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Locke's Linguistic Turn

The genesis of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century has been characterized as “the linguistic turn” in the history of philosophy. It is true that a philosophical movement emerged in the beginning of this century that drew on the groundbreaking work of the philosopher and logician Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) and held that “philosophical problems may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about language we presently use.”¹ Nevertheless, the definite article in “the linguistic turn” is inappropriate because there were other significant turns to language besides Frege’s.

Language was as central to the Prague Linguistic Circle as it was to the Vienna Circle, and the Prague Circle was also interdisciplinary, including not only linguists but also literary critics, anthropologists, and philosophers (Steiner 1982, ix–xii and 83). Rooted in Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857–1913) groundbreaking theory of language, the “Theses of the Prague Circle” was an important milestone in the history of structuralism and had a profound influence on European thought. The idea that language and its structural properties are appropriate models for understanding other fields of study, including philosophy,

¹ See Rorty 1967; 1992, 3. Other statements of the fundamental tenet of what is also known as “linguistic philosophy” include “the theory of [linguistic] meaning is the fundamental part of philosophy which underlies all others” (Dummett 1973, 669); philosophy “should be defined... as the *pursuit of meaning*,” namely the meaning of propositions (Schlick 1932, 48); “a great part of philosophy can be reduced to something that may be called ‘syntax’” (Russell 1945, 830); “the business of philosophy, as I conceive it, is essentially that of logical analysis” (Russell 1988, 9:176); “a careful study of language may lead to positive philosophical conclusions” (Copi 1949, 65); and “Preoccupation with the theory of meaning could be described as the occupational disease of twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon and Austrian philosophy” (Ryle 1963, 128).

still reverberates in discussions of texts and subtexts. No less influential was the linguistic hypothesis formulated by Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorff (1897–1941) that human languages have incommensurable differences that cause human beings to perceive the world in radically different ways. This hypothesis has been so influential that it is considered a ruling paradigm in the contemporary social sciences. This cannot be said of philosophy, but linguistic relativism has also left important marks on European and North American philosophy.²

Not only was analytic philosophy's linguistic turn one among several in twentieth-century philosophy, but, like all the other contemporary turns to language, it gathered significant momentum from a series of earlier evolutions. Without Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767–1835) turn to the phonological form of a language, Saussure's work is hardly conceivable, and the same is true of Frege and the groundwork for a theory of linguistic meaning laid out by John Stuart Mill (1806–73). Moreover, the turns to language of the twentieth century that still in one form or another play a role today are also culminations of a shared development. Despite their important differences, they have common ancestors. The earliest of these ancestors, and the one that can be credited with making the first linguistic turn not only in the modern period but in the history of philosophy, is John Locke (1632–1704).

Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a recognized epistemological landmark devoted to understanding the nature and limits of human knowledge and doing so in terms of ideas. The concept of ideas plays such a fundamental role in Locke's *Essay* that he apologizes for its frequent use, yet he is also willing to describe his approach as a "new way of ideas." But there is another distinctive feature about this work. Although Locke's primary aim is to use ideas to develop an account of sensation, reflection, perception, memory, knowledge, and the objects of knowledge, the same themes that exercised his successors and critics such as Berkeley, Hume, and Reid, the *Essay* also includes an equally significant turn to human language. Locke devotes an entire book of the *Essay* to language, a work that has justifiably

² On the social science paradigm, compare Pinker 1995, 56–7 and 405–7. The Sapir-Whorff hypothesis plays a role in various forms of linguistic relativism, including the relativism of Feyerabend and Kuhn. The linguistic turns in existentialism and phenomenology, particularly in the works of Heidegger (1944) and Merleau-Ponty (1964), should also be mentioned.

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been called “the first modern treatise devoted specifically to philosophy of language” (Kretzmann 1967, 379; also Kretzmann 1968). But why does Locke turn to language? The answer to this question shows why Locke’s *Essay* marks the beginning of the philosophy of language in the modern period.

