

Locke on Common Use

Benjamin Hill · Buffalo Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy · 16 October 2026



THESIS

Contrary to appearances, meanings for Locke are determined not by individual speakers' ideas but by ideas shared among language users through Common Use, the rule for semantic propriety for established languages.

ARGUMENT

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| P1 | Locke consistently and sincerely treated CU as a standard for evaluating a speaker's semantics. |
| P2 | Lockean Common Use actually is a genuine standard for semantic propriety. |
| P3 | For CU to be a rule for semantic propriety, it must supply the archetypes against which individual speakers' meanings are measured. |
| P4 | Within Locke's philosophy of language, the archetypes for meanings are ideas. |
| P5 | For Common Use ideas to function as archetypes shared among language users, they cannot be determinate, private ideas. |
| P6 | Locke characterized Common Use archetypes as indeterminate "imperfect" ideas preserved in speakers' memories through language acquisition. |
| ∴ | Meanings are determined, for Locke, by indeterminate ideas shared among language users through Common Use. |
| ∴ | Semantic authority in Locke is communal rather than individual. |
| ∴ | Locke's main semantic thesis (<i>Essay</i> 3.2.2) expresses a truism about the mechanics of signification rather than grants absolute semantic authority to speakers. |

KEY DISTINCTION

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| SM | Speaker meaning. The idea in a speaker's mind at one utterance; private and variable. Described by E 3.2.2. Medieval counterpart: <i>suppositio</i> . |
| StM | Standing meaning. The idea tied to a word across the whole linguistic community; a shared standard prior to any utterance. Prescribed by E 3.11.11. Medieval counterpart: <i>significatio</i> . |
| | Speaker meaning ought to be regulated by standing meaning. |

KEY QUOTATION 1

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| Q1 | <p>"Words in the primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them."</p> <p>— John Locke, <i>An Essay concerning Human Understanding</i>, 3.2.2.</p> |
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KEY QUOTATION 2

- Q2** “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*

KEY QUOTATION 3

- Q3** “’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

KEY QUOTATION 4

- Q4** “These Words, *Kinneah* and *Nioup*, by degrees grew into common use; and then the case was somewhat alter’d. *Adam’s* children . . . found these two Words, *Kinneah* and *Nioup*, 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

KEY QUOTATION 5

- Q5** “. . . 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

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