

“There’s glory for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

———Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

In the epigraph above, Lewis Carroll was mocking Locke’s philosophy of language. Locke’s main semantic thesis, *Essay* 3.2.2, invests speakers with absolute semantic authority over the words they use: “*Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them.*”<sup>1</sup> Of course, in the mouth of a capricious and libertine speaker such as Humpty Dumpty, such authority devolves into semantic arbitrariness and chaos. Communication is thus made impossible. Poor Alice, for example, cannot really know what any of Humpty Dumpty’s words mean until he tells her, and even then Alice can never really trust Humpty Dumpty not to be taking semantic license and imposing arbitrary meanings on any word any time he speaks, even when he is explaining what his idiosyncratic meanings are. Carroll has, in effect, given us a compelling *reductio* of Locke’s whole philosophy of language.<sup>2</sup> Or at least one central principle of it, the principle that absolute semantic authority is invested in speakers. Call this the Humpty Dumpty Principle (HDP).

Virtually all accounts of Locke’s semantic thesis accept HDP. The scholarly consensus is that there are three contenders for interpreting it: (1) The Kretzmann interpretation,<sup>3</sup> which invokes the mediate signification of words for things to analyze

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<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 3.2.2, 405. References follow the standard convention of including book, chapter, section, and pagination. Norman Kretzman coined 3.2.2. Locke’s main semantic thesis, “The Main Thesis of Locke’s Semantic Theory,” *The Philosophical Review* 77, no. 2 (Apr 1968): 175–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183319>.

<sup>2</sup> A much more compelling one than the semantic idealism objection raised by John Seargent and John Stuart Mill.

<sup>3</sup> Kretzmann, “Main Thesis”; Hannah Dawson, *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy*, Ideas in Context 76 (Cambridge: University Press, 2007); Timothy Pritchard, “Locke and the Primary Signification of Words: An Approach to Word Meaning,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (May 1, 2013): 486–506, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2013.771611>.

Lockean signification; (2) The Ashworth interpretation,<sup>4</sup> which invokes the Scholastic concept of *significare* to analyze it; and (3) The Ott interpretation,<sup>5</sup> which invokes the Augustinian concept of indicative sign to analyze it. They differ on whether, and how, Locke could avoid Dumpty's semantic chaos, but all accept the Humpty Dumpty challenge is a real problem for Locke because all attribute HDP to him. There is very good reason for their attributions, of course, because the texts seem exceptionally clear, not only *Essay* 3.2.2 but all passages where Locke discusses signification in any detail.<sup>6</sup>

But I'm not so sure. Are we really reading these passages correctly when we read them as straightforward assertions? There are some general thoughts that give me pause. First of all, Locke was a pretty smart guy who was thinking deeply about language; if Carroll's *reductio* were so easy to see and so obviously problematic, why didn't Locke himself see it? What might have blinded him to it? Indeed, Locke was clearly very sensitive to the problem that absolute authority devolves into arbitrary authority as a matter of course,<sup>7</sup> why wouldn't he have seen that very problem at the core of his main semantic thesis? What could have blinded him *to that*, assuming that he really was granting absolute semantic authority to speakers? Generally speaking, thoughts like these give me pause when considering attributing HDP to Locke. At the very least there is a mystery here that scholars have still not yet adequately cleared up when it comes to Locke's philosophy of language—why didn't Locke worry more about speakers like Humpty Dumpty?

I have some specific thoughts about this I'd like to share with you in this essay. I don't think that Locke worried about speakers like Humpty Dumpty because he did not really intend to invest absolute semantic authority, or even primary semantic authority,

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<sup>4</sup> E. J. Ashworth, "Do Words Signify Ideas or Things?' The Scholastic Sources of Locke's Theory of Language," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (July 1, 1981): 299–326; idem, "Locke on Language," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (March 1984): 45–73; idem, "Medieval Theories of Signification to John Locke," in *Linguistic Content: New Essays on the History of Philosophy of Language*, ed. Margaret Cameron and Robert J. Stainton (Oxford University Press, 2015), 156–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198732495.003.0009>; Michael Losonsky, "Language, Meaning, and Mind in Locke's Essay," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding"*, ed. Lex Newman, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 286–312, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521834333.011>.

