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LOCKE'S THEORY OF SIGNIFICATION

Locke's theory of signification has in itself some lack of clarity, and consequently some critics make mistake in their interpretations. One such wrong interpretation is that Locke's theory of signification has only one thesis. An attempt will be made in this paper to give an analysis of the facts which underlie Locke's theory of signification, and to suggest that if this analysis is correct then there must to be two theses in Locke's theory. At the same time a few mistaken characterisations of Locke's theory will be pointed out.

Lock starts his discussion of signification with his views about the origin of words. Locke thinks : " God, having designed man for a sociable creature, ... furnished him also with language, waich was to be the great instrument and common tie of society. Man, therefore, had by nature his organs so fashioned, as to be fit to frame articulate sounds, which we call words ".[1] On the other hand, man " should be able to use these sounds as signs of internal conceptions; and to make them stand as marks for the ideas within his own mind, whereby they might be made known to others ... ".[2] This gives an account of the nature of the necessity of words and a glimpse of the basic nature of them. In this connection it may be interesting to see more about the origin of them. Locke's view about this is that :

> ... it was necessary that man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof 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, came 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.[3]

Thus, according to Locke, particular words are derived by the *voluntary imposition* of sound for the ideas of mind. This account of the origin of words also gives us a certain view of the *relation between words and ideas.* This relation, as evident from the above quoted passage, is *voluntarily imposed arbitrary relation;* and this is quite true about the origin of particular words and particular languages; and this is clear from Locke's use of the word " particular " in discussing the connection of articulate sound and certain ideas. And thus as the mark of the idea of *book,* we use " book " in English and " das Buch " in German and " livre " in French; and accordingly there are different languages. This is why Locke thinks that there is no " one language amongst all men ". However, there is a common ground of the origin of *words and languages as such* and a common relationship between *words and ideas as such.* This common relationship is, however, non-voluntary, non-arbitrary and natural. This natural relationship will be true for any word in any language. This natural relationship for Locke is that of *" stand for "* or *" signification "*; and words are the " sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they *stand for* are their proper and immediate *signification."*[4] This relationship can be explained as that of the semantic connection between the linguistic units like words, and ideas in mind. Locke uses different words and

phrases to express this relation, and as clear from the above, they are " marks of ", " stand for ", " signs of ", " signification " and so on. Accordingly Locke defines his theory of signification as : " words, in their primary and immediate signification, for nothing but *the ideas in the mind of him that uses them* ".[5]

In this way the next important question that may be raised regarding Locke's semantic theory is : *do these different semantic connectives express the same relationship between words and ideas ?* Locke's position is not very clear on this question, and this has been the cause of confusion and mistaken interpretation of his position. Locke does not clearly say anything about the number of such relationship between words and ideas. And Norman Kretzmann thinks that all these semantic connectives express the one and same relation, and he makes a generalization among them. About the different statements and the different connectives, Kretzmann says :

> [there are] various similar statements in the *Essay* – statements in which Locke, without intending to draw any semantic distinctions, can be found saying, for example, that words are signs of, or are marks of, or are names of, or signify, or mark, or correspond to, or are annexed to ideas. The uncovering of a single, explanatory, Lockean sense for Locke's many semantic connectives is, I think, one of the results of the present investigation; but in conducting it I am going to shut out this terminological noise by adopting the neutral verb ' signify '.[6]

This generalization of Locke's uses of different semantic connectives between words and ideas is wrong. As a means to the clear understanding of Locke's position, we may see how this is wrong and how another mistaken view follows from this.

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Since Kretzmann substitutes ' signify ' for all similar semantic connectives under consideration, he would say that the theses that " words stand for ideas " and " words signify ideas " are same. And as an extension of the generalization of these semantic connectives, Kretzmann arrives at the view that there is only one main thesis in Locke's view. Kretzmann says : " I propose to take the following close paraphrase as a standard version of the main thesis of Locke's semantic theory. *Words in their primary or immediate signification signify nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses* them ".[7]

This generalization of Kretzmann's may be shown to be wrong by pointing out the two-fold uses of words, and by showing that the signification of words vary accordingly. Locke is not very clear on this point and failed to differentiate between the two-fold uses of words.

