Introduction

Language was a problem for early-modern philosophers. Not only were a remarkable number of works devoted to the subject, but it intruded upon texts about nature, morality and politics. At a time when both the portrayal of reality and our access to that reality were being challenged, and when religious and political conflicts proliferated, language came to seem dangerously unhinged. It was supposed to reach out to the world and to mediate between men, but instead it barred the way.[1] As perceptions of the natural and cultural worlds mutated and splintered, it was feared that language no longer mapped them. Yet language was not silent. Covering over the cracks in the semantic edifice, it told its own duplicitous story. It seemed to have a power of its own. Unfettered in practice by the forces that ought to have constrained it, it tore at knowledge and at the community. So pressing was the unease about language that when John Locke came to write his great work on human understanding, he felt impelled to include an entire book on words. This inclusion is even more surprising when one considers that the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) is recognisably a work of logic.[2] Logics old and new had, in the main, treated ideas and words simultaneously, and even interchangeably, explaining how these simple units were gradually compounded by the mind in a process that culminated in chains of reasoning. Locke repeats this traditional trajectory from ideas to knowledge, but inserts a distinct treatment of words, therein delivering the most sustained, devastating and acute critique of language that his age produced. The aim of the present study is to show why he came to make this insertion and, more generally,

[1] Early-modern philosophers generally speak of 'men', rather than 'men and women'. In order to avoid anachronism or exculpation, I tend to maintain this usage.

[2] Locke effectively names it as such at its end (Locke 1975, p. 720 (IV.xxi.4)). It becomes clear that it was perceived as a logic by himself and contemporaries in his *Correspondence* (Locke 1976–89, IV, pp. 479 and 601–2; V, p. 351). See also Buickerood 1985, pp. 157–9, and Schuurman 2004, p. 2.

why language came to be the object of such general disquiet among early-modern philosophers.

More precisely, this book does four things. First, it analyses the theories of language that were bequeathed to early-modern philosophers in obscure as well as canonical texts. Second, it uncovers the linguistic concerns and ambitions that these theories, in conjunction with certain epistemological and practical developments, provoked in philosophers. Third, with the framework of early-modern philosophy of language in place, it considers Locke's intervention. It identifies the arguments that he was repudiating and amplifying, as well as those that he simply reiterated. Against the background of everyday assumptions, negative reactions and creative developments, the innovative force of Locke's polemic is thrown into relief. The book ends with an assessment of the ramifications of Locke's philosophy of language for his epistemological and political projects.

While commentators have produced important work on Locke's philosophy of language, they have often done so from a contemporary perspective, evaluating his answers to questions that preoccupy philosophers now. The principal debate has revolved around Locke's fundamental linguistic thesis that words signify ideas.[3] His critics retort that meanings cannot consist of private ideas. If they did, people would be able neither to communicate nor to refer to external things. His defenders exculpate him from the crime, variously arguing that he did not make such an obvious mistake. However, Locke could not have seen the original privacy of meaning as a mistake. It was obvious to *him* that meaning was primarily private. The entire point of words was to publicise ideas that would otherwise be hidden. This was a truism that Locke accepted without question and that made sense as part of a network of beliefs about God, man and the world. An understanding of Locke's intellectual environment makes it clear that he was not interested in proving that words signify ideas; this was an uncontested fact. Moreover, by establishing what was taken for granted, one can unearth what Locke was saying that was new, and therefore the points he was actually trying to make. It turns out that Locke was in fact concerned to expose the desperate consequences that follow from the commonplace that words signify ideas. Ironically, these consequences touch on precisely the pitfalls of which commentators have declared him naively ignorant. That is to say, he worries that, given that words signify ideas, they are removed

[3] For references to this debate see fn. 44, p. 219, chapter 8, below.

from the world and obstruct communication. Situating Locke's ideas in their context, therefore, captures his concerns rather than our own. We believe that, given that we communicate, meaning must be publicly accessible, and so we trawl the objective world and linguistic use for this elusive entity. We search for an exit from Locke's ideational theory of meaning. But reading him in the light of our opinions erases his. We come at meaning from the opposite direction. Whereas we see meaning as working – with ease, it is sometimes said – from the outside in, for Locke it works – with difficulty – from the inside out.

More generally, Locke's linguistic theory has been flaunted and attacked as the exemplar of a representational model of language, whereby words stand in a representative relation to ideas and (perhaps, in some ways) to things. This 'Lockean' approach has been contrasted with the various non-representational accounts that have flourished in the twentieth century. However, it turns out that, long before the howls began, Locke himself struggled with and owned up to the failings in the only linguistic paradigm that was avaliable to him. His immanent critique is testament not only to his acuity, but also to his intellectual courage and integrity.[4]

There are some commentators who have taken a historical approach to Locke's philosophy of language, and to early-modern philosophy of language as a whole. However, historians tend to present Locke as ushering in a strikingly new way of words rather than developing old ones in a complex performance of debt and denial.[5] More generally, scholarly attention has focused on the outstanding contributions to linguistic theory in the period, on the abundance of literature that explicitly and entirely pertained to language.[6] In addition to these strange and mighty ships, I explore the waters that kept them afloat and the undercurrents

[4] I am indebted to Jim Tully for making this clear to me.

