



Locke on Language

Walter Ott*

Virginia Tech

Abstract

John Locke is the first modern philosopher to offer a comprehensive philosophy of language. After discussing Locke's aims and scope, I explore Locke's main linguistic category, signification, and the most prominent interpretations of it, including those of Norman Kretzmann and E. J. Ashworth. I then turn to the nature of the proposition and the question whether Locke can distinguish between the act of forming a proposition and the attitude one adopts toward it.

While one can find discussions of language in other early modern philosophers, John Locke is the first to present a detailed and systemic discussion of language and its relevance to philosophy.¹ Philosophers like Galileo and Bacon had already pointed to scholastics' tendency to assume that each noun or adjective indicates a corresponding substance or quality as a key source of their confusion. Indeed, frustration with the scholastics' verbiage and resulting ontological excess is a constant of theme of most moderns.² But a well-developed positive account of language, and a diagnosis of just where other views go wrong, had to await Locke. His 'linguistic turn' put philosophy of language at the heart of empiricism.

Little about Locke's views on language is uncontroversial. Despite his continuity with later, and even twentieth-century, empiricists, we should be wary of projecting contemporary interests and concepts on to Locke. Thus in section 1, I briefly set out what I take to be Locke's main concerns and assumptions. In section 2, I sketch the current debate over his key linguistic concept, signification. In section 3, I set out the main lines of controversy regarding his views on propositional content and attitude.³

1. The Aims and Scope of Locke's View

Locke is squarely interested in the fact-stating uses of language, particularly as they figure in science and philosophy. The notions of performative utterance, such as is involved in promising, or emotive or prescriptive uses of language, are simply not discussed.⁴

What is more important, Locke shares with his predecessors a commitment to what I shall call 'mentalism': the view that the linguistic inherits its

meaning from the mental. The work of intentionality or aboutness is done at the level of the mental; words come by convention to serve as 'signs' of mental contents. This view fell out of favor with the work of Wittgenstein and especially Putnam (whose slogan 'meaning ain't in the head' encapsulates his rejection of mentalism), but it is once again the default view, as seen in the work of Fodor, Dretske, Recanati, and others.⁵

Now, Locke's mentalism has often been taken to be his Achilles' heel, the one point that vitiates the rest of his discussion. Many philosophers take Locke to have been refuted by Wittgenstein's private language argument. But this dismissive attitude ignores three things.⁶ First, so far from being unaware of the possibility of mis- (or non-) communication due to the privacy of ideas, Locke is among the first to insist upon it: if two speakers use words for different ideas, they 'speak two Languages' (III.ii.4:406). Our laziness in not taking the time to be sure that we are using words in the same way is responsible for much of the confusion and ineptitude that plagues both philosophy and natural science. Second, Locke explicitly (III.xi) offers remedies for this predicament, recommending ostensive definition, *inter alia*, as a way to secure univocity. Moreover, Locke's account of the nature and workings of the mind, and especially the way in which *ideas* come to represent their objects, amounts to a guarantee that we are not, in principle, cut off from one another's meanings.

Finally, it is important not to lose sight of the normative force Locke attaches to his philosophy of language. Although he provides an account of how we in fact use language, his ultimate goal is to show it *should* be used.⁷ The schools, with their metaphorical and often ambiguous use of terms, are one clear target; but so are the doctrines of the Cartesians. Without ideas or mental acts lying behind our words, we are merely making sounds.

2. Signification

Locke's text offers a bewildering variety of claims about words: by turns, they are said to signify, denote, name, denominate, design, and mark. Like most commentators, I take signification to be his main linguistic category.

What I shall call Locke's 'linguistic thesis' is this: '*Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them*' (III.ii.2:405; see III.ii.4:406; III.ii.8:408). Note that it is only the user's, not the auditor's or reader's, ideas that can be signified.

