

Hobbes on language: propositions, truth, and absurdity

Stewart Duncan

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Language is important in several ways in Hobbes's philosophy. Hobbes regards use of language as a significant feature distinguishing humans from other animals. For instance, in the *Elements of Law* Hobbes defines a name as a sort of "voice of man",<sup>1</sup> and argues that "the advantage of names is that we are capable of science, which beasts, for want of them, are not".<sup>2</sup> A similar story in *Leviathan* takes into account the fact that animals do sometimes engage with language. A dog, for instance, will respond to "the call ... of his master".<sup>3</sup> However, Hobbes maintains, it cannot understand more complex speeches, such as affirmations and negations. As a result, a dog cannot understand someone's "conceptions and thoughts", though perhaps it can understand their "will". The grasp that dogs (and other non-human animals) have on language is minimal, Hobbes thinks, and not enough to give them access to the sorts of knowledge that humans can have. Hobbes also argues that – despite humans' superior intellectual abilities – if we correctly understand the workings of language, then we can give an account of human cognitive capacities that refers only to the (corporeal) imagination, and not to any further intellectual faculty, such as the sort of intellect that Descartes thought was incorporeal.<sup>4</sup>

The discussion of language also became an important critical tool for Hobbes. This approach is notable in *Leviathan*. There he criticizes the "insignificant speech", "insignificant

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<sup>1</sup> *Elements of Law* 5.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Elements of Law* 5.4.

<sup>3</sup> *Leviathan* 2.10, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Language has other roles too, as recently illustrated by Pettit (2008).

words”, and “insignificant sounds” of various opponents.<sup>5</sup> Language certainly has its benefits, in Hobbes’s account, but it brings with it “the privilege of absurdity; to which no living creature is subject, but man only. And of men, those are of all most subject to it, that profess philosophy”.<sup>6</sup> Hobbes’s particular criticisms of language are often directed at “deceived, or deceiving Schoolmen”,<sup>7</sup> but other philosophers, including Hobbes’s contemporary Descartes, are targets at times. Scholastics are particularly singled out, however, for not just using problematic language, but for intentionally deceiving people with it.<sup>8</sup>

As well as criticizing the errors of other philosophers’ language, Hobbes also developed a positive account of the workings of language. One early version is in the *Elements of Law* (1640), a later version is in *Leviathan* (1651), and the lengthiest account is in early chapters of *De Corpore* (1655).<sup>9</sup> I consider all three of these accounts in this paper, in order to investigate what Hobbes’s theoretical views about language are, what his criticisms of others’ faulty language are, and how the two relate. This is a broad field.<sup>10</sup> Within it, this paper focuses on Hobbes’s theory of propositions and their truth, and its relationship to his criticism of various philosophical claims as absurd and incoherent.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Leviathan* 1.5, 4; 4.1, 12; 4.20, 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Leviathan* 5.7, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Leviathan* 3.12, 11.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., *Leviathan* 4.21-2, 17; and 46.14-40, 371-9; and Hobbes’s claim in *Behemoth* that men in universities “learned to dispute for him [the Pope], and with unintelligible distinctions to blind men’s eyes, while they encroached upon the rights of kings” (Hobbes 1990, 41).

<sup>9</sup> The *Elements of Law* circulated as a manuscript soon after its writing, but was not published until 1650. On its composition, see Baumgold (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Within this same broad field, Duncan (2011) investigates Hobbes’s account of the signification of proper names, and how it relates to his criticism of various philosophical terms as insignificant.

<sup>11</sup> Hobbes’s views about language were very important to him. Several writers since the middle of the twentieth century have also thought that Hobbes’s views have important connections to recent views – see, e.g., Martin (1953) and Hungerland and Vick (1981) – though this trend has perhaps declined in more recent years.

## 1. Names, propositions, and truth

When Hobbes lays out his positive view about the workings of language, he begins with the notion of a *name* and works towards that of a *proposition*. To begin, like Hobbes, with names, we see a basic view in the *Elements of Law* that is revised and elaborated upon in the later works. In the *Elements*, Hobbes defines a name as “the voice of a man, arbitrarily imposed, for a mark to bring to his mind some conception concerning the thing on which it is imposed”.<sup>12</sup> On this view, a name is public, external item (thus “voice”) but its role, or at least its primary role, is a personal one, of enabling the speaker to recall thoughts.<sup>13</sup> A great variety of words and phrase count as names. Looking just at the first two paragraphs in which examples occur, we have “one”, “two”, “three”, “just”, “valiant”, “strong”, “comely”, “visible”, “moveable”, “Socrates”, “Homer”, and “he that writ the Iliad”.<sup>14</sup>

The view that names serve as marks is expanded upon in *Leviathan*, where names are given two roles. They are again marks, for “registering of the consequences of our thoughts”.<sup>15</sup> Though not exactly as described in the earlier work, this remains a role that words have for speakers themselves. But names are now also said to be signs. Names function as signs in communication between people, “when many use the same words, to signify (by their connexion and order,) one to another, what they conceive, or think of each matter; and also what they desire, fear, or have any other passion for”.<sup>16</sup> This same

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<sup>12</sup> *Elements of Law* 5.2.

