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**THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE  
IN THE PHILOSOPHICAL SYSTEM  
OF THOMAS HOBBS**

Linguistic consideration understood by Thomas Hobbes as an arranged system of signs making the basis of thinking creatures<sup>1</sup> called speech appeared in his works relatively early. In the workbook of logic entitled *Computatio sive logica* which he had been preparing since 1655 (it was not until 1655 that it was published as the first section of philosophy entitled *De Corpore*)<sup>2</sup> Hobbes tackled issues of language, the topic which he would continue exploiting in his later works presenting his views on social philosophy.

The consequence characteristic for Hobbes's commitment to the issue of language and its meaning in his most important works allows us to state that "language" alone has a significant role in his system. It is necessary to notice that what Hobbes had in mind was basically a language of science, that is to say, a humble, dry language consciously deprived of any glare of eloquence<sup>3</sup>. Hobbes's ideas about other uses of language appeared accidentally in his works.

Hobbes's views on the genesis of language – *the most noble and profitable of all inventions*<sup>4</sup> – are not precise and explicit. In *Leviathan* published in 1651 Hobbes stated that speech was created by God and was given as a gift to Adam who eagerly grasped at the chance of enlarging his supply of words. In *De Homine* published in 1658 Hobbes was trying to prove that speech

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<sup>1</sup> See R. Tokarczyk, *Hobbes*, Warszawa 1985, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> The source of the information is S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, in *Metoda I język. Studia z semiotyki i metodologii nauk*, Lublin 1994, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, translated by C. Znamierowski, Warszawa 1954, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford 1909, p. 24.

was established directly by people. Disputes between God and Adam before that establishment were conducted in a *supernatural way*<sup>5</sup>, apparently with the help of the language of mind spoken without words since words did not exist then.

Independently of accepting either of the two concepts of language's genesis, it is undoubtedly a man who has the most important role when it comes to the origins, development and propagation of the language. The vocabulary of the first language primary and common for all people and gathered by Adam and his descendants was lost together with the fall of the Biblical Babel. National languages contemporary for Hobbes were a human product which was the result of the fact that people had been gradually enlarging the dictionaries of their languages.

Every language is based on words. According to Hobbes's theory, the assumption that a single name can include several words allows for almost every word (with the exception of copula)<sup>6</sup> to be a name or its part. The appearance of particular elements of the language or, in other words, names was possible due to a special feature of man which is the ability to create **signs** or *memorizing things*. According to Hobbes, signs are objects governed by senses which have been accepted as signs voluntarily in order to adopt in our minds thoughts similar to the ones which have been the inspiration for the thoughts accepted as signs<sup>7</sup>.

In the above-mentioned definition Hobbes expresses his assumption that the decision to adopt a given sign is entirely a result of man's will. This assumption reveals Hobbes's devotion to **conventionalism**<sup>8</sup>. In contrast to naturalists searching for connections between a name of the object and its essence, Hobbes highlights the role of man's freedom while naming objects. Such declarations highlighting the rationality of his stand reinforced by the example of the variety of national languages seem to be common for Hobbes<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. II, translated by C. Znamierowski, Warszawa 1954, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., pp. 41–43. See also J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes's system of ideas*, New York 1965, p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> See P. Hoffman, *The quest of power. Hobbes, Descartes and the emergence of modernity*, New York 1996, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 26. and T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. II, op. cit., p. 118., see also B. Suchodolski, *Antropologia Hobbesa*, "Studia Filozoficzne" 1967, p. 195.

Undoubtedly, signs have a significant role allowing us to register a course of thinking of the one who has accepted the sign. Moreover, signs make it possible to go back to the previous thoughts as well as to perform reasoning. Nevertheless, they do not reveal a feature of universality. A sign is made for an individual use; what is a sign for one person may not be the same sign for another person which means that signs themselves are not enough to make even significant discoveries of an individual be common knowledge for the rest of the people.

