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Historical Remarks on the Category of the Common Noun

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1. Introduction

The term "common noun" appears throughout the English grammatical tradition.[1] It derives from Latin and Greek grammarians, and ultimately from Stoic philosophers of the Hellenistic period. Moreover, the English grammarians appear to have transmitted the position of the ancients largely unchanged. So, Ian Michael remarks:

> "the English grammarians [of the Early Modern period (1500-1700)] add nothing to the traditional [that is, Renaissance, Medieval, and Late Antique] treatment[s] of the common noun."[2]

In light of this, my account of the historical conception of the common noun will ultimately focus on the ancients. More precisely, it will focus on the sense in which the ancients conceived of common nouns as *common*.

2. Three Preliminary Points

Before turning to the ancients, three preliminary points will be useful. The first is a clarificatory one concerning the fact, of contemporary linguistics, that noun is a syntactic category and that common noun may be conceived either as a hybrid semantico-syntactic category or as a purely syntactic one. The second and third points pertain to two features of the historical treatment of the common noun by English grammarians. The first of these is a brief one concerning the English adoption of the word "noun" from the Latin "*nomen*." The second, somewhat more elaborate point concerns the fact that English grammarians of the Early Modern period followed the ancients in including adjectives within the category of common nouns.

2.1. Noun and Common Nouns as Syntactic Categories

Noun is a syntactic category. The reason for this is that nouns are licensed in certain syntactic configurations and forbidden in others. For example, compare the adjective "salty" and the plural count noun "pretzels" in the following constructions:

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[1] Ian Michael, *English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800*, Cambridge University Press, 1970. "In the corpus of Early Modern English grammars it is first found in Gill's grammar [*Logonomia Anglica*, 1619/1621] ('nomen commune' vs. 'nomen proprium,' p.36) and is later taken up by all grammarians with the exception of Butler [*English Grammar*, 1634] and Aickin [*The English Grammar*, 1693]." (U. Dons, *Descriptive Adequacy of Early Modern English Grammars*, De Gruyter, 2012, 31)
[2] (1970) 83, 87.

1. Pretzels are for sale.
2. Saul bought pretzels.
3. * Salty are for sale.
4. * Saul bought salty.

The asterisks prefixed to (3) and (4) are a standard linguistic device for indicating syntactic ill-formedness. Nouns are licensed as subjects of one-place predicates such as "(be) for sale" and as direct objects of two-place predicates such as "buy." Adjectives are not licensed in either case.

Within the category of noun, the distinction between proper and common nouns may be drawn syntactically or semantically. For example, consider the following semantic description of the distinction from Andrew Radford's 1997 *Syntactic Theory and the Structure of English*:

> "From a semantic viewpoint, proper nouns have the property of having *unique reference*."[3]

Accordingly, common nouns lack the property of having unique reference.

Radford does not say what it means to have unique reference. But presumably it means to refer to only one entity. In that case, one may venture the claim that common nouns have the property of plural reference. In other words, common nouns refer to a plurality of entities. Whether these semantic claims regarding the distinction between proper and common nouns are defensible and, even if they are defensible, exactly what they mean and how to understand them, I take to be open questions.

A syntactic ground for drawing the distinction between proper and common nouns is that common nouns license determiners, whereas proper nouns do not. For example, consider modification by the definite article:

5. * The Jack loves the Jill.
6. The man loves the woman.

With these contemporary linguistic points regarding the category of the common noun in mind, I turn now to two points regarding the historical grammatical treatment of common nouns.

2.2. Nouns, Names, and Adjectives

Consider the following definition of "common name" from Robert Lowth's influential *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, a work published more than twenty times between 1762 and 1800:

> "Common names stand for kinds, containing sorts; or sorts, containing many individuals under them; as *Animal*, *Man*."[4]

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[3] Cambridge University Press, 1997, 60.
[4] Lowth, 1762, 22. (Cp. Michael, 1970, 297)

Observe here Lowth's use of the term "name" rather than "noun." Grammarians frequently used the term "noun," which is a calque – that is, a loan translation – of the Latin word "*nomen*," meaning "name."

In their 1711 *A Grammar of the English Tongue*, Charles Gildon and John Brightland criticize English grammatical use of the word "noun" as follows:

> "The words that signify the simple objects of our Thoughts, are in all Languages, but English, call'd *Names*; but our first Formers of Grammar, either out of Affectation, or Folly corrupted the Latin Word *Nomen*, into the Barbarous sound *Noun*, as it is call'd in the Vulgar grammars."[5]

Until the end of the seventeenth century the category of common noun or name was widely taken to include adjectives as well as what we now regard as nouns. The reason for this inclusion is instructive. The term "adjective" is also a calque, in this case of the Latin "*adjectivum*." The Latin word "*adjectivum*" is itself an adjective, meaning "added." Originally, "*adjectivum*" modified the noun "*nomen*," viz. "*nomen adjectivum*" ("name added"). However, the term "*adjectivum*" came to be used by itself as a noun with the same meaning as the phrase.

