

One Word and Multiple Senses: John Locke's Philosophy of Abuse of Language

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining the impotence of language or what is famously referred to as the phenomenon of inconsistency of language through the philosophy of John Locke on the abuse of language and with specific reference to the Eighth Edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary authored by Hornby (2010). Locke as well stated that adequate signs which he also referred to as words are lost or corrupted especially when a word is given many meanings. By discussing selected entries of the dictionary, the present research intends to demonstrate how polysemanticity and the use of a word in different contexts can cause what Locke called language misuse. Illustrating in the case of particular examples, the study shows the potential consequence of this process for the language learners and users, stressing on the necessity to enhance the meticulousness of the language one will opt to use. The research concludes that there is need to resolve discrepancies that grow from these ambiguities for language teachers and lexicographers to improve meaning and communication, an idea supported by Locke's goal of enforcing the correct usage of language among English speakers. Results imply that teachers should draw students' attention to the fact that words' meanings cannot be understood separately from their contexts. Language educators are advised to introduce the students to the different meanings of words and contexts of their use.

Keywords: John Locke, Inconstancy of words, Abuse of Language

1. Introduction

To make an understanding of the nature and existence of the external world - has always been a debate in philosophy. John Locke (1632-1704), a renowned political theorist, educationist, and philosopher, had introduced humans to the most difficult philosophies existing underneath English language. In Lock's universally acknowledged and appreciated epistemological work: 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding', initiated the idea of theory of representation.

The theory took the knowledge of the whole world merely based on perception of ideas that perplexed many philosophers (Kondrla & Kralik, 2016). He perceived the theory of knowledge directly related to ideas existing in human mind. The way humans may perceive ideas and to evaluate the worth of ideas and further to compare and combine them accordingly is a reflection of external world around the humans. As we go into details of this essay, John Lock divided the essay into four books where every books deals with some specifics. The book one considers mind as tabula rasa, a blank slate, where there is no knowledge that exists innately or at time of the birth.

This concept has always been opposed by the mentalist or cognitive theories and frameworks. The book two argues on existences of knowledge as a result of experiences. Indeed, this part of the essay presented the theory of knowledge as an accumulation of ideas where ideas were found dependent on human mind and the way it acquires knowledge. Knowledge is an outcome of unique and specific bond between various ideas. Every human perceives the world around him/her in a unique way; perception of ideas regarding the objects in the external world (Mārik & Kralik, 2024). There exist simple ideas and then they merge to give rise to complex ideas. The book 3 is a digression from the philosophy of knowledge to its relationship with language. The intricate and complicate nature of language has been debated to a greater extent in order to understand the abuse of language. He thus considers language as an obstacle in the way of proper and meaningful communication and suggests the various ways where confusion and ambiguity can be removed to make people understand each other in a more precise and concise manner (Martin, Morales & Kralik, 2021). The bond between Knowledge, beliefs, and opinion was the focal point of the fourth book.

The reason of criticism had been -how to entirely acquire ideas as a production of one's sensory experiences. Also, if there is such a situation that Lock mentions then few other questions arise: how the ideas of God are different for different humans? If mind is a blank slate, then how does one perceive anything from his surroundings? How does mind even think of an idea if there is no understanding of any idea? If purpose

of an idea is the potential to think in Lock's terminology, then the angle and position of how to think is also unique to individuals. It points out the existence of some special advents in human minds. Mind definitely needs a special portion in mind to perceive any idea and then combine or compare and merge with the other ideas as John Locke's mentioned. Also if simple ideas first exist and they make complex ideas, then how can we confirm that every idea is a simple idea for all humans? Lock himself mentioned that humans perceive ideas with sensory experiences.