<sup>13</sup> Martinich (2005: 141) translates the equivalent passage in *De Corpore* (2.4) as “A name is a human vocal sound”.

<sup>14</sup> *Elements of Law* 5.4-5. Martin (1953: 206) notes that Hobbes’s use of ‘name’ is broad, but that this “is common in British logical writing” giving several examples. These are all of authors writing some time after Hobbes: J.S. Mill, J.N. Keynes, and Jevons. Mill had read Hobbes’s *De Corpore* as part of his study of logic, and discusses it at several points in his own *System of Logic*.

<sup>15</sup> *Leviathan* 4.3, 12-3.

<sup>16</sup> *Leviathan* 4.3, 13.

distinction, between a role of names as personal marks and as signs in communication with others, is also present in *De Corpore*.<sup>17</sup>

Names appear to stand in two main semantic relations for Hobbes, naming and signifying. Though one might wonder how the naming relation works, it is relatively clear what, according to Hobbes, is named.<sup>18</sup> Proper names name individuals – thus ‘Emily’ is the name of my cat Emily – while general names name several individuals – so ‘zebra’ names each of the zebras, and ‘red’ names each of the red things. It is more puzzling, however, what Hobbes thinks names signify. He repeatedly announces, when presenting his theory, that names signify ideas – so, in the simplest version, when I use ‘Emily’ it signifies my idea of Emily. But outside those theory-stating contexts, he almost always talks as if names signify the very same things they name.<sup>19</sup>

Names alone, however, are not enough for most communication. So one wants to understand what happens when words are combined. Thus we find the following in the *Elements of Law*:

Of two appellations, by the help of this little verb IS, or something equivalent, we make an AFFIRMATION or NEGATION, either of which in the Schools we call also a proposition, and consisteth of two appellations joined together by the said verb is: as, for example, this is a proposition: man is a living creature; or this: man is not righteous; wherof the former is called an affirmation, because the affirmation living creature is positive; the latter a negation, because not righteous is privative.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *De Corpore* 2.1-2. Törnebohm (1960: 54) argues that Hobbes does not give a “proper definition” of ‘name’, and proposes the following as capturing Hobbes’s use: “An expression E is a name =<sub>def</sub> E can be placed before ‘is’ (or ‘are’) and/or can be placed after ‘is’ (or ‘are’) in the sentence form ‘ - - - (is [/] are) - - - ’ so as to yield a significant sentence.”

<sup>18</sup> Watkins (1965: 142) complains that Hobbes does not really explain the name-thing relation.

<sup>19</sup> Here I rely on the arguments of Duncan (2011).

<sup>20</sup> *Elements of Law* 5.9.

In this model, a proposition has the structure ‘A is B’, where ‘A’ and ‘B’ are both names. In the examples given, ‘man’, ‘a living creature’ and ‘not righteous’ are names. They are ‘joined together’ by ‘is’, yielding a proposition. The negations have the same structure as the affirmations: ‘man is not righteous’ is for Hobbes a proposition involving two names, ‘man’ and ‘not righteous’.

After giving the above account of propositions, Hobbes goes on to give an account of their truth. This is explained in terms of one name comprehending another.

In every proposition, be it affirmative or negative, the latter appellation either comprehendeth the former, as in this proposition, charity is a virtue, the name of virtue comprehendeth the name of charity (and many other virtues besides), and then is the proposition said to be TRUE or TRUTH: for, truth, and a true proposition, is all one. Or else the latter appellation comprehendeth not the former; as in this proposition, every man is just, the name of *just* comprehendeth not every man; for *unjust* is the name of the far greater part of men. And then the proposition is said to be FALSE, or falsity: falsity and a false proposition being the same thing.<sup>21</sup>

Hobbes is clear here, as he will be elsewhere, that truth belongs to propositions. But what is comprehension, the key notion in the explanation of truth? The notion is not really explained here, but there is a clue in the way Hobbes talks about “unjust”.<sup>22</sup> His treatment of the just/unjust example invokes the things named by the different terms, and is suggestive of a view, one that fits well with what Hobbes said in later works. That view is an extensional

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<sup>21</sup> *Elements of Law* 5.10.

