

Our paradox/dilemma for this unit is (Anti)signification. We're more or less going to take up Locke's dilemmas:

- How can something so fragile or unstable be relied upon to communicate so much?
- How is it possible for language to destabilize meaning while also making some experiences more concrete? [*Language operates on a principle of "signs," yet the process of "signification" allows for so many gaps and misses.*]
- How is it possible for ideas to "come first" but then also to be in some sense created by language?

Useful claims from our backgrounders/skimers to help contextualize Locke's Essay. What bearing could any of these claims have on our reading of *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*?

"Claim 1": Locke wanted to prevent "solipsism" – the belief that "one's own mind is always correct and may be the only real mind in existence" (Smith 217). We have to learn to communicate with others, even though that's where interpretive risks and misses occur. Mutual agreement could help verify the more "accurate" uses of language (Smith 217-218). Very reason-based. We apparently need a system of rules to guide language through reasoning.

"Claim 2": Locke claimed that people are able to remember and retain knowledge by using abstraction (for Locke it's mixed modes) to create a pyramid of categories. When a word is mentioned, like football, we fill it in with rules, teams, players, great games, and so on. This is why Locke writes that the names of mixed modes are the most liable to doubtfulness and imperfection, because when we

think of something like love or virtue, we all think of something different (Smith 217).

“Claim 3”: Locke’s education was influenced by Plato (esp the Socratic dialogue) and this may have influenced how he saw communication operating. “Internal” discourse he thought was more pure or reliable than “external” discourse. Problem is, communication requires an external discourse (obviously) so a lot of risk of words “taking on meaning of their own” and not conveying what he thought was more “accurate” meaning (Smith 217).

“Claim 4”: For Locke sensory information is the most primary information, but even sensory knowledge (or “simple” knowledge) isn’t failsafe (Bizzell and Herzberg 815). The balance between “word and idea” could be upset by incomplete knowledge or unclear communication (Bizzell and Herzberg 798).

“Claim 5”: Locke studied ancient languages, so he studied language’s function, in addition to studying language philosophically (Bizzell and Herzberg 814). Locke criticized Scholastic philosophy for creating obscurities through disputation. He argues that we perplex one another so as not to arrive at truth (Bizzell and Herzberg 815).

“Claim 6”: Locke studied language as a psychological phenomenon (Bizzell and Herzberg 814).

“Claim 7”: Locke criticizes rhetoric (as it was commonly and publicly understood in his episteme) for increasing ambiguities through excessive ornamentation (Bizzell and Herzberg 815). “Rhetoric” in this sense was not epistemological, but ornamental.

“Claim 8”: For Locke, knowledge could be arrived at by sensory experience, question, reason, investigation, observation (not merely

by revelation). Human nature could be regarded as the basis of critical judgment, but it had to be *observed* (Bizzell and Herzberg 798). Locke was an empiricist.

“Claim 9”: Bizzell and Herzberg say that this essay (by Locke) shows an 18th-century passion for “fixing” the language, which means preventing too much widespread change (fixing = making more stable). So, it’s possible that Locke was promoting something like the circulation of dictionaries (Bizzell and Herzberg 799).

What can we learn about Locke’s theory of language in each section of the *Essay*?

(Prof. G added her notes to yours – hers are in brown font below.)

Propositions 1-5

- words have two purposes: communicating and recording our own thoughts
- any word will work for recording but you have to be consistent
- for communicating, there are two categories: civil and philosophical
- words are imperfect because they are ambiguous and arbitrary, and that is due to the fact that they can be applied to different and contracting ideas
- the meaning of words has to be learned and retained, elaboration on point 4
- primary ideas are gleaned through sensory observation (that is guided by common experience)
- words are merely signs of internal conceptions—they can only show associations to ideas and things
- it’s the process of signification that fails, not the signs themselves