To make achievements of an individual be shared with other people, it is necessary to use **universal signs**, in other words, signs common for all people. For Hobbes, an example of such a conventional (or accepted by man's will) universal sign is a sprig of ivy hung over the house to inform that it is possible to buy wine there. Another example of such a universal sign is a stone left in a certain place to mark a boundary of the field<sup>10</sup>.

The way in which signs created by an individual for mnemonic aims could become universal requires a separate discussion. Apparently, before a sign becomes universal, it has to be accepted by the society. However, such a statement implies the existence of the society in the period preceding a creation of language which contradicts Hobbes's thesis (discussed later in this paper) that language (speech) constitutes a necessary condition for the creation of the state and abandonment of the state of nature<sup>11</sup>. It may have been a social agreement that cleared up the uncertainty as to the signs created for an individual use which finally got the status of being universal and therefore entered a dictionary of the people accepting that social agreement<sup>12</sup>. When it comes to the state of nature, it must have been during a period when many private languages coexisted and an effective exchange of thought was limited.

It is necessary to state that only universal signs allow for communication of the acquired knowledge to the contemporary as well as to the following generations. It is easy to notice that in relation to universal signs individual signs are elementary; all universal signs have the quality of signs whereas not all signs may become universal. If we consider the role of functions which complement each other to a great extent, the role of signs is undoubtedly primary (basic), nevertheless, the function of universal signs seem

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<sup>10</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> See J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes's system of ideas*, op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> See R. Tokarczyk, *Hobbes*, op. cit., p. 68.

to be equally significant for they allow to practise real science – philosophy. Names seem to have the roles of both individual and universal signs for they relate to terms; therefore, names seem to relate to terms (not to objects) as well<sup>13</sup>.

Interesting is the fact that for the cohesion of his theory Hobbes was ready to accept as objects<sup>14</sup> something which S. Kamiński calls a characteristic reism<sup>15</sup>. The statement that every name remains in certain relation with the object named<sup>16</sup> led him to accept something which has been named as an object. He postulates the existence of names of the names, the category which was especially useful in science. What is more, by introducing a division into primary and secondary intentions<sup>17</sup>, he was ready to note (but he did not go further than that) a difference between the language and metalanguage<sup>18</sup>.

Among numerous divisions of names conducted by Hobbes significant is the division into the names common for many objects and the names common for individual objects<sup>19</sup>. It is only in case of individual objects' names that it is possible to point out a designation since Hobbes is convicted that common objects do not exist; what exists is a name of common objects: *in respect of all which together, it is called Universal; there being nothing in the world Universal but Names; for the things named, are every one of them Individual and Singular*<sup>20</sup>. The equivalents of names of common objects in the mind are the images of singular individual objects. It is words that are general but not objects. In his rejection to acknowledge the existence of the names of common objects, Hobbes joins a group of nominalists with their strong tradition regarding the question of universality. Nevertheless, he does not negate the role of general names in science: general names are essential since they enable us to think and understand without having to perceive an object primary and common for all people each time we think about it<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 27–28.

<sup>15</sup> S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 31–32.

<sup>18</sup> See S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, op. cit., pp. 35–36.

<sup>19</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford 1909, pp. 25–26.

<sup>20</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> R. Tokarczyk, *Hobbes*, op. cit., p. 69.

One of indirect consequences of Hobbes's nominalism is the statement that we can talk about truth or falsity only in relation to words and replies; one has no rights to relate these categories to the world of objects<sup>22</sup>. Only a sentence which consists of names can be either true or false. The notions of truth and falsity appeared together with speech for they had no reason to exist before speech. Therefore, the words "truth" and "falsity" function in relation to the human linguistic reality. As false it is possible to treat only a kind of mistake which appears not because of sensual grasping and is not a part of the thing itself but it is rather a result of the reply being inconsiderate<sup>23</sup>. Just as well-understood speech causes proper reasoning, badly-understood speech causes mistakes and falsity<sup>24</sup>.