<sup>22</sup> Talk of comprehension has some verbal resemblance to Leibniz's view that in a true proposition the predicate is contained in the subject. On the relationship between Hobbes's approach and Leibniz's here, see Nuchelmans (1998: 121-2): “It is worthy of note that Hobbes's use of *continens* for the predicate and *contentum* for the subject, which is also found in Geulincx's theory of predication, was reversed by Leibniz”. Note too that Hobbes thought about this containment extensionally, but Leibniz did not.

treatment of comprehension in terms of the objects named. On that view ‘A’ comprehends ‘B’ if and only if the things named by ‘B’ are among the things named by ‘A’.<sup>23</sup>

Chapter 4 of *Leviathan* is the equivalent of chapter 5 of the *Elements of Law*, being the place where Hobbes explains the basics of his view of language. In the *Leviathan* chapter, the term ‘proposition’ is absent, but ‘affirmation’ is still present, and a similar model of how names are combined into affirmations, and of how affirmations come to be true, is present.

When two names are joined together into a consequence, or affirmation, as thus, *a man is a living creature*; or thus, *if he be a man, he is a living creature*, if the latter name *living creature*, signify all that the former name *man* signifieth, then the affirmation, or consequence is *true*; otherwise *false*. For *true* and *false* are attributes of speech, not of things. And where speech is not, there is neither *truth* nor *falsehood*. *Error* there may be, as when we expect that which shall not be, or suspect what has not been: but in neither case can a man be charged with untruth.<sup>24</sup>

Again, truth is a property of propositions – affirmations here, which are said to be a kind of ‘speech’ – which have the basic structure ‘A is B’.<sup>25</sup> Again, too, we have an explanation of when ‘A is B’ is true: just when ‘B’ signifies everything that ‘A’ signifies. Given Hobbes’s typical use of ‘signify’ for the relation between a name and the thing it names, ‘A is B’ will then be true if and only if every thing named by ‘A’ is also named by ‘B’. That is, the

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<sup>23</sup> That is admittedly not terribly clear here, and one might want to say it wasn’t fully part of Hobbes’s view at this point. In taking that line, however, one must acknowledge that there is no other account of comprehension here.

<sup>24</sup> *Leviathan* 4.11, 14-5.

<sup>25</sup> *Leviathan* 4.18, 16. Nuchelmans (1998: 120) distinguishes two seventeenth-century (and earlier) views of a categorical proposition: the tripartite subject-copula-predicate view, and the bipartite subject-verb view. The authors of the Port Royal logic are noted as going the first way, indeed as holding that “there is only one genuine verb, the copula”. This is very much Hobbes’s sort of approach too.

extensional account of truth that I suggested was present in the *Elements of Law* is more clearly present here.

Some new features of Hobbes's account are introduced here. Generally, the trend is towards discussing more of the phenomena of language, rather than just introducing a basic model. Even in the quote above, we see Hobbes talking about the conditional form 'if he be a man, he is a living creature', as well as 'a man is a living creature'. More generally, affirmations are not the only types of speeches acknowledged: "*affirmation, interrogation, commandment, narration, syllogism, sermon, oration, and many other such, are names of speeches*".<sup>26</sup> Thus the model of affirmations and their truth is explicitly acknowledged to be only a partial story about language.

We have, then, a story about the basic structure of propositions, and their truth conditions. This story is repeated and elaborated upon in chapters 2-5 of *De Corpore*. Particularly relevant is chapter 3, where Hobbes gives his account of the proposition. As in *Leviathan*, Hobbes acknowledges several types of speech, but focuses on one type, the proposition, which he describes indeed as the only kind of speech that is useful in philosophy.<sup>27</sup> He defines a proposition as

*speech consisting of two copulated names by which the one who is speaking signifies that he conceives the name which occurs second to be the name of the same thing as the name which occurs first; or (what is the same) the first name is conceived to be contained by the second name.*<sup>28</sup>

This repeats several themes from earlier texts. A proposition is a sort of speech (Latin, *oratio*). It involves two names, linked by the copula – in English, 'is'. So again we have the basic structure, 'A is B'. When are such propositions true?

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<sup>26</sup> *Leviathan* 4.18, 16.

<sup>27</sup> *De Corpore* 3.1.

<sup>28</sup> *De Corpore* 3.2. In quoting from the early chapters of *De Corpore*, I use Martinich's translation in Hobbes (1981).

The third distinction is that some propositions are *true* and others *false*. A *true* proposition is one in which the *predicate* contains the *subject* within itself, or in which the *predicate* is the name of each and every thing of which the *subject* is the name; as “Man is an animal” is a true proposition, therefore whatever is called “man” is also called “animal.” And “Some man is sick” is true since “sick” is the name of a certain man. But what is not true, or a proposition in which the *predicate* does not contain the subject, is called “False,” as “Man is a rock.”<sup>29</sup>

Again the truth of propositions is explained in terms of what is named by the subject and what is named by the predicate. A proposition ‘A is B’ is true if and only if every thing named by ‘A’ is also named by ‘B’. Here this is treated as equivalent to talking of containment.<sup>30</sup>

Another source for Hobbes’s views is Chatsworth manuscript A.10. This was published by Jacquot and Jones as a set of Hobbes’s own notes for *De Corpore*.<sup>31</sup> More recently, Noel Malcolm has argued that the manuscript actually contains Robert Payne’s notes on Hobbes’s work.<sup>32</sup> Either way it provides us with some further information (albeit perhaps secondhand) about Hobbes’s thought. And it gives us yet more confirmation of Hobbes’s consistent basic view about names, propositions, and truth. A true proposition, this text tells us, is one where “the predicate contains the subject”.<sup>33</sup>

A certain basic picture is, then, consistently present in Hobbes’s thought about language. He starts by thinking about names; thinks about the ways these are used in

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<sup>29</sup> *De Corpore* 3.7.

