Locke and the primary signification of words: an approach to word meaning

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Locke's claim that the primary signification of (most) words is an idea, or complex of ideas, has received different interpretations. I support the majority view that Locke's notion of primary signification can be construed in terms of linguistic meaning. But this reading has been seen as making Locke's account vulnerable to various criticisms, of which I consider two. First, it appears to make the account vulnerable to the charge that an idea cannot play the role that a word meaning should play. I argue that the role Locke actually gives to signified ideas is not susceptible to this criticism. Second, it appears to make Locke guilty of at least some degree of semantic idealism. I argue that Locke is not guilty of this and that he makes a proper distinction between the non-referential relation that holds between a word and its primary signification and the referential relation that holds between a word and things the word is used to speak about.

1. Introduction

Locke's claim that the primary signification of (most) words is an idea, or complex of ideas, has received different interpretations. Most theorists argue that by primary signification Locke has in mind '(linguistic) meaning' (e.g. Alston, 1964; Kretzmann, 1967; Losonsky, 1994; 2007; Yolton, 1970). Some though have denied this. Ashworth (1981; 1984) argues that signification relates, not to meaning, but to

'making something known'. Ott (2004: 24) argues that the sign/signification relation is a matter of a sign being an 'indicator' of (evidence for) what is signified. Against these latter theorists, I argue that something like linguistic meaning is almost certainly correct (section 2).

But this reading has been seen as making Locke's account vulnerable to various criticisms, of which I consider two. First, it appears to make the account vulnerable to the charge that something like an idea cannot play the role that a word meaning should play. The concern is that an idea cannot determine whether or not a word applies to a particular object. In response, I argue that this is not the role that Locke gives to ideas. Locke describes a different role, one that is appropriate for his account of words (section 3). Second, the account appears to make Locke guilty of at least some degree of semantic idealism, in which a word is taken to refer not only to things in the world but also to the ideas that a word signifies. Hence, when we say 'The sun is the cause of the day' we are, in part, talking about our idea of the sun and our idea of a day. Losonsky (2007) accepts that this is a consequence of Locke's account. In a two-part response to Losonsky, I argue that there is no need to suppose that any degree of semantic idealism is a consequence of the account (section 4).

2. Primary signification as word meaning

Locke states that the proper/primary/immediate signification of a word is the idea (or ideas) that the word stands for (III.ii.1, 2-4, 7; III.iv.1-2).[1] Locke often omits the qualifiers and makes the same point in terms simply of the signification of a word.

The textual support for the claim that Locke associates signification with word meaning is very strong.

[1] References to Locke's *Essay* (Nidditch, 1975) are given by book, chapter and section. I do not consider the type of word for which Locke would not propose an idea-based account, such as connectives (III.vii.1-6).

Locke emphasizes that if a word does not stand for any idea that word is merely an empty sound. Words that belong to no idea 'would be perfectly insignificant Sounds' (III.i.4), 'bare Sounds, and nothing else' (III.x.26). The idea a word stands for is what is needed to make the difference between merely 'articulate Sounds', which even parrots can make, and a word of a language (III.i.1-2). This corresponds to the intuition that it is when we have learnt the meaning of a word that the word becomes more for us than just a sound. A word for which 'there are no determined *Ideas*' laid up in the user's mind is a word '*without any distinct meaning* at all' (III.x.3). 'He that hath Names without *Ideas*, wants meaning in his Words, and speaks only empty Sounds' (III.x.31). On this reading, the signification of a word is what makes a word significant, just as we might think of a word's meaning as that which makes a word significant.

In many passages we find the terms 'meaning' and 'signification' in close proximity. Losonsky (1994: 124-127), who summarizes the evidence, says that of sixty-eight occurrences of 'meaning' in the *Essay* sixty-one of those occurrences are to what Locke in other places calls the 'signification' of words.[2] To take just one type of example, Locke comments disparagingly on situations where people do not use words with the same significations as one another, and he alternatively describes this in terms of people using words in different meanings or senses (III.iv.15; III.ix.8; III.x.6; III.xi.25-27).