<sup>5</sup> Walter R. Ott, "Locke and Signification," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 27 (July 1, 2002): 449–73, [https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr\\_2002\\_11](https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr_2002_11); idem, *Locke's Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2004); idem, Walter Ott, "Locke on Language," *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 2 (2008): 291–300, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2007.00126.x>; E. J. Lowe, "Language and Meaning," in *A Companion to Locke* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 279–95, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118328705.ch14>.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Dawson gives perhaps the best defense of HDP in "Words Signify Ideas Alone," ch. 7 of *Locke, Language, and Early-Modern Philosophy*, 185–209.

<sup>7</sup> This is a cornerstone of his political philosophy, so much so that his usual way of writing collapsed them into the phrase "absolute, arbitrary authority". Indeed, it would not be inappropriate to characterize much of his philosophical thinking, broadly speaking, as pushing back against various forms of absolute authority.

in speakers. Locke did not, in other words, wish to adopt HDP. This is my thesis. He did have concerns about semantic instability, as Hannah Dawson termed it, and he did address those concerns, as we will see, but Locke's concerns were not, pace Dawson, the radical, skeptical, metalinguistic concerns raised by Humpty Dumpty.

To show you this, I need to approach Locke's main semantic thesis from a different direction than is typical. Instead of starting with *Essay* 3.2.2, I need to begin with a concept that has not factored much in the scholarly discussion of Locke's account of signification, or even in his philosophy of language more generally. This concept is the concept of *common use*<sup>8</sup> (CU). I shall argue that Locke's uses of CU point toward a different conception of semantic authority. This, in turn, points to a different explanation for why Locke included the HD qualification in his semantic thesis. In section one of the paper, I present Locke's CU and show that it held a central place in his thinking about language. We shall see that Locke believed that CU was causally and conceptually constitutive of language, that it drove his Biblical hermeneutics, and that it underlay his thesis that some languages are not inter-translatable. None of these points conclusively establish anything about semantic authority, but they are suggestive enough to add to the pressure placed *prima facie* on HDP by the thoughts sketched above. In the second section, I shall turn to the linguistic norms CU imposes on language users. **Here we shall see a clearer image of semantic authority that is grounded in the community's CU significations.** In the third section, I shall finally turn to *Essay* 3.2.2 and Locke's main semantic thesis. The aim there will be to show that Locke intended to curtail HDP in 3.2.3–8 by restricting the speaker's linguistic liberties to merely suggesting additions to or revisions of CU to the linguistic community, who really has semantic authority in Locke's account. This transforms the problem of semantic instability into a much more tractable and treatable problem as well as provides a ready resolution of the Humpty Dumpty problem.

### **1.0 Locke's Concept of *Common Use***

Locke gave no "official" definition of "common use" like he did for "idea" in *Essay* 1.1.8.<sup>9</sup> CU was a concept that Locke used and applied in a variety of contexts, but not one he thought required a definition or explication.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it is relatively easy to reconstruct the concept from what he said while using it.

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<sup>8</sup> I follow the convention of italicizing the name of a concept when it is mentioned.

<sup>9</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 1.1.8, 47–48. Foreshadowing a point I made below, I here note that the definition of "idea" is interesting because it does not clearly conform to the definitions Locke thought CU requires when old words are used in a new way. Locke did apologize for using the term so frequently but not for altering its meaning, as he apologized for regarding "mode" in 2.12.4. But he clearly indicated that he was using it as a genus term for the traditional intentional concepts of phantasm, notion, and species, which was not common.

<sup>10</sup> *Prima facie*, this indicates that Locke thought it was a common word that he was using in the ordinary way. I believe that he was correct in thinking this.

### 1.1 Basic Characteristics of Lockean Common Use

Locke's preferred names for the concept were "common use" or "vulgar use", though he occasionally also used "common signification" and "ordinary signification" to designate the concept of CU. Basically, for Locke the common use of a name was the way that the ordinary language users in a country used the word, what they typically meant and understood by it. In a modern idiom, we would say that the common use of a word consists of the way that a linguistic community typically used and understood a linguistic sign.