In accordance with the above-mentioned thesis and his conventionalism remains another thesis of the philosopher which states that the very first truths appeared as a result of the will of those who were either the first to name objects primary and common for all people or accept the names given by others<sup>25</sup>. He claims that these first truths are characterized by some kind of arbitrariness (eg. a statement "a man is an animal" is true only due to our ancestor having a freak to give one object two names). These "first truths" have a function of the "first sentences" or, in other words, initial premises of reasoning which, because of their arbitrariness, do not require any proofs<sup>26</sup>.

This particular point of Hobbes's theory of language was heavily criticized by his contemporaries and followers. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz blamed it for the fact that if the premises of a given sentence were optionally defined, every sentence could easily be proved<sup>27</sup>. Using the language of contemporary logic, S. Kamiński tries to defend Hobbes from Leibniz's critique (assuming that in the Hobbesian system optionality means only the ability to replace one name with another) but at the same time he blames him for other inconsistencies. In his theory Hobbes accepts both the optionality of choice giving a name and the optionality of choice while giving the name a defined meaning (sense) which consequently leads us towards a paradox allowing to prove every thesis<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., pp. 47, 50, 70. See also M. Dascal, *Leibniz. Language, Signs and Thought*, Philadelphia 1987, pp. 8, 18.

<sup>23</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> See S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Correct reasoning which requires the existence of language is guaranteed by the correctness of the definition of names (for the philosopher, a correct definition is the definition which **clearly** represents the idea of the thing discussed). Hobbes presents a detailed concept of reasoning many times reducing it to calculating, addition (or subtraction) replies and names<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, reasoning occurs when human mind performs mathematical operations (in practice, two of them – for multiplication and division can be reduced to division and subtraction). A starting point for reasoning are the first definitions and the meaning of names agreed upon. It aims at finding their close and far consequences<sup>30</sup>. Hobbes's concept was perfectly complemented with a notion of syllogism as a composition of the sum which is the result of the two sentences linked<sup>31</sup> (therefore, sentences or statements are in turn the result of the addition of two names). Reasoning (or proof) is governed according to the strictly defined laws of syllogism and it is proper to prove premises of the next syllogism with the help of the first definitions<sup>32</sup>.

When reasoning is based on words of general meaning and leads us towards a general conclusion, it is called absurdity. Hobbes uses the formulation of privilege of absurdity to highlight that it is exclusively man who is capable of committing it; only man can make generalizations with the use of words (also those burdened with a mistake)<sup>33</sup>. A lot of absurdity which the English philosopher found in the works of his precursors (only few works of geometricians were free from mistakes) were rooted in the wrong method chosen by them for they did not start the process of reasoning from the definition or, in other words, explanation of the terms accepted in the beginning<sup>34</sup>.

Although Hobbes certainly put too much emphasis on the role of syllogism in the process of reasoning, his role was undoubtedly significant when it comes to the development of science of definition. Hobbes's theory of definition was to a great extent polemics with Aristotle who treated defining as an operation from the field of ontology; for him, a definition was an answer to the question about the essence of object; according to him, the process

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<sup>29</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit, p. 50. and T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit, pp. 32–33.

<sup>30</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit, pp. 34–35.

<sup>31</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>32</sup> See A. Child, *Making and knowing in Hobbes, Vico, and Dewey*, California 1954, p. 273.

<sup>33</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit., pp. 35–36.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

of defining aimed at highlighting essential features of the object defined. (Aristotle differentiated between oral definitions which informed about the sense of the word especially characteristic for geometry; nevertheless, he claimed they were unimportant for science)<sup>35</sup>. The Aristotelian stand survived almost unchanged till the times of Hobbes<sup>36</sup>, (surprisingly enough, it was accepted even by the authors of *Logic from Port-Royal* who were quite innovative in their views<sup>37</sup>) therefore, one has to notice the courage of the Hobbesian concept which contributed to the depart from the hitherto tradition<sup>38</sup>.

Hobbes, fascinated by the theory of Euclides, arrived at the conclusion that his theory of defining mathematical terms based on the explanation of names was the only correct and universal method which had to be accepted in all fields of science. Breaking up with the Aristotelian concept of definition understood as exploration of the essence of the object defined, he accepted a definition (defining) as an operation on language dealing with names (words)<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, the term “definition” means defining sense of the words.

