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An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language

MICHAEL MORRIS



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An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language

This book is a critical introduction to the central issues of the philosophy of language. Each chapter focuses on one or two texts that have had a seminal influence on work in the subject, and uses these as a way of approaching both the central topics and the various traditions of dealing with them. Texts include classic writings by Frege, Russell, Kripke, Quine, Davidson, Austin, Grice, and Wittgenstein. Theoretical jargon is kept to a minimum and is fully explained whenever it is introduced. The range of topics covered includes sense and reference, definite descriptions, proper names, natural-kind terms, *de re* and *de dicto* necessity, propositional attitudes, truth-theoretical approaches to meaning, radical interpretation, indeterminacy of translation, speech acts, intentional theories of meaning, and scepticism about meaning. The book will be invaluable to students and to all readers who are interested in the nature of linguistic meaning.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page ix</i>
Introduction	1
1 Locke and the nature of language	5
1.1 Introduction	5
1.2 What Locke says	5
1.3 Meaning and signification	9
1.4 Problems about communication	10
1.5 Words and sentences	14
1.6 Locke's less disputed assumptions	18
2 Frege on Sense and reference	21
2.1 Introduction	21
2.2 Psychologism and the Context Principle	22
2.3 Frege and logic	26
2.4 Frege's mature system (i): reference	28
2.5 Frege's mature system (ii): Sense	32
2.6 Two further uses of the notion of Sense	36
2.7 Questions about Sense	40
2.8 Sense and the Basic Worry	47
3 Russell on definite descriptions	49
3.1 Introduction	49
3.2 The problems	50
3.3 Russell's solution in outline	53
3.4 Russell's solution in detail	55
3.5 Strawson on definite descriptions	61
3.6 Donnellan on referential and attributive uses of descriptions	63

3.7	Russellian defences	66
3.8	Russell beyond descriptions	70
4	Kripke on proper names	74
4.1	Introduction	74
4.2	Kripke's target	76
4.3	Kripke's objections (i): simple considerations	78
4.4	Kripke's objections (ii): epistemic and modal considerations	80
4.5	Defences of the description theory	85
4.6	Sense and direct reference	90
4.7	Conclusion	92
5	Natural-kind terms	94
5.1	Introduction	94
5.2	A Lockean view of natural-kind terms: the individualist version	96
5.3	A Lockean view without individualism	102
5.4	How can there be Kripke-Putnam natural-kind terms?	105
5.5	How can natural-kind terms be rigid designators?	108
6	Quine on <i>de re</i> and <i>de dicto</i> modality	113
6.1	Introduction	113
6.2	Quine's three grades of modal involvement	114
6.3	Referential opacity and Leibniz's law	118
6.4	Referential opacity and the three grades	121
6.5	Quine's logical problem with <i>de re</i> modality	126
6.6	Quine's metaphysical worries about <i>de re</i> modality	130
7	Reference and propositional attitudes	134
7.1	Introduction	134
7.2	Quine's problem	135
7.3	Quine's proposed solution	138
7.4	Perry and the essential indexical	145
7.5	The problems for Quine's solution	147
7.6	Consequences	150
8	The semantics of propositional attitudes	152
8.1	Introduction	152
8.2	Kripke, names, necessity and propositional attitudes	153

8.3	Kripke's Pierre	155
8.4	Referential solutions to the puzzle	158
8.5	A Fregean response	163
8.6	Davidson's proposal	166
8.7	Can Davidson's proposal solve Kripke's puzzle?	169
9	Davidson on truth and meaning	173
9.1	Introduction	173
9.2	Meanings as entities	175
9.3	Tarski's 'definition' of truth	179
9.4	Davidson's use of Tarski	183
9.5	The obvious objections to Davidson's proposal	187
9.6	Truth and the possibility of general semantics	189
9.7	One final worry	191
10	Quine and Davidson on translation and interpretation	194
10.1	Introduction	194
10.2	Quine and radical translation	195
10.3	Davidson and radical interpretation	198
10.4	Statements of meaning and propositional attitudes	202
10.5	Theories of meaning and speakers' knowledge	205
10.6	How fundamental is radical interpretation?	210
11	Quine on the indeterminacy of translation	214
11.1	Introduction	214
11.2	'Two dogmas of empiricism'	215
11.3	Indeterminacy and inscrutability	219
11.4	Resisting Quine on indeterminacy: some simple ways	228
12	Austin on speech acts	231
12.1	Introduction	231
12.2	Performative utterances	232
12.3	Towards a general theory of speech acts	234
12.4	Truth and performatives	239
12.5	Issues for a theory of speech acts	242
13	Grice on meaning	248
13.1	Introduction	248
13.2	Grice's overall strategy	249