<sup>30</sup> The 1656 English translation talks here of comprehension, which was the language used in the *Elements of Law*: “A True Proposition is that, whose predicate contains, or comprehends its Subject...” (*Concerning Body* 3.7, 26).

<sup>31</sup> “Notes pour la ‘Logica’ et la ‘Philosophia prima’ du *De corpore*”, in Hobbes (1973: 461-513).

<sup>32</sup> Malcolm (2002: 99-101).

<sup>33</sup> “Propositio vera; cujus praedicatum continet in se subjectum; sive cujus praedicatum est uniuscujusque rei, cujus nomen est subjectum” (Hobbes 1973: 466).

different kinds of speech; focuses on one of those types, the proposition; explains the basic ‘A is B’ structure of the proposition; and explains the truth of a proposition (and thus all truth) in terms of what is named by the names involved.

## 2. Absurdity and its causes

Having explained his basic model of the workings of language, Hobbes moves on, in both the *Elements of Law* and *Leviathan*, to talk about reason and the passions. Intermingled with the discussion of reason in *Leviathan* chapter 5 is, however, a discussion of absurdity and its causes. *De Corpore* has a somewhat different structure, but there chapter 5 is devoted to the discussion of error and absurdity.

In the *Elements of Law*, the absurd is associated with the impossible and the insignificant.<sup>34</sup> Hobbes also makes use of an analogy between absurdity and injustice, in the course of which he presents the view that absurdity is or involves contradiction: “he that is driven to contradict an assertion by him before maintained, is said to be reduced to an absurdity”.<sup>35</sup>

In *Leviathan*, the absurd is again associated with the insignificant, with nonsense, with being “without meaning”, and with being “senseless”.<sup>36</sup> The notion that the absurd is the contradictory, seen in the *Elements of Law*, appears in *Leviathan* too. We get the same analogy between absurdity and injustice,<sup>37</sup> and in objecting to some views, Hobbes argues that they are contradictory, in order to justify the claim that they are absurd.<sup>38</sup> The absurd is also, in

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<sup>34</sup> *Elements of Law* 6.5, 12.5.

<sup>35</sup> *Elements of Law* 16.2.

<sup>36</sup> *Leviathan* 4.21, 17; 5.5, 19; 7.4, 31.

<sup>37</sup> *Leviathan* 14.7, 65.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., *Leviathan* 18.18, 93.

*Leviathan*, associated with the false, as when Hobbes talks of “absurd and false affirmations” and “absurd and false general rules”.<sup>39</sup>

In *De Corpore*, the absurd is once more associated with the insignificant, as well as with the ridiculous.<sup>40</sup> And an association is again made between the absurd and the false.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, the heading of *De Corpore* 5.2 talks of a certain ‘incoherence’ (Latin: *incohaerentia*) that is associated with propositions always being false. Hobbes discusses several ways this can come about. As we will see below, these correspond closely with what Hobbes in *Leviathan* calls causes of absurdity. Thus the incoherence of *De Corpore* appears *Leviathan* to be the absurdity of the earlier text, and this incoherence is associated with falsity.

There seem to be two main ways one might understand Hobbes’s talk of absurdity. The first option is to take the absurd to be the contradictory. This is supported by the passages that use the analogy between absurdity and injustice, among others.<sup>42</sup> The second option is to take the absurd simply to be the false, albeit dramatically described. This is supported by some of the passages and examples discussed below. In these Hobbes discusses the causes of absurdity, but many of his examples appear to involve falsehood without contradiction. One might, given these two supported options, think that Hobbes is simply careless or inconsistent in his talk of absurdity. Thus Soles (1996, 111) says, discussing one of the passages I consider below, that “Hobbes is rather cavalier about the distinction between absurdity and falsehood in this context, considering them both to be errors, though he does not in general deny there are meaningful falsehoods”.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps we are just left with this slightly unsatisfactory conclusion. Sometimes, for Hobbes, ‘absurd’ is

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<sup>39</sup> *Leviathan* 4.22, 17; 5.19, 21.

<sup>40</sup> *De Corpore* 3.1, 3.12.

<sup>41</sup> *De Corpore* 1.7, 3.8.

<sup>42</sup> *Leviathan* 5.5, 19.

