

Chapter 1

The Power of Names

One of the primary sources of sophistical reasoning is the equivocation between different significations of the same word or phrase within an argument. Aristotle believes that no language can avoid words of multiple signification and, therefore, that possible sophistical reasonings will be endemic to any language use. In this chapter I will show that Aristotle argues at the beginning of *S.E.* for one kind of verbal multivocity that is endemic to any language, namely, the existence of universal terms that signify both the universal and the multiple particulars under that universal. This necessary feature of language, however, is not the source of those sophistical arguments that Aristotle dwells on later in his treatise. In subsequent chapters, Aristotle will attribute most sophistical reasonings to those terms that signify different kinds of things (i.e., different universals). This kind of multivocity is not endemic to any language. In short, Aristotle conflates two sorts of verbal multivocity, one which is endemic to all language but is only rarely a cause of false reasoning, and the other which is a contingent feature of any language and is the more usual cause of false reasonings.

NAMING IS NOT LIKE COUNTING

In *S.E.* 1, Aristotle repeats the definition of reasoning (συλλογισμός) from *Topics* I, 1, and defines a refutation (ἔλεγχος) as reasoning to the denial of a conclusion. Attempted refutations often took place in formal dialogue between two people, referred to, in Aristotle's day, as the questioner and the answerer. The questioner was the person attempting to refute the answerer.

The questioner would begin by asking his opponent if he accepts the truth of some claim. When the answerer answered “yes,” that became the proposition the questioner tried to refute. He would continue to ask the answerer if he accepts certain other claims, hoping eventually to show that these other claims agreed to by the answerer logically entailed the opposite of the original proposition. That constituted a refutation. A sophistical refutation is a line of questioning that appears to result in a refutation but is actually a fallacy (παραλογισμός) and not a refutation.¹ How do sophists produce these appearances? Aristotle says that there are many ways, but the most natural (εὐφρέστατος) and most common (δημοσιώτατος) way is through names.

For since it is not possible to converse by bringing in the actual things themselves, but we use the names in place of the things as symbols, we think that what happens with the names also happens with the things, just as in the cases of people who calculate with counters. But it is not similar, for names and the number of expressions are limited (πεπέρανται) while the things are unlimited (ἄπειρα) in number. It is necessary then that the same expression and one name signify many things. So just as in the former case those who are not clever at handling their counters are led astray by the experts, in the same way too in the case of arguments, those who are inexperienced with the power of names miscalculate (παραλογίζονται) both in their own conversations and while listening to conversations of others.²

This disanalogy drawn between arithmetical counters and names (and expressions) is important, for upon it Aristotle argues for the unavoidable multivocality of language. Yet there are problems in interpreting what Aristotle means by contrasting limited names with unlimited things. If I understand correctly the force of Aristotle’s claim, his disanalogy shows only the linguistic necessity of universal predicates applying to more than one individual. It does not show any necessity for predicates applying to more than one different kind of individual. To use the vocabulary of *Categories* 1, Aristotle’s contrast between names and things in *S.E.* 1 only shows the necessity of synonymy, not the necessity of homonymy. To make this clearer, I must examine the purported disanalogy in some detail.

Aristotle’s claim is that names are not related to the things named as counters are related to the things counted, because names are limited but things are unlimited in number. The following three questions must be addressed:

1. In what sense are names and expressions “limited”?
2. In what sense are things “unlimited in number”?

3. What does Aristotle mean by “counters,” and how does the relationship between counters and what they stand for differ from the relationship between names and the things names signify?

I argue below that, for Aristotle, the number of names is limited by the number of universals, which are the proper referents for names. The names of these universals, however, possess the power to signify an unlimited number of individuals. Therefore, that “power of names,” the recognition of which is so important for avoidance of fallacy, is the use of a name both to signify a universal and to apply to the particulars under that universal. I shall begin, however, with the third question and show that the relationship between counters and things counted is necessarily isomorphic in a way that the “power of names” makes impossible for the relationship between names and things named.