13.3	Sympathetic objections to Grice's account of speaker-meaning	253
13.4	Sympathetic objections to Grice's account of expression-meaning	258
13.5	An unsympathetic objection to Grice's account of expression-meaning	261
13.6	An unsympathetic objection to Grice's account of speaker-meaning	264
13.7	After Grice	268
14	Kripke on the rule-following paradox	271
14.1	Introduction	271
14.2	The sceptical challenge	272
14.3	The 'sceptical solution'	277
14.4	A community-based response	283
14.5	Can dispositionalism be defended?	284
14.6	Anti-reductionism and radical interpretation	287
15	Wittgenstein on the Augustinian picture	292
15.1	Introduction	292
15.2	The Augustinian picture	293
15.3	The Anti-Metaphysical interpretation	295
15.4	The Quasi-Kantian interpretation	299
15.5	Worries about these Wittgensteinian views	308
	<i>Glossary</i>	312
	<i>Works cited</i>	316
	<i>Index</i>	323

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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.

about the relation between these sounds and a person's Ideas. But the Ideas themselves cannot be perceived by another person, according to (L6). So we could only know which Ideas were signified by a person's words if there were some dependable, reliable relation between particular words and particular Ideas: that would give us the right to make an inference from the presence of a particular word to the presence in a person's mind of a particular Idea. But the relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary, according to (L7). That means that we have no right to make any assumptions about the Ideas signified by particular words. That means that we can never know what someone means when she speaks, on Locke's account of the meaning of words. And that means that genuine communication is impossible.

Some people might be tempted to accept this conclusion: perhaps communication really is impossible. You may think it's just true that no one else can really know what you mean by your words. But this doesn't look like a very stable position to hold. In the first place, it cannot sensibly be accepted by a Lockean, or anyone else who thinks that the nature of language is defined by its function ((L1)) and that the function of language is to communicate ((L2)). Think for a moment about the reasons for holding that the nature of language is defined by its function. The idea here is to try to explain what language is by seeing what job it does. If you think the job is communication, and you think that communication is impossible, you're trying to explain what language is in terms of the job you think it does, even though you accept that it doesn't actually do that job at all. If you think that communication is impossible, it seems silly to try to explain the nature of language in terms of the function of communicating in the first place.

And in fact it's hard to see how you could really believe that nobody else knows the meaning of the words you use. Ask yourself: why do you use the particular words you do use, rather than some others? You'll be bound to answer: because of the meaning of these words, which is appropriate for what you want to say, whereas the meaning of those other words is not. And how do you know the meaning of these words? Because you learned them from your parents and other people who speak the language. And, of course, that shows that you're already assuming that it's possible for one person to know the meaning of the words another person uses: you have

come to know the meaning of the words used by other people who speak the same language.

Perhaps you think that there is still something about the meaning of the words you use which no one else *can* know. Perhaps no one else can know the particular associations which the words you use have for you. But it's not obvious that no one else *can* know the particular associations which the words you use have for you: why can't you just tell other people? It's certainly true that other people do not in fact know all the particular associations which words have for you, but this seems just to show that these associations have got nothing to do with meaning. After all, you seem to assume that other people do know what the words you use mean, even though they don't know all the associations these words have for you.

This seems to show something quite significant: the psychological associations which a word might have for particular people are irrelevant to the meaning of the word. Whatever meaning is, it can't be just a matter of what people happen to think of when they hear or read or use a word. We might put the same point in another way by saying that meaning is connected with understanding. Meaning is what you know when you understand a word; and understanding a word does not involve knowing the psychological associations which a word might have.

What is clear is that Locke's theory as a whole, which accepts all of the assumptions (L1)-(L8), needs revision. The slightest revision might be to change this:

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

But if we think of Ideas as being a kind of mental image, revising (L6) will not be an attractive option, because it will not seem very plausible that one person could perceive another's mental images.