To understand fully a status of definition in the theory of Hobbes, it is necessary to employ certain differentiations of terms. Bearing in mind the aim of definition, Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz divides it into the definition of things which aims at recognition of things (it seems that such a character is revealed by the Aristotelian definitions) and the definition of word which aims at the enrichment of the language with the word defined. The latter includes also the definitions which while defining a given term relate to the thing (real, inner linguistic definitions) as well as the ones which while defining a word relate to the words (nominal definitions or meta-linguistic)<sup>40</sup>.

Ajdukiewicz points out that the British scientist does not provide any division of the definitions into real and nominal definitions. Since a name of the designation was always an object, every definition was a real definition being at the same time a definition of the word (his definitions are the

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<sup>35</sup> T. Kotarbiński, *Wykłady z dziejów logiki*, Warszawa 1985, pp. 28–29.

<sup>36</sup> S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, op. cit., pp. 27–32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. See also A. Arnauld, P. Nicole, *Logika*, translated by S. Romahnowa, Warszawa 1958, pp. 114–125 and pp. 234–239.

<sup>38</sup> S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, op. cit., pp. 49–50.

<sup>39</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> K. Ajdukiewicz, *Logiczne podstawy nauczania*, in „Encyklopedia wychowania”, vol. II, (ed.) S. Kempicki, Warszawa 1934, pp. 35–36.

definitions which, while defining an object, speak about the object itself)<sup>41</sup>. Attributing the status of nominal definitions to the definitions presented by Hobbes would contradict his entire system<sup>42</sup>.

For Hobbes, the essence of knowledge or, in other words, the real philosophy, is an intellectual recognition of reasons or ways in which different phenomena take place<sup>43</sup>. Since the condition for correct thinking (argumentation) is a primary acceptance of the definition of words (as the first premises) with a key role, it would be useful if the definitions showed the reasons of the given thing. While talking about primary principles, Hobbes differentiates between the definitions of words which mean objects whose reason can be thought of and the definitions of words which mean objects but cannot be understood without recognition of their reason. The rank of the latter is wide in science; it is because of them that science develops since definitions – primary principles do not speak about the reasons of objects, the results of thinking cannot mention them (after all, it is the discovery of reasons that is the aim of science)<sup>44</sup>.

A basic role of definitions in science is a removal of ambiguities and obscurities and precise settlement of the meaning of the object defined<sup>45</sup>. A name purified from all other meanings so that it reveals its real meaning becomes clear and comprehensible – it clearly presents the idea of the object considered and may have a role of *principium* in argumentation. The definitions of names are also the means which enable us to reveal the falsity of the reply<sup>46</sup>. Thus, in the Hobbesian philosophy argumentation and science become a logical consequence of the definition<sup>47</sup>. However, the acceptance of a given name in one of the fields of philosophy in its concrete meaning does not exclude the possibility of its different defining in other field of science (Hobbes notices that a parabola in geometry undoubtedly differs from a parabola in rhetoric).

The considerations presented above lead us to believe that language in some sense constitutes intellect and is an initial condition for the development of science, its cultivation and passing its results to the next generations. Apart from its undoubtedly significant role which is a func-

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 28–29, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, op. cit., pp. 12, 79, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 96. See also S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, op. cit., pp. 40–41.

<sup>45</sup> T. Hobbes, *Elementy filozofii*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> S. Kamiński, *Hobbesa pojęcie definicji*, op. cit., p. 47.

tion of language, we can highlight another important role of language: for Hobbes, language is a primary condition for the establishment of the government. People, who have already acquired a language, are following a voice of the intellect aiming at the abandonment of the state of nature (a strenuous experience), which has been their destiny so far. The alternative they want to leave it for is the state which, although artificial, still guarantees peace.