Propositions 6-7

Propositions 8-11

- “Sounds are usually learned first; and then, to know what complex ideas they stand for, they are either beholden to the explication of others, or are left to their own observation and industry.” Locke (proposition 9)
- “...These moral words are in most men’s mouths little more than bare sounds; or when they have any, it is for the most part a very loose and undetermined, and, consequently, obscure and confused signification.” Locke (proposition 9)
- Senses important for language through Locke; but in our minds important for interpretation
- Where would Locke say instinct comes into play? If a cat knows the stove is hot, without communication to the cat... we cannot talk to animals... how do they know not to walk on the stove? How does knowledge/language come into effect with instinct? [I think that Locke was tackling language as a phenomenon primarily used by human animals. In this essay, he was focusing on human understanding, as opposed to all animalistic understanding –Prof. G]
- “simple” is defined by things/facts (principally in “civil” or everyday discourse)
- “complex” must be experienced because it is otherwise too abstract to be used or to explain (for example, moral or evaluative words can only be learned through repeated use, and not abstractly; how do we know “good” or “love” if we don’t have it demonstrated and reinforced?)
- Modernizing ancient texts shows real-life difficulties in translation, which Locke uses as another way to prove that interpretation involves space and time
- Words are too easily corruptible if we let them take on meanings of their own
- Common use of terms can be misleading, i.e., it’s not always enough. (James brought up the example of how “glory” and “gratitude” could be experienced differently historically, i.e., one man’s glory may not be another man’s.)

Propositions 12-15

- the names of substances have been made to stand for the essence of something but the word itself does not tell you the definition, making it arbitrary
- each definition to a word coexists but no one determines the signification of the word because they are co-developed

- there is no standard that allows certain qualities to be a part of the definition of a word, and no standard that keeps certain qualities out
- in civic language, words have a specific signification, making it the closest thing we have to a standard, but philosophical language is arbitrary because no one person is required to be convinced on a fixed definition since many propositions that can be made on the nature of a word
- Substances = the qualities we think an idea carries (the embodiment of an idea)
- “simple” vs. “complex” distinction is less inherent on the nature of the sign/word, and more tied to the uses to which the sign/word has been put
- “mixed modes” = those which Locke says are the most difficult to deal with in language because of potential multiplicities in meaning

Propositions 16-18

Language is a function of the mind

Locke called for precise use of language

Difference between deductive reasoning/inductive reasoning

Instance, liquor

- signification is a discourse (822)
- all physicians had different opinions of the definition
- collectivity/ compromise

Instance, gold

- signification of language is built around all properties of that word both physical, cultural, ideological (823)
- also within the same language even different stages of life can form different meanings around words

names of simple ideas least doubtful

- least liable to mistakes
- denotation & connotation
- inductive/deductive reasonings

The success or failure of signification depends upon which ideas are central or peripheral to the debate. For example, in the liquor debate, it wasn't the nature of the substance that was disagreed upon, but rather what their ideas of “liquor” made it feasible to do. And in the gold debate, it wasn't the value of gold that was disagreed upon, but rather the various ways it could take shape or become realized.

Propositions 19-23

- Simple modes are almost universally conveyed or interpreted in any language. Can use symbols or language themselves. Things like "cats" or "hello" or "the bathroom" are all simple modes because they are easy to understand but also a foundational and very concrete form of language
- Mixed modes are more difficult to understand. They involve a level of advancement or unpacking. Deals with things like good or bad, mortality etc. which means very different and complex things in other languages and cultures. It is more subjective than simple modes.
- Discourse- if we don't ascribe meaning to words, when reading or speaking etc. it loses much of its power. The way we convey and interpret words gives it power.
- In different cultures, languages, speakers etc. the figures of speech, notions, context, tempers, tone, style etc. varies for the same subject or even words. Everyone interprets things differently including words and how to use them
- Simple modes are the least doubtful; mixed modes are the most doubtful (and thus have to be regulated through some set of principles or guidelines)
- (That could possibly be a statement in support of dictionaries, I guess, or some kind of text that directs our "civil" use of words/signs.)
- It's difficult to translate sacred texts without imposing our own sense of ancient authors.
- Words/signs can have "abuses" or instances where the sign acts not like a sign.

To try to synthesize ... For Locke, what makes the relationship between knowledge and language so complex?

- Language is supposed to be specific and concrete but knowledge varies from person to person (it's like "truth" *suspended?*).
- Language is situational and changes, but knowledge is what you generalize based on learning
- Language is imperfect – i.e., the difference between simple and mixed modes demonstrates this. Sensory experiences are a part of it, but are not enough on their own.

- Knowledge (for Locke) relies on direct experience, but we may not know what things are “called” (i.e., their “signs”); so, we need to have language make our knowledge realized.
- Locke says that the general idea comes first (it precedes the sign/word), but at the same time, in some sense the general idea is *created by* language. There’s a paradox.
- Certain things that we *think* are standard ideas might actually be subjective and we will realize this subjectivity through language (its uses, its applications, its mis-uses, its communications, its mis-communications, etc.).

Prof. G says: Here’s the sense I’m getting from what you shared above: Knowledge is partly made in the “intervention of words” – so it’s hard to pull apart words from knowledge in certain situations (like, in mixed modes and substances).