The next slightest revision would be to change this:

(L5) The components of thought are Ideas.

What else might they be? You might take refuge in the word 'concept' - whatever exactly that means - and suggest *this* instead of (L5):

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

The reason for suggesting this change is that it might seem - on an everyday understanding of the word 'concept' - that you could tell from

someone's behaviour what concepts she has. After all, you might think that you can tell that a dog has the concept of her master or mistress, the concept of dinner time, and the concept of a walk; and you can tell that a dog does not have the concept of impressionism as a painting style or the concept of the square root of three. One major tradition in recent philosophy of language can be seen as differing from Locke's theory in accepting something (L5*) instead of (L5): the great German philosopher and mathematician, Gottlob Frege, can be understood as belonging to this tradition, though in a slightly complicated way (see chapter 2).

You would get a more radical alternative to Locke's theory if you questioned *this* assumption:

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

(L3) – at least as it is understood within the context of a Lockean theory – arises from a peculiarity of Locke's general conception of communication. Locke's conception of communication (like Hobbes's, from which it, in part, derives) is fundamentally *individualist*. Each person is thought of as an autonomous individual, whose basic relationships with the world and with other people are independent of society and social institutions. The individual person has to understand the world and other people for herself, and make sense of them all in her own terms. Other people figure in this picture, not in the first instance as other members of a society to which each person originally belongs, but as potential rivals for a common resource, as potential aids in projects which might lead to mutual benefit, and as potential objects of affection and concern. If each person starts off as an autonomous individual among other autonomous individuals, the fundamental goal of communication is clear: each individual needs to find out what the other individuals are thinking. Only in this way can we anticipate the actions of our rivals, plan with our colleagues, and understand how things are with the people we feel for. Speaking a language will then be part of a general process of giving up our independence, by revealing our thoughts, in the hope of the larger or safer benefits of co-operation.

But this isn't the only possible conception of communication. We might instead have a fundamentally *collaborative* view. On such a view, the basic purpose of communication will not be to find out what other people are

thinking, but to inform one another of how things are in the world. If we take this collaborative view, then we may propose *this* as an alternative to (L3):

(L3*) What language is meant to communicate are *facts*.

If (L3*) is meant to be a genuine alternative to (L3), it will change the orientation of language radically. Whereas on Locke's conception language is concerned first with what is in people's minds, on this alternative view language is fundamentally concerned with things in the world. How might this view be developed? Suppose we still accept the following assumption:

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

What might the components of facts be? Perhaps they will include *objects*, such as tables and chairs; we could count people as objects for this purpose too. Perhaps they will include *qualities* or *properties*, like whiteness or waspishness. If we accept that suggestion, we will propose this instead of (L5):

(L5**) The components of facts are *objects* and *properties*.

If we accept this world-oriented conception of language, then the meaning – even in the first instance – of a name, like 'Socrates', will just be a particular person, Socrates the philosopher himself, instead of an image of that person (as it would have been on the Lockean view) or a concept of that person (as it would have been on an individualist view which accepts (L3) and (L5*)). And the meaning – even in the first instance – of an adjective, like 'waspish', will be a particular quality, waspishness, instead of an image of waspishness (as it would have been on the Lockean view) or the concept of waspishness (as it would have been on an individualist view which accepts (L3) and (L5*)). This world-oriented view of language is also represented in a major tradition in recent philosophy of language: Bertrand Russell was one of its pioneers (see chapter 3).

1.5 Words and sentences

We should look again at an assumption we've just rushed past:

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

The idea behind this was that words are the basic components of language, so the meanings of words must be the basic components of what is meant by language. But what does it mean to say that words are the basic components of language? And what could it be for something to be a basic component of what is meant by language?

It's tempting to think that the sense (whatever it is) in which words are components of language is the same as the sense (whatever it is) in which words are components of sentences. Sentences are made up of words, and whatever is spoken or written is constructed in sentences – or at least is meant to be constructed in sentences. But why should we think that words are the *basic* components of sentences? What about letters (if the sentences are written) or sounds (if they are spoken)?