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Locke’s book III of the *Essay* has the title “*Of Words*” and begins with a chapter called “Of Words or Language in General.” The preceding book II, “*Of Ideas*,” begins with an account of the mind’s basic elements and operations, such as simple ideas, complex ideas, sensation, reflection, perception, memory, composition, and abstraction, and then continues with an account of some key ideas, such as the ideas of space, power, substance, causality, identity, and difference. Locke concludes this book on the structure of the human understanding with these words:

Having thus given an account of the original, sorts, and extent of our *Ideas*, with several other Considerations, about these . . . Instruments, or Materials, of our Knowledge, the method I at first proposed to my self, would now require, that I should immediately proceed to shew, what use the Understanding makes of them, and what Knowledge we have by them. . . . [B]ut upon nearer approach, I find, that there is so close a connexion between *Ideas* and Words; and our abstract *Ideas*, and general words, have so constant a relation one to 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. (1975, 401, II.29.19)

Locke in fact does postpone the discussion of the nature, extent, and degree of human knowledge to book IV.

This account of the development of the *Essay* is repeated later in Locke’s discussion of the “*Imperfection of Words*”:

I must confess then, that when I first began this Discourse of the Understanding, and a good while after, I had not the least Thought, that any Consideration of Words was at all necessary to it. But when having passed over the Original and Composition of our *Ideas*, I began to examine the Extent and Certainty of our Knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with Words, that unless their force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning Knowledge. (1975, 488, III.9.21)

Locke's claim that he had planned to turn to knowledge right after his discussion of ideas in book II but decided instead to turn to language first is not made for dramatic effect. The earliest known draft of Locke's *Essay*, written in 1671, has very little to say about language. It addresses language primarily in connection with propositions that "are only verball but are not Instructive" (1990, 55). For instance, a Roman might signify with the word *homo* the idea of something rational and risible, and then his utterance in Latin that all men are rational and risible is universally true. But this does not tell us anything about humanity, but only that "this word Homo in his country comprehended" both the idea of rationality and capacity for laughter (1990, 56). But the second draft, written a few months later, already has a much richer discussion of language. In his discussion of substances, Locke recognizes that we use language not only to communicate or to record something but "also even to think upon things" (1990, 166). Yet the second draft also does not have a unified and self-contained discussion of language. Instead, the discussion of language is woven throughout Locke's discussion of substances, kinds, and other classifications, where Locke believes words play a role in our thinking.

Only in the published *Essay* does Locke devote a whole book to language. Even the third known draft of the *Essay*, written in 1685, does not contain a book on language. However, the last paragraph of Draft C already matches the last paragraph of the published *Essay*. Locke announces in Draft C that after having discussed

the instruments or matter of our knowledge it will probably now be expected that I should immediately proceed to shew what knowledge we have by them. This was that I confesse I at first proposd to my self & thought would be my next & only worke as soon as I had dispatcht the Consideration of our Ideas. But when I began to apply my self to that which was my chief end viz what use the understanding made of these Ideas & what knowledge it attaind by them I found words by constant use soe neare a Connection with them & were by inadvertency soe often put for our Ideas that it was impossible to speake clearly & distinctly of our knowledge which all Consists in propositions without considering first the nature use and signification of language which therefor must be the business of my next booke.³

³ I am very much indebted to John Rogers for information about Draft C.

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This strongly suggests that it was during the writing of this draft that Locke came to believe that language was so important that he needed to insert a distinct section on language before he could go on to discuss the nature, degree, and extent of human cognition.

The seeds for this decision, however, were already sown in the second draft of the *Essay*, where Locke writes that human beings use language not only to communicate and record, but “also even to think upon things” (1990, 166). That language is needed for thinking, particularly “to comprehend several particular Things” – that is, to think about “a multitude of particular existences” (1975, 402, III.1.3) – becomes a central thesis in the *Essay*. This concept is so important for Locke that in the concluding chapter of the *Essay*, where he gives his overall “Division of the Sciences,” he recommends that one of the three branches of science is “σημειωτική, or the Doctrine of Signs, the most usual whereof being Words” (1975, 720, III.21.4). This branch of science is concerned with “the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for the understanding of things” (ibid.).