[5] For interpretations of Locke's novelty, see Cohen 1997, p. xxiv; Formigari 1998, p. 13; Padley 1985 and 1988, I, p. 352. Important exceptions to this discontinuous approach include Hacking (1975b) and Ashworth (1981), both of whom locate Locke in certain linguistic traditions. Ayers (1991) is a masterpiece that straddles philosophical and historical approaches to Locke's epistemology and, within this, his philosophy of language. Ott (2004, pp. 13–21) brilliantly identifies the Hellenistic semiotic tradition to which Locke is indebted. He also evaluates Locke's position from a contemporary perspective, and defends it against the attacks of Berkeley, Mill, Frege, Wittgenstein, Quine and Putnam. For my response to this book see Dawson 2004.

[6] References to this literature occur throughout the book. Among the significant contributions to the study of early-modern philosophy of language are: Aarsleff 1982; Bono 1995; Cave 1979; Chomsky 1966; Cohen 1977; Coudert 1978 and 1991; Demonet 1992; Elsky 1989; Fish 1971a and 1972; Formigari 1988 and 1993; Foucault 1970; Hacking 1975b; Katz 1981; Kessler and Maclean 2002; Knowlson 1975; Land 1986; Maclean 1992 and 2002; Markley 1993; Padley 1976, 1985 and 1988; Rossi 2000; Salmon 1972, 1988 and 1996; Slaughter 1982; Stillman 1995; Struever 1995; Skinner 1996; Vickers 1985; Waswo 1987.

that affected their course. Taking account of the fluid, international republic of letters that connected philosophers across borders through migration and the circulation of correspondence, manuscripts and books, I cover English and European authors, especially French ones. As well as making significant additions to the subject of language, the French turn out to be particularly resonant with Locke. And, in addition to texts from the early-modern period, I study those from antiquity and the intervening years whose traces are so vivid in early-modern writing.

Within this frame, I look at two kinds of source that have not received much attention from students of early-modern language movements. To recover quotidian assumptions about language, I turn to the textbooks that taught the three arts of language – grammar, logic and rhetoric. The *trivium* formed the bedrock of every gentle education. It embodied the received wisdom about the nature of words that philosophers would have learnt at school and university, and that they went on to rehearse, embellish and unpick. In order to uncover these reactions, I then turn to a wide range of books that are primarily occupied with subjects other than language, such as metaphysics, commonwealths and Scripture, but that nevertheless record the irresistible pressure of linguistic concern. I look, for example, at Descartes' *Le monde* (written 1629–33; published 1664), Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) and Pufendorf's *De iure naturae et gentium* (1672). In this small sample, the menace of language worms its way into discussions of light, republics and law. I investigate this kind of ubiquitous linguistic interference. Accordingly, when I come to Locke, I look not only at book III of his *Essay* – the book that is entitled 'of words' and is so well known to historians of linguistics – but also at those parts of the *Essay* that are apparently not concerned with language, as well as the vast extent of his published and unpublished *oeuvre*. This use of all manner of philosophical texts delivers a more richly shaded, generally darker, picture of early-modern philosophy of language than that painted by those books which enthusiastically advertise their interest in language. In addition, these comments about language that spilled so plentifully and so anxiously on to the pages of early-modern philosophy tell us something that might otherwise be missed about the intimate relationship that was conceived between language and philosophy. One cannot grasp the full extent of contemporary linguistic concerns when they are abstracted from philosophy. Indeed, it seems to me that early-modern philosophers were not so much concerned about language *per se*, except insofar as it obstructed philosophy and the better life that philosophy would bring.

This brings me to the distinctive thrust of this book: that the early-modern preoccupation with language originates from deep fears about the corruptible nature of words themselves – about their fragile relation to the concepts and things to which they were supposed to be fixed, and about their extraordinary power to disrupt truth and society. On the whole, commentators have tended to elucidate how language was conceived to *work* by Locke and his predecessors. We are told, for example, how Jacob Boehme believed that there was a divine *natursprache* that inherently contains knowledge of nature, or how John Wilkins believed that language can map the world essentially, albeit conventionally, or how Locke believed that words signify ideas. This may all be so, but it fails to register the anxiety that characterises so much early-modern treatment of language, that fuels so many of the reformatory plans with which we are familiar, and that pushes the subject into philosophy at large. By projecting on to early-modern linguistic thought our mission to discover how language works, we are easily blinded to the overriding source of its urgent energy: alarm that language did *not* work as it should. As established perceptions of man's relations to the world and to his fellows were questioned, so too were the aptness, the stability and the strength of language. Language was both the agent of provocation and the victim of these unsettled perceptions. It was this complicated interaction of beliefs about the internal constitution of language and of changing philosophical positions that made language come to seem so threatening to natural, moral and political philosophers and to so encroach upon their writing. This book examines this volatile interaction. It tells a story about the *problem* of language *in philosophy*.