According to Hobbes, one of the basic conditions for people to abandon the state of nature is an assignment of the **social agreement**, characteristically understood. The philosopher did not write much about the nature of the agreement. It is known that every person agrees to give the right to rule himself to the sovereign person on condition that every member of the given community does the same<sup>48</sup>. Hobbes did not explain the mechanism of giving the rights to that person neither did he explain which of the subjective rights were to be given to the sovereign person. In many places he mentioned that a citizen did give something to the sovereign person, something secret and elusive, which symbolized the act of imposing the reigns upon the Sovereign. Hobbes claimed in *Leviathan* that a citizen whose decision was taken by the Sovereign was still the author of his actions<sup>49</sup>.

J. W. N. Watkins, a famous researcher of Hobbes's works, puts forward an interesting concept trying to explain Hobbes's theory of social agreement in the light of his nominalism. According to this concept, every citizen gives the Sovereign a sign (symbol) of his persona – his name<sup>50</sup>. From that point on the monarch represents the citizen becoming so to say his procurator and acting for him with the right of the law. Since the agreement has been assigned by every citizen, the Sovereign is the procurator of all the citizens. A citizen, who in the act of the social agreement has directly given the rights to the Sovereign to act efficiently in his name, is still (at least nominally) the author (aspirator) of these actions.

The aim of the social agreement is the constitution of the government whereas the aim of the state is the assurance of safety for the citizens. The basic guarantee of safety is the establishment of equal moral principles compulsory for everybody. Finally, it is the Sovereign accepted by the social agreement who can introduce a differentiation between moral and immoral acts; it is him who distinguishes between good and evil. In the state of nature preceding the state of state there was no objective criterion as

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<sup>48</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit., pp. 131–134.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes's system of ideas*, op. cit., pp. 160–161.

for good and evil; what was good for one person could be evil for another. Thus, everybody wanted to be “the source” of moral judgment and everybody wanted to give the words **good** or **evil** different meanings: *For these words of Good, Evil, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule for Good and Evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves*<sup>51</sup>. At that time there was a great number of particular laws each of which was deprived of even a relative attribute of permanence. Undoubtedly, the way in which the Sovereign establishes the common standards defining moral matters is worth mentioning. It seems that even here the Hobbesian philosophy of language remains in close connection with his political and social philosophy.

Chosen by the will of the citizens and acting in their names, the Sovereign does more than just pure expression in the moral matters. With the reference to Austin’s theory of speech acts, his declaration can be called a performative declaration<sup>52</sup>. Naming certain moral acts by the Sovereign constitutes a legislative act; a starting point for the evaluation of the future conduct for the citizens. Surprisingly enough, this operation has the features of the process of defining objects and it indeed is. Since, as it was mentioned before, the process of defining is characterized by the arbitrariness, it also characterizes the legislative acts of the Sovereign. Since a correctly (although arbitrarily) formulated definition is not the subject for controversy or discussion, the legislated acts of the Sovereign should not (cannot) become the subject of public debate<sup>53</sup>. Just like correct definitions begin reasoning and the construction of the system of scientific knowledge, legislative acts (laws where the Sovereign decides what is right and what is wrong) constitute the foundation of a safe state. Questioning these acts by the citizens is unsteady and highly dangerous for the state order. Therefore, in Hobbes’s system any critique of the law established by the Sovereign is eliminated. Another reason for its absence is the lack of the possibility for the law to be unjust or faulty<sup>54</sup>.

In conclusion, it is necessary to highlight that for Hobbes a language is a necessary element in the development of the institution of state, law and morality. The discovery of language (speech) enabled man to leave the state

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<sup>51</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>52</sup> See J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes’s system of ideas*, op. cit., p. 153.

<sup>53</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163., see also J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes’s system of ideas*, op. cit., pp. 153–157.

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of nature and resulted in the next discovery – the discovery of state<sup>55</sup>. It is the discovery of language that has definitely separated man from the world of animals resulting in the development of science and recognition. Speech, just as state, is an artificial product of men which contributed to the fact that a man became an intelligent and moral creature<sup>56</sup>. Therefore, it may seem that in the philosophy of Hobbes political and social implications of language are wider than they have known to be and may reveal a source for further studies.

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<sup>55</sup> See B. Suchodlski, *Antropologia Hobbesa*, “Studia Filozoficzne” 1967, p. 202.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*