This thesis has occasioned scorn, from Locke's day to our own. Locke's early critic John Sergeant writes, 'when a Gentleman bids his Servant fetch him a Pint of Wine; he does not mean to bid him fetch the *Idea* of Wine in his own head, but the wine it self which is in the Cellar' (33). More famously, J. S. Mill writes, '[w]hen I say, 'the sun is the cause of the day', I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of the day' (15). Summing it all up, William Alston (24) stigmatizes

Locke's view as 'linguistic idealism': the implausible claim that words refer to ideas.

The three main contemporary interpretations of Locke provide a means of parrying this criticism. How each does so provide a handy way of distinguishing them.

Norman Kretzmann makes much of the implied distinction in Locke's thesis between 'primary or immediate' and secondary signification. Kretzmann writes,

Once it becomes clear that it is only *immediately* that words signify *nothing but* the user's ideas, it is clear also that where the ideas immediately signified are *themselves* signs – that is, are representative ideas – their originals may be *mediately* signified by those words. (133)

So it is wrong to say that words refer to ideas. Rather, it is through the mediation of ideas that they are able to refer to things. Although Kretzmann doesn't explicitly use this terminology, he seems to have in mind something like Frege's distinction between sense and reference: a word's primary signification is its sense (an idea), while its secondary signification is its reference (a thing in the world) (see Ashworth, 'Do Words Signify Ideas or Things?' 302; Landesman 33).

Two things might give one pause here. First, Locke never so much as uses the phrases 'mediate signification', 'secondary signification', or anything like them, anywhere in the *Essay*. It is hard to believe that a fundamental notion like reference would get no explicit discussion at all from Locke. Second, there is the danger of anachronism: the notion that Locke had clearly formulated an antecedent to Frege's *Sinn/Bedeutung* distinction is *prima facie* suspect.

In line with this second criticism against Kretzmann, E. J. Ashworth offers a different reading, which has Locke appealing to the common use of 'signification' among the late scholastics.

By the early sixteenth century the standard definition of '*significare*' was 'to represent some thing or some things or in some way to the cognitive power', where 'in some way' was introduced in order to cover the case of such syncategorematic terms as 'all' and 'none'. ('Locke on Language', 60)

For Ashworth, signification includes 'aspects' of both sense and reference, though it is reducible to neither. Like Kretzmann, Ashworth takes Locke to mean that words primarily signify ideas, but secondarily, things.

And both take Locke's main argument for the thesis to be 'the argument from representative ideas' (see Kretzmann 132–3; Ashworth 'Do Words' 317). Locke writes,

Nor can anyone apply them [words], as Marks, immediately to anything else, but the *Ideas*, that he himself hath: For this would be to make them Signs of his own Conceptions, and yet apply them to other *Ideas*; which would be to make them Signs, and not Signs of his *Ideas* at the same time; and so in effect, to have no Signification at all. (III.ii.2:405)

As Kretzmann reads the passage, the argument is this: since any successful use of x to immediately signify y (where y is not an idea of mine) presupposes that I have an idea of y , to say that x could immediately signify y would be to say that I could use x to signify y without having an idea of y , which is impossible. One worry here is simply that the argument is no good. To say that something is presupposed by signification, whether primary or secondary, immediate or mediate, does not entail that that thing is itself signified. Having a brain is similarly necessary for immediate signification, but no one thinks it is that which is signified. (This criticism by itself does not prove, of course, that it is not in fact Locke's argument.)⁸

By contrast, E. J. Lowe and Walter Ott have developed a quite different interpretation. As they read Locke, words are signs in the sense of indicators or signals of mental contents and acts. Thus it is misleading to say that words *refer* at all; indication is not reference, sense, or any mixture of both.⁹ Although Ashworth isolates one common meaning of 'signification' among the late scholastics, there is another tradition, one that begins with Augustine and runs through the Port-Royalians and Hobbes, according to which a sign is not merely something that expresses or reveals something, but one that does so by means of indication.¹⁰ Consider Hobbes's characterization of a sign:

