

“JOHN LOCKE ON THE RELATION OF LANGUAGE IN MAN’S ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE”

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Abstract

According to one of the greatest Greek philosophers in history, Aristotle, all men by nature desire to know. Human beings are in the pursuit for knowledge and truth. Across the history of philosophy, many thinkers provided various views in understanding the human cognition. In man’s search for knowledge, it is inevitable to resort to language in the sense that it is the principal method of human communication. In this paper, the researcher will try to investigate the relation of language in human’s acquisition of knowledge in the perspective of John Locke. John Locke was widely regarded as one of the most notable and influential thinkers during the Enlightenment period. Locke was famous for his work “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding” which was one of the first great defenses of modern empiricism. He stressed that the human mind is basically a “tabula rasa” or a blank tablet and only through experience that knowledge can be written down. In Book II, it was stressed that language plays an important role in human cognition. Locke believes that language is a tool for communication; that humans want to communicate their ideas, the contents of their minds. It is by the use of words that people convey their necessarily private thoughts to each other. Accordingly, words signify or indicate ideas; words are sensible marks of ideas. However, Locke asserted that there is a misuse or abuse of language. He believes that improper use of language is one of the greatest obstacles in human cognition. The main question of this paper is: Based on Locke’s philosophical perspective, what is the relationship of language in man’s acquisition of knowledge?

This paper only limits to the book of Locke entitled, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”, which is also supplemented by various secondary sources. The first part of this paper is all about Locke’s philosophical understanding on human understanding. The second part is about the relationship between knowledge and language as discussed particularly on the Book III of his book. The third part is all about the abuses of language and their remedies.

Keywords: *John Locke, Human Understanding, Language, Ideas, Knowledge*

I

John Locke's epistemological view can be found on his monumental book entitled "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding". It is one of the first great defenses of modern empiricism and concerns itself with determining the limits of human understanding in respect to a wide spectrum of topics. It tells the readers in some details what one can legitimately claim to know and what one cannot.¹ John Locke devoted himself in understanding the human cognition because this is what sets man above from the rest of other beings. Human beings simply understand other beings, yet they fail to understand their own understanding. For Locke, the inquiry of human understanding is very much essential in order to understand not only the extent and nature of the mind, but also in the cognition of other beings. As to the Book 1 – Chapter 1 of his book "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" reads,

"Since it is the understanding that sets man above the rest of sensible beings, and gives him all the advantages and dominion which he has over them: it is certainly a subject, even from its nobleness, worth our labor to inquire into. The understanding, like the eye, whilst makes us see, and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself: and it requires arts and pains to set it at a distance, and make it its own object. But whatever be the difficulties lie in the way of this inquiry, whatever it be keeps us so much in the dark to ourselves, sure I am, that all the light we can let in upon our minds, all the acquaintance we can make with our own understandings, will not only be very pleasant, but bring us great advantage, in directing our search thoughts in the search of other things."²

The main purpose of John Locke is to inquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge.³ For Locke, there's no such thing as innate ideas or principles in the mind. In the Book 1, Locke proposed various arguments in order to refute the innatist view of knowledge. He begins by presenting the great argument of the innatists – the General Assent. It is an argument saying that there are certain principles, both speculative and practical, universally agreed upon by all mankind; which therefore, the souls of men receive in their first beings, and which they bring into the world with them, as necessarily and really as they do any of their inherent faculties. ⁴ Yet, Locke used this innatist

¹ Uzgalis, William, "John Locke," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>

² Locke, John, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book 1 p. 1.

³ Ibid, 1.

