if names referred to conceptions, and conceptions refer to things, it would not follow that names mediate refer to things. (Unlike Hobbesian signification, the reference relation is not transitive: if Dante's definite description 'Esmée's written words' refers to Esmée's written words, and Esmée's written words 'Isaiah's curly hair' refer to Isaiah's curly hair, it does not follow that Dante's definite description (mediately) refers to Isaiah's curly hair).

To sum up, for Hobbes, names perform two basic functions: they *mark* conceptions and *signify* conceptions. True, for Hobbes names also literally *name* things. Indeed, in a non-literal sense, one can say that names mark, signify, and denote things. But these are all simply shorthand for saying that names mark or signify conceptions of things. They are not ways of saying that names refer to or stand for things (or conceptions).

IV. Meaning

Hobbes equated signifying with indicating, and eschewed a notion of linguistic reference, but his philosophy of language did not thereby lack a "theory of meaning."⁵⁰ A word of caution: the expression 'theory of meaning' is ambiguous between a *semantic theory* that specifies the meanings or contents of linguistic expressions, and a *foundational theory of meaning* that specifies the facts in virtue of which linguistic expressions have the contents they do.⁵¹ Hobbes arguably had a theory of meaning in both senses: an account of the semantic meaning of linguistic expressions and of the facts in virtue of which they have meaning.

50. For the suggestion that Hobbes had a theory of signifying but not meaning, see Hacking (1975: 23). For the charge that Hobbesian signs lack semantic meaning, see Davis (2005: 73–74). For the assumption, in relation to Locke, that taking signifying to be indicating evacuates a properly linguistic notion of meaning, see Losonsky (2007). For a response to Losonsky, see Ott (2008).

51. Speaks (2014).

We can see this by attending to Hobbes' distinction between natural and arbitrary signs on the one hand, and between his broader and narrower sense of "Understanding" or *intellectus* on the other. Recall that if thick clouds are a sign of rain, then they indicate rain such that perceiving clouds will raise a conception of rain in the mind of a regular observer who takes them to be such a sign. Similarly, if the word 'rain' ordered in speech signifies a conception of rain, then hearing a speaker utter "rain" in the appropriate way will raise in the hearer's mind a conception of rain. But there is a crucial difference: clouds are a *natural* sign of rain, but 'rain' is an *arbitrary* sign of a conception of rain. As we have seen, in the former case the relation of signification holds independently of any human decision, but in the latter case the relation holds only in virtue of an explicit or tacit linguistic convention.

To *understand* a speaker's words, in Hobbes' broader, purely semiotic sense of the term, is simply for the speaker's words to raise in one's mind conceptions corresponding to the conceptions or passions signified by those words: "The Imagination that is raised...by words, or other voluntary signes, is that we generally call *Understanding*; and is common to Man and Beast."⁵² It is sufficient for understanding in this broad sense that one be caused to have the conceptions thanks to one's disposition to take those words to be signs of such conceptions. But in Hobbes' narrower, properly linguistic or semantic sense, to understand a speaker's words is to have such conceptions not just in virtue of taking the words to be signs, but in virtue of knowing them to be *linguistic* expressions, *i. e.*, *arbitrary* signs. In this narrower sense, one understands a speaker's words only if the corresponding conceptions are raised in one's mind in virtue of applying the conventional linguistic rules in virtue of which the words signify the conceptions. According to Hobbes, while other animals are capable of understanding speech in the broader, purely semiotic sense, only humans seem

52. L 2.10: 36.

capable of understanding speech in the narrower, properly linguistic or semantic sense.⁵³ Speech, as he put it in *De Homine* (1658),

seems to be peculiar to man. For even if some brute animals, taught by practice, grasp what we wish and command by means of words, they nevertheless do not do so by means of words insofar as they are words, but insofar as they are signs; for they are unaware that words are constituted by the decision (*arbitrio*) of men for the purpose of signification.⁵⁴

Other animals do not understand words *as words* because they do not understand them as *arbitrary* signs — which is what they are — but merely as (natural) signs. Therefore, in the narrower, properly linguistic sense of the term, other animals “lack understanding. For understanding is a kind of imagination, but one that ariseth from the signification constituted by words.”⁵⁵