The answer is that words are thought to be the basic components of sentences as far as *meaning* is concerned. The meaning of sentences depends systematically on the meaning of the words of which they are composed; but the meaning of words does not depend systematically on the meaning of the parts of words. There's no systematic dependence of the meaning of words on the letters which are used in writing them, or on the sounds which are used in speaking them. The idea here is that words are, so to speak, *atomic* in an account of meaning. An atom, etymologically speaking, is something which cannot be divided. If we think of breaking down the meaning of a bit of text by looking at the meaning of the sentences of which it's composed, and then of breaking down the meaning of sentences by looking at the meaning of their parts, we have to stop at the level of words: the idea is that words are meaningful, but parts of words are not.

This assumption could be doubted in one of two obvious ways. First, you might think that there are compound words (like 'ice-pack' or 'ice-pick'), or words with standard prefixes (like 'un-' in 'unhappy', 'pre-' in 'pre-marital', or 'sub' in 'subnormal') or suffixes (like '-ness' in 'idleness', or '-ly' in 'stupidly'), whose meaning does depend systematically on the meaning of their component parts. One simple solution to this kind of problem might be to change our conception of what counts as a single word: so we might say that 'ice-pack' is two words, and prefixes and suffixes are words themselves.

The other way of doubting the assumption that words are atomic as far as meaning is concerned is to question whether the letters and sounds

from which a word is made really are irrelevant to its meaning. This is to doubt whether words are arbitrary signs: if words are arbitrary signs, then, whatever word you think of, a quite different word (one spelled or pronounced quite differently) could have had the same meaning; and that makes it look as if the meaning itself doesn't depend at all on the letters and sounds from which a word is made. I'll come back to this issue briefly in section 1.6.

So much for the way in which words might be thought to be the *basic* components of sentences, taking for granted that in some sense words are components of sentences. But in what sense are words *components* of sentences at all? How are words put together to make sentences? In the first place, it's crucial to notice that sentences are not just lists of words. Compare a sentence with a list:

- (i) Socrates is waspish;
- (i*) Socrates, being, waspishness.

The basic difference between the sentence (i) and the list (i*) is that (i) is complete in a way that (i*) is not. We could have stopped (i*) after 'being' and we would still have had a list; we could have added any word after 'waspishness' and we would still have had a list. But if we had stopped (i) anywhere earlier than its end, we would not have had something which would ordinarily be counted as a whole sentence. (Only in a pretentious mood can we hear 'Socrates is' as a sentence – unless it's an abbreviated answer to a question, such as 'Who's the one talking to Protagoras?') And we cannot add just any word after 'waspish' and still have a sentence. This feature which sentences have and mere lists do not is sometimes called the *unity of the proposition*: in one of its senses 'proposition' means *sentence*.¹¹

The unity of the sentence turns out to be very hard to explain, or even acknowledge, unless you think of words as already being suited for particular roles in sentences – that is, unless you think of words as already having built into them, as it were, a grammar which dictates how they can combine to form sentences. If, for example, you think of all words as being names, grammatically speaking, it's hard to see how you can avoid treating a sentence as just a list.

¹¹ For a consideration of the treatment of the problem in the early analytic tradition, see M. Gibson, *From Naming to Saying: The Unity of the Proposition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

Locke seems bound to find it difficult to explain the unity of the sentence, because he seems to treat words as names of Ideas. In fact, though, he makes an exception for some words – precisely to deal with this problem. This is what he says:

The mind, in communicating its thought to others, does not only need signs of the *ideas* it has then before it, but others also, to shew or intimate some particular action of its own, at that time, relating to those *ideas*. This it does several ways; as, *Is*, and *Is not*, are the general marks of the mind, affirming or denying.¹²

The suggestion seems to be this. If I say, ‘Socrates is waspish’, then I am *affirming* waspishness of Socrates; if I say, ‘Socrates is not waspish’, then I am *denying* waspishness of Socrates. What happens, according to Locke, is that the various Ideas are joined together in an action of the mind. The unity of the sentence, then, is created by the mind.

Does this really solve the problem? I think the problem is just transferred. A unity is created by an action of the mind – of affirming or denying, for example – but the nature of the unity which is created is left mysterious. What exactly does the mind do in affirming waspishness of Socrates? How does this create a unity? At best it seems that the unity of the proposition is explained in terms of the unity of something in the mind – a *judgement* or a *thought*, perhaps. But it is left mysterious in what sense a judgement or a thought is a unity, and not just a collection of Ideas.