The sensory experiences may lead humans to a variety of directions. It may be a simple idea for one but quite a complicated one for another. Who will then categorize the existence of simple and complex ideas? These are few significant questions which converted Lock's philosophy into bewilderment. According to Connolly (2013), Locks categorizes complex ideas into substances (ideas of things existing independently), modes (ideas of things existing as a result of dependence on substances), and relation (ideas of things involving more than one substance).

Language is in fact, the basic and fundamental unit of all cognitive processes that humans go through (Kobylarek, Madej, & Roubalov 2022). Humans develop and maintain social ties via use of language but the significant question is how language is used to serve this purpose. In order to answer this question, Locke formulated a theory of words and considered words as responsible for conveying ideas and thoughts which stand in an arbitrary relation with each other but according to Locke, due to this arbitrary nature, languages differ from one another and there is no universal language (Kemerling, 2011).

It was for this reason that though not genuinely Locke planned to dedicate the whole book on language but he ended up eventually doing so. Language goes beyond the simple usage of communication. It traces the existence of those complicated ideas which exist beneath the words. Words themselves are nothing but denote the ideas. He believes: "Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them." (3.2.2, p. 405). Locke perceives words as not only having primary purpose of conveying their meaning related to a particular idea but also a 'secret reference' that other person may possess in connection to that idea in his cognition. Words do not occur in isolation but in connection to the certain others words and ideas (Martin et al., 2022).

The way Locke categorized the ideas; he also linked them to the usage of words. Sometimes the words do not denote any ideas but the bond between the ideas which Locke termed as Particles to clarify his philosophy of words. For example, if I say, 'Faiza is a student'. Faiza and student are two ideas and what unites them is the particle 'is' expressing the relation between two ideas. However, this understanding till here is very much fine for Locke, the issue where he wants correction is regarding the misuse of language. Language due to the occurrence of the multiple ideas becomes much more complicated for its understanding (Pavlikova, 2018). Children are taught the words long before they form the image of that word. Since the word government may be taught at an early age but it takes few years to understand what really a government is? Then what is more the matter of bafflement and bewilderment is the extension of the usage of the words. The misunderstandings between people, the political statements, and speeches are all the result of misuse and abuse of language (Kobylarek, 2020). The consistent use of words is crucial where people do not equivocate.

1.1 Research Questions

- 1) In what way does the 8th edition of Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary by Hornby (2010) illustrate the phenomenon of linguistic abuse as described by John Locke and in relation to the phenomenon of polysemy – that is, when multiple meanings are assigned to a single word?
- 2) How does the existence of multiple meanings of words inpidual words as discovered in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary impact on non-native English users in the area of understanding as well as constructive communication?

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- i. to investigate the polysemy and the consequent linguistic vagueness and misunderstanding according to Locke's dictum, the author will randomly select the entries of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (8th edn) by Hornby (2010) in which polysemy is present
- ii. to analyze polysemy on the English reproduction and comprehension of the foreign-speaking population by identifying how this feature influences their learning and usage

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study aims at exploring the relevance of Locke's abuse of language – people use words to refer to different things at different times and contexts which create confusion. This aspect of Locke's abuse of language has not been explored earlier by the researchers but it has its authenticity if we see the meanings of the words in English dictionaries- majority of the words have been used in number of contexts and situations. Though the concept of Polysemy as discussed much in previous researches also deals with extensions of meanings related to a single lexical entry, Locke's abuse of language deals with this expansion of meanings as abuse of language as they lead to confusion in language due to the fact that meanings are not same for all individuals. It can also be helpful to dictionary makers to assign the clear usage of meanings to words and to provide such examples which can further make people clear about meanings of words which in turn can be helpful to avoid miscommunication among people.