The Latin phrase "*nomen adjectivum*" is itself a calque of the Greek "*onoma epitheton*" (ὄνομα ἐπίθετον) or simply "*epitheton*."[6] In Latin and Greek, adjectives are, like nouns, inflected according to number (singular, dual, plural), gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), and case (example, nominative, accusative, ablative, dative, genitive). This grammatical fact encouraged grammarians of these languages to subsume adjectives, along with what we now call "common nouns," under the category of common names or nouns.[7]

Within their category of common name or noun, the English grammarians distinguished adjectives, that is, noun adjectives from what they called "noun substantives." This distinction was semantically rather than syntactically based, and its semantic basis was ultimately derived from Aristotelian metaphysics. Noun substantives, for example "animal" and "man," were viewed as denoting entities belonging to the Aristotelian ontological category of substance. In contrast, noun adjectives, such as "yellow" and "good," were viewed as denoting entities belonging to non-substantial ontological categories such as that of quality. Compare the description of *nomina adjectiva* (name adjectives) in the following remark of the Late Antique Latin grammarian Priscian (*c*. 500 CE):

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[5] 1711, 72 n. (Cp. Michael, 1970, 317)

[6] As Michael notes, the terms ἐπίθετον and *adjectivum* were originally applied only to evaluative terms. For example, *adjectivum* is so used by Donatus. But for Priscian this is not so; he writes that *adjectiva* are used to express press or blame ("just"/"unjust") or a neutral judgment. (II.25, K.II.60)

[7] Cp. U. Dons: "In contrast to our modern understanding, the majority of Early Modern English grammarians understand by the term *noun* both substantives (i.e. nouns in the modern sense) and adjectives. This classification is motivated by the model of Latin grammar: Latin is a highly inflected language, with the adjective sharing many morphological properties with the noun." (2012, 29)

> "[*nomina adjectiva* are so called] because they are put with other common names that indicate substance, or even with proper names, to show their quality or quantity … as 'good animal' … 'wise grammarian.'"[8]

This semantic basis for distinguishing noun adjectives from noun substantives, of course, dubiously retains a commitment to the view that adjectives are nouns or names. On this point, consider Lowth's critical remark:

> "Adjectives are very improperly called *Nouns*; for they are not the *Names* of things. The Adjectives *good, white*, are applied to the Nouns *man, snow*, to express the qualities belonging to those Subjects; but the Names of those Qualities in the Abstract, (that is, considered in themselves, and without being attributed to any Subject) are *goodness, whiteness*; and these are Nouns, or Substantives."[9]

Here Lowth appears, in some manner, to recognize a syntactic ground for distinguishing adjectives from nouns.[10]

Compare the following remark from James Buchanan's *The British Grammar* (also published in 1762):

> "the strange Absurdity of ranging [Adjectives] with Nouns into which grammarians fell, misled by their having Terminations in the ancient languages like Nouns … Though a man may be called *good*, and therefore, *good* in some Sense, may be said to be his Name, yet it is not equally as much his Name as Man."[11]

So much then for the early inclusion of adjectives within the category of common nouns and the use of the term "noun" itself. I turn now from the English grammarians to the ancient grammarians and philosophers, and precisely to the question of the sense in which the ancients conceive of common names as common.

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[8] *Institutiones Grammaticae*, II. 24, H. Keil, ed., *Grammatici Latini*, vols. 2-3, Leipzig, 18?? II.25, K. II.58. (Cp. Michael, 1970, 89-90.)

[9] Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, London, 1762, 40 n. (Cp. Michael 1970, 296.) As Michael notes, Lowth's remarks were frequently quoted by his successors.

[10] Cp. Dons, commenting on Alexander Gill's introduction into English grammar of the distinction between common and proper nouns: "Common and proper nouns are distinguished by means of extra-linguistic reference, use of the article, and capitalization." (2012, 31, referring to Gill, 1619/1621, 3)

[11] 1762, 92 n. (Cp. Michael, 1970, 296.) Cp. Alexander Adam: "The Adjective … is only a word *added to* a substantive or noun … and should therefore be considered as a different part of speech. But as the substantive and adjective together express but one object, and in Latin are declined after the same manner, they have both been comprehended [here in Adam's grammar] under the same general name." (*The Principles of Latin and English Grammar*, 1772, 6; cp. Michael, 1970, 297.) [Buchanan's comment suggests that the distinction of adjectives from common nouns was also motivated by an appreciation of the *disanalogies* between English grammar and the grammars of the classical languages.]