What we have here is an indication of the real difficulty of understanding the sense in which words are *components* of sentences.¹³ This difficulty is just as significant for a world-oriented kind of theory as it is for a mind-oriented theory like Locke’s. On a theory like Locke’s the unity of sentences is explained in terms of an apparently more basic unity of something mental – judgements or thoughts. On a world-oriented theory it is likely to be explained in terms of an apparently more basic unity of something out there in the world – *facts*, for example. But in both cases the nature of the apparently more basic unity is left mysterious.

¹² *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, III, viii, 1.

¹³ We will return to this difficulty in chs. 2 and 9.

1.6 Locke's less disputed assumptions

I've concentrated here on the assumptions Locke makes which have been at the centre of debate in recent philosophy of language. But we should not forget the other assumptions which form part of Locke's picture, even if they are generally shared by modern philosophers.

Locke's whole account is built on these two basic assumptions:

- (L1) The nature of language is defined by its function;
- (L2) The function of language is to communicate.

It's worth pausing a moment to consider whether we should accept them. (L1) and (L2) both assume that language has a single function. Is that obvious? Aren't there many things which we can do with language? It is not immediately clear that any one of these is basic.¹⁴

Perhaps, though, it might seem obvious that all the different things which we can do with language depend at least on the possibility of using language to communicate. This may be true, but it is not so clear that this is enough to make communication the basic *point* of language. If we think that the function of language is to communicate, we will focus on the role of language in certain everyday dealings. We use language to warn people of danger, to inform them of various things, to ask for information, to get them to do things for us, and so on. In this way, language is part of the business of everyday living. But there are other uses of language which are not – or, at least, are not *obviously* – concerned with communication in the same way. The clearest cases are provided by literature. It's not at all obvious that it is the business of a poem, a play, or a novel to *communicate* something – at least, if communication is the kind of thing which is important in ordinary workaday dealings. It is mostly rather odd to think of a poem or a novel as something like a contribution to a conversation. It seems generally to be part of the point of a work of literature that it should transcend its immediate context, and have a meaning which is not just a matter of its contribution to a particular historical situation.

¹⁴ This kind of point is emphasized by Ludwig Wittgenstein, e.g. in his *Philosophical Investigations*. See ch. 15 below.

The other Lockean assumptions which are commonly accepted are these two:

- (L7) The relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary;
- (L8) Words are not intrinsically meaningful.

(L7) is the claim that is familiarly known as the thesis that words are arbitrary signs. Its basic point can be expressed like this: whatever one word means could have been meant by a different word; so it's arbitrary that we use this word – rather than that other one – to mean it. What would make that other word different from the one we started with? Presumably, the way it is pronounced and spelled. So it seems that (L7) requires us to say that anything which depends on the pronunciation and spelling of a word is irrelevant to its meaning. To see what might be controversial about this, consider again the use of words in a poem. It seems that all kinds of things about a word are relevant to what we might intuitively call the meaning of a poem: the sound of its vowels and consonants, its rhythm, its etymology, its spelling. These are just the features which someone who accepts (L7) will count as *irrelevant* to meaning.

Why should anyone think they are irrelevant? I suspect that this view depends, in the end, on some assumptions like (L1) and (L2). If we think that the function of language is to communicate, we may think that all these features which depend on pronunciation and spelling make no difference to *what* is communicated – only to the *way* in which it is communicated. So we might think they can safely be ignored in an account of meaning. If this diagnosis is correct, then we ought to worry about (L7) if we start to question (L1) and (L2).

Finally, we should note that (L8) goes beyond what is required for (L7). (L8) is commonly expressed by saying that words are just types of sound or mark, which are meaningless in themselves, but are given meaning by their role in something we do with them. This is a very natural assumption – and, indeed, it is shared by many philosophers in the analytic tradition – but it is hard to see why it should seem so compelling. The fact that we can speak and write words does not mean that they are nothing but sounds or marks. It looks as if Locke is motivated by a general philosophical theory of the kinds of things there are in the world. If we begin with a very general conception of the things we might expect to encounter – in science, for

example – and ask which of *these* are words, then it does seem natural to think that words are just types of sound or mark.