In studying a wide range of texts, I want not only to achieve a fuller image of early-modern philosophy of language, but also to penetrate the early-modern usage which is foreign to us now. By moving back and forth between a wealth of texts, it gradually becomes possible differentially to decode the (unstable) meanings of key terms. From our point of view, the most vexed and important of these involve those entities that words are said to 'signify': 'meaning', 'signification', 'sense', 'thing' or '*res*'. By enveloping oneself in the cultural lexicon of early-modern speakers, one can begin to see things in their terms. One begins to shake off the modern presumption that meaning is in certain ways a function of the interplay of signs, that language and meaning are somehow made of the same stuff, or draw breath from the same source. One begins to internalise the radical disjunction between sign and signified which is axiomatic for early-modern thinkers and key to understanding their linguistic solicitude.

However, I am not simply concerned to give an impressionistic account of early-modern philosophy of language, one that juxtaposes an array of resemblances and aporias. I am also interested in recovering a *history* of the debate, in the strings of actions and reactions that constitute a dynamic conversation. Rather than merely unlocking what various writers thought that words *meant*, I track a narrative of the shifting semantic ground. I probe the responses of philosophers to what they read in the *trivium*, the quarrels and bequests that related these philosophers and the rejoinder that Locke gave to this debate.

In establishing these associations, I note some of the connections that we know existed between authors, particularly in the case of Locke, whose manuscripts and library afford us access to his literary interests. However, the marks that writers leave on each other do not originate simply from the reading of books. In the self-consciously friendly and dialogical community of seventeenth-century philosophers, ideas were shared and developed off the page.[7] Indeed, Locke is keen to tell us that the seed of his *Essay* was produced when 'five or six friends meeting at my chamber' were overwhelmed by the difficulties of philosophical inquiry.[8] The trade in ideas was particularly active in a culture that positively encouraged gentlemen to copy wise dicta into their notebooks and to pepper their speech with them. The high value set on commonplaces promoted an intense and elusive exchange of identical beliefs. Moreover, just as language is overwhelmingly communal, so too are beliefs. Invented in the interstices between speakers, they are circulated, reinforced and contested. They make up that symbolic web which gives us voice. I take it, then, that one does not need explicit allusions or proven familiarity to justify relating texts to one other. The fact that Locke may well not have read, for example, Thomas Spencer's *Art of Logick, Delivered in the Precepts of Aristotle and Ramus* (1628) does not mean that he was not familiar with the ideas represented there. Spencer declared that 'by institution . . . the signification of words followes the intent of the speaker, and not otherwise'.[9] It strikes me as legitimate to say that Locke was 'repeating' this view when he wrote: 'that then which words are the marks of, are the ideas of the speaker: nor can any one apply them, as marks, immediately to any thing else, but the ideas, that he himself hath'.[10] This is not to say that individuals are drowned by the discourses in which they move. They can

[7] See Shapin and Shaffer 1985; Shapin 1994; Walmsley 1993.
[8] Locke 1975, p. 7 (Epistle to the Reader). [9] Spencer 1970, p. 154.
[10] Locke 1975, p. 405 (III.ii.2).

modify, challenge and invert the conceptual resources they are given. Indeed, it is crucial to my analysis that authors can act, particularly when I come to Locke's shocking interruption. Treading a path, then, between intertextuality and authority, this book follows the ideas that led philosophers to fear language.

Part I examines the mainstream beliefs about language that are imparted in the *trivium*. It is important to note that early-modrn philosophy of language is fundamentally a philosophy of *words*. While today we might focus more on sentences, and while concatenations of words were explored by early-modern writers, their primary unit of analysis was words, which were believed to signify something outside themselves. More particularly therefore, early-modern philosophy of language might often be characterised as a philosophy of *names*, whereby sounds are considered to be applied to, or to name, something extra-linguistic, such as a pelican, an emotion or a mental action such as negation. Drawing on and reinforcing this tradition, all three sister arts depict words as signs that, by convention – or semantic contract, as I shall call it – have one proper meaning. Meanings are thoughts that in turn, if one is talking about the external world, hook on to things. Following Aristotle, the mainspring of early-modern linguistic theory, these three units – words, thoughts and things – are presented as operating in harmonious and univocal synchrony. Indeed, they are so tightly joined that the spaces dividing them seem to disappear. Words are taken so straightforwardly to represent their meanings that they stand confidently alone, what they actually signify remaining concealed or unconsidered. Often, thoughts are subsumed by things, mental mediation eclipsed by a seemingly perfect realism. However, under the gaze of external critical eyes and the pressure of internal dissent, various aspects of the tripartite union threaten to unravel.