3. Common Names

As Michael writes, "the Renaissance grammarians, if they define the common name at all, repeat the [description of the Late Antique Latin grammarian] Donatus [(4th c. CE)]":[12] "*multorum nomen*" (name of many things).[13] Compare the Late Antique grammarians Charisius and Diomedes (also 4th c. CE): "*generaliter communiterve*" ([name used] generally or commonly).[14]

Consider now Priscian's remarks, composed about a century later. Priscian is more precise than his predecessors; and, for reasons I will explain momentarily, he employs the term "appellative name" (*nomen appellativum*) instead of "common name":

> "The difference between a proper (*proprium*) name and an appellative (*appellativum*) name is that an appellative name is naturally common to many things (*naturaliter commune est multorum*), which the same substance or quality or quantity, be it general or specific (*generalis specialisve*), joins: to the genus names like 'animal,' 'body,' 'courage'; to the species 'man,' 'stone,' 'white,' 'short.'"[15]

As Priscian's comment indicates, his ground for the distinction between proper and common nouns is a semantic one. In fact, it appears to be the very one that Radford employs in his 1997 textbook on syntactic theory, cited above.

In distinguishing common or rather appellative names from proper names, Priscian is following his Greek predecessors. The Latin term Priscian uses for "proper," namely "*proprium*," is a calque of the Greek "*kurion*" (κύριον), which in non-grammatical contexts typically means "authoritative," "principal," or "legitimate." The Greek word was originally employed by grammarians and philosophers to distinguish standard and prevailing, hence "*kurion*," usage from non-literal, for example metaphorical usage. The extension of the Greek phrase "*onoma kurion*" or the Latin "*nomen proprium*" to the names of unique entities or individuals appears explicable in terms of the fact that the "proper name" most precisely and thus fittingly and decisively identifies the unique entity/ individual.

With respect to the term "appellative" (Latin *appellativum*) that Priscian uses, instead of "common" (Latin *commune*), Michael notes that from antiquity through the Early Modern period

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[12] "The only writer to have suggested a fresh approach is Siger of Courtrai, who introduces from logic the definition of the common noun as one that can be preceded by universal signs such as *all* and *no*, it being a defining property of the common noun that it cannot be so preceded: "Ista autem qualitas appellativa est principium constructionis cum signis universalibus ut: omnis, quidlibet, nullus, etc. quae cum propriis nominibus, unde propria sunt, congrue non ordinatur.' (Siger of Courtrai (d. 1341), *Summa modorum significandi*, G. Wallerand, *Les oeuvres de Siger de Courtrai*, *Les philosophes Belges*, vol. 8, Louvain, 1913, p.97) (Michael, 1970 87)

[13] *De partibus orationis ars minor*, H. Keil, ed., *Grammatici Latini*, vol. 4, Leipzig, 1864, 355.

[14] Charisius, *Ars Grammatica*, II.6, H. Keil, ed., *Grammatici Latini*, vol. 1, Leipzig, 1857, 153; Diomedes, *Ars Grammatica*, I, H. Keil, ed., *Grammatici Latini*, vol. 1, Leipzig, 1857, 322. (Cp. Michael, 1970, 87.)

[15] Priscian, *Institutiones Grammaticae*, II. 24, H. Keil, ed., *Grammatici Latini*, vols. 2-3, Leipzig, 18??, 58. (Cp. Michael, 1970, 87.)

"*appellativum* … was the [Latin] term generally used, as was *appellative* in the early English grammars."[16] However, as we have also seen, Priscian, Donatus, and others use the term "*commune*" (common) or a semantic kin such as "*generale*" (general) to define or describe appellative names.[17,18]

The Latin "*appellativum*" is a calque of the Greek "*prosēgorikon*" (προσηγορικόν),[19] which derives from the Stoics. But before turning to the Stoics, I want to consider the distinction between proper and appellative names in the *Technē grammatikē* (Τέχνη γραμματική) attributed to Dionysius of Thrace:

> "A proper name, which is a name applied individually (*idiōs*), is one that signifies individual being (*idian ousian*)." (ὄνομα κύριον, ὄνομα ἰδίως λεγόμενον, τὸ τὴν ἰδίαν οὐσίαν σημαῖνον.)
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> "An appellative name, which is a name applied commonly (*koinōs*), is one that signifies common being (*koinēn ousian*)." (ὄνομα προσηγορικόν, ὄνομα κοινῶς λεγόμενον, τὸ τὴν κοινὴν οὐσίαν σημαῖνον.)

