Introduction

What is language? What is it for words to have meaning? What is the meaning of words? These are the basic questions of the philosophy of language. And here's a natural-seeming way of answering them. Language is a system of signs which we use to communicate with each other. Communication is a matter of letting other people know what we think. The signs which make up language get their meaning from our associating them with the thoughts we want to express. The meaning of words of common languages, such as English or French or Japanese, is a matter of a convention among speakers to use them with agreed associations.

Something very much in the spirit of that natural-seeming way of answering these basic questions was proposed by John Locke at the end of the seventeenth century. Recent philosophy of language is most simply understood by considering where it stands in relation to Locke's view. The most decisive shift came with the judgement – associated most obviously with John Stuart Mill and Gottlob Frege – that our words concern things in the world, rather than things in our minds. So complete has this transformation been that it is now accepted as simply obvious that one of the central things which has to be understood in the philosophy of language is how language relates to the world. That major change apart, however, there are significant points of overlap between Locke's view and the standard assumptions of contemporary philosophers of language. It continues to be assumed that words are signs, and that the basic business of language is communication. And it is generally accepted – even if it is sometimes questioned – that the meaning of words in common languages is a matter of convention.

The task of this book is to expose the issues here to serious scrutiny. This is done by considering carefully the arguments of the best minds to have dealt with them. Each chapter takes as its focus one or two articles, or

a few chapters of a book, and uses these texts to provide a critical introduction to the issues. I hope that the individual chapters will enable readers to understand the texts (which are sometimes quite difficult), and to raise serious questions about them. The accuracy of my presentation of the issues of the texts, and the fairness of my criticisms, can be checked against the texts themselves. This should encourage an understanding of the issues which is deeper because of being reached through a double perspective – the texts themselves, and the chapters of this book.

The book begins with an examination of the short passage in Locke where his famous view is presented. I present a fairly orthodox interpretation of Locke's view, and try to draw out what is significant about it. After that the book jumps historically, to the work of Frege at the end of the nineteenth century. The rest of the book examines works which are, by common consent, among the jewels of the analytic tradition of philosophy.

Chapters 2 to 9 deal with the ramifications of the judgement that our words are associated with things in the world, rather than things in our minds. This seems to suggest that if two linguistic expressions are linked to the same item in the world, they have the same meaning, and if an expression is linked to no item in the world it has no meaning. There are contexts which make this hard to swallow, most notably those in which we use words in a 'that'-clause to say what someone thinks or feels. We might call this the *Basic Worry* for views which follow Mill and Frege in linking words to the world. In response to this worry, Frege suggested that there is a *cognitive* aspect of meaning, which he called *Sense*: this suggestion is the topic of chapter 2. Bertrand Russell did not acknowledge the existence of such a thing as Fregean Sense: chapter 3 deals with his attempt to deal with the same problems by means of a different sort of analysis of a certain basic kind of expression, so-called *definite descriptions* (mostly singular noun phrases beginning with the definite article).

Russell's account only succeeds in dealing with the Basic Worry by treating a wide variety of terms as equivalent in meaning to descriptive phrases. Saul Kripke argued that this kind of account fails to deal adequately with proper names, and he and Hilary Putnam applied similar reasoning to the case of natural-kind terms. These are the topics of chapters 4 and 5, respectively. One particularly striking argument they offer is that views like Russell's belong with, and force us into, an

unacceptable conception of necessity. Among other things, then, their arguments aim to make us revise our view of what can be necessary and what contingent.

The leading advocate of the view of necessity which Kripke and Putnam were keen to overturn was Willard Van Orman Quine. His position on this topic is dealt with in chapter 6. Contexts of necessity have a lot in common with contexts in which we say what people think and feel: we use a 'that'-clause to say what is necessary, and it seems, on the face of it, that these clauses exploit something more in the meaning of linguistic expressions than just which items in the world they're correlated with. Unsurprisingly, then, there's a close parallel between Quine's treatment of contexts of necessity and his treatment of contexts in which we say what people think and feel, which is the topic of chapter 7. Chapter 8 generalizes the problem of trying to explain what words are doing when we use them to describe people's thoughts and feelings, focusing on famous articles by Kripke and Donald Davidson. Chapter 9 deals with Davidson's approach to an even more general problem: how to explain what words are doing whenever they occur. The most obvious difficulty for his proposal is a version of the Basic Worry which Frege introduced his notion of Sense to solve.