⁴ Ibid, Chap. 1, p. 9

argument on knowledge as the grounds in order to prove that there is nothing innate. As the Book 1, Chapter 2 reads,

“This argument drawn from universal consent, has this misfortune in it, that if it were true in matter of fact, that there were certain truths, wherein all mankind agreed, it would not prove them innate, if there can be any other way shown, how men may come to that universal agreement, in the things they do consent in; which I presume may be done. ‘What is, is’, and ‘it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be,’ not universally assented to. But, which is worse, this argument of universal consent, which is made use to prove innate principles, seem to me a demonstration that there are none such; because there are none to which all mankind give an universal assent.”⁵

Locke then vehemently asserted that there’s no principle universally accepted by human beings. Furthermore, Locke asserted that since there are some principles which are not entirely known by other human beings, especially children and idiots, then it is not naturally imprinted in the mind. Accordingly, for to imprint anything in the mind without minds perceiving it, it seems to be hardly intelligible. If, therefore, children and idiots have souls and minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths; which since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions. For if they are not notions naturally imprinted, how can they be innate? And if they are notions imprinted, how can they be unknown? To say a notion is imprinted on the mind, and yet at the same time to say the mind is ignorant to it and never yet took notice of it, is to make this impression nothing.⁶

Now, what then is Locke’s understanding of human understanding? Refuting the belief on innate ideas, Locke asserted that the primary condition of the human mind is “tabula rasa”, meaning, “blank tablet”. He argues that at birth, the mind is a tabula rasa or a blank state and this can only be filled with ideas through sense experience.⁷ The mind then is like a blank tablet and only the sense experience can write down the ideas and knowledge in it. Locke holds that there are only two sources of ideas and knowledge: sensation and reflection. “All the ideas we have” says Locke come from these two aspects. Locke then goes on to unpack these in greater detail. He explains that when our senses take in “particular sensible objects” they cause perceptions in our minds. The colour yellow for example is a quality of a sensible object which produces this perception of yellow in the mind. This process Locke calls sensation.

⁵ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book 1 p. 9.

⁶ Ibid, p. 10.

⁷ Maden, Jack, “John Locke’s Empiricism: Why are We All Tabula Rasas,” Philosophy Break, 2021, <https://philosophybreak.com/articles/john-lockes-empiricism-why-we-are-all-tabula-rasas-blank-slates/>.

The second aspect of experience Locke calls *reflection*. The mind operates on the ideas it has gained and reflection seems to refer to our conscious reflecting on these operations. Locke puts it this way: “the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas“. These reflections produce ideas, says Locke, such as perception, thinking, doubting, believing and many others. Though these ideas don’t directly come from sensation, but they do rely ultimately on perceiving external objects.⁸

They then provide the basic materials – simple ideas – out of which more complex knowledge is constructed. He further asserted that man has variety of faculties to receive and abilities to manipulate or process the content once we acquire it.⁹ The Book II , Chapter I reads,

“To this I answer in one word from experience; that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.”¹⁰

Locke stressed that the primary object of human thinking are “ideas”. He said that for every man being conscious to himself that he thinks, and that which his mind is applied about whilst thinking, being the ideas that are there, it is past doubt, that men have in their mind several ideas, such are those expressed by words, whiteness, hardness, sweetness, thinking, motion, man, elephant, army, and many others. ¹¹ He classified ideas into two: simple and complex ideas. Simple ideas are the elements of thought we passively receive through sensation and reflection. Simple ideas mostly agree with things since the mind can by no means make to itself any simple ideas; these being all the products of things operating on the mind in a natural way. Complex ideas, on the other hand, are made up of simple one as have been discovered to co-exist with nature.¹² Complex ideas are formed by the mind through comparing, combining, and abstracting simple ideas. It then necessarily includes multiple variables or ideas. Accordingly, there

⁸ Butler, Joseph, “Locke: All Ideas come from Sensation and Reflection,” Word Press, 2012, <https://theanalogyofreligion.wordpress.com/2012/09/22/locke-all-ideas-come-from-sensation-and-reflection/>.

⁹ Uzgalis, William, "John Locke," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>.

¹⁰ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book II p. 51.

¹¹ Ibid, 50.