“COUNTERS”

The error in assimilating names to counters, according to Aristotle, is to think that in arithmetic, as counters are to the things enumerated, so in speech, names (and expressions) are to the things signified. Those who fail to see the difference are liable to be cheated in conversation analogously to the way poor arithmeticians are cheated in calculations of prices. In short, to be fooled by an apparent analogy is to be made vulnerable to some truly analogous consequences of that false analogy! The entire example, then, provides a particularly apt introduction to the general danger of mistaking appearances for the realities that they mimic. Aristotle is warning against assimilating the activity of signifying items in the world by words or phrases to the activity of counting items in the world by counters (ψηφοί). When Aristotle refers in the analogy to “people who calculate with counters,” he probably has in mind the counters on an abacus. Arithmetical operations on an abacus were designated as “calculations by counters” (ψηφοίς λογίζεσθαι). It can easily be appreciated how an inexperienced abacus user could be cheated by an unscrupulous expert. The principal point of the disanalogy with names, however, is that names are multivocal in a way that counters are not. But here one may raise an objection. Characteristic of an abacus is that the same counter can signify a different amount in different calculations. This “multivocality” of the counters on an abacus gave rise to a common Greek simile.

[Solon] used to say that the men who surrounded tyrants were like the counters used in calculations (ταῖς ψηφοῖς ταῖς ἐπὶ τῶν λογισμῶν); for just as each counter signified now more and now

less, so the tyrants would treat each of their courtiers now as great and famous, now as of no account.³

It is true that within each separate calculation the counter could only refer to one amount. This could provide Aristotle his contrast with names, which sophists might use to signify different things even within the same argument. There is, however, a better way to differentiate between this proverbial feature of multiple signification of counters as units in an abacus and the multiple signification of names. Even though a counter on an abacus might stand now for one unit or number, and now for another, it always stands for a definite number. In computing manpower, for instance, a counter may stand for one man, twenty men, or 100 men. It can never stand for all men or an indefinite number of men! But a name like ἄνθρωπος may refer to a particular man, or it may stand as a universal predicate, thereby signifying an indefinite number of men. The danger lurking behind the comparison, then, is to think that names, like counters, only signify particulars, either individually or in sets of limited numbers.⁴

In the mistaken analogy, counters are to the things counted as names are to the things signified. The second member of each relationship constitutes the same class. It is the class of things in the world that can be counted or signified. In both cases, they are unlimited (ἄπειρα). This cannot be understood as a claim for an actually infinite number of things, which Aristotle denies.⁵ It is an appeal to the indefinite number, and thereby unknowability, of individuals that Aristotle often contrasts to the limited number of universals that are proper objects of scientific understanding.⁶ The disanalogy at work between names and counters is a form of that between universals and individuals with respect to their knowability. Whereas counters are equinumerous with countable things (whether as individuals or sets of limited individuals), names and expressions are not. In the act of signifying, the absence of the isomorphism that makes computation possible is precisely what makes linguistic deception possible.

“SIGNIFIERS”

Aristotle defines “name” as “a spoken sound signifying by convention, without time, no part of which signifies in separation.”⁷ He includes both general terms, such as “pirate-ship” (ἐπακτροκέλης), and proper names, such as Κάλλιπος, as “names.” These latter names will require some special comment below. What places limits on the number of different names in a language is the requirement that names signify (σημαίνειν). That is, the number of signifiers is restricted by the possible kinds of things that can be signified.

In his study of this relationship, Irwin argues that real, extralinguistic properties with discoverable essences are the exclusive primary objects of signification.⁸ The most difficult counterexample to this position is Aristotle's claim that the nonreferring term "goat-stag" (τραγέλαφος) signifies something.⁹ Irwin accounts for this by distinguishing between "signifying by nature" and "signifying to us." Although "goat-stag" fails to signify by nature, it has significance to us, that is, it signifies our beliefs about goat-stags, including the belief that no such real natures exist. By Irwin's interpretation, names that *only* signify to us have meaning without reference.