Dionysius gives "Homer" as an example of a proper name, and he gives "man" and "horse" as examples of appellative names.[20]

The origins of Dionysius' *Technē grammatikē* may date to the first century BCE, although much of its content was added by later commentators.[21] Granted this, the distinction between proper and common names given in Dionysius' text derives from the Stoics of the Hellenistic Period, who – at least according to the letter[22] – appear to be their ultimate source. For example, in his *Lives and Opinions of Famous Philosophers* (2-3rd c. CE) Diogenes Laertius reports the following of the Stoic scholarchs Diogenes of Babylon (*c*. 230-150 BCE) and Chrysippus of Soli (279-206 BCE):

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[16] Michael, 1970, 87. E.g. Michael (ibid.) notes: "Thomas [of Erfurt (fl. 1352), *Grammatica speculative*, P. Fr. Mariani Ferdandez Garcia, ed., Quaracchi, 1902] is unusual in preferring the term *commune* to *appellativum*."

[17] E.g., Michael (1970, 87) also cites Isidore of Seville (*c.* 570-636), *Etymologiae*, W.M. Lindsay, ed., Oxford, 1911, I.vii: "*Appellativa nomina inde vocantur quia communia sunt et in multorum significatione consistunt*" (Appellative names are so-called because they are common and occur in the signification of many things).

[18] Note that Priscian here distinguishes different degrees of generality that common names may denote, whether relating to *genus* such as "animal" and so *generalis* or relating to species such as "man" and so *specialis*.

[19] [Check the earliest instances of this.]

[20] *Ars Grammatica*, G. Uhlig, ed., Leipzig, 1883, 33. (Cp. Michael, 1970, 83.)

[21] [Careful here. It is questionable whether this part of the text goes all the way back to Dionysius.]

[22] I return to and expand upon this qualification below.

> "There are five parts of a sentence,[23] as Diogenes [of Babylon] says in his treatise *On Speech* and [as] Chrysippus [says]: name (*onoma*/ὄνομα), appellative (*prosēgoria*/προσηγορία), verb, conjunction, article … An appellative is defined by Diogenes as a part of a sentence that signifies a common quality (*semainon koinēn poiotēta*, σημαῖνον κοινὴν ποιότητα), for example 'man,' 'horse.' A [proper] name is a component of a sentence indicating (*dēloun*, δηλοῦν) an individual quality (*idian poiotēta*/ἰδίαν ποιότητα), for example 'Diogenes,' 'Socrates.'" (DL 7.57-58)

Two metaphysical points, not evident in the text above, are worth noting with respect to these Stoic definitions of appellatives and names (the latter of which is here equivalent to proper names). First, the Stoics conceive of qualities (ποιότηται) as bodies.[24] In other words, qualities are not merely *of* bodies, but are themselves bodies. Second – and of primary importance for our purposes – the Stoics, apparently from as early as their first scholarch Zeno of Citium, are conceptualists with respect to universals. By "universal" here I understand: the meaning of an appellative (or predicate expression more generally). In pursuing this point, I will principally be concerned here with simple appellatives. By "simple" I mean composed of a single word. Common nouns (in our contemporary sense of this phrase) such as "man" and "animal" are examples of simple predicate expressions. Predicate adjectives such as "good" and "black" are other examples of simple appellatives.

Given the definition of universals as the meanings of appellatives (and predicate expressions more generally), the Stoics take universals to be concepts (*ennoēmata*/ ἐννοήματα).[25] Given this, we need to clarify the Stoics' view of concepts as well as their view of the relation between concepts and common qualities, which, as we have seen, they take appellatives to signify.

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[23] On the phrase "τὰ μέρη τοῦ λόγοῦ," misleadingly translated as "parts of speech," cp. D. Blank and C. Atherton, "The Stoic Contribution to Traditional Grammar," in *Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, B. Inwood, ed., Cambridge University Press, 2003, 310-44, at 323-24; and ibid. "From Plato to Priscian: Philosophy's Legacy to Grammar," in *Oxford Handbook of the History of Linguistics*, K. Allan, ed., Oxford University Press, 2013, 283-339, at 312-14.

[24] I underscore that this claim is not to be confused with the claim that the Stoics conceive of qualities as *of* bodies. Cp. I. Kupreeva, "Qualities and Bodies: Alexander against the Stoics," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* ? (2003) 297-344. [Cp. Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Categories* 217.32-218.1 (*SVF* 2.389 part): "The Stoics say that the qualities of bodies are corporeal, those of incorporeals incorporeal …"]

[25] For an early defense of this view, see D. Sedley, "The Stoic Theory of Universals," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 23 (1985) 87-92; more recently see the defense of D.T.J. Bailey, "The Structure of Stoic Metaphysics," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 46 (2014) 253-309. Cp. V. Caston, "Something and Nothing: The Stoics on Concepts and Universals," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1999) 145-213.