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Meaning and Publicity

*Edited by Richard N. Manning*

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# SPEAKING YOUR MIND: EXPRESSION IN LOCKE'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

*Lewis Powell*

## *Abstract*

*There is a tension between John Locke's awareness of the fundamental importance of a shared public language and the manner in which his theorizing appears limited to offering a psychologicistic account of the idiolects of individual speakers. I argue that a correct understanding of Locke's central notion of signification can resolve this tension. I start by examining a long standing objection to Locke's view, according to which his theory of meaning systematically gets the subject matter of our discourse wrong, by making our ideas the meanings of our words. By examining Locke's definition of "truth", I show that Lockean signification is an expression relation, rather than a descriptive or referential relation. Consequently, the sense in which our words signify our ideas is roughly that our utterances advertise our otherwise undisclosed mental lives to each other. While this resolves one aspect of the public/private tension, I close with a brief discussion of the remaining tension, and the role for normative constraints on signification to play in generating a genuinely shared public language.*

## Introduction

John Locke opens book three of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by highlighting the social role of language. It is because we are social creatures, Locke tells us, that we require language. At the same time, the actual account of the workings of language that he offers is hyper-individualized and based in the psychologies of particular speakers. Locke explains the importance to humans of having a shared language, but, in essence, offers a theory on which each speaker has their own idiolect. So, there is a *prima facie* tension between Locke's view of language's fundamentally social *purpose* and his account of its fundamentally individualistic *mechanisms*. In this paper, I show how Locke resolves this tension between the social purpose of language and its individualistic mechanisms.

One of the most common concerns about Locke's theory, from his own day forward, was the objection that his individualistic, psychologicistic account of the meaning of language winds up getting the subject matter of our discourse wrong. Locke has long been accused of incorrectly maintaining that when we

speak, we are always talking about our own ideas and mental states, rather than ever talking about objects and qualities in the external world. If correct, this objection is a major concern for Locke's philosophy of language, as it is untenable to offer an account of language on which all of our assertions are making claims about the contents of our own minds. Fortunately for Locke, this objection turns on a misunderstanding of his views.

In the first section of this paper, I present this "wrong subject matter" objection, found in the writing of Locke's contemporary John Sergeant, which was also offered later by John Stuart Mill, and which continues to be raised as an objection to Locke's account. In section two, I show how a careful reading of Locke's claims about truth show that the objection is misplaced. Locke's theory of language does not render our own minds the constant and essential subject matter of our discourse. Instead, Locke's theory presages an expressivist approach to thinking about language. In the third section of the paper, I turn to a remaining set of worries about how Locke's individualistic psychological account of meaning leaves him with a theory of individual idiolects, and no theory of a common public language. While some thinkers could rest content without accounting for a shared language, Locke's concern for the social nature of communication seem to require him to address this worry. In the conclusion of the paper, I articulate Locke's normative approach to resolving the idiolect problem without positing a genuine public language.

## Section 1: The Wrong Subject Matter Objection

John Locke is one of the few figures of the early modern period to offer an explicit, systematic treatment of the workings of language. The entirety of book three of the *Essay* concerns his account of language, and the very opening of his discussion helps to establish the outlook and orientation of his theorizing:

§1. 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. *Man* therefore had by Nature his Organs so fashioned as to be *fit to frame articulate Sounds*, which we call Words. But this was not enough yet to produce Language; for Parrots, and several other Birds, will be taught to make articulate Sounds distinct enough, which yet, by no means, are capable of Language.

§2. Besides 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 Mind be conveyed from one to another. (*Essay*, 3.1.1–2)

In these two sections Locke establishes some of the most integral and core commitments of his account of language, including both the view that the purpose of language is to allow humans to enter into proper social relationships with one another, as well as the view that the mechanism by which language functions is the use of articulate sounds as outward manifestations of one's thoughts.