Now, those things we call SIGNS are the *antecedents of their consequents, and the consequents of their antecedents, as often as we observe them to go before or follow after in the same manner*. For example, a thick cloud is a sign of rain to follow, and rain a sign that a cloud has gone before, for this reason only, that we seldom see clouds without the consequence of rain, nor rain at any time but when a cloud has gone before. And of signs, some are *natural*, whereof I have already given an example, others are *arbitrary*, namely, those we make choice of at our own pleasure, as a bush hung up, signifies that wine is to be sold there; a stone set in the ground signifies the bound of a field; and words so and so connected, signify the cogitations and motions of our mind. (*De Corpore* I.ii.2, 1:14–15)

Words, then, are conventional indicators of mental acts and events. Unlike natural signs like clouds, words have no autonomous causal connection with what they signify. This, of course, is what makes them liable to ambiguity. The indicator view emphasizes, as much as (or more than) its competitors, Locke's mentalism: intentionality takes place at the level of ideas, not words.

Ott's argument for this position begins with the claim that we can gain insight into how words function as signs by assuming, as Kretzmann, for instance, cannot, that Locke is using 'sign' univocally when he calls ideas of sensation signs. As Michael Ayers (1:38–9) points out, an idea of white, for example, that comes through the senses is a (natural) sign of the quality in the body that produces it (IV.xi.2:631; see II.xxx.2:372–3). This is how it comes to have its role in the natural language of thought. That Locke might have transferred this notion of signification as indication to language would hardly be surprising, since there was a rich tradition of doing so.

One advantage of the indicator view is that the argument for the linguistic thesis it attributes to Locke is both plausible and to be found in other writers of the period, particularly Hobbes (*De Corpore* I.ii.5, 1:17). Arguing against the position that words can be signs of real essences, Locke writes,

by this tacit reference to the real Essence of that Species of Bodies, the Word *Gold* (which by standing for a more or less perfect Collection of simple *Ideas*, serves to design that sort of Body well enough in civil Discourse) comes to have no signification at all, being put for somewhat, whereof we have no *Idea* at all, and so can signify nothing at all, when the Body itself is away. (III.x.19:501)¹¹

It is hard to know what to make of this argument. If we lack an idea of gold's real essence, then, when using the word as if it signified that idea, the word comes to have no signification at all. This much makes sense, on any of the competing understandings of 'signification'. But this is not what Locke says: what he concludes is that the word cannot signify 'when the Body itself is away'. Why should this be? If we have no idea of the real essence, then, on either Kretzmann's or Ashworth's views, the word used in that sense should not signify *at all*. What difference could it make whether the body is in the presence of the speaker or not?

The indicator view has a ready response. For Locke, we can know that each substance has some real essence or other, i.e., some 'real, but unknown Constitution' of its insensible parts (III.iii.17:408). So in the presence of gold I can, if perversely, make the word 'gold' a sign of the real essence: I become a sort of real-essence-thermometer. But this is plainly not the use of words: their use is to indicate ideas. Indicating things, whether real essences or not, is useless, since the whole purpose of language is to unfold our thoughts to one another.

Most recently, Michael Losonsky has argued for a version of Ashworth's view. As he sees matters, signification cannot be analyzed as indication, since it is by means of signification that we provide others with indications of our ideas. Losonsky (297) refers us to III.ii.6:407, where Locke writes that words are

immediately the Signs of Mens *Ideas*; and, by that means, the Instruments whereby Men communicate their Conceptions, and express to one another those Thoughts and Imaginations, they have within their own Breasts. (III.ii.6:407)

But Locke does not here say that it is by means of being signs that words *indicate* ideas; he says instead that they are thus the means by which we *communicate*. Locke is, after all, offering a theory of communication, and this is achieved, on the indicator view, by the establishment and use of a conventional system of signs.

