Univocal Terms

I. Lesson

"Things are said to be named 'univocally' which have both the name and the definition answering to the name in common."

-Aristotle, *Categories* (W.D. Ross, 1952)

- **Univocal Terms:** a *univocal term* is a term which has a constant meaning in all of its uses. In other words, it is a term without any homonyms, a world that has only one meaning.

Univocal terms are those terms that are always used in the same way in the course of an argument . Aristotle expresses this more complexly, spelling out an important caveat. He says that univocal terms have the same "definition" in all circumstances. That is, every time term is used, if we were to ask "what is the term's definition?", we would have to give the same answer. This more complicated definition captures that, though the term always expresses the same concept, it need not always refer to the same individual object. For instance, the term "animal" always has the same definition, but it could be used to refer to different animals. One could refer to a dog being an animal, and likewise one could refer to a cat being an animal. This is done, even though a cat is not the same thing as a dog, and yet the definition of "animal" is held constant.

"A man and an ox are both 'animal,' and these are univocally so named, inasmuch as not only the name, but also the definition, is the same in both cases"

-Aristotle, *Categories* (W.D. Ross, 1952)

We can explain Aristotle's example by distinguishing between **genus** and **species**. These should not be confused with the scientific definitions of such terms.

Genus: The larger category to which **species** belongs

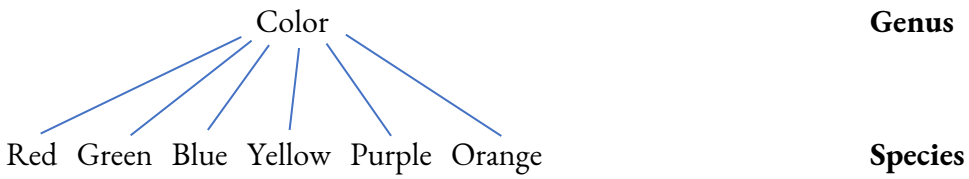
Species: A specific and distinct kind of thing that falls under a **genus**

When two or more terms denoting species are united by a genus, and a term with a definition that defines the genus is predicated of each, we call each predication of the genus term **univocal** with respect to the others.

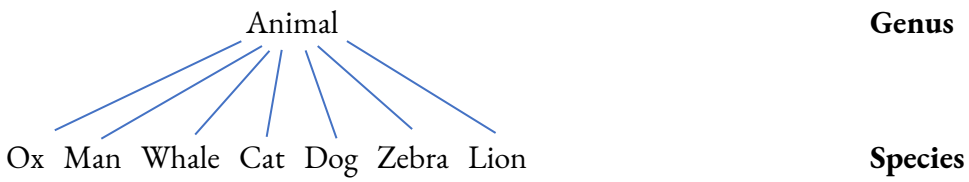
II. Examples

(1) Take, for instance, the term "color." Since there are a number of things that fall under the category of "color," we could say that color is a **genus**. Thus, the **species** that fall under the category of color would be entities like red, yellow, and brown. Another way of putting this is that there are different kinds of color: red, yellow, brown, etc. Thus, if we

were to say "red is a color" and "yellow is a color", using "color" in this sense, we would be using "color" **univocally** (since its definition defines the same genus in each sentence).



(2) Let us evaluate Aristotle's example from *Categories*. He says that "animal" is used "univocally" in both claims "an ox is an animal" and "a man is an animal," because the definition of "animal" is the same in both claims. Both man and the ox are animals. We can describe this in terms of **genus** and **species** by saying that "animal" defines the genus which contains the species defined by "man" and "ox."



III. Exercises

1. Treat each of the following terms as a genus. Come up with 5 different species that could fall under the category of that genus

   Ex. Furniture

   Answer: Couch, Chair, Table, Dresser, Bookshelf

a.) Sports
b.) Fruit
c.) Trees
d.) Music
e.) Clothing
f.) Academic Subject
g.) Part of the human body

2. Evaluate each of the following sets of terms. Show that they can be "named univocally". In other words, treat them as species, and come up with a genus that unites them under one name (Use the most specific possible genus).

Ex. Aristotle, Plato, Immanuel Kant

Answer: Philosopher (All three of the people mentioned are Philosophers). Thus, "Aristotle is a philosopher," "Plato is a philosopher," and "Immanuel Kant is a philosopher," all use "philosopher" *univocally*.

a.) Summer, Spring, Fall
b.) Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday
c.) Islam, Christianity, Hinduism
d.) Violin, Piano, Flute
e.) Columbia, New York University, The City University of New York
f.) 1, 2, 3, 4, 85, 1902, 39345
g.) Jupiter, Mars, Saturn
h.) Sadness, Happiness, Anger

3. Consider the following:

The same thing can be a genus and a species. For example:

Genus: fruit

Species: apple

Now consider the genus to be apple:

Species: golden delicious (a kind of apple)

Can you come up with another example? (explain how it is both a genus and a species)

IV. Conclusion:

We have learned in this lesson that terms can be categorized into genus and species. This helps us to explain how terms can be univocal. Many times, a term can be both a genus and a species. These lessons will be very helpful in a very important logical topic: Definitions.

V. Lesson Goals:

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Define univocal terms
- Define genus and species, as they relate to equivocal terms

- Give examples of species terms, given a genus
- Identify a genus, given a class of species terms

Answer key:

Exercise 1

a.) Answers may vary. Some include: soccer, football, basketball, tennis, polo, baseball, etc.
b.) Answers may vary. Some include: apple, pear, watermelon, grape, orange, etc.
c.) Answers may vary. Some include: oak, poplar, pine, birch, weeping willow, etc.
d.) Answers may vary. Some include: classical, pop, rock, rap, electronic, etc.
e.) Answers may vary. Some include: scarf, coat, hat, jacket, etc.
f.) Answers may vary. Some include: math, science, philosophy, history, english, etc.
g.) Answers may vary. Some include: nose, mouth, arm, leg, neck, etc.

Exercise 2

a.) season
b.) day of the week
c.) religion
d.) instrument
e.) universities in New York (this is the most specific genus)
f.) number
g.) planet
h.) emotion

Exercise 3

Answers may vary. Correct answers are those that show that explain that a given term is a “kind” of something, and a category which can be broken down into “kinds” of things.