According to Locke, the contents and events of one person's mind are obscured from others. But humans are social creatures, and so, cannot flourish in isolation from each other. The primary purpose of language, then, is to act as antidote to our natural state of social isolation, by permitting us to actually share the goings on of our inner lives with each other. Locke then proposes that the way language serves to do this is for an individual's utterances to serve as signs of their thoughts, permitting them to create outward manifestations of their inner lives.

Stated this way, Locke's basic picture has a lot of *prima facie* appeal. However, because of Locke's focus on the social role of language in allowing us to share our mental lives with each other, his primary semantic relationship is one that obtains between words or utterances and an individual speaker's thoughts and ideas. This feature has led to some fairly longstanding criticisms of Locke's views.

To outline the basics of Locke's view: a term like "Elizabeth" will signify your idea ELIZABETH.<sup>1</sup> And a term like "human" will signify your idea HUMAN. In general, substantive terms will signify ideas. A word like "is" (or "is not") on the other hand, will signify an act of the mind, like affirming (or denying).<sup>2</sup> So the sentence "Elizabeth is human" signifies affirming HUMAN of ELIZABETH. A slightly less cumbersome way to phrase this would be to say that the sentence "Elizabeth is human" signifies the judgment/belief that Elizabeth is human.

In Locke's own day, John Sergeant offered what I term the "wrong subject matter" objection against his idea-based theory of meaning, with a similar objec-

1 I here adapt a convention, common to contemporary philosophy of mind, of designating ideas or concepts with all caps.

2 These positions are outlined straightforwardly in *Essay* 3.1 (for substantive terms) and 3.7.1 (for the copula).

tion offered later by Mill, and still offered casually today.<sup>3</sup> Here is Sergeant's presentation of the objection:

16. It may be perhaps replied, that the *Ideas* are only meant by the *Words*; because when we speak, we intend [Note: *Proof* 10th. Because when the thing it self is *intended* to be made known, the *Thing it self* is the *first meaning*, or *what is first meant* by the words. ] to signify our Thoughts. I answer, that, however it may be pretended that what is meant *immediately* by the words, is our *Thoughts*, when our *own Thoughts* or Judgments about any matter, are the things desir'd to be known; yet, when the *Things* are the Objects enquired after, as, when a Master teaches a Scholler *Natural Philosophy*, or any other *Truth*, the Intention of the Speakers does primarily *aym* and *mean* to signify the *Things* or *Truths themselves*; and not our *Thoughts* concerning them; and, therefore, the *Things themselves* are in the *Intention* and *Mind*, or are the *Meanings* of the Speakers, or Discourers. And this passes generally in all other occasions, except only when the Knowledge of our Interiour Thoughts is ultimately aymed at. **Thus, when a Gentleman bids his Servant fetch him a Pint of Wine; he does not mean to bid him fetch the Idea of Wine in his own head, but the Wine it self which is in the Cellar; and the same holds in all our Commerce and Conversation about things without us.** (Sergeant 1697, Preliminary Second [emphasis added])

Sergeant's objection, despite its now-archaic presentation, is clear. When I say "get me the wine" I am asking for someone to retrieve actual wine, not to produce the idea of wine in my mind. Generally when I use the word "wine", unless I am specifically trying to talk about my interior mental life, I am talking about wine itself, not my idea of wine. Here is a slightly more formal presentation of this objection:

Wrong Subject Matter (WSM) Objection:

1. If "Elizabeth" signifies ELIZABETH, then the sentence "Elizabeth is human" is about ELIZABETH, not Elizabeth herself.
2. The sentence "Elizabeth is human" is about Elizabeth herself, not ELIZABETH.
3. So, it is not the case that "Elizabeth" signifies ELIZABETH.

Let us grant premise (2), as it seems extremely plausible. So, the strength of this objection to Locke's view hinges on the strength of premise (1). The WSM objection maintains that "Elizabeth" signifying the idea ELIZABETH means that utterances involving the term are thereby *about* the idea. And this point relies

3 Mill (2006), I.2.1



on the assumption that signification and aboutness will go hand in hand: if the things signified by a sentence are the things the sentence is about, it would be impossible for the Lockean view to escape this objection. So behind premise (1) is something like the principle that signification implies aboutness, and for individual words, that would be something like the principle that they refer to the things they signify.