2. Literature Review

Locke was not the first one to account for inconsistencies of a language and abuse of words. There were many who talked about this phenomenon earlier but couldn't throw light as Further, Locke did so. Locke's ideas were largely influenced by Francis Bacon ideas of

abuse and inconsistent use of language. This abuse of language cannot be denied by the people as it is very much evident and obvious in any languages. One word cannot mean the same to all the individuals as every individual perceives the word in a different reality (Orwell, 2014). According to Connolly (2013), Locke's ideas may be traced back from the artificial language planning of the 17th century to 18th century linguistic prescriptivism. Owing to fact that modern writers could not contribute to permanence and glory of language as Addison, Swift and Pope did, Priestley stated (2013):

The conjectures and apprehensions we find in the writings of Addison, Pope, Swift, and others, their contemporaries, that the language of their time would, at length become obsolete in this nation, are absolutely groundless. And it may be taken for granted, that the schemes of some still more modern writers, to add something considerable to the perfection of the English language, in order to contribute to the permanency of it, cannot, according to the course of nature, produce any effect. (p. 60)

Jang (2013) emphasizes arbitrariness as a key concept of linguistic assignments by Roman writers. According to Ruthrof (2014), "Proper language" or speaking properly refers to speaking in accordance with linguistic conventions and if people do not follow this convention then they are using abuse of language as per Locke's philosophy of inconsistent use of words. According to Locke, when words fail to convey natural clarity, then they become abuse of language but Ruthrof criticizes Locke for this major flaw in his essay and at the same time mentions that Locke was aware too of this tension in his Essay on abuse of language since words possess some hidden social meanings along with social expectations. He stands against with Locke's philosophy of ideas and their link to things which they stand for since he mentions that Locke's takes ideas of every human unique to him then how idea of one human can be understandable for another and as per Ruthrof's Philosophy it is for this reason that one word when used by different people got different meanings which were in accordance with social needs (Ruthrof, 2014).

Sarpi, like Locke favoured the multiple meanings as misuse of language and considered them as misleading people. He also mentioned that people from religious and political spheres of life in the past distorted words to create new meanings to serve their interests the best way. He also presented the solution to misuse of words by going back to the original meanings of the words to avoid all confusions and ambiguities in meanings (cf. Riverso, 2016). According to Dawson (2007), Locke has made a great contribution to the philosophy of language since different meanings are given to one word due to careless use of language which can be avoided by assigning clear and distinct meanings to words (Dawson, 2007).

The basic concern of John Locke's book three is related to the use and abuse of language. The most common abuse of language is no specific or definite meaning regarding one word. Though people attached a specific meaning to the word in the past but with the passage of time people introduced several changes to their meanings to take language as a source to serve their interest the better way, the words such as wisdom, glory and gentleman etc. had specific meanings but there were no concrete objects linked to them so their usage got other meanings as well (Alam et al., 2021; Alam & Haque, 2021). In fact, people introduced changes in the meanings of the words to use them in different contexts situations in order to serve their needs (Ahmad, Alam & Kaur, 2022). Meanings are dependent on the people who use them the way they want to use (Kobylarek, Madej, & Birova, 2022). People give meanings to words according to their own perceptions (Sharma et al, 2024a). Further, giving a name to any entity, object, or phenomenon is a job of a mind and it leads to abuse of language (sharma et al., 2024b).

Locke's philosophy regarding language brings into light his epistemological background since he declared all ideas as formed by people's own intuitions and perceptions. In turn these ideas lead to multiple senses that affect the real sense of a word. Locke took complex ideas as formed by combining the simple ideas so people keep on associating different ideas to a single word according to time, place, situation, and context and thus make it a complex entity that leads to confusion and becomes the abuse of language. Such abuse of language leads to obstacles and hindrances in acquiring knowledge in a language as people remain unable to make a mutual agreement about a proper usage of a word. Words reveal ambiguity due to their inconsistent usage so knowledge hence becomes hard to attain so people should sue one word for one meaning only to avoid obscurity of expressions (Orwell, 2014).

