



Western

Locke on Common Use

*Buffalo Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy · University at Buffalo ·
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PHD RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIP · CALL FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST

The History of Western Philosophy of Language (HOWPOL)

Aristotle, c. 350 BCE

De Interpretatione

Ockham, c. 1323

Summa Logicae

Frege, 1892

the usual starting point

Locke, 1689

Essay

The project

More than two thousand years of philosophical work on meaning, mind and language, not just Frege and Russell. We plan journal articles on early modern philosophy of language and two books on the history of the field.

The (possible) assistantship

200

hours a year, max

\$35

an hour, about

\$7,000

a year, roughly

For the length of the funded PhD, on top of standard funding. Research and project management, as a full member of the research group.

Contingent on

- SSHRC Insight Grant funded (decision spring 2027)
- Admission to Western's Philosophy PhD, decided separately by the department

Admission and standard funding do not depend on the grant.

If interested, email us before you apply. bhill28@uwo.ca · rstainto@uwo.ca

Professors Benjamin Hill and Robert Stainton, Western University · A conversation by Zoom commits no one to anything · October 2026

Presentation Materials

You may access all the material for this presentation electronically.

- Handout
- Slide deck
- Full paper

<https://drbenjaminhill.ca/lockeoncommonuse>



drbenjaminhill.ca/lockeoncommonuse

Primary Research Question

How ought we understand Locke's main semantic thesis, "*Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them*"?

Thesis

Contrary to appearances (and the scholarly consensus), meanings for Locke are determined by Common Use, the standard by which speakers are obliged to regulate their words.

Overview

- I. The Humpty Dumpty Problem

- II. Locke's Appeals to Common Use

- III. Common Use Archetypes for Meaning

- IV. Resolving the Humpty Dumpty Problem

I. The Humpty Dumpty Problem

If meanings are nothing but the speaker's ideas, what prevents a speaker from changing their meanings at will?

Humpty Dumpty Speech

“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.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Why Humpty Dumpty Speech is Catastrophic