Locke doesn't give us an explicit account of aboutness, making it harder to identify directly whether this is a principle Locke would subscribe to. However, there is still good reason to find this assumption questionable, and it has been questioned by a number of Locke scholars. Norman Kretzmann (1968) has argued that ideas on Locke's theory of meaning function more like Fregean senses than referents (and thus, would not necessarily go hand in hand with "aboutness"). EJ Ashworth (1981), Paul Guyer (1994) and Walter Ott (2003) have also argued that that the sense of signification which Locke is using, inherited from ancient, medieval, or other early modern sources, does not track reference (and thus would not track aboutness). One notable exception is Michael Lososky (2007), who grants that, for Locke, names refer to ideas, but attempts to defend the plausibility of such a view.

My own interpretation differs in some important ways from those of Kretzmann, Ashworth, Guyer, and Ott but, importantly, aligns on this issue: that a term signifies something, for Locke, does not mean the term refers to that thing, or that utterances involving the term are automatically *about* the thing signified.

So, the plan is to avoid the objection by denying premise (1). However, in order for this to be a successful reply to the objection, it is important to provide a sustainable account of how Locke avoids commitment to (1). And here, it is helpful to outline a positive account of Lockean signification.

## Section 2: Locke's Expressivist Account of Meaning And Assertion

In this section, I will show how Locke articulates what I term a sincerity-conditional semantic theory. Many contemporary semantic theories we are familiar with are primarily in the business of providing *truth conditions* for sentences. The meaning assigned to a sentence on such accounts may be the truth conditions themselves, or a proposition which maps directly on to some truth conditions, or the like. If one is accustomed to such a perspective, it is natural to look at what Locke assigns as the meanings of sentences, and attri-

bute to him a confusion about the subject matter of our discourse. Against that background perspective, if someone proposes that the meaning of the sentence “Elizabeth is human” is the belief that Elizabeth is human, rather than the state of affairs of Elizabeth being human, or a third-realm proposition that Elizabeth is human, or a function from worlds where Elizabeth is human to the value “true”, it is natural to think that Locke’s account of the meaning of the sentence will get the result that the sentence is true provided the speaker has that belief, rather than it being true provided that Elizabeth is a human being. But this way of interpreting his view deeply misunderstands the relationship Locke sees between language and mind.

For Locke, the role of language is to help us advertise our otherwise undisclosed mental states to others. So when someone utters the sentence “Elizabeth is a human” the thing that Locke’s account treats as having primary importance is the relationship between the speaker and the psychological state they are attempting to put on display. The WSM objection effectively assumes that Locke’s account does so by making the sentence *describe* the speaker’s mental state. But, describing and displaying are different. Their difference is similar to the difference between:

- 1: I am feeling pain.
- 2: Ouch!

These two sentences are arguably related to the same mental state (a first personal pain sensation), but they differ in that the former straightforwardly describes oneself as having that mental state, while the other one seems to be an utterance we can make sense of because, typically, the person who (sincerely) says it is in that mental state. But they are not describing themselves as being in that mental state by saying “ouch”, they are merely allowing it to have an outward manifestation.<sup>4</sup>

So now, compare these two sentences, for Locke:

- 3: I believe that Elizabeth is a human.
- 4: Elizabeth is a human.

The defense of Locke here is that (3) and (4), like (1) and (2), can be related to the same mental state (a belief that Elizabeth is a human). But, whereas (3) describes that mental state, (4) displays, manifests, or expresses it. In other

4 This distinction is familiar in much contemporary literature on expressivism, See, for example, Schroeder (2008).

words, when someone utters (4), they have done so in order to advertise being in that mental state. They are not *talking about* that mental state, they are, instead, *giving voice to* that mental state.<sup>5</sup>

Locke's fundamental semantic interest isn't in the descriptive facet of language, it is in language's power to advertise or display what is going on in our head. Locke's account of the meaning of a sentence doesn't map a sentence to its truth conditions, rather it maps the sentence to the mental state that one is advertising through uttering that sentence, which I'll term the sentence's *sincerity conditions*.