In view of this, the area of focus in the philosophy of John Locke on the use of language especially when the accent is put on the abuse of language especially where there is inconsistency remain a topic of interest in analyzing the dynamics and the careful use of language. According to Locke, ambiguity happens when one employs a certain word, which has several meanings; this is wrong (Locke 1690). This research aims at examining this phenomenon using a reliable source; the eighth edition of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary by Hornby (2010) with extended paradigm detailing the various facets of polysynony in the English language.

Numerous empirical works also testify to the truth in Locke's arguments about how language is subject to the vice of ambiguity. Works show that understanding of the polysemy is problematic in language learning due to confusion in the use of a particular word, meaning which may at time be diverse; Yule, 2016, Pavlikova & Tavilla, 2023). For instance, in his research, Yule (2016) showed that the interlocutors tend to misunderstand one another's messages due to the choice of polysemic words. This concurs with what Locke has said it being impossible to communicate when there are different meanings for the same word.

Regarding the problem of language abuse, one of the significant tasks in education is to draw students' attention to the fact that words' meanings cannot be understood separately from their contexts. Language educators are advised to introduce the students to the different meanings of words and contexts of their use (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Polysemy has always been problematic and this approach can assist in the attempts to reduce different interpretations of exactly the same word.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

As we have seen from Locke in his “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”, clarity is of great essence when it comes to languages. Locke was of the opinion that when a given term does not refer to different concept, difficulties in comprehending actual meaning stem from the confusion (Locke, 1690). He stressed on the significance of the linguistic preciseness to avert what he referred to as the “misuse of the language.” This theoretical lens offers a theoretical basis upon which to analyse the modern dictionary as either contributing towards the amplification of this matter, or as attempting to contain it.

For this study, the research utilised The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary the edition produced by Hornby (2010). This dictionary is well abbreviated for containing Word entries meant for usage by the non-native English people. Nevertheless, it also perfectly illustrates the problem that is inherent in the analysis of texts – the fact that single words can have multiple meanings. For example, the word ‘hard’ is explained with the following contexts including ‘a hard choice,’ ‘hard work,’ ‘hard man,’ ‘hard evidence,’ and ‘hard question,’ all of which carry different connotations although sharing the same word (Hornby, 2010). Likewise, the examples of the words such as item, just and keen show that most words encompass several meanings causing confusion in interpersonal communication (Hornby, 2010).

3. Research Methodology

The research makes use of the qualitative content analysis approach which is meant to give the answers of the questions such as how and why? Following the tradition of such kind of research, my vision of the research is subjective interpretation of the lexical entities as found in Oxford advanced English learner’s dictionary in order to reveal many senses associated with a single lexical entry. This research method is appropriate to find abuse of inconsistent use of language as per Locke’s philosophy of abuse of language since it describes how one word has got multiple senses and how the senses may lead to many interpretations and confusions in communication in a language.

3.1 Research Sample

The researcher has chosen the eighth edition of Oxford English Advanced Learner’s Dictionary by Hornby (2010) in order to explore the inconsistent use of words in a language which is the abuse of language as per Locke’s philosophy.

3.1.1 Rationale for the Selection of the Research Sample

Only few examples have been chosen due to limited time constraint. Oxford advanced English learners’ dictionary is used by keeping in mind its reliability and validity since language learners as well as native speakers consult this dictionary most of the time to find out meanings. But it leads to confusion on their part as one word has got series of meanings in many cases. How far it is true for acquisition of language can be traced below by quoting few examples with reference to the Lock’s claims in his essay on abuse of language (cf. Orwell, 2014).

4. Discussion

People do not use words consistently since they use one word in order to refer to many meanings and many ideas which are at times quite distinct and different from one another. Locke’s six abuses of language also include one such aspect in which he talks about confusion and ambiguity as created by people by associating multiple meanings to a single entity or lexical item. The researcher has taken Oxford English Dictionary in order to bring into light this phenomenon. I have further chosen one or two words from every letter of the English alphabet from Oxford English dictionary (Hornby, 2010), to explore the above mentioned phenomenon.

