

# Noun or Word in Aristotle

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Aristotle's analysis of language is, firstly, on the basis of co-positing and positing away: this is the starting point of analysis: what is asserted in language either involves a co-positing or does not (Cat.<sup>1</sup>, 2, 1a16-17). Although he does not explain what he means by co-positing, we can see that he considers something like a sentence (his examples: man runs, man wins) and not merely a co-positing of two words like not-man, which he calls an indefinite noun (OI., 2, 16a30-32). Aristotle and his contemporaries had no word for 'word.' The closest words for 'word' are ὄνομα and λόγος. ὄνομα is distinguished from ῥῆμα (verb) and, thus, cannot mean word. λόγος means a sentence or statement. Daniel W. Graham (Aristotle's Two Systems, 1987, Oxford University Press, 38, fn.27) renders λεγομενον as 'word.' The problem with this suggestion is that, as Aristotle asserts in *Categories*, it is used both for single words and the composition of several words and even sentences.

Aristotle distinguishes a noun from all the followings:

- a) A co-positing of words: noun is a word that is said without co-positing. (Cat., 2, 1a16-19)
- b) Inarticulate sounds: the sounds like those that brutes produce are not considered as nouns, though Aristotle believes that they are significant. (OI., 2, 16a28-29)
- c) Verbs: words that carry with them the notion of time. (OI., 2, 16b6-8)

So far, a noun is a word said without co-positing, without the notion of time and distinguished from inarticulate sounds. What remains in language, however, is not necessarily a proper noun, though it is related with noun. What remain are different kinds of names:

- 1) Noun (ὄνομα) or definite noun: a sound that is significant by convention and of which no part is significant from the rest (OI., I, 1, 16a19-20) unless not having an independent meaning, the parts contribute to the meaning of the whole (OI., I, 1, 16a22-27). This latter condition is indeed a division made by Aristotle between two kinds of nouns:
  - a. Simple nouns: a word in which the part is in no way significant.
  - b. Composite nouns: a word in which though the part may be significant, i) it contribute to the meaning of the whole and ii) it does not have an independent meaning.
- 2) Indefinite noun: expressions like ‘not-man’ that i) have no recognized term by which denote the expression and ii) are not a sentence or denial by themselves (OI, 2, 16a28-29; 10, 19b8-10).
- 3) Cases of a noun. This is what used in languages like Greek language that have different cases. They show the senses that are asserted by other elements like prepositions in languages like English in a form or case of the name. Thus, e.g. Φίλωνος means ‘of Philo’ while Φίλωνι means ‘to Philo’. The cases of a noun have the same definition as the noun itself. However, they are not able to combine with any of the different tenses of the verb ‘is’ so that a true or false preposition results. (OI., 2, 16ab4-5).

Aristotle thinks convention (συνθήκην) is the basis of the formation of nouns: ‘The limitation ‘by convention’ was introduced because nothing is by nature a noun- it is only so when it becomes a symbol.’ (OI., I, 1, 16a27-28)

In Greek language, Francesco Ademollo notes (B508, 34), *onoma* has a close etymological connection with any transitive verb. Thus, it seems that an *onoma* is essentially ‘an expression that names or refers to something.

It is strange that Aristotle does not distinguish proper from improper noun. We find no text in which Aristotle made such a distinction. In fact, it seems nouns are essentially

improper for him: ‘A name, e.g. ‘round,’ means vaguely a sort of whole: its definition analyses this into its particular senses. Similarly, a child begins by calling all men ‘father’ and all women ‘mother’ but later on distinguishing each of them.’ (Phy., A, 1)

Nouns necessarily are applicable to others: ‘If one were defining you, he would say ‘an animal which is lean’ or ‘white’ or something else which will apply to someone other than you.’ (Met., Z, 1040a12-14)

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviations used in this article:

Cat.    *Category*  
OI.    *On Interpretation*  
Phy.    *Physics*  
Met.    *Metaphysics*