If we think about the meanings of the sentences as their sincerity conditions, we can see why having the meaning of a given sentence be a judgment does not automatically involve getting the subject matter wrong. Instead, Locke is taking a stance on a different relationship than the one that Sergeant seems to be concerned with.<sup>6</sup>

Showing that the utterance isn't about my own judgment is one thing, but it is a further step to show how Locke's theory can secure the result that the utterance is in fact about Elizabeth. As mentioned, Locke doesn't offer an account of aboutness. He does, however, offer us a reasonably robust discussion of truth. And for the relevant issue here, that serves our purposes well. We can see whether Locke delivers on premise (2) by seeing what his account of truth would say about the truth conditions for a sentence like "Elizabeth is human".

Here is Locke's general definition of truth:

§2 *Truth* then seems to me, in the proper import of the Word, to signify nothing but *the joining or separating of Signs, as the Things signified by them, do agree or disagree one with another*. The *joining or separating* of signs here meant is what by another name, we call Proposition. So that Truth properly belongs only to Propositions: whereof there are two sorts, *viz.* Mental and Verbal; as there are two sorts of Signs commonly made use of, *viz.* *Ideas* and Words. (*Essay*, 4.5.2)

Here we get a sort of correspondence account of truth. A joining (or separat-

- 5 The difference between this approach and Ashworth's "making known" is subtle, but significant. Ashworth's interpretation includes in the signification of a word/sentence a great deal more than just the idea/thought being displayed.
- 6 It is worth noting that Sergeant's objection dealt with an imperative sentence, and everything I am saying here is focused on declaratives. The point I am making can be generalized fairly easily. As an example, if imperative sentences are used to display desires (rather than beliefs) we can see how the reply to Sergeant would go: my utterance "(you) bring me the wine" signifies a desire of mine built out of my idea of the addressee, my idea of the wine, my idea of the act of bringing, and my idea of myself. That's not to say the desire is about my ideas, but that it is built out of them.

ing) of signs – a proposition – is true just in case the the things signified by the signs agree (or disagree) with one another. So, propositions join (or separate) signs, and the things signified by those signs stand in relations of agreement (and disagreement). If the signs are joined, and the things signified agree, the proposition is true. And, if the signs are separated, and the things signified disagree, then the proposition is true. Otherwise, the proposition will not be true. Importantly, Locke distinguishes between two types of propositions here, mental and verbal. As Locke clarifies in 4.5.5, mental propositions are composed of ideas, and (many) ideas signify objects in the world, while verbal propositions, on the other hand, are composed of words and words signify ideas. So far all that has been said, there is still room for the Sergeant/Mill worry: my relevant beliefs may be directly about the world, but my utterances might not turn out to be about the world (they may even still turn out to be about my beliefs). However, looking to Locke’s further elaboration on these two types of truth, we can see that this is not the case:

§6 [ . . . ] When *Ideas* are so put together, or separated in the Mind, as they, or the Things they stand for do agree, or not, that is, as I may call it, *mental Truth*. But *Truth of Words* is something more, and that is the affirming or denying of Words one of another, as the *Ideas* they stand for agree or disagree: And this again is twofold. Either *purely Verbal*, and trifling, which I shall speak of, or *Real* and instructive; which is the Object of that real Knowledge, which we have spoken of already. (*Essay*, 4.5.6)

Locke’s treatment of mental truth here is very brief. A judgment is mentally true just in case the ideas joined (separated) in it, or the things they stand for, agree (disagree).<sup>7</sup> As to the truth of words, Locke tells us that it is “the affirming or denying of Words one of another as the Ideas they stand for agree or disagree”. Here we see that the account for an utterance like “Elizabeth is human” will affirm “human” of “Elizabeth” which will then be true provided that our idea HUMAN agrees with our idea ELIZABETH.