#### [Textual example]

Locke pretty much meant the same thing that we mean when we are talking about the common use of a word, however the differences in context between us and Locke significantly affect connotative characters and applications of the concept (more on this below).

In Locke's way of thinking, this shared system of meaning requires consent and approval. I find the clearest expression of this in Draft C of the *Essay*, 2.31.18.

Besides the society of interest and government, which is of Commonwealths there is another society which is that of ordinary Conversation which since it cannot be kept up without certain rules that which establishes them there is tacit consent & approbation & that which enforces their observation is that power which men will hardly be persuaded to part with of judging & censuring soe that the reward & punishment that enforces the observation of this sort of laws is laus et vituperium reputation or disgrace.<sup>11</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the consent and approval Locke is thinking of here is tacit. By virtue of learning the language, joining and remaining within this "society" of "ordinary Conversation," language users are consenting to follow the accepted rules and norms of the language. Really, what else could it be for Locke? But notice what he also said about the enforcement of the rule for ordinary conversation: "that power which

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<sup>11</sup> John Locke, *Draft C*, vol. 2 of *Drafts for the Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by J. R. Milton and G. A. J. Rogers, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2021), 2.31.18, 178v–179r, 249–50. This passage in Draft C corresponds to *Essay* 2.28.10, in which Locke deemphasizes, but does not completely remove, the linguistic focus of the Draft C passage to concentrate more on the moral relations of virtue and vice within a population. Because we do not have Books III and IV for Draft C, we cannot tell if the material in *Essay* 3.9.3 was altered to incorporate the linguistic material deemphasized from Draft C 2.31.18. But there is nothing in the content of Locke's philosophy of language that suggests he downplayed this material because he came to doubt it. The revision to Draft C 2.31.18 generalizes the point and focuses on unconventional behaviors that coheres better with immoral and illegal behaviors, but it is still applied to those we "converse with".

men will hardly be persuaded to part with of judging and censuring.” This is reminiscent of Locke’s process for abandoning the state of nature. In the state of nature, everyone is responsible for upholding the laws of nature, but when we establish civil society we consent that the magistrate take over that responsibility and transfer our individual coercive power to the state. Yet we do not transfer to the state our power to think well or ill of others (the inalienability of that power is the central point of Locke’s argument for toleration, of course). We always retained that power for ourselves.<sup>12</sup> That means that we remain responsible for enforcing the laws of conversation according to Locke. Consequently expressing our power of judgment, either verbally or behaviorally, is the actual mechanism for upholding the rules of ordinary conversation. Moreover, it is a powerful and appropriate enforcement mechanism, as Locke explained at length in *Essay* 2.27.12.

Locke was making two important points here about CU, that are crucial to notice and which we’ll be coming back to again and again. The first point Locke was making here is that CU is the consuetudinary feature of a language. It is, in other words, where the normative force of all the grammatical and semantical rules lies, rules which are essential for a language. Secondly, Locke identified dual obligations that CU imposes onto language users. Language users are obliged to follow CU (other things being equal) because they consented to it. Language users are additionally obliged to uphold CU by exercising and expressing their retained powers of censure and disapproval. These normative features of CU are the key the defense of my thesis and my interpretation of *Essay* 3.2.2. They do the heavy-lifting of distributing semantic authority to all language users and contextualizing the issue of semantic instability. So, I ask readers to look for this as I continue working through Locke’s uses of the concept of *common use*.

The final basic feature I wish to present is the connection between CU and definitions. Definitions are not typically a part of CU, but they are connected with it in Locke’s thinking because definitions are what play the role of CU when it is unavailable.

In *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, in the course of defending why it is better to learn Latin “by roat” than through study of its grammar, Locke invoked the concept of *common use*. “Languages were not made by Rules, or Art, but by Accident, and the