In fact, if we try to respect our ordinary, pre-theoretical conception of the nature of words, it becomes very difficult to say what they are. To begin with, it seems that the same word could be pronounced differently (by people who speak the same language in different places, for example), or spelled differently (by people who speak the same language at different times, for example): so it's hard to see how we can define what counts as the same word just in terms of sound and shape. This makes the Lockean conception of words rather unnatural. But it's not clear that it will help just to include the *meaning* of words as part of their identity: after all, we usually think that the same word can *change* its meaning over time. ('Nice' originally meant *ignorant* or *foolish*, for example – it comes from the Latin 'nescius'.) The issue of what words are has largely been ignored in the philosophy of language.

The four assumptions we've just been considering – (L1), (L2), (L7), and (L8) – have generally been accepted without question in the analytic tradition. And nothing we'll consider in the rest of the book will cast them into serious doubt. For all that, it's worth reflecting on whether they really have to be accepted.

Further reading

For a general introduction to Locke, see E.J. Lowe, *Locke on Human Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1995): chapter 7 deals with Locke's account of language. For papers specifically on Locke's philosophy of language, see N. Kretzmann, 'The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantic Theory', *Philosophical Review*, 77 (1968), pp. 175–96, and E.J. Ashworth, 'Locke on Language', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (1984), pp. 45–73.

2 Frege on Sense and reference

Key text

Gottlob Frege, 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', *Zeitung für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 100 (1892), pp. 25–50; translated (for example) as 'On Sense and Meaning' in G. Frege, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*, ed. B. McGuinness (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); this paper appears in many anthologies in various translations.¹

2.1 Introduction

The German mathematician and philosopher, Gottlob Frege, is widely regarded as the father of analytic philosophy. His work has shaped everything which has been written in the philosophy of language in the analytic tradition. I think there are two principal reasons for this. First, his philosophy of language presents a way of accepting what seems most natural and intuitive about the kind of approach to language found in Locke, while decisively rejecting what seems most questionable about it. And, secondly, his work offers the prospect of a thoroughly systematic approach to meaning.

Frege shares with Locke these three crucial assumptions which we identified in chapter 1:

- (L1) The nature of language is defined by its function;
- (L2) The function of language is to communicate;
- (L3) What language is meant to communicate is *thought*.

¹ In page references to this work, I'll use the page numbers of the original, which appear (in the margins, or in brackets) in some translations.

But his clearest disagreement with the Lockean tradition comes in his treatment of these two assumptions:

- (L4) Words signify or mean the components of what language is meant to communicate;
- (L5) The components of thought are *Ideas*.

Frege accepts some version of (L4), but understands it in a non-Lockean way. Locke had the following conception of how words are components of sentences. Individual words – or most of them, at least – stand for self-standing Ideas in the mind of the speaker, and these are combined into something sentential by an action of the speaker’s mind. Frege rejects this: sentences are, in some sense, basic, and individual words only make sense in the context of sentences. Frege holds that the Lockean conception of the relation between words and sentences has to be rejected if we are to avoid accepting that words mean Ideas (in a broadly Lockean sense of the term), and he is adamant that words cannot mean Ideas. Since Frege accepts (L3) and (L4), he has to deny (L5).

The other striking innovation of Frege’s philosophy of language is his use of the materials of formal logic to characterize the meaning of words. He was peculiarly well-placed to make such an innovation. His first great work was the invention of a new system of formal logic. This new system forms the basis of what is studied as elementary logic today: it has completely superseded the Aristotelian logic which was dominant before, and is taken for granted in all analytic philosophy. Almost all analytic philosophy of language works with some variant of this Fregean logical system.

2.2 Psychologism and the Context Principle

Frege’s first philosophical (as opposed to mathematical or logical) work was *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. The Preface to this work contains two principles which are central to Frege’s philosophy of language.

The main preoccupation of the Preface is with an attack on something which is often known as *psychologism*. Frege is concerned with more than one thing here,² but the claim of his which is most important for our purposes is this:

² He is also concerned to argue that psychology (like history) is irrelevant to philosophy. This makes him opposed to psychologism in the same way as Edmund Husserl was (in