Further, Locke explicitly identifies signification with meaning when he discusses definitions. In a definition we use words to indicate the ideas that constitute the signification of the word that is being defined, and Locke straightforwardly describes a definition as 'properly nothing but the shewing the meaning of one Word by several others' (III.iv.7):

> *[A] Definition is* nothing else, but *the shewing the meaning of one Word by several other not synonymous Terms.* The meaning of Words, being only the

[2] Losonsky shows that the textual evidence points decisively against Ashworth's (1984) claim that Locke only infrequently and casually links signification with meaning.

> *Ideas* they are made to stand for, by him that uses them; the meaning of any Term is then shewed, or the Word is defined when by other Words, the *Idea* it is made the Sign of, and annexed to in the Mind of the Speaker, is as it were represented, or set before the view of another; and thus its Signification ascertained. (III.iv.6. See also III.iii.10; III.xi.17)

Thus there is overwhelming evidence that the meaning and signification of a word are identical for Locke, 'being only the *Ideas* they are made to stand for' (cf. Losonsky, 1994: 125; Yolton, 1970: 199).

It is natural to think of a word as standing in a tight relation with its meaning. Locke's language is often strongly suggestive of this. He uses certain descriptions for the relation of word to signified idea that he does not use, or almost never, to describe the relation between words and external things. Ideas are 'affixed' to a name (II.xxii.5; III.iii.14; III.vi.51; III.x.3; III.xi.11; IV.viii.9; IV.xii.9); there is a close (or constant) 'connexion' between idea and word (I.ii.23; II.xxxiii.19; III.ii.6-8; III.iii.16); names and ideas are 'annexed' to one another (frequently, see e.g. III.iii, vi, ix, x).[3] These descriptions are suggestive of a close bond. Locke also sketches an account of how this initial connection is put in place. By 'attention and repetition' an idea, such as the idea of a colour or shape, can become fixed in our memory (II.x.3). Once such ideas are 'lodged in the memory', words can be 'got to them' (I.ii.15).

From this perspective, what a word (primarily) signifies is most naturally seen not as something to which the word refers but as relating to an initial connection, between word and idea, that needs to be in place before the word can be used to refer to things (cf. Guyer, 1994: 121; Kretzmann, 1968: 186f.; Soles, 1988). If so, the primary signification of a word needs to be in place before we can use a word

[3] 'The term "annexed" is used fifty-four times in Book III [of the Essay] and always in order to discuss the annexation of names' (Losonsky, 2007: 299 note 13). The only uses of 'annexed' relating to the word-thing relation are I.ii.23; III.vi.6 ('that which annexes [a parcel of Matter] … to the *Species*, is the nominal Essence'). Putative annexation to a real essence of a substance is mentioned at III.x.19. The only use of 'connexion' for the word-thing relation is III.iii.13 (and IV.vi.5 for putative connexion to a real essence of a substance).

to make something known (Ashworth's account of signification) or to indicate an idea that a person has (Ott's account of signification). Losonsky (2007: 296f.) makes this point against Ott and it applies equally against Ashworth: 'it is the fact that a speaker uses a phrase that already has a certain meaning that makes it possible for that phrase to be evidence for what the speaker has in mind' (ibid.: 297).

Ott (2008: 295) has responded to Losonsky by saying that 'indicating' (Ott's interpretation of signification) is not the same thing as 'communicating'. Ott's position seems to be that setting up the sign as an indicator of an idea is preliminary to using the sign to communicate that idea (cf. Ott, 2004: 26). If so, this parallels the preliminary status that I have suggested belongs to a word's primary signification. But being an indicator of something is not, for Ott, properly described in terms of linguistic meaning. Ott illustrates from Hobbes what he means by an indicator. Hobbes states that things are 'signs' when they are regularly observed either to follow something or to go before something. A thick cloud is a sign of rain to follow; rain is a sign of a thick cloud that went before. As well as these natural relations, signs can be set up arbitrarily. Hobbes writes:

> [A] bush hung up, signifies that wine is to be sold there; a stone set in the ground signifies the bound of a field; and words so and so connected, signify the cogitations and motions of our mind. (Hobbes, *De Corpore* I.ii.2. 1839, 14f.)