That Locke had expressly connected epistemology to semantic inquiry has been recognized as a new and unique contribution of Locke’s *Essay* (Kretzmann 1967, 379). Of course, the stature of Locke’s *Essay* as a philosophical masterpiece that “inaugurates an ‘epistemological turn’ which was to launch philosophy on the road to Kant” is beyond all doubt (Jolley 1999, 14). It has also been noticed that Locke has very practical reasons for engaging in, to use Hume’s words, “abstruse philosophy” (Hume 1996, 1:3). It is not an exaggeration to say that “Locke intended his epistemology as a solution to the crisis of the fracturing of the moral and religious tradition of Europe at the beginnings of modernity” (Wolterstorff 1996, 227). Locke begins his inquiry into the human understanding because “five or six friends” who regularly met in his apartment ran into “doubts” and “difficulties” that, Locke writes, could be resolved only after an examination of “what Objects our Understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with” (1975, 7, Epistle). The topic of these discussions is not known with certainty, but it is highly probable that they were discussing morality and religion (Woolhouse 1983, 7–8). Locke came to believe that in certain areas, particularly morality, religion, metaphysics, and also science, human beings “extended their Enquiries beyond their Capacities” (1975, 47, I.1.7). The task of the *Essay* was to show what our cognitive capacities are, or how far they can reach, and thus avoid the many disputes that Locke thought marked his age.

But what is frequently overlooked in assessing Locke's philosophy is that his epistemic concerns do not lead him straightaway to discuss justification, belief, and knowledge. Only in the last book of the *Essay*, book IV, does Locke turn to the theory of knowledge. What precedes Locke's epistemology is a theory of mind in book II devoted to the elements and operations of the human understanding.

This psychological turn marks the opening sentences of the *Essay*. Locke writes that he is going to begin by investigating human understanding, which, like the eye, "takes no notice of itself" and requires "Art and Pains to set it at a distance, and make it its own Object" (1975, 43, I.1.1). Locke turns to the human mind because he believes that to know the limits and extent of human cognitive capacities, one needs to know something about how cognition works: "This was that which gave the first *Rise* to this *Essay* concerning the Understanding. For I thought that the first Step towards satisfying several Enquiries, the Mind of Man was very apt to run into, was, to take a Survey of our own Understandings, examine our Powers, and see to what Things they were adapted" (1975, 46–7, I.1.7). That epistemology must rely on psychology is a basic assumption of Locke's *Essay*. Therefore it is a misunderstanding of Locke's project to suppose that he is confusing epistemology and psychology, as some have argued.⁴ Locke fully understands the difference between the psychological inquiry of books I and II and the epistemic questions concerning justification in book IV.

In sum, Locke's epistemological turn is combined with a psychological turn, and Locke's psychological interests lead him in the first instance to language. So an important feature of Locke's linguistic interests is that it is tied not only to epistemic concerns but also to his psychological inquiries. As Locke writes, he turns to language because after his psychological investigations, that is, after examining "Instruments, or Materials, of our Knowledge," he realized he cannot discuss epistemology (i.e., "proceed to shew, what use the Understanding makes of them, and what Knowledge we have by them") until he looks at language (1975, 401, II.33.19).

⁴ Kant was the first philosopher to accuse Locke of confusing questions of fact with questions of justification. He writes that Locke does a "physiology of the human understanding" (Kant 1904, 4:Aix), and a "physiological derivation . . . cannot strictly be called a deduction" (Kant 1904, 4:A87).

Psychology and Philosophy of Mind

Before we examine Locke's linguistic turn more closely, it is important to be clear about the nature of Locke's psychological turn. He does not care about the biology of the mind: he will not "meddle with the Physical Consideration of the Mind" or study "by what Motions of our Spirits, or Alterations of our Bodies, we come to have any Sensations by our Organs, or any *Ideas* in our Understandings" (1975, 43, I.1.2). He will also not discuss the traditional mind-body problem: "I shall not . . . trouble my self to examine, wherein [the mind's] Essence consists" and whether "*Ideas* do in their Formation, any, or all of them, depend on Matter, or no." Instead, Locke announces that he will "consider the discerning Faculties of a Man, as they are employ'd about the Objects, which they have to do with" (1975, 43–4, I.1.2).

