

I. Of Words or Language in General

1. We are sociable animals, and language contributes to this sociability by allowing us to communicate with others. The ability to make articulate and distinct sounds is not enough to produce language, though it might be necessary.
2. Language also requires that there be ideas in the mind of the speaker which the words (signs) he/she uses stand for. Language is the mechanism by which such ideas can be conveyed from one mind to another.
3. But it would be impractical to have a new word for each idea: “for the multiplication of words would have perplexed their use, had every particular thing need of a distinct name to be signified by.” So, general terms exist. A general term is a single word that marks “a multitude of particular existences.” General terms stand for general ideas; particular terms stand for particular ideas.
4. Some useful names do not stand for ideas; they stand for privations — e.g., barrenness.

II. Of the Signification of Words

1. Again, words are the public signs for our private ideas. The connection between the particular sounds and the ideas they represent is normally arbitrary and purely conventional. The ideas words stand for are their “proper and immediate signification [i.e., referents]”.
2. “[W]ords, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but *the ideas in the mind of him that uses them*, how imperfectly soever or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things which they are supposed to represent.” To be *understood* is to have one’s ideas conveyed by speech.

We cannot use words meaningfully without actually possessing the ideas that they stand for: “A man cannot make his words the signs either of qualities in things, or of conceptions in the mind of another, whereof he has none in his own.”

3. “They [words], in every man’s mouth, stand for the ideas he has, and which he would express by them.”

Q: So, does the “same” word have different meanings (significations) as used by different people in the same cultural setting? The ‘gold’ example suggests a “yes” answer.

4. Though words immediately signify only ideas, they also have two “secret references.” First, they also stand for ideas in the minds of others. This is essential for understanding. Otherwise the speaker and hearer would “speak two languages”.

5. Second, words also stand for “the reality of things”. But be warned: “it is a perverting the use of words, and brings unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds.”

6. A word becomes so associated with its corresponding idea, that hearing a word that we are accustomed to brings forth its idea just as if we had actually perceived the object in the world corresponding to the idea.

7. Sometimes people use words without understanding the ideas they signify. Such people are like parrots.

8. The connection between a sound and its signification is wholly arbitrary. Still, it is governed by community practice: “It is true, common use, by a tacit consent, appropriates certain sounds to certain ideas in all languages, which so far limits the signification of that sound, that unless a man applies it to the same idea, he does not speak properly.”

III. Of General Terms

1. All things that exist are particular, but most words are general. Why?

2. First, it is impossible to give a proper name to every particular. Distinct names would require distinct ideas (because words directly signify ideas, which in turn signify things in the world). But, we cannot have distinct ideas

for every bird, grain of sand, etc.

3. Second, even if it were possible to have only proper names, it would defeat the purpose of language — understanding. Communication works by having the idea that accompanies the word in the speaker’s mind appear in the mind of the hearers. But, the hearers will not have all these same ideas (e.g., for every grain of sand) that the speaker possesses.

4. Third, having all proper names would not improve knowledge. Knowledge “enlarges itself by general views”. We should make proper names only for what is beneficial for us to single out — like other people.

5. Our interests determine what we give proper names for. E.g., jockeys have particular names for horses, but most of us do not.

6. How do words come to be general? How do we acquire general ideas? By *abstraction*: “Words become general by being made the signs of general ideas: and ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of time and place, and any other ideas that may determine them to this or that particular existence.”

9. We know by introspection that this answer is correct. General ideas are simply abstract or partial ideas in this sense. “Of the complex ideas signified by the names *man* and *horse*, leaving out but those particulars wherein they differ, and retaining only those wherein they agree, and of those making a new distinct complex idea, and giving the name *animal* to it, one has a more general term, that comprehends with man several other creatures.” This is supposed to be an answer to the old philosophical question about genera and species, as well.

11. Everything that exists in the world is particular, so “*general* and *universal* belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding, made by it for its own use, and concern only signs, whether words or ideas.”

12. What do general terms signify? They refer to neither particulars *nor* pluralities (e.g., if the latter, then there would be no difference between ‘man’ and ‘men’). They refer to “sorts”, which are represented by general ideas. The abstract (general) idea is the same as an *essence*. Essences are, therefore, creatures of the understanding, not in the real existences: “the essences of the sorts of things, and, consequently, the sorting of things, is the workmanship of the understanding that abstracts and makes those general ideas.”