What is crucial to appreciate here about Locke’s account is that there are two relevant pairs of concepts being deployed: joining/separating, and agreement/disagreement. For Locke, a verbal proposition is true when the verbal signs are joined (separated) in parallel with the agreement (disagreement) of the ideas signified, *not* when words are joined (separated) in parallel with the joining (separating) of the ideas signified. So, as I argued above, an utterance of “Elizabeth is human” isn’t made true by the speaker having the belief that

7 The disjunction here is to cover the case of ideas without archetypes (Pegasus, Centaurs, etc.). In such cases, the agreements will terminate with the ideas themselves, rather than depending on some further agreement between the objects, since there are no objects.

Elizabeth is human. Instead, it is made true by some concordance between the speaker's idea ELIZABETH and their idea HUMAN.<sup>8</sup> In fact, a few sections later (4.5.II), Locke defines a concept of "moral truth" (not in the sense of the truths of morality, but rather a morally relevant definition of truth) as "speaking Things according to the persuasion of our own Minds, though the Proposition we speak agree not to the reality of Things". This is a definition of what we'd more likely call honesty, and Locke specifically distinguishes it from his account of "the truth of words". One way to put my proposal is that the core of Locke's account of language tells you what it takes to utter a sentence honestly, rather than what it takes for an utterance of it to be true. The truth conditions will be a secondary feature, derived from this primary assignment of sincerity conditions.<sup>9</sup>

To summarize: "Elizabeth is human" is a verbal proposition, composed of "Elizabeth" signifying the idea ELIZABETH, "human" signifying the idea HUMAN, and "is" signifying the act of affirmation or the joining of those two ideas. The whole thing signifies a judgment joining HUMAN and ELIZABETH. But for "Elizabeth is human" to be true, requires that HUMAN and ELIZABETH agree with each other, not that they have been joined by the speaker. And for HUMAN and ELIZABETH to agree with each other requires that the things they stand for agree with each other (namely Elizabeth and the astra idea HUMAN). Setting aside whether Locke winds up having the right truth conditions for the belief that Elizabeth is human, the general structure of his account of verbal truth seems correct, here: the truth conditions for the sentence "Elizabeth is human" and the judgement that Elizabeth is human wind up being the same, systematically. And this seems right. The truth conditions of your utterances should match the beliefs you are displaying by making such utterances.<sup>10</sup> And this, it is clear, his account captures.

However, there is one remaining related concern, which will be the focus of the next section. So far, we've been ignoring the fact that my idea ELIZABETH and your idea ELIZABETH might be different in their particulars. Locke talks explicitly about people having different qualities built in to their idea of gold

8 My treatment of Lockean judgments here is cursory and oversimplified in some ways. For a better, more thorough treatment of Locke's account of judgment, see Smalligan-Marusic (2014).

9 By advertising your belief that Elizabeth is human, you have publicly put yourself on the hook for possessing that belief, and can be held to account or challenged by someone with a contradictory belief. On this account, assertion is the result of publicizing one's beliefs.

10 Other approaches can obviously capture this systematic alignment in the other direction: because the sentence has certain truth-conditions, believing what you say means that you would only utter it if you possessed the belief that has those truth conditions.

or of swans, and the same thing will go for ideas of individual people, or really, any of our ideas. At first glance, this means we would all be speaking subtly different languages, and talking past each other constantly. If it is part of my idea of Elizabeth that she was 30 feet tall, then my utterance of “Elizabeth is 30 feet tall” would turn out to be true, rather than false. And that seems like the wrong result.