Locke believes he can consider the "discerning faculties" without examining the physical properties of the brain. To understand what he has in mind, it is useful to look at what Locke means by "faculty." Locke is not fully comfortable with this term because he believes that referring to various faculties of the mind suggests that the mind has distinct agents responsible for its various powers. Claims that the human intellectual faculty is responsible for cognition or that the elective faculty, or will, is responsible for human conation do not advance knowledge, he maintains (1975, 243, II.21.20). Nevertheless, Locke recommends keeping the term "faculty" because it is widely used but emphasizes that he is *not* using it to refer to "distinct Agents" responsible for distinct capacities or abilities such as cognition, conation, and digestion.⁵ For Locke, "*Faculty, Ability, and Power* . . . are but different names for the same things" (1975, 244, II.21.20).

What Locke aims to examine are certain powers or abilities of the mind – the discerning powers – that we are aware of without knowing anything about the mind's physical structure. We exercise these powers consciously and are able to experience them in our own case. Specifically, he wants to consider the discerning powers, which he characterizes later in the *Essay* as the capacity to distinguish and identify ideas (1975, 155, II.11.1). Discernment, however, is only one among several

⁵ This suggests that Locke would reject the modularity thesis, namely that the mind is a collection of semiautonomous agencies (Gazzaniga 1985) or independent processing systems devoted to well-defined tasks, such as language acquisition or memory (Chomsky 1980; Fodor 1983).

mental capacities we have, so Locke appears caught in one of the many discrepancies of the *Essay*, which was written and rewritten over the span of almost two decades. Nevertheless, Locke's intentions are clear. Human beings are conscious of certain powers that, broadly speaking, are the powers that characterize the human understanding. These powers include abilities such as recognizing, distinguishing, comparing, and remembering things, and Locke aims to examine these more closely.

Locke's interest in the mind's powers from a first-person point of view suggests that he is also concerned with what might reasonably be called a "phenomenology of mind." Relying on introspection or reflection, Locke describes mental phenomena and analyzes them into their apparent components. Locke can also be described as doing what has been called "descriptive metaphysics" (Strawson 1959, xiii). He is, to use Strawson's terminology, describing the "actual structure of our thought about the world," namely that part of the world inhabited by human minds. So Locke's aim is to give an empirical theory of the mind, but the empirical evidence he uses is subjective. For Locke, empirical evidence is not limited to objective, publicly accessible evidence (Searle 1987). Because he does rely on first-person evidence, however, Locke's psychological project is not sharply distinguished from what today we might think of as the philosophy of mind.

Locke's linguistic turn, then, has two significant features. First, it is tied to his epistemology. To understand the scope of human knowledge, we need to understand human language. Second, it is tied to his psychology and philosophy of mind. Language is relevant to human knowledge because language plays a crucial role in how we think about the world, and this feature is something we can recognize in our own case.

Knowledge and Propositions

As we saw, Locke turns to language because he believes "there is so close a connexion between *Ideas* and *Words*" (1975, 401, II.33.19). One reason for this close connection, according to Locke, is that all human knowledge "consists in Propositions" (ibid. and 488, III.9.21). Although Locke believes that propositions can be either mental or verbal because "there are two sorts of Signs commonly made use of" in propositions, namely ideas and words (1975, 574, IV.5.2), verbal propositions are what Locke has in mind here.

Locke gives several reasons for why he had to consider verbal propositions more closely. First, treating verbal propositions separately is very

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difficult because they must be used when discussing mental propositions, “and then the Instances given of *Mental Propositions*, cease immediately to be barely Mental, *and* become *Verbal*” (1975, 574, IV.5.3). To consider a mental proposition, one would have to consider only ideas without any words, and once we express a proposition using language, the mental proposition ceases to be pure. Locke believes that once language is used to express a proposition, the words of the verbal proposition come to replace the ideas not only in our discussion but also in our thinking about the proposition.