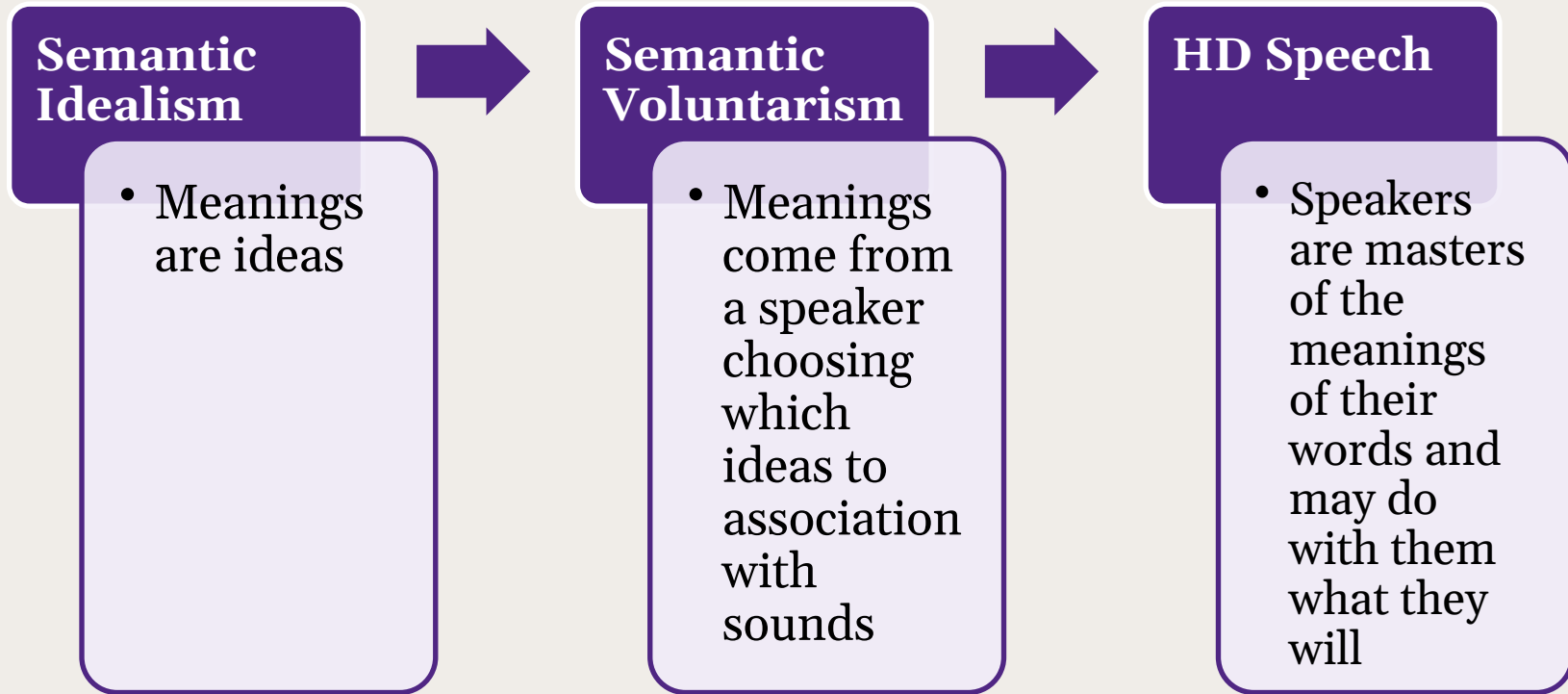


The mere possibility of HD speech is sufficient, like Cartesian hyperbolic doubts

Locke Seems to License HD Speech

“Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them.”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.2.2



Absolute Authority Devolves into Arbitrary Authority

Political Authority	Semantic Authority
Absolute political authority → Arbitrary authority	Absolute semantic authority → Arbitrary Authority
Threatens liberty in the commonwealth	Threatens integrity and success of communication
Locke's solution: Distribute political authority across stakeholders in the state	Locke's solution: Distribute semantic authority across stakeholders in the linguistic community

Locke's Response to HD Problem: *Essay 3.2.2 Does Not Express SV*

Three possible ways to address the HD Problem:

1. Deny that Metalinguist Skepticism follows from HD speech
2. Deny that HD speech follows from Semantic Voluntarism
3. Deny Semantic Voluntarism

Locke's Response to HD Problem: *Essay 3.2.2 Does Not Express SV*

Three possible ways to address the HD Problem:

1. Deny that Metalinguist Skepticism follows from HD speech
2. Deny that HD speech follows from Semantic Voluntarism
3. **Deny Semantic Voluntarism ← Locke's path**

Speaker Meaning vs Standing Meaning

Speaker Meaning	Standing Meaning
Idea in a speaker's mind at one utterance	Idea tied to a word across the whole community
Private and variable	Shared standard, prior to any utterance
Described by E 3.2.2	Prescribed by E 3.11.11
Medieval: suppositio	Medieval: significatio
<i>Speaker meaning ought to be regulated by standing meaning</i>	

II. Locke's Appeals to Common Use

I show how Locke appealed to Common Use as a regulative principle for language, binding language users, remedying the imperfections of language, and serving as the measure for linguistic behavior.

Common Use the Rule of Propriety

“*common Use*, that is the Rule of Propriety”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.9.8

Common Use the Speaker's Standard

Speakers “*must* also take care to *apply their Words*, as near as may be, *to such Ideas as common use has annexed them to.*”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.11.11

Locke's Third Remedial Principle

“’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*. For Words, especially of Languages already framed, being no Man’s private possession, but the common measure of Commerce and Communication, ’tis not for any one, at pleasure, to change the Stamp they are current in; nor alter the *Ideas* they are affixed to;”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.11.11

Abuses of Language are Willful Faults

“there are several *wilful Faults and Neglects*, which Men are guilty of, in this way of Communication”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.10.1

Abusers of Language are Epistemic Enemies

“He that uses Words without clear and steady meaning, What does he but lead himself and others into Errors? And he that designedly does it, ought to be looked on as an Enemy to Truth and Knowledge.”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.11.5

Pessimism, Not Skepticism, about Common Use

	Remedies	Normativity	Blame
Skeptic	None: the problem is unsolvable	Cannot say how speakers ought to speak	Cannot blame: language itself is broken
Pessimist (Locke)	Offers remedies despite the difficulty	“Must” and “obliged”	“Wilful Faults”; “Enemy to Truth and Knowledge”

Locke Uses CU as a Semantic Law

	Normativity	Remedies	Blame
Locke's <i>Essay</i>	References Binding Normative Language: Must and Obligation	Proposes genuine, actionable Remedies for Semantic Instability	Forcefully Condemns Semantic Abusers of Violations
A Semantic Voluntarist	Could Only Use Prudential Language	Cannot Acknowledge Remedies Being Required	Cannot Acknowledge Faults in Anyone's Abuse of Language

Common Use as a Law: Three Formal Conditions

An authority “is bound to dispense Justice . . . By promulgated standing law, and known Authoris’d Judges.”