<sup>43</sup> She is discussing the list of causes of absurdity or incoherence in *De Corpore*, which I consider below.

just a dramatic way of saying ‘false’. At other times it suggests something more: contradictory or inconceivable, perhaps. But there are few or no external markers of which context is which. We just have to work through the claims of absurdity one by one, seeing what is at issue in each case.

In the discussion of absurdity in *Leviathan*, Hobbes provides a list of “causes of absurdity” or of “absurd conclusions”.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in *De Corpore* he provides a list of “types of incoherence of names”.<sup>45</sup> Each of these is a list of seven ways that language can go wrong. They are not the same list, though there is considerable overlap. There is also a somewhat longer discussion of each of the categories of problem in *De Corpore* than there is in *Leviathan*.<sup>46</sup>

*Leviathan* lists seven causes of absurd assertions. An eighth, though not included in the numbered list by Hobbes, is provided straight after. They are as follows.<sup>47</sup>

- L1. “want of method”, i.e., not starting from definitions ;
- L2. “giving of names of *bodies*, to *accidents*, or of *accidents* to *bodies*”;
- L3. “giving of the names of the *accidents of bodies without us*, to the *accidents* of our *own bodies*; as they do that say the *colour is in the body*”;
- L4. “giving of the names of *bodies*, to *names*, or *speeches*”;
- L5. “giving of the names of *accidents*, to *names*, or *speeches*”;
- L6. “use of metaphors, tropes, and other rhetorical figures”;
- L7. “names that signify nothing; but are taken up, and learned by rote from the

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<sup>44</sup> *Leviathan* 5.8, 20.

<sup>45</sup> *De Corpore* 5.2.

<sup>46</sup> These lists are discussed at length by Engel (1961) and Martinich (1981: 404-11), and considered more briefly by Peters (1956: 136-7), Soles (1996: 110-1), and Martinich (2005: 143).

<sup>47</sup> *Leviathan* 5.8-16, 20-1.

Schools”; and

L8. “the length of the account; wherein [one] may forget what came before”.

We should note that the category “accidents of our own bodies” appears not to include everything one might think of as an accident of one’s own body. Height, for example, seems not to be the sort of example Hobbes has in mind. His examples are sound and color, and the error he alleges is giving them names of external bodies, by saying things such as “the colour is in the body” and “the sound is in the air”. So the color and sound involved are not external color, but internal, experiential color. In the equivalent list in *De Corpore*, these are not called any sort of accidents, but phantasms, though the parallels between the lists suggest that Hobbes has the same examples in mind in both cases.

Despite considerable overlap between this and the equivalent list in *De Corpore*, some items on this list are not on the later one: L1, L6, L7, and L8. These items that are only on the *Leviathan* list appear to be a variety of ways to be led into error. But the other items on the *Leviathan* list, and the overlapping items of the *De Corpore* list, are all instances of one particular way to go wrong.

That one way of going wrong, exemplified to L2 – L5, lies in giving a name of a thing of one kind to a thing of another kind – giving a name of an accident to a body, etc. There appear to be five relevant kinds of thing invoked here: bodies, accidents of bodies without us, accidents of our own bodies, names, and speeches. These correspond to the four kinds of things that are said to be “subject to names” in chapter 4 of *Leviathan*, though there names and speeches are grouped together, whereas here they are separated.<sup>48</sup>

Hobbes appears to be using that list of kinds together with a principle that forbids combining two names of different kinds in a proposition of the form ‘A is B’. But what

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<sup>48</sup> *Leviathan* 4.14-8, 15-6.

exactly is the role of this principle? Where did it come from, and how does it relate to Hobbes's other views about language?

Moreover, given the way Hobbes is arguing, one might expect him simply to apply the principle "do not apply a name for things of one kind to a thing of another kind" systematically. However, not all the apparently possible cases appear on this list. Why is the giving of names of bodies to names on the list of causes of absurdity, but the giving of names of names to bodies not on the list? Is this second sort of predication not, in Hobbes's view, a cause of absurdity, with the implication that the general principle does not hold? Or is the second sort of predication just not a common enough cause of absurdity to be worth drawing attention to here? An indirect clue as to why the list is incomplete in that way is perhaps provided by the way Hobbes proceeds after giving the list in *De Corpore*. He works through each of the listed cases, arguing about particular examples. It is notable that the examples given tend to be of commonly held philosophical positions. Hobbes is not merely examining possible sorts of error. He is also using these views about sorts of error to object to a wide range of philosophical views. Here his general reflections on language and attacks on others' uses of language come together.

Perhaps, then, there is further illumination to be found in the lengthier argument in *De Corpore*. We are presented there with a list of seven sorts of combinations of names, which always give rise to a false proposition.<sup>49</sup> If names are "copulated in these ways", the result is "incoherent, and constitute[s] a false proposition". The list is as follows.