The upshot is that, on Hobbes' account, names have linguistic or *semantic meaning* only for human beings. There is, to be sure, a weak sense in which even natural signs have “meaning” — the evidentiary sense in which one might say that thick clouds mean rain.⁵⁶ But the purely semiotic relation of indication does not establish meaning in the stronger, linguistic sense: names have semantic meaning only for creatures that, beyond taking them to be signs of something else, take them to be *arbitrary* signs. For such properly linguistic creatures, the semantic meaning of a name is, according to Hobbes, its significate:

53. L 2.10: 36; 4.22: 62.

54. DH 10.1: 37/87, translation modified. As the invocation of wish and command indicates, Hobbes thought that animals' purely semiotic understanding is restricted to the signification of *passions*, but that the signification of *conceptions* requires properly linguistic understanding, and is therefore restricted to humans. See L 2.10: 36; 4.22: 62.

55. DH 10.1: 38.

56. What Grice (1957) called “natural” meaning.

the mental state that it signifies.⁵⁷ This, to return to our distinction between two types of theory of meaning, is Hobbes' “semantic theory” of meaning, and it explains why Hobbes could regularly use ‘signification’ as a synonym for ‘meaning.’⁵⁸ As for a “foundational theory of meaning,” for Hobbes, names have the linguistic meaning they do — they signify the conceptions they do — in virtue of the express or tacit conventions that govern the relation between linguistic expressions and conceptions. These two aspects of Hobbes' account are intimately related: it is only for creatures who understand the linguistic conventions that names have semantic meaning; for other creatures, at best they are *merely* evidential signs. Animals may understand the meaning of a command in a weak sense — they may understand the passion signified by the commanding utterance — but they fail to understand it *as meaningful*, *i. e.*, as signifying a passion in virtue of linguistic conventions.⁵⁹

This apparatus enabled Hobbes to distinguish, at least implicitly, between expression-meaning, *i. e.*, the conventional meaning (or signification) of a linguistic expression such as a name or sentence, and speaker-meaning, *i. e.*, what a speaker means (or intends to signify to others) in using an expression.⁶⁰ The expression-meaning of uttered names ordered in sentences are “those thoughts which the words of

57. See, *e.g.*, EL 6.3–4: 41: “Evidence” — which Hobbes defined as “the Concomitance of a mans Conception, with the words that signifie such Conception” — “is meaning with our words,” and “the meaning of the words or termes...are alwayes Conceptions of the minde.”

58. *E.g.* L 34.1: 610.

59. The contention by Lososky (2007: 297) that meaning cannot amount to signifying *qua* indicating, on the grounds that a linguistic expression's meaning is what makes indicating possible in the first place, equivocates between ‘meaning’ in the semantic-theory and foundational-theory senses. For Hobbes, what enables a linguistic expression to indicate is its “meaning” in the foundational-theory sense (*viz.* the convention), but the meaning of an expression, in the semantic-theory sense, is what it indicates to someone guided by the convention.

60. Grice (1968). In emphasizing that Hobbes drew on such a distinction, Hungerland and Vick are correct; their mistake lies in attributing to him the Gricean view that speaker-meaning is prior to (is what explains) expression-meaning.

that Speech, and their connexion, were ordained and constituted to signifie.”⁶¹ But the conceptions that speakers actually have in mind and intend to signify when uttering words may differ from the conceptions that the words are “ordained” to signify — as when people “use words metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for.”⁶² To discern speaker-meaning, therefore, one must resort not merely to knowledge of semantic and syntactic conventions, but also to consideration of the pragmatic context. As Hobbes put it in *De Cive* (1652, second edition 1647):

For such is the nature of speech in generall, that although it deserve the chiefe place among those signes whereby we declare our conceptions to others, yet cannot it perform that office alone without the help of many circumstances (*multarum circumstantiarum*). For the living voice hath its interpreters present, to wit, time, place, countenance, gesture, the Counsell of the Speaker, and himselfe unfolding his own meaning in other words as oft as need is.⁶³

The role of conventions in explaining linguistic meaning also helps to address the argument that some commentators have marshalled to attribute to Hobbes a notion of *direct* reference. On the interpretation I have defended, the word-thing relation depends on — because it is in part composed of — the word-conception relation of signification. Commentators who attribute a notion of indirect reference to Hobbes also take the word-thing relation to depend on — albeit not to be composed of — the word-conception relation of signification: the word ‘Socrates’ can be used to refer to Socrates only in virtue of signifying a conception of Socrates. But de Jong and Soles have argued that any such dependence would fail to explain Hobbes’ view of the