Losonsky makes a further contribution to the debate. He argues that words themselves become a means of thought; not only do they, on his

view, refer to or have as their sense ideas and sometimes things, they are necessary for us to think of classes of things. (By contrast, on the indicator view, all thoughts of classes or kinds take place at the level of ideas; Losonsky is arguing that words are 'formal' signs, i.e., entities by which thought is accomplished.)

All of this is to say that the debate over signification is a rich and many-faceted one that continues to show signs of life.

3. Propositions and Propositional Attitudes

Whatever Locke means by 'signification', he relaxes the linguistic thesis to allow for words that do not signify ideas (III.vii). This is a good thing, since otherwise he would have no way of accounting for propositional content. To paraphrase Peter Geach (60), a set of words that each signifies an idea is not a proposition but a list. If the copula, for instance, signified an idea, a proposition that included it would be prevented from asserting *that* anything is thus-and-so; it could only record a train of ideas. In this, Locke's view is clearly superior to Hume's, which takes a belief to be nothing more than a forceful and vivid idea.¹²

Locke echoes Arnauld and Nicole (II.ii) when he writes,

Besides Words, which are names of *Ideas* in the Mind, there are a great many others that are made use of, to signify the *connexion* that the Mind gives to *Ideas*, or *Propositions*, one with another. The Mind, in communicating its thought to others, does not only need signs of the *Ideas* it has then before it, but others also, to shew or intimate some particular action of its own, at that time, relating to those *Ideas*. This it does in several ways; as, *Is*, and *Is not*, are the general marks of the Mind, affirming or denying. But besides affirmation, or negation, without which, there is in Words no Truth or Falsehood, the Mind does, in declaring its Sentiments to others, connect, not only the parts of Propositions, but whole Sentences one to another, with their several Relations and Dependencies, to make a coherent Discourse. (III.vii.1:471)

There is no question that Locke sees the necessity for syncategorematic words, words like 'is' and 'is not', to signify, not ideas, but mental acts. Moreover, Locke also recognizes the need for words that signify the connections between the propositions so generated, as, for instance, in conditionals.

The problem is that Locke identifies 'is' with affirming, and 'is not', with denying. Thus it seems that there is no way to form an affirmative proposition without asserting it. David Owen (413f) frames the real question here well: does Locke subscribe to a one-act view, which identifies proposition formation with assertion (or denial), or does he endorse a two-act view, according to which it is one thing to form a proposition, and another to assert or deny it?

The one-act view is subject to grave difficulties, as Mill (59) was perhaps the first to point out. If it were true, it would be impossible

merely to consider a proposition without asserting (or denying) it. Similarly, it would be impossible to assert a conditional, which is not the same as asserting either the antecedent or the consequent. To assert 'if p, then q' is not to assert either p or q.

Owen argues that Locke in fact subscribes to the disastrous one-act view. In this, he is in accord with Mill, Geach, and, more recently, Jill Buroker. On their view, the distinction between propositional content and attitude was first drawn by Frege.¹³ Owen finds a clear statement of this as Locke writes,

[e]veryone's Experience will satisfie him, that the Mind, either by perceiving or supposing the Agreement or Disagreement of any of its *Ideas*, does tacitly within it self put them into a kind of Proposition affirmative or negative, which I have endeavour'd to express by the terms *Putting together* and *Separating*. (IV.v.6:576)

As Owen reads the passage, the combination or separation of ideas that generates propositional content just is the act of perceiving or supposing.

