Executive Summary of *"Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages"*

In these passages from "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages", Adam Smith proposes an account of the development of language. He presumes that the first step is assigning names to individuals, which he regards as unproblematic. His aim is to show how general terms (and subsequently, adjectives) might have developed from the starting point of all terms being proper names for objects (and similarly how ordinary verbs might have developed from "impersonal verbs"; verbs that did not take a separate subject term as an argument).

A term might first have been used as the name of a particular river, and when a second river was encountered, the resemblance between the first river and the new one would lead the speaker to apply the same name. Thus, Smith writes, "the proper names of individuals, would each of them insensibly become the common name of a multitude." In other words, Smith's account is that proper names are converted to common names via a process of autonomasia. This portion of the story does not invoke a mental process of abstraction, by Smith's lights. True abstraction only enters the picture after this, in the development of adjectives from general nouns and personal verbs from impersonal verbs.

It is natural for the contemporary reader to see Smith's account as something of a "just-so" story. Rather than dismiss his account as unsupported speculation, though, there is a more charitable way to understand Smith's arguments, provided we take account of the context of this discussion. Smith was participating in a then-lively debate relating to philosophical challenges for accounts of the origin of languages. In this context, the more appropriate question is whether Smith has successfully articulated an origin story that addresses these challenges than whether he has given historical support for the story on offer.

This aspect of Smith's discussion is highlighted when he explicitly claims to resolve a worry from Rousseau, regarding an apparent circularity in the origins of general terms. On the one hand, it seems that the ability to generalize requires an antecedent use of words. On the other hand, it seems that the use of words requires an antecedent ability to generalize. Smith's proposed resolution is that "[w]hat constitutes a species is merely a number of objects, bearing a certain degree of resemblance to one another, and on that account denominated by a single appellation". This nominalist response to Rousseau's challenge denies that the use of words requires an antecedent ability to generalize. Rather, the use of words (even the use of words to denote classes of objects), requires only antecedent use of the powers of memory and comparison.

This is the basic approach taken by Smith. However, not all cases are as simple for him to explain as the use of, for example, 'river' as a general term. Smith's account is not complete without the more sophisticated story he offers concerning "nouns adjective" such as 'green', prepositions, such as 'above', and "personal verbs" such as 'venit' (latin for 'to come/arrive'). It is far from clear that Rousseau would be

satisfied with these responses to the worry, but it is easy to understand Smith's account from these passages as his attempt to resolve this worry by showing how the mental activity required to develop general language from the use of particular terms does not run afoul of Rousseau's circle.

Several scholars have investigated connections between Smith's work on language and his much better known work on economics, rational choice, and the marketplace. For more on these themes, please consult the suggested readings below.

Further Readings

In this book:
Locke,
Rousseau,
Condillac,

Writings about Smith on Language:
Berry, C., "Adam Smith's Considerations on Language," Journal of the History of Ideas, 35(1): 130-138, (1974).

Dascal, M., Adam Smith's theory of language. In K. Haakonssen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pages 79-111 (2006).

Levy, D. M., "Adam Smith's rational choice linguistics," Economic Inquiry 35(3): 672-678, (1997).

Otteson, J. "Adam Smith's First Market: The Development of Language," History of Philosophy Quarterly 19(1): 65–8, (2002).

Schliesser, E., From Adam Smith to Darwin (July 27, 2009). Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1440166 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1440166