61. L 4.22: 62, my underlining.

62. L 4.4: 50.

63. DCv 17.18: 233/265. Cf. EL 5.8: 37; 13.8: 76–77; 15.6: 83; L 26.26: 436. On the importance of pragmatics for Hobbes, see Zarka (1989).

name-thing relation in the case of *universal* names. On Hobbes’ account, a “Universall name” such as ‘man’ or ‘triangle’ is by definition “the name of divers particular things,” and it “is imposed on many things, for their similitude in some equality, or other accident.”⁶⁴ Hobbes insisted, moreover, that universal names cannot signify universal or general conceptions, for the simple reason that there are no such conceptions: all conceptions are of some particular thing.⁶⁵ But if a universal name such as ‘man’ always signifies a conception of some particular thing — a conception not of man, but of Socrates, for example — then how could it also be the name of all other men if, as assumed by the indirect-reference interpretation as well as by mine, the name-thing relation is conditional on the name-conception relation?⁶⁶ Hobbes’ answer is that, at the level of expression-meaning, as we might put it, a universal name is by convention ordained to signify *each* of the relevant conceptions, *i. e.*, conceptions of each of the named things. It is true, of course, that speakers who *use* a universal name in speech will typically, when speaking, have only one such conception: if they utter ‘man,’ for example, the particular man they conceive might be Socrates. But they also have in mind the thought that the name they are using indifferently marks or signifies, in virtue of the convention governing its signification and use, a conception of any of the things that it names. As Hobbes put it in *De Corpore*, to understand “an universal name,” one must, via the faculty of imagination, also “remember that such names bring sometimes one thing, sometimes another, into our mind.”⁶⁷ A speaker’s use of a universal name may not raise, in the mind of hearers, a conception of the same particular thing, but hearers

64. L 4.6–7: 52.

65. EL 5.6: 36; L 4.6: 52; DC 5.8: 60; 6.15: 84. Contrary to a widespread interpretation of Hobbes (*e. g.* Pettit [2008: 31]), language does not make universal conceptions possible.

66. de Jong (1990: 75); Soles (1996: 94).

67. DC 2.9: 20. The *De Corpore* formulation encompasses both the subjective use of general names as marks and their intersubjective use as signs, but the formulation in the *Elements* is specific to the intersubjective context: universal names are “called Indefinite, because we [speakers] lymitte them not our

nevertheless understand the name if they have any conception that the name is ordained to signify, in virtue of recalling the conventional rule that governs its expression-meaning.

V. Conclusion

The dominant contemporary reading of Hobbes' philosophy of language provides a welcome corrective to the traditional view that Hobbesian signification amounts to reference and names refer to mental states. But one can only speculate as to why the alternative reading on which most commentators have settled since 1960 is one that, like the traditional reading, wrongly attributes to Hobbes a notion of linguistic reference. No doubt there are multiple factors, but perhaps one is this: the view that linguistic expressions do not refer seems barely credible to post-Fregean, analytical philosophers of language – even less credible than the view that words refer to mental states rather than things. Perhaps incredulity, combined with a principle of interpretive charity, is what partly lies behind the contemporary reading. I suspect that another important and related motivation has been to avoid saddling Hobbes with a philosophy of language that seems to yield a highly implausible, conventionalist theory of truth. If language is used to express propositions whose subject and predicate refer to things in the world, then the truth of a proposition (as expressed in the asserted relation between subject and predicate) can be seen to depend on the factual relation between the referents. (So "All men are animals" would be true if and only if everything in the extension of 'All men' were in the extension of 'animals.')

Conversely, if language cannot be used to refer to or speak *about* things in the world, then it would appear that the way things are in the world has no bearing on the truth of propositions articulated in language. This concern is clearly behind Törnebohm's early imputation of a distinct category of linguistic reference to Hobbes, and it figures in later work as well.⁶⁸

selves, but leave them to be applied by the Hearer whereas a Singular name is limited or restrained to one of the many things it Signifieth." EL 5.6: 36.