D1. "If the name of a Body [is copulated] with the name of an Accident"

D2. "If the name of a Body [is copulated] with the name of a Phantasm"

D3. "If the name of a Body [is copulated] with the name of a Name"

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<sup>49</sup> *De Corpore* 5.2.

D4. “If the name of an Accident [is copulated] with the name of a Phantasm”

D5. “If the name of an Accident [is copulated] with the name of a Name”

D6. “If the name of a Phantasm [is copulated] with the name of a Name”

D7. “If the name of a Thing [is copulated] with the name of a Speech [Act]”

One might think that the general reasoning, both here and in *Leviathan*, is as follows.

Suppose ‘A’ and ‘B’ are names, and ‘A is B’ a proposition. Hobbes relies on something like the principle (P):

(P) If ‘A’ and ‘B’ are names for things of different kinds then ‘A is B’ is false.

If ‘A’ and ‘B’ are names of things of the same kind, then the proposition may be true, but may not be: ‘Socrates is a man’ and ‘Socrates is a giraffe’ are both propositions of this sort.

Again Hobbes applies his apparent principle to only a certain select list of kinds. Here they are body, accident, phantasm, name, and speech. Allowing that the inclusion of phantasm is a change of terminology but not of content, that is the same list of kinds invoked in the parallel argument in *Leviathan*.<sup>50</sup> Though *De Corpore* 2.15-6 shows Hobbes to be rather skeptical about the value of certain traditional lists of predicaments or categories, he seems to have thought his own shorter list had some value.

Some commentators have thought that Hobbes was here discussing what Ryle called category mistakes. Ryle held that the “logical type or category to which a concept belongs is the set of ways in which it is logically legitimate to operate with it” (Ryle 1949: 8). We could perhaps take Hobbes to have such a theory of categories and concepts (or better, in this

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<sup>50</sup> The final item on the list also includes “thing”. Martinich (1981:405) suggest that Hobbes here “lumped together” the four earlier types (body, accident, phantasm, name) “to avoid a needless proliferation of types of absurdity.”

context, names). For Hobbes on this reading, there are names, which fall into four or five types. In any “logically legitimate” sentence of the form ‘A is B’, the type of ‘B’ must be the same as the type of ‘A’. Thus Peters said that Hobbes “tried to show how absurdities are generated by mistakes about the logical behaviour of different classes of terms”.<sup>51</sup>

I argue below that Hobbes did not in general think that the mistaken sentences he criticized (those described by D1-D7 above) fail to be “logically legitimate”. His principle criticism is simply that such sentences are false, not that they are in some stronger sense wrongly constructed. In arguing for that, I consider how (P) is related to Hobbes’s general theory of propositions and their truth. (P) might appear, especially on a Rylean sort of reading, to be an independent principle about how to construct propositions. In fact however, if we look at the way that Hobbes uses (P), we see that the employed instances of (P) are derived from a combination of the general theory and some claims about the facts in particular cases. (P) is not, for Hobbes, a fundamental principle about how to structure propositions. It is more like an abbreviated explanation of why certain propositions are false.

To fill that point out, and provide some supporting evidence, I consider three examples, which are of sentence types D1, D2, and D3.

*D1. “If the name of a Body be copulated with the name of an Accident”*

Hobbes’s examples here include “essence is a being”, “the intellect understands”, “A body is extension”, and “Whiteness is white”. Indeed, his discussion of this sort example is essentially just a long list of examples. Let us take, as a working example, the Cartesian

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<sup>51</sup> Peters (1956: 136) See also the discussion in Martinich (1981), which is to some extent opposed to that in Engel (1961). Soles (1996: 110) suggests a reading of this sort when she says that “Hobbes restricts semantically the ways in which names can be copulated”.

identification of body with extension, “corpus est extensio”.<sup>52</sup> Why, according to Hobbes, is this false, incoherent, and absurd?

For since no subject of an accident, that is, no body, is an accident, no name of an accident should be assigned to a body and no name of a body should be assigned to an accident.

The reasoning seems to be that bodies and accidents are things of different kinds, so saying that something of one kind is something of another kind is a mistake. How, does this fit into the general theory of propositions sketched in section 1 above? Surely “body is extension” will be true if the things named by ‘body’ are among the things named by ‘extension’, and this theory makes no reference to kinds. Hobbes might appear to have introduced a new theory of falsity of propositions in presenting these lists.