¹² Sharma, Vishal, “Simple and Complex Ideas by Locke,” Your Article Library, <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/philosophy/philosophers/simple-and-complex-ideas-by-john-locke/85545>.

are three acts of the mind which exerts its power over simple ideas: combining, bringing, and separating. As the Book II, Chapter XII reads,

“The acts of the mind wherein it exerts its power over its simple ideas, are chiefly these three: 1. Combining several simple ideas into one compound one, and thus, all complex ideas are made. 2. The second is bringing two ideas, whether simple or complex, together; and setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into one: by which way it gets all ideas of relations. 3. The third is separating them from all other ideas that accompany them in their real existence; this is called abstraction; and thus all its general ideas are made.”¹³

It should be noted that Locke distinguished ideas from knowledge. Knowledge for him is conversant about ideas. He said that, “Since the mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no immediate object but its own ideas, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident that our knowledge is only conversant to them. It is the perception of the agreement and disagreement of two ideas. Knowledge is nothing but the perception of the connexion and agreement or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas.”¹⁴ Hence, though distinct, knowledge is still fundamentally based on ideas. Locke defines four sorts of the agreement and the disagreement of ideas: identity, relation, co-existence, and real existence. He further distinguished three types of knowledge which have different degrees according to certainty namely intuitive knowledge (the most certain), demonstrative knowledge, and sensitive knowledge. Intuitive knowledge is that where “the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately by themselves, without the intervention of any other.” For example ‘white is not black,’ ‘a circle is not a triangle,’ ‘three is greater than two.’ Demonstrative knowledge is that where the agreement or disagreement is not perceived immediately, but rather depends on reasoning – following a series of steps in the mind, each of which must have intuitive certainty, to discover the agreement or disagreement of ideas “by the intervention of other ideas.” Those intervening ideas are called proofs, and where the agreement or disagreement is by this means plainly and clearly perceived, it is called demonstration, it being shown to the understanding, and the mind made see that it is so.¹⁵

After the discussing the nature of human understanding, the paper now discusses the relationship between knowledge and language.

¹³ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book II p. 96.

¹⁴ Ibid, 385.

¹⁵ Hewett, Caspar, “John Locke’s Theory of Knowledge,” The Great Debate, 2006, <http://www.thegreatdebate.org.uk/LockeEpistem.html>.

II

Locke, on the concluding part of the Chapter VI of the Book II, stressed that there is a strong relationship between knowledge and language. As the conclusion reads,

“This was that, which, in the first general view I had of this subject, was that I thought I should have to do; but upon a nearer approach. I find, that there is a close connexion between ideas and words; and our abstract ideas, and general words, have so constant a relation one another, that it is impossible to speak clearly and distinctly of our knowledge, which all consists in propositions, without considering first, the nature, use, and signification of language; which therefore must be the business of the next book.”¹⁶

That is why on the Book III of his book, Locke devoted his philosophical endeavor on showing the strong connection between knowledge and language. In undergoing this matter, Locke basically set the connection between words and ideas. It is necessary to first discuss the connection of these two for knowledge is nothing but a composite of ideas. Locke’s fundamental assertion is that words are sensible marks or signs of ideas. His main semantic thesis is that words stand for, or signify, ideas.¹⁷ The Book III, Chapter II reads,

“Words are sensible signs necessary for communication. Man, though he has great variety of thoughts, and such, from which others, as well as himself, might receive profit and delight; yet they are all within his own breast invisible, and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made appear. The comfort and advantage of the society, not being to be had without communication of thoughts, it was necessary, that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereby those invisible ideas, which his thought are made up of, might be made known to others. For this purpose, nothing was to fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds, which, with so much ease and variety, he found himself able to make. Thus may we conceive how words, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, come to be made use of me, as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas; for there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily mark of such idea. The use then of words, is to be

¹⁶ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book II p. 289 .