I. Attitude:

- A lot of drivers have a serious attitude problem.
- Youth is simply an attitude of mind.
- Hands were folded in an attitude of prayer.
- A band with attitude.

The word attitude doesn’t reflect the same usage as shown through these examples. Sometimes only attitude means bad attitude and at other times people do use the words “bad attitude” to refer to something negative and “good attitude” to present something positive. Attitude has been used in these examples as both physical and mental behavior and thus present confusion.

II. Bitch:

- A female dog
- She’s a real bitch
- We’ve been having a bitch
- Life’s a bitch.

Bitch is possessing both literal and connotative meanings in these examples. Sometimes it is an animal, but usually it means something messy and fussy by the people.

III. Black:

- A shiny black car

- Black deeds/lies
- He hasn't been as black as painted
- She joked with black humour
- The play is a black comedy (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

This word black has got so many associative or connotative meanings. More than a colour, it is used to refer to negative and evil deeds of the people. Disappointment and gloomy picture or portrayal of something or somebody can also be presented well by using the word "black". Black comedy means to deal with unpleasant and terrible things in humorous way.

IV. Character:

- My teacher agreed to be a character witness for me in court
- She has a face with lot of character
- She is a character
- The modern hotels have no real character
- A letter, a sign, mark, or symbol (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

This word character has also go much inconsistency in its usage such as other then reputation as its simple meaning, there are the notions of "good character" and "bad character" but at times a strange and unusual character can also be presented very well with the help of only a word "character". People in the TV dramas, films and literary works are also knowing as characters.

V. Condition:

- He is out of condition
- You are in no condition.
- A good training program is one of the conditions for successful industry (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010).

Out of condition and no condition mean the same thing but there are two different expressions for them. Third usage is totally different as it refers to "only if" situation.

VI. Cool:

- Store lemons in a cool dry place
- She tried to stay cool
- She was cool regarding proposal
- I'm cool with it
- That's cool (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010).

Cool means a lot other than the meaning of cold place since it means a person who is able to control his or her temperament or a comfortable situation or may also be an exciting place, a person, or a visit.

VII. Due:

- The team's success was due to her efforts.
- The next train is due in five minutes.
- He was charged with driving without due care and attention (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010).

Out of so many meanings of due, I have taken only the above three as the most significant one. Due can be taken as a cause of something or somebody, can be something expected, and can also be something right or suitable in any circumstances.

VIII. Dump:

- The dead body was just dumped by the road side.
- He has no right to dump his problems on me.
- He dumped his girlfriend.
- How can you live in this dump? (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2010)

Out of range of so many inconsistent uses of the word dump I have chosen the above mentioned few to throw light on its diverse functions in a language. Dump is not only used to refer to dirty place but also when somebody ends a romantic relationship with somebody or when something is imposed on others as in example 2 or at times it can also be for a place where garbage is thrown.

IX. Fair:

- Was it really fair to him to do all the work?

- My birthday is still a fair way off.
- I have a fair idea of what happened.
- All her children are fair (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010).

Fair is for complexion as well as for justice and fair is meant for “quite good” as well as quite a large number.

X. Fit:

- That jacket fits well
- I feel fit
- Fit of anger
- After eating a lot, I am fit to burst
- She’s fit (British Informal usage to refer to something sexually attractive)
- Pictures don’t fit into any category.
- The experience fitted him to do the job (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010).

Fit is meant for: correct shape and size, physical health, short period of strong emotions or feelings, sexually attractive, appropriateness, making suitable such as for a job.

XI. Free:

- A free man.
- A free admission
- A free time
- Is this seat free (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010)?

The word Free is not only used in the sense of no tensions, and without payment but also to mean when you have nothing to do and when there something is not in some one’s possession.

XII. Grave:

- We were in grave danger.
- She is gravely ill.
- We visited grandma’s grave (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010).