If we follow out the application of the general theory to the case given, we can see where the problem arises, and how it connects to (P). It is reasonably clear what many of the things named by ‘body’ are (leaving various puzzles aside, including puzzles about exactly how to individuate bodies). What, however, is named by ‘extension’? If ‘extension’ were simply a name of every extended thing, then Hobbes would have to say that ‘body is extension’ was true. Indeed, this is presumably what Hobbes thinks about ‘body is extended’. ‘Body is extension’ works differently, however. ‘Extended’ is in Hobbes’s terminology a concrete name, but ‘extension’ is an abstract one.<sup>53</sup> Abstract names are said to name the causes of concrete names. For example, ‘body’ is a concrete name, and ‘corporeity’ the equivalent abstract name. Whereas ‘extended’ names each of the extended things, each

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<sup>52</sup> See for instance the claim in *Principles of Philosophy* 2.21 that “the idea of extension which we conceive to be in a given space is exactly the same as the idea of corporeal substance” (Descartes 1984: 1.232).

<sup>53</sup> *De Corpore* 3.3.

of the things that has “parts distant from one another”, ‘extension’ is a name for whatever is the cause of something’s being extended. Hobbes takes it that none of the things named by ‘the cause of being extended’ is also named by ‘body’. Bodies are not, one might say, the right kind of thing to also be named by that description. Thus, reasoning in terms of the general theory matches up with reasoning that seems to involve (P).

*D2. If the name of a Body be copulated with the name of a Phantasm.*

Turning to this second sort of error, Hobbes again employs philosophically relevant examples, such as “A ghost is a body”, and “Sensible species fly through the air and are moved hither and thither”.<sup>54</sup> Each of these was, in one way or another, a contentious issue. Hobbes made a point of arguing against ghosts, but met with serious opposition on this point, perhaps most famously from Henry More and Joseph Glanvill.<sup>55</sup> The theory of sensible species was a repeated target of Hobbes’s attacks. Indeed it is the one view attacked explicitly in the very first chapter of *Leviathan*, where he identifies it as a view taught by “the philosophy-schools, through all the universities of Christendom, grounded upon certain texts of Aristotle”.<sup>56</sup>

What is Hobbes’s reasoning here?

For since ghosts, visible species [...] etc., are no less present to appear to those who are sleeping than to those who are waking, they are not external things, but are

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<sup>54</sup> *De Corpore* 5.4.

<sup>55</sup> Glanvill’s book on witches went through several versions, and More was responsible for the publication of the final one, *Sadducismus Triumphatus* (Glanvill 1681), after Glanvill’s death. On More, Glanvill, and witches, see Jesseph (2005).

<sup>56</sup> *Leviathan* 1.5, 4.

phantasms of an imagining mind. Therefore, the names of these things cannot be copulated in a true proposition with the names of bodies.<sup>57</sup>

Thus we have something like the following argument.

- (1) Ghosts and visible species are phantasms (which is to be shown by the sleeping/waking argument);
- (2) Phantasms are not bodies; so
- (3) 'A is B' cannot be true if 'A' is the name of a ghost or visible species and 'B' is the name of a body, as nothing named by 'B' is also named by 'A'.

Reconstructing the argument in this way, the general theory about truth and falsity of propositions has a role to play. Much of the work is being done by the arguments for (1), which are supposed to show that ghosts and sensible species are phantasms. The view that phantasms are not bodies is also playing a role. Whatever one thinks of those claims, one thing is clear – this is far from being an case where accepting a principle about predicating names will itself show you that certain sentences are false, incoherent, or otherwise flawed. Hobbes invokes a variety of evidence for his claim, which has little or nothing to do with the logical behavior of different sorts of names, and a lot to do with reinforcing his oft-stated view that ghosts are just phantasms.

One could perhaps reconstruct Hobbes's argument as an argument from (P), or at least as an argument from an instance of (P) – 'if 'A' is the name of a phantasm and 'B' is the name of a body, then 'A is B' is false'. But that instance is really being supported, for Hobbes, the view that ghosts are phantasms and phantasms are not bodies, rather than by the general truth of (P).

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<sup>57</sup> *De Corpore* 5.4.

*D3. If the name of a Body be copulated with the name of a Name.*

Again we are given several philosophical examples, such as “A universal is a being”. Thus Hobbes appears to be using his claims about language to argue against the view that there are universal things. This would be a partial argument for his particular sort of nominalism, his view that there are neither universal things nor universal ideas. Hobbes’s argument is not really explicit. He just tells us that ‘universal’ is the name of a name, not a thing. Can we nevertheless understand this as an argument from his general theory of truth and falsity of propositions, in the manner of the arguments above? Modelling our reconstruction on the argument about ghosts and sensible species we get something like the following.

- (1) The things in the examples (universal, etc) are names;
- (2) ‘Thing’ (*ens*) is the name of a body;
- (3) ‘An S is a thing’ cannot be true if everything named by S is a name (as nothing named by ‘S’ is also named by ‘a body’); so
- (4) It is false to say that universals, etc., are things.

In the previous case, we were given an argument for the first premise (the sleeping/waking argument that the things mentioned are phantasms). What is the equivalent argument for the first premise here?