68. See Törnebohm (1960: 68–69); de Jong (1990); Soles (1996: 108).

But this set of motivations rests on three mistakes. First is the assumption that to deny that names refer to things is to deny any relation between words and things at all. If names signify conceptions, and conceptions have representational content concerning the world of things, then names could be used to indicate the presence of conceptions that are, in turn, about things. This is not to attribute to Hobbes a relation of "mediate signification" between names and things: as I have noted, unlike Buridan, Hobbes never said that conceptions function as signs of what cause them; he rather characterized the relation between ideas and things as one of *representation*.⁶⁹ It is true that for Hobbes the contents of our perceptions, though caused by external objects, do not necessarily directly convey the objects' intrinsic properties. Perceptions do nevertheless have indirect representational content: objects' properties, rather than being directly perceived, must be rationally inferred from the nature and content of perception. If the content of particular conceptions that general names indifferently signify resemble each other in some ways, and such resemblances serve as the basis for classifying those conceptions under the same general name, and if the resemblances between the conceptions represent some resemblance between the things of which they are conceptions, then general names can be used to express linguistic propositions that signify a series of conceptions that in turn refer to how things are in the world. This composite relation between words and things, consisting in the relation of signification between words and conceptions plus the relation of reference between conceptions and things, provides the basis, in Hobbes' account, for the reductive analysis of the apparent relation of reference,⁷⁰ and it can serve as the basis for explaining the power of names to help determine the truth-value of propositions.

Another mistake is to assume that Hobbes completely eschewed a conventionalist theory of truth. No matter how implausible such a

69. L 1.1: 22. See Pécharman (2004). Again, the same issues have arisen in the secondary literature on Locke. For the attribution of a notion of mediated signification to Locke, see Kretzmann (1968). For criticism, see Ott (2004).

70. For the parallel claim about Locke, see Ott (2004: 142).

theory of truth might be, much of what Hobbes did write seems to presuppose precisely such a theory. It is true that much of what he wrote in other passages seems to presuppose an alternative, correspondence theory.⁷¹ But because of this apparent equivocation, Hobbes' writings easily lend themselves to reasonable disagreement over the correct interpretation of his account of truth, such that this account does not provide solid ground for motivating a reading of his philosophy of language against the grain of his explicit account of the two-fold function of names.

It is also true that a principle of interpretive charity speaks against imputing incredible views to serious philosophers of Hobbes' stature.⁷² But one must not conflate deploying a principle of interpretive charity with engaging in anachronism. A non-anachronistic principle of charity speaks against imputing views that would have been manifestly implausible to philosophers in their own context, given the available intellectual and discursive resources. But it does not speak against attributing an account of language or truth that philosophers today deem incredible because of developments in analytic philosophy since Frege.⁷³

If my reading of Hobbes' philosophy of language is correct, then we are left with the question of *why* Hobbes eschewed an irreducible notion of linguistic reference (and with this the apparatus of *suppositio*). A plausible answer lies, I believe, in what Hobbes understood to be the primary function of language. At the subjective level, Hobbes took its primary function to be, not to give birth to new cognitive faculties — there are none beyond sensory perception and the imagination — but to enhance our existing ones. As Hobbes put it, "besides Sense, and Thoughts, and the Trayne of thoughts, the mind of man has no other motion; though by the help of Speech, and Method, the same

71. On Hobbes' theory of truth, see Krook (1956); McNeilly (1968); Watkins (1973).

72. For a nice statement of the principle in Hobbes scholarship, see Lloyd (1992).

73. For a defence of an historical approach to seventeenth-century philosophies of language, see Ott (2004); Dawson (2007).

Facultyes may be improved to such a height, as to distinguish men from all other living Creatures."⁷⁴ And like many seventeenth-century philosophers, Hobbes took it for granted that the primary function of intersubjective language-use is to communicate our thoughts and passions to others, and not, as Frege urged, to talk about the world.⁷⁵ Hobbes' concern was to ensure that the results of our ratiocinations — by which we come to know something about the world — and the content of our threats, promises, and commands — by which we coordinate our social relations — could be made known to others.⁷⁶

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74. L 3.11: 46.

75. On this feature of the early-modern context, see Dawson (2007).

76. I am grateful to several anonymous referees for their comments and to SSHRC (Insight Grant) for funding.

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