Grave is a place for dead people as well as serious situations and concerns. There are numerous examples as seen in oxford English dictionary which deal with multiple meanings or uses associated with one word or a single entity. These meanings didn’t come altogether or at once but gradually they got incorporated along with original meanings of the words with the passage of time. Instead people started suing them inconsistently will be a right phenomenon for such diverse uses of one word.

Table 4. The multiplicity and ambiguity in meaning (Oxford Advanced English Learner’s Dictionary, 2010)

Word	Examples
Hard	A hard choice/hard work/hard man/hard evidence/hard question
Item	A collector’s item/Are they an item? heard an item on radio/this item is not on list
Just	Just in time/just like her mother/just caught the train/I am just off
Keen	Keen to help/keen sportsman/keen rivals/a keen eye for a bargain
Lift	Lift a ban/lift the lid of a box/lifted his eyes/never lift a finger/my depression started to lift/lift to the station/exams gave him a real lift
Mind	A great mind/gave his mind/ lose the mind/make up the mind/call to the mind
Nick	A good nick/nicked himself while shaving/to end up in the nick
Open	Open air/open day/open ended/open the door
Quiet	Quiet evening/quiet voice/move quietly/quietly confident
Raw	Raw data/raw meat/raw emotion/raw beginner
Right	Doing the right thing/people have rights/be within your rights
Saw	Workman sawed all day/sawed away at her violin/she saw me yesterday
Smart	Smart for work/smart clothes/smart move/eyes were smarting from smoke/a smart

	set/smarter from the defeat/smart girl
Term	Full term/end of term/term of agreement/economy or anything is approaching its term
Tip	Giving the waiter a tip/a generous tip/ a handy tip/ finger tip
Value	Property value/zero value/poor values/set of values

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Human language is characterized with natural elements of obscurity, imperfection, and confusion. To a great surprise, humans do not render these traits of language any gargantuan significance. Though men took a start from the simplest form of a language, they are still making it complicated and incomprehensible particularly in terms of its meanings with every passing day. Moreover, Language is a highly complex phenomenon and its existence is due to ambiguity. According to Quiroga-Clare, C. (2003), ambiguity of a word is created by multiplicity of meanings. It cannot be only taken as a curse but also a blessing by linguists after years of research. The complexity of language refers to complexity of truths-there is no single truth and we are forced to rely on the truth as derived from our cultural systems and we do so for our own survival. There is no definite truth existing in our surrounding so there is no word with a definite meaning. Future research can be conducted to explore this area of ambiguity proposed by Quiroga-Claire since there is much to explore regarding the concept of ambiguity to understand people’s intentions behind their use of language.

These examples effectively reveal the inconsistency of the words used in English language. Sometimes they refer to one aspect and at other times they refer to another aspect. It has also been observed that words possess much confusion in terms of their multiple uses. They do not seem to be one clear entity but one ambiguous entity that can be used to refer to complexity of ideas at the same time. When language has this abuse in Locke’s term, then language will be so hard to learn and use effectively. A Successful communication is possible only when listener exactly decode what the speaker encodes. Also there will not be clarity about the uses of words even within the native speakers as people keep on experimenting with language and keep on expanding its meanings and uses and this expansion in fact leads to complexities and ambiguities.

Future research can be conducted on other languages to check whether they possess abuse of language as does English or not. Researchers can also go for other abuses of language as mentioned in Book 3 of Locke’s philosophy of language for their further research to explore other hidden areas. Such discoveries can also make the linguists find the suitable ways to have the concrete terms instead of many uses of a single entity as per Locke’s philosophy. There can also be research on reasons for abuse of language that what makes people use one word for different senses.

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Authors Contributions

Dr. SZ and Dr. MA were responsible for study design and revising. Dr. MP and SA was responsible for revising and drafting the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Dr. FA and SB equally contributed in the manuscript with their insights and regular discussions. All authors contributed equally to writing, editing, and proofreading the manuscript.

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