The second problem is more serious because it affects human thinking not just in the special case where we are talking or writing about propositions. Most human beings, if not all, Locke writes, “in their Thinking and Reasonings within themselves, make use of Words instead of *Ideas*” (1975, 574, IV.5.4). This occurs primarily when people have thoughts involving complex ideas. As is well known, Locke distinguishes between simple ideas that are received passively and complex ideas that are products of the workmanship of the understanding (1975, 163, II.12.1; Losonsky 1989). In a complex idea, various simple ideas are tied together to form a new idea. For Locke, all ideas of substances (e.g., animals, minerals, and plants) are complex ideas, as are ideas of space, duration, number, power, and causality. These ideas are the sources of many problems, and for Locke the fact that human beings typically rely on words when thinking about subjects that involve complex ideas is “great evidence of the imperfection and uncertainty of our *Ideas* of that kind” (1975, 574, IV.5.4).

The problem with complex ideas is that for the most part they are imperfect. For example, in the case of ideas of substances, the number of ideas the human mind “combines, *depends upon the Care, Industry, or Fancy of him that makes it*” (Locke 1975, 456, III.6.29). Because the amount of care, industry, or imagination that is exercised changes from occasion to occasion and from person to person, ideas of substances can differ depending on the context and who has them. In fact, Locke writes that “[*m*]en are far enough from having agreed on the precise number of simple Ideas, or Qualities, belonging to any sort of Things, signified by its name” (1975, 457, III.6.30). For this reason,

when we would consider, or make Propositions about the more complex *Ideas*, as of a *Man, Vitriol, Fortitude, Glory*, we usually put the Name for the *Idea*: . . . we reflect on the *Names* themselves because they are more clear, certain, and distinct, and readier to occur to our Thoughts, than

the pure *Ideas*: and so we make use of these Words instead of the *Ideas* themselves, even when we would meditate and reason within ourselves, and make tacit mental Propositions. (1975, 575, IV.5.4)

So although, for example, we are thinking to ourselves about man, we usually do not use the complex idea of man but instead rely, Locke writes explicitly, on the name “man.”

Locke's claim that words are a “*Medium* through which visible objects pass” and they “impose upon our Understandings” (1975, 488, III.9.21) – that words “interpose themselves so much between our Understandings, and the Truth . . . that . . . their Obscurity and Disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our Eyes” (ibid.) – poses a problem. This role he appears to assign to words conflicts with his central view that “*the Mind*, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate Object but its own *Ideas*” so “our Knowledge is only conversant about them” (1975, 525, IV.1.1). Consequently, “’Tis evident, the Mind knows not Things immediately, but only by the intervention of the *Ideas* it has of them” (1975, 563, IV.4.3). If words “interpose themselves . . . between our Understandings, and the Truth,” then ideas are not the only immediate objects of our understanding.

This conflict also infects Locke's discussion of propositions. As we saw, Locke claims that all human knowledge “consists in Propositions” and that sometimes these propositions are verbal, that is, propositions in which “*Words [are] . . . put together or separated in affirmative or negative Sentences*” (1975, 575–6, IV.5.5). So sometimes knowledge consists of sentences (1975, 488; III.9.21), but this does not square with the claim that knowledge has only ideas as immediate objects. If knowledge consists only of ideas, then it cannot *consist* in sentences.

One way of resolving this conflict is to suppose Locke was careless and that, strictly speaking, Locke is proposing that when we rely on language in our thinking, the *immediate* objects of such thoughts are *ideas* of words, not words themselves. For example, when the word “gold” comes to replace the idea of gold, strictly speaking what happens is that the idea of the word “gold” replaces the idea of gold in thinking and reasoning about gold (Losonsky 1994).

Unfortunately, Locke is not clear about this issue, and the historical context offers few clues. As we will see later, both Hobbes and Leibniz assign an important role to language in human reasoning, particularly abstract reasoning. Unfortunately there is too much room for interpretation whether they meant literally that words themselves are constituent