I identify three concerns that are thus provoked and in part II I follow the ways in which various philosophers address them. The first is about the relationship between language and the world. The fear is that words might not correspond to things as they really are, but pervert them instead. The new philosophers choke on the Aristotelian linguistic-ontological paradigm they had been fed by logicians. While some, particularly the Cartesians, replace it with equally ambitious accounts, others stress the unstoppable breach between words and the world. The second concern is about semantic instability, whereby the conventions that connect words to meanings are insecure, and whereby one word might have a plurality of meanings. Logical fallacies and, more dangerously,

rhetoric had advertised and warmly embraced the ambiguous possibilities inherent in language. Reflecting on these, philosophers warn of the perils of free-floating words, particularly in the moral sphere. The third concern is that words might usurp the theoretically sovereign place of thoughts and things, and come to dominate the relationship. This danger had been both inadvertently broadcast by grammarians, who focused on the body rather than the soul of words, and shamelessly celebrated by rhetoricians, who taught the sweet and irresistible power of words. As a result of their supremacy, words might in fact stand for nothing at all. Moreover, they might belie the truth and write the natural and moral worlds in their own deceitful, but opaque, image.

When Locke urged his readers, then, to consider well 'the errors and obscurity, the mistakes and confusion, that is spread in the world by an ill use of words', he was picking up a well-established refrain of early-modern philosophers.[11] Part III investigates his intervention in their discussion. While keeping in mind the different circumstances and purposes that inform each of his different writings, I pursue the comments about language that run throughout them. Locke deepens each of his predecessors' concerns, and, generally speaking, where they had often blamed speakers for the imperfection of words, Locke blamed words themselves, as well as their (un)knowing users. Provoked by overambitious and treacherous talk, influenced by critics of linguistic abuse, and thinking through revolutionary scientific and political developments, Locke makes his landmark case against language. In the context of the first concern that I have identified, he declares that we cannot know things in themselves, but only insofar as they affect our senses. Our talk about the external world is therefore bound to signify ideas alone (or rather, ideas and the fruits of our rational labour on them), and these bear no resemblance to the world. While this is basically a repetition of new (rationalist-) empiricist claims, Locke elaborately consolidates it through the filter of his distinctive epistemology. He also extracts the specifically linguistic implications of anti-Aristotelian mechanism from the epistemological ones with which they had generally been run together, and thereby gives them an original prominence and particularity. The second concern, about semantic instability, had not been nearly so developed by Locke's predecessors. The ambiguous use of words had generally been characterised as a clearly identifiable, preventable misdemeanour. The breach of linguistic conventions had been conceived as avoidable, as caused by

[11] Locke 1975, pp. 509–10 (III.xi.4).

the deliberate malice of men who wanted to subvert truth, justice and peace. Locke's reply was that people inevitably, innocently and most of the time, mean different things by the same words, particularly moral ones. They therefore do not communicate about matters of the utmost importance. The application of his theory of ideas to language leads him to conclude that we actively construct the complex meanings of the great majority of our words. They are therefore bound to differ from person to person in accordance with differences of experience and belief. This calls into question the very existence of *common* use. Locke firms up the third concern by systematically laying out the sensible autonomy of words and their great allure to our sensuous minds. In themselves, words are sounds and squiggles that enter and fix in our minds with far more ease than their ephemeral and complicated meanings. Words therefore dominate in cognition as well as in communication. Their palpable and singular presence conceals the unreal and multiple nature of meaning, with the result that people mistakenly imagine that their words are a mirror both of reality and of other people's minds. Moreover, people often speak words that they either do not understand or that have no meaning to speak of. Locke fears that the impressive façade of words fills our heads and tells its own tales. While our semantic handiwork is fissile and full of holes, our words instruct us otherwise. His treatment of language is a plea for us to realise the limitations and imperfections of the meanings of our words and their intractable presence in private and interpersonal experience.

I conclude by asking how Locke's critique of language might cause us to re-read the theorist of human understanding and of politics with whom we are perhaps more familiar. The answer is potentially devastating. Locke's fears about the embodied power of language threaten to dim the light of knowledge. By infecting men with erroneous and empty discourse and by encouraging them to pretend to a greater intelligence than they can ever have, language threatens both the judgement that establishes political legitimacy and the precious policy of toleration. Moreover, Locke's apprehension about the loose ties that bind words to ideas challenges both the trust and the unity that gives life to civil society. Locke's pessimistic account of language turns out to subvert, if not obviate, crucial ambitions of his philosophy.

PART I

Language in the trivium