¹⁷ Ashworth, E.J., “Locke on Language,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Cambridge University Press, 2020, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/canadian-journal-of-philosophy/article/abs/locke-on-language/26A28B193A839034F181CBB3BB77490F>.

sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for, are their proper and immediate signification.”¹⁸

The quotation above shows that language makes ideas sensible to other agents. Ideas basically exist in the mind which is therefore inaccessible or unavailable to other agents. Through words, the immaterial (ideas) will become sensible and perceptible to other beings. Hence, language is necessary for communication of ideas. Man has diverse view and understanding of reality. Yet, these views can only be communicated through language. It is solely through language that expression and exchange of ideas will occur. In that case, without language, there would be no argumentations, debates, agreements, or syntheses; all which are necessary for the enhancement and development of knowledge. Furthermore, Locke emphasized the arbitrariness of language. When a subject represents an idea, he represents through voluntary imposition. He then favors to the conventional nature of language in opposition to the natural nature of language.

Locke also suggested that language is used to record ideas or thoughts. The use men have of these marks, being either to record their own thoughts for the assistance of their own memory.¹⁹ It can then be implied that for Locke, there are two functions of language. The first function is to transmit the ideas in a man’s mind to another man’s. The second function is to enable the record of our ideas which may be consulted later in the future.²⁰ Locke further asserted that words are direct representation of ideas. Accordingly, words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing, but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever, or carelessly, those ideas are collected from things which they are supposed to represent.²¹ He then asserted that words are direct representation of ideas but indirect representation of objects. The word is the sign of idea by means of sound; thus a person claiming that he is speaking about things is wrong. There is that indirect association between words and things. Locke claims that it would be a mistake to think that we can speak about things.²² Human beings basically speak about ideas and not about things. Words are direct representation of ideas and indirect representation of objects. Moreover, man could not use words which do not signify ideas on his mind. Words, being voluntary signs, they cannot be voluntary signs imposed by man on things he know not. That we be to make them signs of nothing, or sounds without signification. A man cannot make his words the signs of either qualities in things, or of conceptions of the mind of another, whereof he has none of his own. Until

¹⁸ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book III, p. 291.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Baykent, Ufuk, “An Introductory Course to Philosophy of Language,” Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, p. 57.

²¹ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book III, p. 291.

²² Baykent, Ufuk, “An Introductory Course to Philosophy of Language,” Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, p. 61.

he has some ideas on his own, he cannot suppose them to correspond with the conceptions of other man, nor can he use any signs for them; for thus they would be signs which he knows not, which in truth, signify nothing.²³

Locke further asserted that words are not only sensible signs of particular ideas, but also to formulate general signs. It would be a huge limitation of words if it only signifies particular ideas since there are thousands of particular beings. A sign should then be made which represents the multitude of particular existence. This sign is called the general terms. As the Book III, Chapter I reads,

“But neither was this sufficient to make words useful as they ought to be. It is not enough for the perfection of language, that sounds can be made signs of ideas, unless those sounds can be so made use of, as to comprehend several particular things; for the multiplication of words would have perplexed their use, had very particular thing need of a distinct name to be signified by. To remedy this inconvenience, language had yet a farther improvement in the use of general terms, whereby one word was made to mark a multitude of particular existences; which advantageous use of sounds was obtained only by the difference of ideas they were made signs of: those names becoming general, which are made to stand for general ideas; and those remaining particular, where the ideas they are used for are particular.”²⁴

But how are these general signs formulated? These are made through abstraction. Words become general by separating them from the circumstances of time, and place, and any other ideas that may determine them to their particular existence. By this way of abstraction, they are made capable of representing more individuals than one; each of which having in it a conformity to that abstract idea.²⁵

Locke also allows that words make what he calls “secret reference” to two other things. First, humans want their words to refer to the corresponding ideas in the minds of other humans. Communication would be impossible without the supposition that our words correspond to ideas in the minds of others. Second, humans suppose that their words stand for objects in the world. But Locke is suspicious of these two other ways of understanding signification. He thinks the latter one, in particular, is illegitimate.²⁶ Remember that Locke emphasized that words stand for the ideas and not directly for the objects in the world. Moreover, due to the familiarity and commonality on the usage of language, Locke asserted that words are often used without signification. As the Chapter II, Article VII reads,

²³ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book III, p. 292.