Chapters 2 to 9 are concerned with the question what kind of meaning linguistic expressions have. From chapter 10 we're concerned with the question what kind of thing, in general, linguistic meaning is. Chapter 10 introduces the idea, advocated by Quine and Davidson, that linguistic meaning is something which is always, in principle, open to being learned by someone who approaches a language as an outsider, and constructs a kind of scientific theory of what speakers of the language are up to. This can be seen as an elaboration of the Lockean – and everyday – assumption that words are signs. Quine takes this to have the consequence that beyond certain clear limits, there is no fact of the matter about what words mean: two theoretical accounts of the meaning of a language might differ in their interpretation of the words of that language, and yet both be correct, in the only sense in which interpretation can be correct. This view is examined in chapter 11.

If chapters 10 and 11 consider the idea of languages as objects of scientific interpretation, chapters 12 and 13 are concerned with trying to understand more deeply the place of language in our lives. Chapter 12 considers J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, according to which the basic

thing which needs to be understood about any linguistic item is what a speaker is doing in uttering it. Chapter 13 deals with what seems to be an even more basic issue: what is it for a linguistic expression to mean anything at all? H. P. Grice attempted to explain the meaning of linguistic expressions in terms of what speakers mean by them; and he tried to explain what speakers mean by the expressions they use in terms of what they are trying to communicate.

The nature of linguistic meaning is put radically in question by a sceptical challenge which Saul Kripke thought he found in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. What is it about me which establishes that I mean one thing rather than another when I use a particular expression? If we can't find anything, then it's hard to see how I can mean anything at all. Chapter 14 is concerned with this problem, and with various proposed solutions to it.

Chapter 15 deals with a short extract from the work of Wittgenstein's which led Kripke to consider that problem. Wittgenstein remains an awkward figure in the analytic tradition: the ultimate inspiration for much of its best work, but also rejected by many who work in the analytic mainstream. His work is difficult to interpret, but it seems cowardly to ignore it. Chapter 15 presents two different kinds of interpretation of this work, neither of which is likely to be entirely acceptable to any Wittgensteinian, but both of which capture something of the text. These two interpretations present Wittgenstein as an opponent of the analytic mainstream, in order to allow questions to be raised about some of the tradition's deepest assumptions.

The philosophy of language – and its treatment by the analytic tradition, in particular – has a formidable reputation for difficulty. The aim of this book is to make the issues and texts at the heart of analytic philosophy of language accessible even to those with a minimal philosophical background. (I have included a glossary to help here.) I also hope to have said something of interest to scholars in the field (and even the glossary is not entirely uncontroversial).

1 Locke and the nature of language

Key text

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book III, chs. 1 and 2.

1.1 Introduction

This book is an introduction to philosophy of language in the analytic tradition. Analytic philosophy begins with Gottlob Frege, who wrote at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. So why begin this book with John Locke, whose principal work was written at the end of the seventeenth century? Briefly: because Locke presents in a clear and simple way the background to analytic philosophy of language.

In the first place, Locke's general theory of language initially strikes many of us as extremely natural. His views about what words are and what language is for are shared with almost the whole analytic tradition. But he is also a clear representative of a line of thinking about language which has been the main target of much of the analytic tradition. Frege's philosophy of language can be said to begin with a rejection of what seem to be central features of Locke's view. And much recent work on proper names and natural-kind terms (the topics of chapters 4 and 5) is defined by its opposition to a broadly Lockean kind of view.

