

Locke on Common Use

Handout of Texts

Dr. Benjamin Hill
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An Interpretative Problem

1. “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*]
2. *Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them.* [Locke, *Essay* 3.2.2]

Common Use: An Alternative Principle for Semantic Authority

3. common use, by a tacit Consent appropriates certain Sounds to certain *Ideas* in all Languages [Locke, *Essay* 3.2.8]

Common Use as Normative

4. He that applies his Names to Ideas different from their common use, wants Propriety in his Language and speaks Gibberish. [Locke, *Essay* 3.10.31]
5. First, when a man makes use of the name of any simple idea, which he perceives is not understood, or is in danger to be mistaken, he is obliged by the laws of ingenuity, and the end of speech, to declare his meaning, and make known what idea he makes it stand for. [Locke, *Essay* 3.11.14]
6. there is another society which is that of ordinary Conversation which since it cannot be kept up without certaine rules that which establishes them there is tacit consent and approbation & that which inforces their observation is that power which men will hardly be perswaded to part with of judging and censuring soe that the reward and punishment that inforces the observation of this sort of laws is laus et viruperium reputation or disgrace. [Locke, Draft C, 2.31.18, *cf. Essay* 2.28.10]

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Individuals Not the Semantic Authority

7. no one hath the Power to make others have the same Ideas in their Minds, that he has, when they use the same Words, that he does. And therefore 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 as much to say, that he could not arbitrarily appoint, what Idea any Sound should be the Sign of, in the Mouths and common Language of his Subjects. [Locke, *Essay* 3.2.8]
8. It were therefore to be wished, that men, versed in physical inquiries, and acquainted with the several sorts of natural bodies, would set down those simple ideas, wherein they observe the individuals of each sort constantly to agree. This would remedy a great deal of that confusion which comes from several persons applying the same name to a collection of a smaller or greater number of sensible qualities, proportionably as they have been more or less acquainted with, or accurate in examining the qualities of any sort of things which come under one denomination. But a dictionary of this sort containing, as it were, a natural history, requires too many hands, as well as too much time, cost, pains, and sagacity, ever to be hoped for; and till that be done, we must content ourselves with such definitions of the names of substances as explain the sense men use them in. [Locke, *Essay* 3.11.25]
9. That this is so, and that Men in framing different complex *Ideas*, and giving them Names, have been much governed by the end of Speech in general (which is a very short and expedite way of conveying their Thoughts one to another) is evident in the Names which in several Arts have been found out, and applied to several complex *Ideas* of modified Actions belonging to their several Trades, for dispatch sake, in their Direction or Discourses about them. Which *Ideas* are not generally framed in the minds of Men not conversant about these Operations. And thence the words that stand for them, by the greatest part of men of the same language, are not understood: *v.g. Coltshire, Drilling, Filtration, Cohobation*, are words standing for certain complex *Ideas*, which being seldom in the minds of any but those few whose particular Employments do at every turn suggest them to their Thoughts, those names of them are not generally understood but by Smiths and Chymists; who having framed the complex *Ideas* which these words stand for, and having given names to them, or received them from others, upon hearing of these names in communication, readily conceive those *Ideas* in their minds; as by *Cohobation* all the simple *Ideas* of Distilling, and the pouring the Liquor

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distilled from any thing, back upon the remaining Matter, and distilling it again.
[Locke, *Essay* 2.18.7]

How Words are Created

10. I doubt not but we our selves might distinctly number in Words, a great deal farther than we ususally do, would we find out but some fit denominations to signify them by; whereas in the way we take now to name them by Millions of Millions of Millions, etc. it is hard to go beyond eighteen, or at most four and twenty decimal Progressions, without confusion. But to shew how much distinct names conduce to our well reckoning, or having useful *Ideas* of Numbers, let us set all these following Figures in one continued Line, as the Marks of one Number: v.g.

| Nonillions. | Octillions. | Septillions. | Sextillions. | Quintillions. | Quatrilions | Trillions | Bilions. | Milions. | Unites |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|-------------|-----------|----------|----------|--------|
| 857324 | 162486 | 345896 | 437916 | 423147 | 248106 | 235421 | 261734 | 368149 | 623137 |