²⁴ Ibid, 289.

²⁵ Ibid, 296.

²⁶ Connolly, Patrick J., “John Locke,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://iep.utm.edu/locke/>.

“Though the proper and immediate signification of words, are ideas in the mind of the speaker; yet, because, by familiar use from our cradles, we come to learn certain articulate sounds very perfectly and have them readily on our tongues, and always at hand in our memories; but yet are not always careful to examine, or settle their significations perfectly, it often happens that men even when they would apply themselves to an inattentive consideration, do set their thoughts more on words than on things. Nay, because words are many of them learned before ideas are known for which they stand; therefore some, not only children, but men, speak several words, no otherwise than parrots do, only because they have learned them, and have been accustomed to those sounds. But so far as words are of use and signification, so far is there a constant connection between the sound and the idea; and a designation, that the one stands for other; without which application of them, they are nothing but so much insignificant noise.”²⁷

The quotation above suggests that the familiarity of words would result to careless or useless utilization of language. Human beings receive thousands of strange words in their minds everyday and these words would somehow be used by them even though they haven't had yet a clear idea about it. It would then also be called as an “ignorant use of words or language.” It would seem that the assertion above contradicts to the view of Locke that man could not use words which basically do not exist in the mind of the agent (an idea). However, Locke just wanted to emphasize that human beings sometimes carelessly use language that they use it without signification. That is why he reduced these kind of agents into a “parrot” which simply receives sounds in their minds without signification of ideas. This is then a preliminary discussion of the abuse of words. If one uses words without signification, there would probably be misunderstanding or miscommunication. Using words without knowing what it really signifies would hinder a successful and effective communication.

After discussing the connection between words and ideas, Locke moved on to the discussion of knowledge. There is a long discussion on ideas and words since they are the fundamental basis or foundation in understanding the connection between knowledge and language. His discussion about ideas led him to knowledge which also gave way to the study of language, for knowledge is composed of propositions and proposition of words.²⁸ For Locke, knowledge is nothing but the perception of agreement and disagreement of any of mans ideas. It then follows that man can have knowledge no farther than he has ideas and that man can have knowledge no farther than he can perceive their agreement and disagreement.²⁹ Remember that it is stated above that the

²⁷ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book III, p. 293.

²⁸ Baykent, Ufuk, “An Introductory Course to Philosophy of Language,” Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016, p. 60.

²⁹ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book IV, p. 398.

connection of ideas is fourfold: identity, co-existence, relation, and real existence. However, their agreement and disagreement can only be clearly formulated through the use of language, that is, proposition. As the Book IV, Chapter VI of his book reads,

“Treating of words necessary to knowledge – Though the examining and judging of ideas by themselves, their names being quite laid aside, be the best and surest way to clear and distinct knowledge; yet through the prevailing custom of using sounds for ideas, I think it is very seldom practiced. Every one may observe how common it is for name to be made use of, instead of ideas themselves, even when men think and reason within their own breasts; especially if the ideas be made very complex, and made up of a great collection of simple ones. This makes the consideration of words and propositions so necessary a part of treatise of knowledge, that it is very hard to speak intelligibly of the one, without explaining the other.”

The quotation above emphasizes the great connection between language and knowledge. Locke asserted that it is difficult to examine the connection of multiple ideas solely by the use of human mind. Due to the complexity and diversity of ideas, man needs to express these beings in words and propositions. It is through this that man can clearly and effectively formulate the connection of different ideas so as to arrive at a certain knowledge. Moreover, Locke asserted that it is difficult to understand general truths without the aid of verbal propositions. For Locke, the general truth, which reason is most sought after, can never be made known, and is very seldom apprehended, but as conceived and expressed in words. It is therefore necessary to inquire into the truth and certainty of universal propositions in examining the nature of human knowledge.³⁰