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<sup>12</sup> Locke replaced the following in Draft C with the passage noted above, which makes the connection with the state of nature explicit: “that power which ‘every man hath reserved for himself when he <one or two words illegible> all his force in the hands of the magistrate & that is the power’ of judging & censuring”. The deleted text is underlined and enclosed in single quotes. The illegible word or words are probably something like “passed” or “transferred”. See also *Essay* 3.28.10: “For though Men uniting into politick Societie, have resigned up to the publick the disposing of all their Force, so that they cannot employ it against any Fellow-Citizen, any farther than the Law of the Country directs: yet they retain still the power of Thinking well or ill; approving or disapproving of the actions of those whom they live amongst, and converse with:

common Use of the People. And he that will speak them well, has no other Rule but that; nor any thing to trust to, but his Memory, and the habit of speaking after the Fashion learn'd from those, that are allow'd to speak properly, which in other Words is only to speak by roat.”<sup>13</sup> The claim that Locke was making here is two-fold. There is, on the one hand, a historical claim about how languages formed, and there is, on the other hand, a philosophical claim about what was involved in the forming of a language. The latter claim is what we want to focus on. Locke is thinking about language as a natural human phenomenon, something that people do within an ordinary, everyday context. It is, in other words, a tool for human communication suited to the ordinary contexts and understandings of people in general going about their ordinary lives. If there were confusion about this, Locke developed it more deeply on the next page.

Men learning Language for the ordinary intercourse of Society and Communication of thoughts in common Life without any farther design in their use of them. And for this purpose, the Original way of Learning a Language by Conversation, not only serves well enough, but is to be prefer'd as the most Expedite, Proper, and Nautral. Therefore, to this use of Language one may Answer, That Grammar [i.e., the study of grammatical rules] is not Necessary. This so many of my Readers must be forced to allow, as understand what I here say; and who conversing with others understand them without having every been Taught the Grammar of the English Tongue. Which I suppose is the Case of Incomparably the greatest part of English Men; of whom I have never yet known any one who learned his Mother Tongue by Rules.<sup>14</sup>

What Locke is maintaining here is that a language is not something created by someone, or some committee, but something that spontaneously arises out of agreements, tacit and explicit, obtaining among all speakers of the language. “Languages were made not by Rules, or Art,” Locke said. This applies to the semantic rules as well as the syntactic rules, which is why Locke invoked the conjunction of “Accident, and the common Use of the People.” In Locke’s thinking, semantic rules are not imposed onto a people, even by an absolute tyrant such as Augustus. In the Essay, Locke emphasized that even “the great Augustus himself, in the Possession of that Power which ruled the World, Acknowledge he could not make a new Latin Word: which was a much as to say, that he could not arbitrarily appoint what Idea any Sound should be a Sign of, in the Mouths and common Language of his Subjects.”<sup>15</sup> It is the linguistic practices of a group of people that are primary for constituting a language, Locke was maintaining, which is

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<sup>13</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, edited by John W. and Jean S. Yolton, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), §168, 224.

<sup>14</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts*, §168, 225.

<sup>15</sup> Locke, *Essay*, 3.2.8, 408.

why a language is properly learned through conversation and practice—“by roat”—instead of by learning grammatical rules to follow when speaking. This framework makes grammatical rules out to be a set of descriptive patterns discernible within the phenomenon of language, which can be prescriptive for individuals looking to develop a “Critical knowledge of the Tongue itself” and to take “care of polishing his Tongue, and of speaking better than the illiterate” but not necessary for the majority of those “that are allow’d to speak properly.”<sup>16</sup>

By prioritizing linguistic practices over the formalization of the rules governing the manipulation of linguistic signs (and our knowledge of said rules), Locke was defining the analytic framework he was adopting for the development of his philosophy of language. This is an important insight to his way of thinking about language and applicable to almost everything he theorized about it. And *common use* lay at the center of it as seen in his explanation in *Some Thoughts*. This same orientation and the centrality of common use can be seen in his Biblical hermeneutics. The standard expression of Locke’s hermeneutics is the opening paragraph of *The Reasonableness of Christianity*: “a collection of writings, designed by God, for the instruction of the illiterate bulk of mankind, in the way to salvation; and therefore, generally, and in necessary points, to be understood in the plain direct meaning of the words and phrases: such as they may be supposed to have had in the mouths of the speakers, who used them according to the language of that time and country wherein they lived; without such learned, artificial, and forced senses of them, as are sought out, and put upon them, in most of the systems of divinity, according to the notions that each one has been bred up in.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout *The Reasonableness* and its *Vindications*, Locke’s preferred way of talking about his Biblical hermeneutics is in terms of their being “plain” and suited to “vulgar capacities”. This is all just alternative ways of saying that the Bible should be interpreted according to the standard of common use. Locke’s reasoning here is that this follows from the the principle of communication and that God was seeking to communicate with ordinary people in its revelations and not with a leisured theological class. This is clear enough in the *Reasonableness* and its *Vindications*, but it is even clearer in a 1699 correspondence with Samuel Bold, where they place *common use* at the center of depiction of reading the Bible.

