

## *Words as Artifacts: Intentional Creation and Cultural Curation*

I will argue that words are a particular kind of artifact. The paper will unfold as follows:

1) I start by arguing that at least *some* words are clear examples of artifacts. These are words that are parts of deliberately made up languages such as Esperanto, Volapük, and Klingon. This claim will be defended against the objection that words are abstract and so cannot be made. I reply that there are many kinds of abstract artifacts and that to deny the artifactuality of these words and the languages they are parts of would seriously misrepresent their nature. When I say more about the nature of artifacts in 2) below I will explain how there can be abstract artifacts.

2) I briefly sketch a general theory of artifacts as what I call “ideal” (or “intentional”) entities that are the impress of mind onto matter. Mind is impressed onto matter by the intentional acts of creation performed by the maker on the matter. The maker acts on the matter with the intention of making an F out of it (for an artifact kind F) and thereby imposes the concept F onto the matter. (Note that imposing the concept on is a *sui generis* operation, not to be confused with predicating the concept of.) This results in the coming into existence of an F that has that matter as its matter. Such ideal entities are not identical to their matter (and can change that matter over time or across possible worlds) but nor is there some further thing such that the artifact is that thing + the matter (for any understanding of the operation indicated by “+”). This account has consequences for the individuation of artifacts which I bring out. I then go on to outline how the account also applies to abstract artifacts (including the kind of words considered in section 1)). In these cases, the artifact is abstract because its matter is abstract. The maker acts on the matter by selecting it as the matter of an entity she makes. In selecting it, she imposes the concept of the relevant artifact kind onto that matter and thereby brings into existence an instance of that concept that has the matter as its matter. (I note in passing that this is a way of describing Jerrold Levinson’s views on the ontology of musical works.)

3) Here I come to the key question to be considered. Even if some words, the words of Volapük and Esperanto, for example, are abstract artifacts of the kind sketched in 2), can the same be said for the words of natural languages? Can the account I developed in section 2) of abstract artifacts as the intentional imposition of mind onto abstract matter apply to what I will henceforth call ordinary words, words like “and,” “goat,” “jolly,” and “exists”?

One possibility is that the account cannot be extended and we should not see ordinary words as artifacts (or at least, not artifacts of the kind I have described). In that case, the kind *word* would be a kind whose instances might either be artifacts or not. There are other possible examples of such kinds (highlighted by Risto Hilpinen), such as *village* and *path*.

In any case, I think the account I offered in 2) *can* be extended to ordinary words. Obviously, the account needs to be liberalized but this can be done in a non-*ad hoc* way that sheds light on all sorts of social-historical entities (of which words are but one example). Ordinary words are

clearly not made in deliberate acts of creation by a single maker, imposing the concept *word* onto some abstract matter. I suggest that the work that is done by the single maker's imposition of a concept onto matter can be done, in the context of social-historical entities like words, by a notion of public creative curation. Collectively, the members of a social group deploy various cultural concepts (including concepts like *word* and *language*) and, over time, continuously 'curate' the objects that fall under these concepts. In the case of words, this toolkit of cultural concepts is studied by anthropologists under the name "linguistic ideology." The deployment of a culture's linguistic ideology by its members (and possibly by some privileged authorized sub-group) will, though not always with absolute precision, show words coming into and going out of existence, having histories, changing gradually, and generally behaving like abstract artifacts.

4) In the final section, I draw out some of the consequences of this account of words for questions around such things as loan words, the persistence of words through different languages, the relation of word-tokens to words, and the fusion and fission of words.