### Section 3: The Problem of Idiolects

Locke’s theory, as it has been so far laid out, looks like it fundamentally offers an account of individual idiolects.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Locke even implicitly recognizes this when describing our ideas of swans as an example of complex ideas of substances (emphasis added):

Thus the *Idea* which an *English*-man signifies by the Name *Swan* is white Colour, long Neck, red Beak, black Legs, and whole Feet, and all these of a certain size, with a power of swimming in the Water, and making a certain kind of Noise, **and, perhaps, to a Man, who has long observed those kind of Birds, some other Properties**, which all terminate in sensible simple *Ideas*, all united in one common subject. (*Essay*, 2.24.14)

We can use this case to lay out the concern for Locke’s view. Consider four individuals, First, Locke’s standard Englishman (the layperson), and his swan observer (the expert). Let’s also consider someone with an underdeveloped views of swans (the novice) and someone with mistaken views of swans (the bungler). So, the idea that the first signifies by the term “swan” is composed of the qualities enumerated by Locke in the passage above. The idea that the second signifies by the term is composed of all of those, plus some extra qualities common to swans (e.g. that they are largely herbivorous). The idea the third signifies by the term is composed of a partial subset of the qualities Locke enumerated (omitting the redness of the beak). And the idea the the fourth signifies by the term includes all those enumerated by Locke, and also some qualities not actually possessed by swans (e.g. that they can breathe underwater).

Let’s examine what the view of truth outlined in the last section seems to commit Locke to for utterances of some swan related sentences by these four:

SI. Swans are white.

<sup>11</sup> A somewhat similar worry to the one developed here is presented in Stainton (1996), p. 101.

- S2. Swans have red beaks.
- S3. Swans are mostly herbivorous.
- S4. Swans are able to breathe underwater.

It seems that regardless of which of the four utters (S1), it will turn out true. All of them signify an idea by “swan” that agrees with the idea WHITE. The layperson, the expert, and even the bungler would also clearly speak truly when they utter (S2), though we don't yet know what Locke would say about the novice's utterance here, because while the sort of agreement between ideas that is involved when the one idea is partially composing the other is clearly sufficient, we haven't established what else could be sufficient for the ideas to agree. Similarly, the expert's uttering (S3) is clearly true on the account we have so far, but it is as yet unclear how to assess whether anyone else speaks truly in uttering it. And lastly, it seems like Locke is committed to saying the bungler speaks truly when uttering (S4), and though we need to know more to decisively assess this, it is unlikely that any of the other three would speak truly by uttering (S4).

However, even merely allowing that the bungler can utter (S4) truly is sufficient to raise this worry. Locke's view is obviously going to be a non-starter if the swan *expert* speaks truly in saying “Swans are able to breathe underwater”. But that would mean that when the bungler utters that sentence, and the expert says “Swans are not able to breathe underwater”, the two are talking past each other, because they are effectively speaking different languages. The bungler is saying a true thing about a fictional type of bird, while the expert is denying a false claim about an actual species.

An ideal treatment would have room for error in addition to ignorance. We want a view on which all four people are speaking the same language, and so, a view on which the truth-value of the four sentences above doesn't depend on which of the four is speaking. And there is a special challenge for Locke in offering such a view, because of Locke's specific focus on language's role for displaying the contents of our minds to others. So, *prima facie*, the utterances of the bungler *should* be signifying the idea he possesses.

Interestingly, Locke has the resources to develop a view on which he could offer a reply that maintains that the bungler *both* signifies his bungled idea and that he utters something false when he speaks, though it is not clear that he ultimately offers such a reply. Towards the end of the second book of the *Essay* Locke outlines several pairs of contrasting attributes which can be (in

some sense) applied to ideas.<sup>12</sup> Significant for our purposes is the contrast he draws between real and fantastical ideas, and the discussion of true and false ideas.

With respect to the first, the bungler's idea is fantastical, rather than real, because there is no external archetype for his idea of a long-necked, red-beaked (...) white bird *that breathes water*. Locke would say that, at best, the Bungler is believing (and thus) saying something on a par with claims about centaurs and gorgons. But this is not good enough for our purposes, as it does nothing to render anything about the claim false.