From the above quotations (2) and (3), it is clear that words are used to express what one has in mind as " invisible ideas ", so that " they might be made known to others. " Thus, the consequence of the use of words is the expression of one's invisible ideas; and secondly the consequence is that they become known or may become known to others. This second consequence sometimes may not take place, for someone may talk to himself when he is alone, or someone's writings may remain undisclosed for ever. And sometimes this second consequence may take place long after the use of the words, as in the case of written or recorded words. Thus, there may be : *(i) the use of words* and *(ii) the use of the used words.* Words may be used to express the invisible ideas of the user's mind, which use may be said to be *the semantic use*; and they may be used to make the expressed ideas known (immediately or remotely) to others, which use may be said to be *the communicative use.* But the relation between the words and ideas which they ex-

press will be different in the two cases. This may be made clear by an example.

In writing a book, an author may use a word which *signified* what the author had in mind in using that word. But in the use of the *reader,* the word cannot signify what immediately was in the author's mind, but can *stand for* that (this will hold in the case of tape-recorded words and listeners as well). The author might have passed away long before; and in the reader's use of the word there will be nothing to be signified as the immediate idea of the author's mind, which is non-existent at present. Apart from this attempt to make this clear by this example, it can also be affirmed by Locke's own statement; and that will be applicable in all cases whether or not it is a written word and whether or not it is immediately communicated. Locke says about all words that : " they are all within his [the user's] own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear ".[8] Thus words can signify ideas ouly in the case of the person who uses them; but in the case of communication to other, they cannot signify anything because what is to be signified is hidden. In that case, words can only *stand for* the hidden ideas.

It ts now clear that Kretzmann is generalizing both the semantic connectives and the semantic theses. Like Kretzmann J. Bennett is also wrong in making the generalization of the semantic connectives. Bennett does not differentiate between the meanings of " signify " and " stand for " but adopts the latter one. For Bennett : " To attach meaning to an utterence, then, is to make it ' *stand as mark* ' for one or more ' internal conceptions ' or ' ideas ' in one's own mind ".[9] Bennett also is not making clear the number of theses in Locke's theory.

More recently C. Landesman has also missed this point of the two theses of Locke's theory. This is clear when he says

that : " I shall use the following brief formulation of Locke's theory : Words immediately signify ideas in the mind of the speaker ".[10] Landesman does not make any clear distinction between " signify " and " stand for " or between the implications of the semantic use and the communicative use of words.

I may conclude this paper by saying ; (i) that words have two uses, the semantic use for expression of the hidden ideas of the user's mind, and the communicative use for letting others know the expressed ideas; (ii) and that there *must* be two corresponding theses in Locke's theory. In Locke's writing, both these theses are present when he says that words *signify* ideas, and that words also *stand for* ideas. Locke does not make clear the distinction between them, and a few critics wrongly interpret him.[11]

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NOTES

1. Locke, J.. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed., A. C. Fraser (New York : Dover Publications, 1959), III. i. 1
2. *Ibid.*, III. i. 2
3. *Ibid.*, III. ii. 1
4. *Ibid.*, III. ii. 1, my italics
5. *Ibid.*, III. ii. 2
6. Kretzmann, N., " The Main Thesis of Locke's Semantics Theory ", in I. C. Tipton ed., *Locke on Human Understanding* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 126
7. *Ibid.*, p. 126
8. Locke, J., *op. cit.*, III. ii. 1
9. Bennett, J. *Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 1, my italics
10. Landesman, C., " Locke's Theory of Meaning ", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976), p. 24
11. I am grateful to Professor Douglas Odegard (University of Guelph, Canada) for helpful discussion on an earlier draft of this paper