Locke classified certainty into two: certainty of truth and certainty of knowledge. Certainty of truth are when words are put together in propositions as exactly expresses the agreement and disagreement of the ideas they stand for. Certainty of knowledge, on the other hand, is to perceive the agreement and disagreement of ideas as expressed in propositions. This is also called as knowing or being certain of the truth of any propositions.³¹

To capsulize, language and knowledge are intimately related in the sense that knowledge is composed of propositions and propositions are composed of words. Words are used to convey the precise notions of things and to express, in general propositions, certain and undoubted truths which the mind may set upon, and be satisfied with in its search after true knowledge.³² It would be a huge difficulty of the human mind if it searches for knowledge by solely using the cognitive power. Locke vehemently asserted that it needs the aid of language not only to evidently and intelligibly express the

³⁰ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book IV, P. 444.

³¹ Ibid, 444.

³² Ibid, 348.

disagreement and agreement of multiple ideas (as his definition of knowledge), but also for it to be accessible and sensible to other agents for further examination and investigation. How could one arrive at the general truth if his knowledge or ideas are kept privately on his mind? This is then a good reflection of the principal use of language, that is, for communication. In Locke's sense, it is used to communicate ideas and knowledge. It is through this that there can be an interchange dialogue between the thinking agents so as to arrive at a richer form of knowledge.

Knowing the great connection between knowledge and language, it is then necessary to discuss the abuses and limitations of language. These abuses can affect man's acquisition of knowledge. Hence, this will be the concern of the next section.

III

Having been established the connection between knowledge and language, discussing language's limitations, abuses, and misuses would be very much necessary for it can distort man's acquisition of knowledge. According to Locke, the basic imperfection of words is the doubtfulness of their signification. As the Book III, Chapter IX reads,

“Since sounds have no natural connexion with our ideas, but have all their signification from the arbitrary imposition of men, the doubtfulness and uncertainty of their signification, which is the imperfection we here are speaking of, has its cause more on the ideas they stand for, than in any incapacity there is in one sound more than the another, to signify any idea: for in that regard, they are all equally perfect. That then which makes the doubtfulness and uncertainty of signification of some more than other words, is the difference of ideas they stand for.”³³

The imperfection of knowledge is fundamentally grounded on the conventionality or arbitrariness of the use of language. Locke asserted that since there is no natural connection between words and ideas, human beings can impose their own sound on a certain idea they have. The possibility is that man would use different significations on a single and the same idea. This would be a huge problem since this would result to miscommunication or misunderstanding. Man has the power to create or impose their own signification which would be an obstacle for a successful communication. Man should therefore have the same and common signification and be consistent with the use of it so as to reduce or avoid such imperfection.

Locke moved on to the discussion of the abuses of words. He identified seven common abuses: (1) people often use words without really knowing what these words mean, (2) people use words inconsistently, (3) people purposefully make terms obscure

³³ Locke, John, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book III, p. 349.

by using old words for new and unusual uses or by introducing new terms without defining them, (4) people mistakenly believe that words refer to things rather than ideas, (5) people try to use words incorrectly to change their meaning, (6) people assume that others know what they are saying when they are not really being clear, and (7) the exaggerated use of figurative language.³⁴ The first one refers to the use of words without clear or distinct ideas, or worse, signs which signifies nothing. Secondly, there is that unsteady application of them. Locke said that words, being intended for signs of the ideas, sometimes stand for one thing and sometimes for another which perhaps shows dishonesty. Thirdly, the affected obscurity by wrong application. Accordingly, people either apply old words to new and unusual significations, or introducing new and ambiguous terms without defining either. The fourth one, another great abuse of words, is the act of taking them for things. Remember that words are taken primarily from ideas and not on things. As a result of this kind of abuse, man will establish a firm belief of the perfection of any received hypothesis; whereby they come to be persuaded that the terms of that sect are so suited to the nature of things that they perfectly correspond with their real existence. The fifth one refers to setting the words for the beings which they incorrectly signify. Words are set in the place of things which they do or can by no means signify. The sixth one means that agents assume that others know what they are implying even though they are actually being unclear. Lastly, the use of figurative language is also a form of abusing the use of words. According to Locke, since wit and fancy finds easier entertainment in the world than dry truths and real knowledge, figurative speeches and allusions in language will be admitted as an abuse or imperfection of language. People then will be fascinated by the entertaining words expressed in literary arts like poems, stories, songs, and the like; and probably degrade the value of truths and real knowledge.³⁵