If this is Locke's view (and Ott, 'Propositional Attitudes', is the only recent dissenter), then he is massively mistaken about some of the most obvious features of language. Locke says that we give propositions 'such different Entertainment, as we call *Belief, Conjecture, Guess, Doubt, Wavering, Distrust, Disbelief*, etc.' (IV.xvi.9:663). How is this possible, if forming a proposition and giving it these different entertainments are one and the same thing? In fact, Owen argues, even on the one one-act view, Locke can allow for a range of attitudes between endorsement and rejection. To have the thought that p (say, that x is F) is to combine one's ideas into a proposition and, inevitably on the one-act view, to assent to that proposition. But, Owen claims, one can assent to a proposition to different degrees, and this is just what Locke means by his different 'entertainments' (IV.xvi). 'Wavering', for example, might be assent poised midway at the continuum between full assent and full rejection.¹⁴ This deserves further discussion. It is not obvious just how such an account can avoid collapsing into the two-act view: to conjecture that x is F is to assume that x and F agree, and this assumption must be distinct from the combination of the ideas of x and F. Moreover, if there is only one act here, it is difficult to make sense of the continuum of propositional attitudes. How can there be a 'degree' of combination or separation? Locke speaks as if combination or separation were an all or nothing affair.

If the two act view were right, however, why would Locke identify the combination of ideas with affirmation? There is an explanation for the confusion here. Other things being equal, joining two ideas with 'is' amounts to an assertion. That is, if we consider only the proposition 'x is F', it is of course natural to take this as an assertion. (There is another, historical reason as well, namely, the Port-Royal logicians' use of *affirmer* to express the combination of ideas.)

In sum, although Owen et al. mount a powerful argument for attributing the one-act view to Locke, this again strikes me as a debate that is not yet settled.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

Short Biography

Walter Ott's work focuses on metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language in the early modern period. He has published in such journals as *Ancient Philosophy*, *The British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Locke Studies*. In 2004, Cambridge University Press published his book, *Locke's Philosophy of Language*. Currently Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Virginia Tech, Ott has taught at East Tennessee State University and Colby College. He holds a B.A. from Alfred University and a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia.

Notes

* Correspondence address: Department of Philosophy, Virginia Tech, 229 Major Williams Hall 0126, Blacksburg, Virginia 24061, USA. Email: ottw@vt.edu.

¹ References are to Locke's *Essay* are in the following format: Book, chapter, section: page number in the *Essay*.

² For more on this theme, especially as it relates to Locke, see Aarsleff; Dawson.

³ 'Philosophy of language' can be construed more broadly, to include mental representation. For the sake of space, I am taking it here in the narrow sense, where it applies to written or spoken words or symbols.

⁴ This is not to say that they could *not* have been discussed by Locke, given his intellectual context; it is not anachronistic to say that a philosopher of the era might well have been aware of these features of language. To see this, one need only consider Berkeley's sensitive treatment of these other uses of language in the Introduction to his *Principles* or in *Alciphron*.

⁵ This orthodoxy has been challenged by Christopher Gauker, who argues against what he rightly calls the 'Lockean theory of communication'.

⁶ Four, if one counts the fact that Wittgenstein's argument is primarily directed at the Russellian notion that we could have words that *refer* only to private sense data. As will emerge below, Locke does not think that words refer solely (if at all) to ideas.

⁷ Locke had not originally planned to include a section on language in the *Essay*. He came to see, however, that such a discussion was a prerequisite for any treatment of knowledge, since the latter has 'so near a connexion with Words, that unless their force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clear and pertinently concerning Knowledge' (III.ix.21:488; see II.xxxiii.19:401).

⁸ Ashworth also points out that late scholastics figures such as Smiglecius considered arguments like the one from representative ideas; thus the argument was 'in the air'. But Smiglecius himself states it only to point out this fallacy.

⁹ An earlier antecedent of this view is suggested by Hacking. Hacking infers, however, as Ott and Lowe do not, that Locke therefore 'did not have a theory of meaning' (53). Losonsky (292) thinks this is an essential feature of the indicator view, and argues against it on this basis: Losonsky thinks, quite rightly, that Locke clearly does have a theory of meaning. But nothing

in the indicator view rules this out, unless one is using 'meaning' in the sense of Frege's notions of *Sinn* or *Bedeutung*. In the pre-theoretical sense of 'meaning', the indicator view is a view about linguistic meaning.

¹⁰ Dawson (14) disagrees, and seems to run together the two notions. But they are clearly not co-extensive: every instance of indicating might be an instance of making known, but the converse does not hold.