The ordinary way of naming this Number in English, will be the often repeating of Millions, of Millions, of Millions, of Millions, of Millions, of Millions, of Millions, (which is the denomination of the second six Figures.) In which way, it will be very hard to have any distinguish Notions of this Number: But whether, by giving every six Figures a new and orderly denomination, these, and perhaps, a great many more Figures, in progression, might not easily be counted distinctly, and *Ideas* of them both got more easily to our selves, and more plainly signified to other, I leave it to be considered. This I mention only to shew how necessary distinct Names are to Numbering, without pretending to introduce new ones of my invention. [Locke, *Essay* 2.16.6]

11. I will not dispute, whether this acceptation of the Word *solid* [that which hinders the approach of two Bodies, when they are moving one toward another] be nearer to its Original Signification, than that which Mathematicians use it in: It sufficies, that I think, the common Notion of Solidity will allow, if not justifie, this use of it; but if any one think it better to call it *Impenetrability*, he has my Consent. Only I have thought the Term *Solidity*, the more proper to expres this *Idea*, not only be of its vulgar use in that Sense; but also because it carries something more of a positive in it, than *Impenetrability*, which is negative, and is, perhaps, more a consequence of *Solidity*, than *Solidity* it self. [Locke, *Essay* 2.4.1]

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Obligations for Speakers

12. 'Tis not enough that Men have *Ideas*, determined *Ideas*, for which they make these signs stand; but they *must* also take care to *apply their Words*, as near as may be, *to such Ideas as common use has annexed them to*. . . . But because common use has not so visibly annexed any signification to Words, as to make Men know always certainly what they precisely stand for: And because Men in the Improvement of their Knowledge, come to have *Ideas* different from the vulgar and ordinary received ones, for which they must either make new Words (which Men seldom venture to do, for fear of being thought guilty of Affectation, or Novelty,) or else must use old ones in a new Signification. Therefore after the Observation of the foregoing Rules, it is sometimes necessary for the ascertaining the signification of Words, to declare their Meaning; where either common Use has left it uncertain and loose; or where a Man uses them in a Sense any way peculiar to himself; or where the Term, being very material to the Discourse, and that upon which it chiefly turns, is liable to any Doubtfulness, or Mistake. [Locke, *Essay* 3.11.11–12]

Locke's Main Semantic Thesis: An Alternative Reading

Common Use Limits Speaker's Liberties with Language

13. But though Words, as they are used by Men, can properly and immediately signify nothing but the *Ideas*, that are in the Mind of the Speaker; yet they in their Thoughts give them a secret reference to two other things. *First, they suppose their Words to be Marks of the Ideas in the Minds also of other Men, with whom they communicate*: For else they should talk in vain, and could not be understood, if the Sounds they applied to one Idea, were such, as by the Hearer, were applied to another, which is to speak two Languages. [Locke, *Essay* 3.2.4]
14. 'Tis true, common use, by a tacit Consent, appropriates certain Sounds to certain Ideas in all Languages, which so far limits the signification of that Sound, that unless a Man applies it to the same Idea, he does not speak properly: And let me add, that unless a Man's Words excite the same Ideas in the Hearer, which he makes them stand for in speaking, he does not speak intelligibly. [Locke, *Essay* 3.2.8]

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Commitment to Mentalism

15. God having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society. . . . Beside articulate Sounds therefore it was farther necessary, that he should be able to use these Sounds, as Signs of internal Conceptions; and to make them stand as marks for the *Ideas* within his own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men's Minds be conveyed from one to another. [Locke, *Essay* 3.1.1–2]
16. to give Names, that might make known to others any Operations they felt in themselves, or any other *Ideas*, that came not under their Senses, they were fain to borrow Words from ordinary known *Ideas* of Sensation, by that means to make other the more easily to conceive those Operations they experimented in themselves, which made no outward sensible appearances; and then when they had got known and agreed Names, to signify those internal Operations of their own Minds, they were sufficiently furnished to make known by Words all their other *Ideas*; [Locke, *Essay* 3.1.5]