At the same time, it is helpful in explaining how Locke can get the intuitively correct results for the novice's utterance of (S<sub>2</sub>) and both the novice and layperson's utterances of (S<sub>3</sub>). Because the other three all do have ideas with an external archetype, Locke can appeal to the actual co-existence of red-beakedness and herbivorousness with the other qualities that are in their ideas of swans to explain why their swan ideas in fact agree with the ideas of herbivorousness and red-beakedness.<sup>13</sup>

However, this real/fantastical distinction will only help with ideas of substances (swans, humans). If the dispute concerns ideas of modes, which don't require external archetypes, there would be no distinction to be drawn, as the direction of fit is reversed. So, Locke's distinction between true and false ideas is much more helpful for a general response to the worry:

§1 THOUGH Truth and Falshood belong, in Propriety of Speech, only to Propositions; yet *Ideas* are oftentimes termed *true or false* (as what Words are there, that are not used with great Latitude, and with some deviation from their strict and proper Significations?) Though, I think, that when *Ideas* themselves are termed true or false, there is still some secret or tacit Proposition, which is the Foundation of that Denomination: as we shall see, if we examine the particular Occasions, wherein they come to be called true or false. (*Essay*, 2.32.1)

Ideas are never, strictly speaking, true or false. But we do sometimes label them true or false, and Locke here claims that this is done only when there is an accompanying proposition or judgment which is itself genuinely false. Locke goes on to outline the two primary ways in which ideas are rendered false in this derivative sense:

§4 When-ever the Mind refers any of its *Ideas* to any thing extraneous to

12 These pairings are: clarity/obscurity, distinctness/confusion, real/fantastical, adequate/inadequate, and true/false.

13 It is unsurprising that agreement between ideas is not a purely internal relation between them, since Locke does not think that all truths are *a priori*.



them, they are then *capable to be called true or false*. Because the Mind in such a reference, makes a tacit Supposition of their Conformity to that Thing; which Supposition, as it happens to be *true or false*; so the *Ideas* themselves come to be denominated. The most usual Cases wherein this happens, are these following:

§5 *First*, When the Mind supposes any *Idea* it has, *conformable to* that in *other Men's* Minds called by the same common Name; *v.g.* when the Mind intends, or judges its *Ideas of Justice, Temperance, Religion*, to be the same, with what other Men give those Names to. *Secondly*, When the Mind supposes any *Idea* it has in it self, to be *conformable to some real Existence*. Thus the two *Ideas*, of a Man, and a Centaur, supposed to be the *Ideas* of real Substances, are the one *true*, and the other *false*; the one having a Conformity to what has really existed; the other not. *Thirdly*, When the Mind *refers* any of its *Ideas* to that *real Constitution*, and *Essence* of any thing, whereon all its Properties depend: and thus the greatest part, if not all our *Ideas* of Substances, are *false*. (*Essay*, 2.32.4–5)

Here, Locke tells us that the main judgments that accompany ideas permitting them to become (derivatively) true or false are (a) when one assumes that the idea they signify by a name is conformable to the idea that other people signify by that name, (b) when one assumes that the idea in question is conformable to some really really existing thing, and (c) when one assumes that the idea captures the things real essence. This last one is largely irrelevant for our purposes here, but the first two both seem applicable to the case of the bungler: the bungler *is* tacitly assuming that their idea SWAN corresponds to other people's idea SWAN, and that their idea SWAN corresponds to certain actual long-necked white birds out in the world.

Locke's take on the bungler's utterance then is that the bungler signifies their judgment that BREATHE UNDERWATER agrees with *their idea* SWAN, and that that judgment is, in isolation, true, but their idea SWAN is doubly false, neither corresponding to other people's use of "swan" nor to reality. Locke doesn't tell us that these tacit judgments are in fact conveyed, signified or displayed by the bungler's utterance of the sentence. That view would roughly amount to the idea that most utterances express a conjunction of beliefs, including a belief that the words you just used signify corresponding ideas to the ones other people used as well as a belief that your ideas correspond to things out in the world. And so the utterance by the bungler would be overall false because it amounts to a conjunction of one true (irrelevant, fantastical belief) and two false beliefs about their idea SWAN. Instead, Locke seems to take the stand that the bungler's utterance was true in his idiolect, but that there are some important/relevant false beliefs involved in the bungler's overall situation.