Those imperfections and abuses of words would become an obstacle or hindrance in man's acquisition of true knowledge. Remember that language plays an important role in acquiring knowledge. That is why, Locke provided some remedies so as to avoid and eliminate these abuses; he formulated four remedies. First, man should use no word without having a clear idea. Secondly, to have distinct ideas annexed to them in modes. It is not enough a man uses his words as signs of some ideas; those he annexed them to, if they be simple, must be clear and distinct; if complex, must be determinate, i.e. the precise collection of ideas settled in the mind, with that sound annexed to it, as the sign of that precise determined collection and no other. Thirdly, man should observe propriety in words. Meaning, they should apply their words as near as may be, to such ideas as common use has annexed them to. Fourthly, man should clearly know the meaning of words. Accordingly, it is necessary to ascertain the signification of words, to declare their

³⁴ Spark Notes Editors, "John Locke: 1634-1704)," Spark Notes, <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/johnlocke/section1/page/2/>.

³⁵ Locke, John, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book III, pp. 359-372.

meaning; where either common use has left it uncertain and loose or where the terms being very material in the discourse and that upon which it chiefly turns, is liable to any doubtfulness or mistake.³⁶ Those remedies will somehow reduce or probably eliminate the abuse of words. In that case, language will become conducive to man's acquisition of knowledge.

Conclusion

Locke's approach in understanding the connection between knowledge and language is inductive. He begins by investigating the relationship between words and ideas then to the relationship between knowledge and propositions. Knowledge is composed of propositions and propositions are composed of words. Locke's primary assertion is that words are sensible signs or marks of ideas. It is through words that man can make the immaterial (ideas) a material one so as to become sensible and accessible with other agents. It is fundamentally through language that the men will be able to express and exchange thoughts with each other. Furthermore, Locke emphasized that language is also used to record the thoughts or ideas. After establishing the connection between words and ideas, Locke moved on to the discussion of knowledge. He defined knowledge as the perception of the agreement or disagreement of two ideas. It is then expressed in a form of propositions which are composite of words. Locke further emphasized that propositions are necessary in order to make knowledge much more evident and intelligible so as to arrive at the general truth. Knowing the great connection between knowledge and language, Locke also discussed the abuses and imperfections of words for it can distort and hinder man's acquisition of knowledge. After acknowledging the abuses, Locke proposed remedies so as to address such problems.

The researcher of this paper, after reading Locke's linguistic philosophy, realized the importance of language in man's journey not only towards certain knowledge, but also towards the fundamental object of intellect – the truth. It should be remembered that it is solely through language that man will be able to communicate and relate with other agents. Hence, anything that includes interchange of ideas, thoughts, or knowledge would be impossible without language. There would be no debates, argumentations, synthesis, and the like; all which are conducive towards the enrichment and enhancement of knowledge. Even in the history of philosophy, contradictions and oppositions became the stepping stone for the intellectual development. A world without language would be a world without progress. Human beings would become highly personal or individual that there would happen no intimate connection with each other. Would man be able to acquire knowledge without language? what would be the use of their ideas if not expressed to other agents? Human beings cannot escape the necessity of language. Remember that

³⁶ Locke, John, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," 27th Edition, London Printing Press, 1836, Book III, pp. 373-377.

they are by nature social beings. Locke's linguistic philosophy is a good basis in presenting not only the connection between knowledge and language, but also in deepening man's understanding of language per se. This paper, however, is simply a brief exposition on Locke's theory of language on the grounds of his epistemology. This does not encompass everything about his philosophy. It is recommended that further research should be made for a profound and deeper understanding of the philosophical topic tackled.

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