Irwin's distinction is, I think, a useful one. But his positing of a class of names that signify to us but not by nature does pose a difficulty for Aristotle's claim that names are limited. For even if names that signify by nature are limited by the limited number of real natures, the *meanings* that we can attach to nonreferring names seem to be inexhaustible. I return to this problem below. For the moment, however, let us consider how the number of names that signify by nature must be limited. Aristotle insists upon the unitary nature of any object properly signifiable by a name. According to Irwin, such a requirement explains why Aristotle denies the full status of being a name to such labels as "not-man" and "not-recovering."¹⁰ There is no single nature common to the things that are not men or the activities that are not recovering, therefore, there is no name for such a class, only what Aristotle agrees to call "an indefinite name" (ὄνομα ἄοριστον). Names and "indefinite names" are alike in that they both signify and can be applied to multiple individuals. They differ in the presence or absence of a unitary nature common to those multiple individuals.

We know that Aristotle has restricted the number of highest kinds of things that are nameable. These are the Categories.

Of things said without any combination, each signifies either substance or quantity or quality or a relative or where or when or being-in-a-position or having or doing or being-affected.¹¹

Each name signifies by nature only one unified entity, and each such entity in turn falls into one of the *kinds* of things specified in the list of Categories. But if the number of names is truly limited by the number of nameable entities, then there also must be a limited number of *infimae species* under the higher Categories.

To illustrate how names must signify one and only one nature, Aristotle conducts a thought experiment in *de Interpretatione* 8 (18a18-27) by supposing a single term (ἰμῶτιον) being given to two entities lacking a natural unity (e.g., a man and a horse). This new term is not a name, for if it signifies anything at all, then it signifies two things (a man and a horse), in much the

same way that indefinite names are not strictly names because the things they signify lack a natural unity. The vexing questions of what constitute Aristotelian natural unities and how they are discovered happily need not be resolved here. It is enough to show that Aristotle believed in (1) a limited number of natural unities, and (2) that to be a name in the strictest sense was to signify one of those unities. We can now understand why the mere logical possibility of infinitely many syntactical strings recursively generable in a language would be untroubling to Aristotle when he claims that names are limited. Given any two names “A” and “B,” one cannot always produce a new name (i.e., signifying by nature) “AB,” since there may not exist any possible unified entity possessing such a combined nature.¹²

There remain two final obstacles to understanding Aristotle’s claim that names are limited. The first deals with names of individuals and the second with names that only signify to us. Although there may be only a limited number of kinds of entities for names to signify, Aristotle also includes individuals among the entities able to be named (e.g., *Κάλλιππος*, *de Int.* 2, 16a21). If I am correct to interpret the contrast between things that are unlimited and names that are limited as the contrast between the unknowableness of particulars and the knowableness of universals, then the application of names to individuals seems to destroy the contrast. The same can be said about names that signify to us but not by nature. It would be possible for “goat-stag,” or any nonreferring term, to signify to us. Nor would there seem to be any limit to the possible number of such names. These difficulties Aristotle never addresses. It would not be unreasonable to suppose, however, that he would regard names of individuals and names that fail to signify by nature as names in only a secondary or derivative sense. It already has been noted that so-called “indefinite names,” while able to signify, are excluded from the list of names proper.¹³

This belief that only universals (i.e., essences or properties) are proper referents of names is no Aristotelian novelty. It continues a Platonic legacy wherein the primary referents of names were the Forms. Only by secondary applications were sensible particulars given the same names as the Forms they share in.¹⁴ This, and the fact that names were regarded as somehow *naturally* connected to their universal referents, meant that, for Plato, only the philosopher or true dialectician could properly apply language to sensibles, for only he had knowledge of the Forms.¹⁵