But the common sort of people, who were principally concerned in what was delivered by the Inspired writers, understanding the words in which they declared the mind of God to them, in a vulgar and common meaning, the true sense of many places of Scripture seem's to me very different, from what it is represented to be, by our learned and critical Commentators. The critical, not being the vulgar sense of the words,

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<sup>16</sup> Locke, *Some Thoughts*, §168, 227 and 224.

<sup>17</sup> Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*,

seem's to me, to be generally the least likely to be the true sense of them. The Inspired Authors I conceive used such words as the common sort of people did ordinarily use and in the sense they generally understood them, and did not send their hearers, to the Rabbins, nor philosophers to learn the meaning of the words in which they delivered to them the minde of God.<sup>18</sup>

What you say about Critics and Critical Interpretations, particularly of the Scriptures, is not only in my Opinion true, but of great use to be observed in reading learned Commentators, who not seldom make it their Business to shew in what Sense a Word has been used by other Authors; whereas the proper Business of a Commentator, is to shew in what Sense it was used by the Author in that Place, which in the Scripture we have Reason to conclude was most commonly in the ordinary vulgar Sense of the Word or Phrase known in that Time because the Books were written, as you rightly observe, and adapted to the People.<sup>19</sup>

The third piece of evidence that we have of Locke placing common use at the center of his thinking about the nature of language is in his claim that certain languages are not translatable because they are missing words for specific ideas. Locke doesn't have in mind that certain ideas are not expressible within some languages. That Davidsonian conception of translation is not his. Locke admitted that they could be described or approximated within the language. His point was rather that there were not commonly accepted words within the language that correspond to the words commonly accepted in another language. "Hence it is that many languages have names which cannot be rendered by one word in another because one people had made Ideas & modes & given them names which another people had never occasion soe to destinguish & therefore had no specific name for"<sup>20</sup> See also *Essay*. See also the discussion of American Indians who cannot count past 100. See also Locke's proposal for a more economical naming system for large numbers. See also the discussion of specialized chemical terms in *Essay* and Draft C.

What this all suggests is that common use is a necessary condition for creating and establishing a word within a language game. Different linguistic communities are playing different, i.e. incommensurable, language games. Of course they can become commensurate should the missing words be added into the community. But this requires that they become part of common use. Notice how this fits in with the story

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<sup>18</sup> Samuel Bold to Locke

<sup>19</sup> Locke to Samuel Bold

<sup>20</sup> Locke, Draft C of the *Essay*, 2.26.5.

about Augustus and his inability to create a new Latin word despite his absolute, despotic power and authority.

This line constitutes independent evidence against the Humpty Dumpty Principle. Locke adopts the Common Use Principle of Semantic Authority (CUPSA).

## Section 2.0: Common Use as a Source for Normative Obligations

Common use imposes norms onto language users, norms regarding linguistic propriety.

1. Defining words when using them differently than common use
2. Norms for mitigating the abuses and imperfections of language
3. Impacts on Locke's main semantic principle, 3.2.2

Locke does not have the distinction between Standing Meaning and Speaker Meaning, but he seems to be caught or constrained by this. Supplying the distinction between Speaker Meaning and Standing Meaning would help him to navigate better and more clearly the intentional relationship between speakers and common use. It does not resolve the ontological question that he would have, obviously, and it does not help with identifying what Standing Meaning is ontologically (an idea, but whose?).

What about the Intentionalist Commitment? This strikes me as a part of the legacy of the Aristotelian framework which Locke has not abandoned, but which he has damaging in certain ways. So it is best to think of Locke as a transitional thinker and his philosophy of language as evolving. Morphologically it displays key features of the old Aristotelian species of language analysis and characteristics of the new Condillacian philosophy of language. Common Use is one of those features, I am arguing here. MENTALISM is the term Ott uses for this.