Between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century the issue of signification of names of first intention such as ‘man’ and ‘animal’ is one of debate among philosophers. It is agreed that such names signify things outside the mind and independent of our understanding. In this respect, they are different from the so-called names of second intention, such as ‘species’ and ‘genus’, which signify concepts of the mind. However, the question concerned how the names of first intentions signify extramental things: do ‘man’ and ‘animal’ signify men and animals primarily, or do they primarily signify the concepts of man and animal, and only secondarily men and animals in the extramental world?

The question concerns mainly, but not exclusively, common nouns. The debate focuses on the interpretation of a famous passage of Peri hermeneias where Aristotle describes written marks as symbols of spoken sounds, whereas spoken sounds in turn are symbols of affections in the soul. As to these affections in the soul, they are said to be the likenesses of things in the world:

Spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks are symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—

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3 See below Duns Scotus’s critical remarks concerning the signification of singular terms and the difficulties they pose to the theories of signification of which he is aware.
Between the thirteenth and the fourteenth century all authors concerned with the semantics of names quote this passage with approval. The crucial question they further ask is what kind of things the affections in the soul are. The answers they give to this questions are widely different.\(^5\)

In this article, I will focus on Duns Scotus’s approach to the signification of names of first intention. I will take into consideration three questions. First, what exactly is Duns Scotus’s position concerning the signification of names? Second, is there any contrast between what Scotus maintains in his commentaries on \textit{Peri hermeneias}, dating from the last decade of the thirteenth century, and what he states in his slightly later \textit{Lectura} and \textit{Ordinatio}? Third, is Scotus’s position in any respect original as compared to what his contemporaries say on the same topic?\(^6\)

To answer these questions, I will first present Scotus’s position on signification in his two commentaries on \textit{Peri hermeneias}. Then I will turn to his remarks on the same topic in the \textit{Lectura} and \textit{Ordinatio}. Finally, I will give a brief account of the positions held by some authors writing in Paris in the last two decades of the thirteenth century.

I will conclude that Scotus’s fair assessment of the two main positions on signification is exceptional among his contemporaries. As a matter of fact, there is no evidence that he ever prefers one position over the other. Specifically, and contrary to what is usually held, there is no evidence that he ever commits himself to a defence of the primary signification of the thing. He simply assumed that doctrine in the course of an argument, in order to show that it is compatible with the doctrine of concepts he defends. I will also show that late in his career he explicitly criticises the presuppositions on which the supporters of the primary signification of things usually base their views.

All the same, it is true that Scotus’s treatment of signification will prove to be very influential. For one thing, his commentaries on \textit{Peri hermeneias}


\footnote{Some commentaries concerning Aristotle's passage are translated into English by Hans Arens, \textit{Aristotle's Theory of Language and its Tradition. Texts from 500 to 1750}, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 1984.}