So, as it has been presented here, Locke's view accepts the counterintuitive consequence that the bungler has said something true in this case, but attempts

to mitigate that consequence by pointing out the related falsities in the beliefs of the speaker. But if the bungler simply didn't have views about what other people's ideas of swans were like (or vandalism, if we want to use an example of a mode), they'd escape the falsity Locke is able to identify here. But if we are each speaking our own individual languages, how can Locke offer any criticism of a speaker like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty,<sup>14</sup> who intentionally uses words in a manner indifferent to their commonly accepted meanings?

## Conclusion: A Lockean Public Language?

William Lycan (2008) provides a nice statement of just this concern as an objection to ideational theories of meaning:

Meaning is a public, intersubjective, social phenomenon. An English word has the meaning it does for the entire community of English speakers, even if some members of that community happen not to understand that word. But ideas, images, and feelings in the mind are not intersubjective in that way; they are subjective, held only in the minds of individual persons, and they differ from person to person depending on one's total mental state and background. Therefore, meanings are not ideas in the mind. (Lycan 2008, p. 68)

Here, I think the best way to understand Locke's avenue for reply involves recognizing that the social purpose of language produces normative force for speakers.<sup>15</sup> Simply put: if the primary goal of speaking is to disclose the contents of your mind to others, you have good reason to try to coordinate the signification of your terms with them. As Locke puts it in his discussion of the abuses of language:

§29 [ . . . ] He that applies the Words of any Language to *Ideas*, different from those, to which the common use of that Country applies them, however his own Understanding may be fill'd with Truth and Light, will not by such Words be able to convey much of it to others, without defining his Terms. For however, the Sounds are such as are familiarly known, and easily enter the Ears of those who are accustomed to them; yet standing for other *Ideas* than those they usually are annexed to, and are wont to excite in the Mind of the Hearers, they cannot make known the Thoughts of him who thus uses them. (*Essay*, 3.10.29)

<sup>14</sup> Carroll, 1872.

<sup>15</sup> Ott (2004) notes that there is normativity here, but does not elaborate on its role in coordinating our usage.

I think this fairly plausible point from Locke is why he is not concerned with generating a full account of a public language of the sort Lycan describes. Having a public language would allow Locke to say that Humpty Dumpty is speaking falsely, but Locke's view is rather that Humpty Dumpty's use of language is impractical. Locke doesn't need his utterances to be false; the important complaint is that Humpty Dumpty's meaning is opaque to his audience. And if the point of his uttering something is to give us a glimpse of what's going on in his head, then he's not going to succeed – unless he explains what he means by the words (or, more effectively) conforms his signification to that of other speakers. So, for Locke, speakers are normatively encouraged to seek as much overlap as possible in the constellation of their individual idiolects.<sup>16</sup> One could even say that when there is a certain critical mass of overlap, that becomes the meaning of the term in some public language, but the background normative system will do the actual work of explaining what Humpty Dumpty and the bungler are doing wrong.<sup>17</sup> So, for Locke, the individualist mechanics of language are prerequisites for achieving its social purpose, but they can function in isolation. The social purpose further provides norms on how to communicate effectively, and those norms are what do the work of encouraging us to speak language the same way.

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- 16 Losonsky (2007) discusses this, pessimistically, under the heading of "rectification", however the sense of "rectification" he is concerned with includes not just inter-speaker coordination, but accurate tracking of how our ideas correspond to the external world. The former is the major concern for the problem of idiolects, while the latter is the source of the bulk of Locke's pessimism about rectification.
- 17 On this sort of proposal claims about what a sentence says in the public language are going to more or less amount to complex statistical/sociological claims about pluralities of speakers. Interestingly, unless we add some further apparatus to this view, it also tells us that the *expert* is doing something wrong, by including more in their idea than the common person does. Specifically, the expert is likely to take as obvious certain swan claims that others will not find obvious at all.

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