— John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2.136

Locke’s Three Necessary Conditions for Law:

1. There is a Rule or Measure against which behavior may be compared
2. This Rule is appropriately promulgated to those whose behavior is to be measured by it
3. A body properly empowered to enforce the Rule through rewards and punishments

III. Common Use Archetypes for Meaning

I argue that Locke makes use of his concept of Archetypes to develop an ideational mechanics for the regulative function of Common Use.

Locke on Established vs Emerging Language

Emerging Languages	Established Languages
Adam naming the animals; Tolkien inventing elvish; van Rossum inventing Python	“Nations,” i.e. English, French, Latin
No Common Use	Common Use
Speakers set up their own ideas as Archetypes for meanings	Speakers are obligated to take the community’s ideas embedded in Common Use as Archetypes
Meanings originate in an individual’s will	Meaning is inherited from the linguistic community
HD speech legitimate	HD speech is an abuse of language

The Archetype Reversal: Essay 3.6.45

“These Words, *Kinneah* and *Niouph*, by degrees grew into common use; and then the case was somewhat alter’d. *Adam*’s children found these two Words, *Kinneah* and *Niouph*, in familiar use, could not take them for insignificant sounds: but must needs conclude that they stood for something, for certain *Ideas*, abstract *Ideas*, they being general Names. . . . If therefore they would use the Words, as Names of Species already establish’d and agreed on, they were obliged to conform the Ideas in their Minds, signified by these Names, to the *Ideas* that they stood for in other Men’s Minds, as to their Patterns and *Archetypes*.”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.6.45

Common Use Archetypes as Imperfect Ideas

CU ideas are indeterminate ideas—Locke calls them “imperfect” ideas—preserved in the memories of language users and formed as approximations to the community’s usage during language acquisition.

Their indeterminacy is the solution; it makes genuine sharing possible without reducing to any individual’s private, determinate idea.

Indeterminacy: The General Idea of a Triangle

“neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, neither Equilateral, Equicrural, nor Scalenon; but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect, that cannot exist; an Idea wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent Ideas are put together. ’Tis true, the Mind in this imperfect state, has need of such Ideas, and makes all the haste to them it can, for the conveniency of Communication, and Enlargement of Knowledge; to both which, it is naturally very much enclined.”

— John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 4.7.9

Semantic Authority in Established Languages is Communal

- In learning a language, children are taught CU meanings.
- The archetypal role of CU ideas is enforced for language learner by their instructors and for all language users by their peers.
- In established languages, every speaker is obligated to take the community's ideas as archetypes for their own words.
- In established languages, CU is embedded in the very structure of linguistic competence as a shared normative standard.

IV. Resolving the Humpty Dumpty Problem

I show how Locke's conception of Common Use delegitimizes Humpty Dumpty's willful alternations of the meanings of words.

Humpty Dumpty's Abuse

HD substitutes his own ideas as archetypes where the community's CU ideas are the obligatory standard

Delegitimizing Humpty Dumpty Speech

Humpty Dumpty *can* speak as he does, but he *may not* substitute his own ideas as archetypes for meaning—HD's failure is normative rather than metaphysical on Locke's view.

Punishment for Humpty Dumpty

Because Humpty Dumpty's failure is normative, he sets himself up for sanctions from the linguistic community. Semantic abusers are epistemically exiled as “enemies of Truth and Knowledge” because they have violated the social contract of established languages themselves.

Open Questions

1. Does Locke's account rule out the prescriptive definitions that a dictionary of experts would offer?
2. How does Locke's account handle legitimate definitional change and innovation—new words, the natural evolution of language, metaphor?
3. Is the parallel between semantic voluntarism and absolute political authority illuminating or merely rhetorical?
4. Do speakers who deploy indeterminate common use archetypes violate Locke's prohibition against using words without clear and determined ideas?

Thank you / Merci

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I am always happy to receive criticism and respond to questions anytime after the conference. Please email me at bhill28@uwo.ca.



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