In matters of linguistic derivation, Aristotle remains true to the Platonic position that names are most properly signifiers of universals.¹⁶ In matters of ontological dependence, however, Aristotle has reversed Plato’s priorities. As a result, although names primarily signify universals, and particulars are only named derivatively, those universals themselves are ontologically dependent upon those particulars. For Aristotle, then, it is the opposite directions of

priority between the activity of naming and that of being that help set up the *S.E.* 1 disanalogy. The limited number of names reflects the linguistic priority of their application to universals, while the unlimited number of things reflects the ontological priority of individuals to universals. Given, then, the unlimited number and unknowable nature of individuals, names possessing the power of multiple signification become necessary epistemological tools for understanding. But this sort of multiple signification is nothing more than the power of common predicates to signify multiple individuals. It does not require that common predicates signify multiple *kinds* of individuals. This latter phenomenon, however, turns out to be one of the chief culprits among Aristotle's examples of fallacies based on linguistic double meanings.

The power of multiple signification includes for Aristotle both (nonhomonymous) universals that apply to multiple individuals of the same definition¹⁷ and homonymous names that signify things having different definitions. The former is a necessary feature of language based on the nonisomorphic relationship between names and things signifiable, while the latter is a purely contingent feature of any given language. Yet Aristotle sometimes conflates the two. In both types of false reasoning, those generated by universals having references to multiple individuals and those generated by universals signifying different kinds of individuals, there is a failure to signify the same thing (whether individual or kind) by the same word or phrase, and this seems to have been what impressed Aristotle more than the difference between the two. This running together of these two types of multivocity explains, for instance, the strange remark in *Generation and Corruption* I, 6, which introduces his discussion of contact:

Just as almost every other name is said in many ways, some homonymously and others from different and prior senses, so it is with "contact."¹⁸

It is certainly not Aristotle's claim that almost every name is "said in many ways" by being either homonymous or related to some prior focal meaning. What is true is that almost every name is "said in many ways" by applying to many particulars. That is the only sense of multiple signification that could be claimed for "almost all names."¹⁹ The use of *σχεδὸν* may be Aristotle's way of qualifying the claim in recognition of exceptions such as the derivative names of individuals, or universal names such as "sun," which only happen to apply to one individual.²⁰

Ultimately, if language is to be a means of human understanding of the world, the only necessary type of multiple signification of words is that of universals applying to many individuals having the same definition. Without that power, much of reality would remain hidden from the discursive probing

of man. And because man naturally desires to understand, and understanding is discursive, such a state of affairs would render the universe a place of ultimate frustration for the human thinker. It is in this sense that words must possess the power of multiple signification if the universe is to be brought under the linguistic control of the human thinker. When this power of names is either intentionally abused by the sophist or just misunderstood by the inexperienced speaker, the attaining of man's final good as an understander is threatened. So it is a task of paramount importance for Aristotle to expose the misuse of this power and to explore the proper use of it.

CONCLUSION

False reasoning is persuasive insofar as it simulates true reasoning. Sophists are particularly adept in making false reasoning look true. One tactic of the simulation is to take advantage of a particular feature of language, a power of names for multiple signification. But "multiple signification" itself signifies different phenomena for Aristotle. In *S.E.* 1, he argues that in one sense multiple signification is a necessary feature of language. The basis of this necessity is the nonisomorphic relationship between limited names and unlimited things. This particular power of multiple signification is not a deficiency of language; without it, language would fail to meet the human need to attain knowledge of his world. This power, which is necessary for human understanding but holds the potential for misunderstanding through deceptive reasoning, is the power of the same common predicates both to signify a universal and to apply to separate individuals. Aristotle's argument in *S.E.* 1, however, supported by the analogy drawn between names and counters, does not entail the necessity of either homonymy or $\pi\rho\delta\varsigma$ ἕν multivocity. There is no need for the same names applying to different kinds of things, only for the same names applying to many different things of the same kind. What I show in the following two chapters is that Aristotle conflates the power of names necessary for understanding and other bases of linguistic multivocity, classified as types of "double meaning."