1.2 What Locke says

One of the four books of John Locke's vast and seminal work, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, is dedicated to language. The core of his

conception of language is laid out in one paragraph; here it is:

> Man, though he have 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 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 thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others. For this purpose, nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds, which with so much ease and variety he found himself able to make. Thus we may conceive how *words*, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, come to be made use of by men, as *the signs of* their *ideas*; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain *ideas*, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an *idea*. The use then of words, is to be sensible marks of *ideas*; and the *ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate signification.[1]

This general conception of language is not original to Locke: much of it can be found in Hobbes, and elements of it can be traced back to Aristotle.[2] Some such conception remained dominant in western philosophy for two centuries after Locke wrote, and significant parts of it continue to be accepted now. Much of it may indeed seem to you to be so obvious that it hardly needs a great philosopher to state it. Locke's achievement is to state it so succinctly that some of the problems it faces become immediately evident.

What exactly does Locke commit himself to in this short passage? First, he thinks of language as some kind of artefact, whose nature is therefore defined by the job it does – that is, by its function. Let's isolate that, to begin with, as a significant assumption:

(L1) The nature of language is defined by its function.

[1] J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), III, ii, 1; I have retained Locke's punctuation and italicization, but have not followed his practice of capitalizing almost all nouns.

[2] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. Plamenatz (Glasgow: Collins, 1962), part 1, ch. 4; Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, ch. 1.

Locke is clear in this passage about what that function is:

(L2) The function of language is to communicate.

(But he does allow elsewhere that language can be used 'for the recording of our own thoughts'.)[3]

He is equally clear (in this passage, at least) about what is communicated in language:

(L3) What language is meant to communicate is *thought*.

Without communication of thought there can be no society, and without society human beings miss out on significant 'comfort and advantage'; according to another writer, their life without society is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.[4] The ultimate good furnished by language is the security and prosperity provided by society; and language promotes that by making communication possible.

This functional conception of language seems to be used by Locke to give a general account of what words mean. The basic idea seems to be that if language communicates thought, then words, being the components of language, must communicate the components of thought. We might put the fundamental assumption here like this:

(L4) Words signify or mean the components of what language is meant to communicate.

(L4), however, is a bit of a fudge. Locke certainly thinks that words are *signs* of, and therefore *signify*, the components of thought; and he occasionally uses the notion of *meaning* instead;[5] but it is not quite obvious that his notion of *signification* is the same as we might ordinarily think was involved in the notion of *meaning*. Having raised that question, I'll leave it aside for now and return to it in the next section.

It is certainly clear enough that Locke thinks that words are signs of the components of thought. What are the components of thought? Here is Locke's answer:

(L5) The components of thought are *Ideas*.

[3] Locke, *Essay*, III, ix, 1. [4] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 143.

[5] For example, at *Essay*, III, iv, 6: 'the meaning of words, being only the *ideas* they are made to stand for by him that uses them'.

The word 'Idea', as it is used here, is a technical term, and Locke registers the fact that it's a technical term by scrupulously italicizing it whenever he uses it. I'll register the same fact by capitalizing the word. Because it's a technical term, it is hard to be sure what it means without going deep into Locke's philosophy, and this is not the place to do that. What do we think thoughts are composed of? This may not strike us as an obvious or natural question: ideas, perhaps we might say (using the word in an everyday sense), or concepts – though we are unlikely to be clear what ideas or concepts are. Casually speaking, we can think of Locke's *Ideas* as like ideas, in the modern sense, or concepts – whatever, precisely, those are – but we probably get closer to Locke if we think of a Lockean Idea as a kind of mental image.[6] Whatever their nature, Locke was clear about one thing: Ideas are 'invisible and hidden from others'; that is to say:

(L6) One person's Ideas cannot be perceived by another.

In addition to all of these assumptions, Locke endorses what seems no more than common sense when he insists that there is no natural connection between sounds and Ideas: the relation between words and Ideas is arbitrary, he says. We can separate two distinct assumptions here. The first is this:

(L7) The relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary.

The second is involved in the fact that Locke seems clearly to think of words as just sounds. In particular, they are sounds which people find themselves able to make. What this suggests is that words are not *intrinsically* meaningful: they only come to be meaningful by being set up as 'sensible marks of *ideas*'. Let's record this final assumption, then:

(L8) Words are not intrinsically meaningful.

These are eight significant assumptions involved in that short paragraph of Locke's. Now we need to understand what would be involved in questioning them.