Any argument for that premise would be an argument for Hobbes’s nominalist view that there are no universal ideas or things, only universal names.<sup>58</sup> So we might think that one of Hobbes’s arguments for his nominalism would be an appropriate supporting argument here. But noticing that just draws attention to a problem with the above argument. An argument that there are no universal things or ideas, only universal names, is used to

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<sup>58</sup> Hobbes did have other arguments for his nominalism. See *Elements of Law* 5.6 and *De Corpore* 2.9.

support (1), which is then used to support (4), the claim that there are no universal things. Hobbes's approach appears to be blatantly circular.<sup>59</sup>

This is not the only case in which one of Hobbes's arguments for one of his fairly fundamental positions appears to be circular or question-begging. Some of his arguments for materialism are like this too.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the circular or question-begging status of these arguments is often fairly obvious, such that one suspects that Hobbes himself was probably aware of it. But why give arguments like that?

The answer to that is related, I suspect, to the answer to why Hobbes's table is not systematically complete. Hobbes's aim here was not to put forward a principle about good and bad ways to construct propositions, then to investigate what happened to follow from that principle. Rather, the table allows Hobbes to gather together a big group of positions held by a wide variety of opponents, and claim they are all wrong for the same general reason.<sup>61</sup> Now it turns out that to do even that thoroughly, one needs to work through the details of the particular cases, and invoke a variety of views and arguments that are unrelated

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<sup>59</sup> One might alternatively reconstruct the argument as based on (P), in something like the following way. (1) A proposition that copulates names of two different kinds is absurd; so (2) a proposition that copulates the name of a body with the name of a name is absurd; but (3) in the proposition "A universal is a thing", "a universal" is the name of a name, and "thing" is the name of a body; so (4) the proposition "A universal is a thing" is absurd. Here again Hobbes's nominalism would be relied upon (here at 3) in order to argue for it (at 4). Not only is there an absence of explicit appeal to a fundamental principle (P) in the text, thinking that there is an implicit one would not remove this oddity.

Meanwhile, Martinich provides another objection to Hobbes's argument "Nonetheless, there is good reason to doubt that these sentences, taken literally, do involve category mistakes, even when we concede Hobbes his doctrine that universals are names. For on Hobbes's own view, names are themselves objects, typically ink or graphite marks or vocal sounds ... [But this] should not obliterate the point he [Hobbes] wants to make, which, quite simply, is that according to him it is false to assert that universals are nonlinguistic entities" (Martinich 1981: 408-9).

<sup>60</sup> Consider for example the argument of *Leviathan* 34.2.

<sup>61</sup> My view here is similar to Engel's thought that "what Hobbes really wished to do was not to prove some new thesis about language, but rather to lend added strength to a position already established by subsuming it under some general logical linguistic scheme" (Engel 1961: 542).

to claims such as (P). Though there is a unity in the cases Hobbes discusses, it is more rhetorical than logical. And in some cases, he extends this rhetorical unity by subsuming under the general sort of criticism some arguments that are themselves poor, just to be able to say that his opponents in another realm – for instance, with regard to nominalism – make the same mistake as other opponents elsewhere.

Hobbes is talking about mistakes that we might, with caution, call category mistakes, though we would not really be using the phrase in its Rylean sense. The theory of categories and their combination is not a fundamental part of Hobbes's understanding of language, and his arguments are not about logical legitimacy in the Rylean way. Hobbes's claims about particular 'category' mistakes can be explained using his theory of propositions and their truth. The 'category mistake' falsehoods are false for the same reason that other false sentences are false, not for some new and different reasoning involving a theory of categories. Rather, talk about category mistakes, and the apparent invocation of (P), is a sort of shorthand for explanations of why certain sentences are false. Moreover, though certain category mistake sentences may be contradictory and absurd, they are in general for Hobbes only wrong because false – it's the weaker sense of 'absurd' or 'incoherent', where it really only means 'false', that is in play here – they are not necessarily logically defective in the way Ryle thinks the mistakes he points to are.<sup>62</sup>

Hobbes did want to have a theory of language – indeed he needed one, in order to have a theory of minds, and of persons. And some of what he says about language is driven by this goal. But at other times – often right next door in the text – his claims and arguments

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<sup>62</sup> One might be tempted, perhaps thinking as Peters (1956: 136-7) does about a British philosophical tradition of criticizing other philosophers' language, to speculate that Ryle somehow – directly or indirectly – derived his criticism of category mistakes from Hobbes. Ryle seems however to have been inspired by Husserl. See Thomasson (2012: 2.2), citing Ryle (1970: 8).

are driven by other goals. Sometimes the point is to defend his other commitments, such as his materialism. Sometimes there's the aim of presenting several of his views as a unified package. And sometimes it seems like he just found he had too good a chance to incorporate another particular criticism under the same general heading. The desire to say 'look, my opponents across all these fields all make the same mistake' proved, on occasion, too strong for Hobbes to resist, even when the resulting arguments were poor enough to make the undecided suspicious, never mind the original opponents.

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