¹¹ Ashworth and Dawson, in their respective reviews of Ott, make much of the parenthetical phrase, which Ott did not include in his quotation of it. But there is nothing there to threaten the indicator view: the word gold stands for, i.e., signifies or indicates in the mind of the speaker, a collection of ideas; it then 'designs' that body. As Ott acknowledges, Locke sometimes uses 'design' to express a word-world relation, which must be analyzed in terms of a word-idea-world relation. And the latter is exactly what Locke offers here: we can say that 'gold' 'designs' gold in the sense that speakers using that word are (typically, and if they are speaking English) indicating that they have a certain complex idea in mind; it is this idea that reaches out to the world. Unlike Lowe and Hacking, Ott goes so far as to say that a notion of reference can be constructed out of Locke's materials; this might even by what Locke means (or would have meant, had he ever used the phrase) by 'secondary signification'. To say that x refers to y is just to say that x (in the convention we have adopted) signifies an idea that picks out y.

¹² See, e.g., the Appendix to Hume's *Treatise*, 623–7.

¹³ I think Frege does not make the distinction sought by Buroker, Geach, and Owen. For Frege speaks of the assertion sign as the sign of the *Anerkennen* ('recognition') of a thought's truth. But if to assert a thought is to recognize its truth, then, since '*Anerkennen*' is a success verb, there is in fact no way to assert a false thought.

¹⁴ In *Locke's Philosophy of Language* 48–9, Ott suggests a similar one-act view, according to which propositional attitudes are 'modes' of thought in the sense that they describe the way in which the subject and predicate are combined. Unfortunately, Ott does not see the difficulty with this version of the one-act view that I go on to point out. (Ott regards Locke's text as indeterminate between the two-act view and this version of the one-act view.)

Works Cited

- Aarsleff, Hans. 'Leibniz on Locke on Language'. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 165–88.
- Alston, William. *The Philosophy of Language*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964.
- Arnault, Antoine and Pierre Nicole. *La Logique, ou L'art de Penser*. Paris: Flammarion, 1970.
- . *Logic or the Art of Thinking*. Trans. and Ed. Jill Vance Buroker. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Ashworth, E. J. 'Do Words Signify Ideas or Things?' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 299–326.
- . 'Locke on Language'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14 (1984): 45–73.
- Ayers, M. R. *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology*. 2 vols. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Berkeley, George. *The Works of George Berkeley*. Eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop. 8 vols. London: Thomas Nelson, 1949–58.
- Buroker, Jill. 'The Port-Royal Semantics of Terms'. *Synthese* 96.3 (1993): 455–76.
- Dawson, Hanna. *Locke, Language, and Early Modern Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.
- Gauker, Christopher. *Thinking Out Loud*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994.
- Geach, Peter. *Reference and Generality*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1980.
- Hacking, Ian. *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*. Ed. William Molesworth. 11 vols. London: Richards, 1839–45.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge. Rev. P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.
- Kretzmann, Norman. 'The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantic Theory'. *Locke on Human Understanding*. Ed. I. C. Tipton. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975. 123–40.
- Landesman, Charles. 'Locke's Theory of Meaning'. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976): 23–35.

- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975.
- Losonsky, Michael. 'Language, Meaning, and Mind in Locke's *Essay*'. *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay*. Ed. Lex Newman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 286–313.
- Lowe, E. J. *Locke on Human Understanding*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Mill, J. S. *A System of Logic*. New York, NY: Harper, 1867.
- Ott, Walter R. *Locke's Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- . 'Propositional Attitudes in Modern Philosophy'. *Dialogue* 41 (2002): 1–18.
- Owen, David. 'Locke on Judgment'. *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay*. Ed. Lex Newman. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 406–35.
- Sergeant, John. *Solid Philosophy Asserted Against the Fancies of the Ideists*. New York, NY: Garland, 1984.