[6] For the view that Locke's Ideas are images, see M. Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1991), ch. 5.

1.3 Meaning and signification

On a quick reading of Locke, it's natural to think that his view is simply that words mean Ideas. Defenders of Locke, however, have claimed that this is unfair. In the first place, it's not clear that 'signify' means the same as 'mean'. And in any case, what Locke says is just that the Ideas they stand for are the 'proper and immediate' signification of words.[7]

Let's take that second point first. According to Locke's general theory, Ideas are representations of other things. So my Idea of gold represents the metal, gold; perhaps it is an *image* of the metal. If the word 'gold', as I use it, is in the first instance a sign of my Idea of gold, then it seems that it must be possible in principle for the word to be a sign in some way – indirectly or 'mediately' – of the metal. If we ignore for the moment the worry about whether 'signify' is equivalent to 'mean', it seems that there has to be some sense in which the word 'gold' *means* the metal, gold, on Locke's view. We might say that a word *first* – directly or immediately – means an Idea in the mind of its user, and *secondly* – indirectly or mediately – means the thing which that Idea represents.[8]

The same point could be made about any theory which supposes that words are signs, in the first instance, of things like concepts (even if we're not quite sure what concepts are). For a concept is always a concept *of* something: the concept of gold is the concept *of* gold. It doesn't matter whether we think (rather as Locke seems to have done) that concepts are *representations* of the things they are concepts of (as if they were pictures of them); they have to be concepts of something to be concepts at all. If we think that a word is in the first instance a sign of a concept, this means that we can always say that it is *also* some kind of sign of whatever it is that the concept is a concept *of*.

Is it fair to attribute to Locke the view that words *mean* Ideas? We might think that this is so unnatural a view that we should hesitate in ascribing it to Locke: surely the word 'gold' means *gold*, the metal, and not any Idea or concept of it? Speaking for ourselves, we may say that the word 'gold' *means* the metal, but, as we use it, *expresses* our concept of the metal. And it might be tempting to attribute such a view to Locke too. The notion of

[7] *Essay*, III, ii, 1.

[8] This point is made by N. Kretzmann, 'The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantic Theory', *Philosophical Review*, 77 (1968), pp. 175–96.

signification, we may say, is loose enough to allow that the word 'gold' in some way *signifies* – for example, by *expressing* – a concept or Idea of gold. But it doesn't follow from that the word 'gold' *means* the concept or Idea.[9]

My own view is that it's hard to deny that Locke thought that words *mean* Ideas – at least in the first instance. This is because he doesn't just say that words signify Ideas: he says that words are *meant* to signify Ideas – that's what words are for. If the nature of language is to be understood by its function, and a word is *meant* to signify something, it's hard to see how that thing could not be what the word means. But even if you disagree about this, it seems clear enough that Locke is committed to the view that it is *part* of the meaning of words that they signify Ideas, and that is enough to raise some of the most obvious objections to his theory.

1.4 Problems about communication

The most obvious difficulty with Locke's conception of language is that it makes it impossible for language to do what it thinks that language is supposed to do: it makes communication impossible. To see this, we need to think about what genuine communication between two people requires. It's not enough for one person to transfer something (a thought, say) to another, as if the second were catching a disease from the first. Genuine communication involves one person *understanding* another, and this requires that she should *know* what the other person means. This is just what is impossible, on Locke's picture.[10]

On Locke's account, knowing what someone means when she speaks is (at least in part) a matter of knowing which Ideas are signified by her words. Words themselves are not intrinsically meaningful, according to (L8): they're just sounds, which might mean anything or nothing. So the only way we can know which Ideas they signify is by knowing something

[9] Defences of Locke, on broadly these lines, are proposed by I. Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), ch. 5, E. J. Ashworth, 'Locke on Language', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (1984), pp. 45–73, and E. J. Lowe, *Locke on Human Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1995), ch. 7.

[10] The argument which follows is a version of one of the simpler strands of argument which make up what is known as Wittgenstein's 'Private Language Argument': for a vivid excerpt see, e.g., L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), § 293.