From this perspective, what is signified is that which is indicated, that for which evidence is given (Ott 2004: 24). Ott (ibid.: 28) allows that there is a notion of meaning that is consistent with indication: we can ask 'What do the clouds mean?', with 'Rain' being an appropriate answer. The clouds indicate, reliably, the coming of rain. But, Ott claims, this notion of signification 'is radically different from that of sense or reference, or making known, or expressing' (ibid.). Hence Ott wishes to separate signification from linguistic meaning.

I doubt Ott's position can be maintained. His notion of an indicator seems to presuppose reliability (made explicit 2004: 31f.): for x to indicate y, x must reliably

correlate with y. But the reliable indication of such-and-such, in the context of a consideration of conventional signs, is most naturally taken as relating to how the conventional signs are used. If a community reliably uses a bush as a sign of a wine shop (and doesn't use it as a sign for other shops), a bush outside a shop will be an indicator of, in the sense of reliable evidence for, a wine shop. Signs can be unreliably used. Signs that say 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' do not reliably indicate that you will be prosecuted if you trespass; arguably, they do not even reliably indicate the 'cogitations and motions' of the minds of the people who put up such signs (a more likely cogitation is, perhaps, 'I hope this deters people'). But clearly it is also the case that the words, in spite of this, still have whatever meanings they have. From this use perspective, Ott's position is vulnerable to Losonksy's criticism: the type of signification Locke talks about seems to be something that needs to be in place before a use of the word can arise.

If Ott does wish to give a more primary role to his interpretation of signification, it is hard to see how reliability can be part of the picture. The terminology of reliability does not seem appropriate for the initial relation between a word and its signification that is presupposed by the use of the word. Locke speaks of the idea that a word is 'annexed to in the Mind of the Speaker' (III.iv.6); there is a 'voluntary connexion' (III.iv.11) between word and idea. We need to reliably remember the connection, but the connection itself is not reliable or otherwise.

A more general problem with Ott's suggestion is that even if it is possible to trace a tradition of thought that treats signs as indicators it does not follow that this will provide an appropriate guide to Locke's account of signification. Locke's own discussion provides us with ample and detailed opportunity to discern what his account of signification is (cf. Losonsky, 2007: 296f.). We might compare this with how, when reading contemporary philosophers, the natural place to begin in order to interpret a semi-technical term is to consider how the theorist in question uses

the term, even when there has been extensive discussion of the term by other philosophers.[4]

This point also applies to Ashworth's (1981; 1984) claim that the discussion of signify/signification by the scholastic philosophers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries gives us the key for interpreting Locke's usage. She argues that the scholastic philosophers relate signification to what a word makes known or reveals.[5] If someone says 'There is a burglar downstairs', this might reveal something about a particular state of affairs (namely, there is a burglar downstairs) or, or in addition, it may reveal something about that person's beliefs and thoughts. The scholastics debated whether it was thoughts or things that were primarily signified (see Ashworth, 1981: 309-17; Dawson, 2007: 26-9). Ashworth suggests we should read Locke in the context of this debate. Some argued that what we primarily pick up on, when we hear words, are statements about how the world is, and that it is only via those statements that we come to learn (if we do) of what the speaker is thinking. Others, such as the logician Burgersdijck, held that utterances primarily signify concepts, not things, and Ashworth claims that Locke 'obviously followed' this second approach (1981: 325).

While this background may indicate something of the context in which Locke wrote, it does not follow that it provides the key to what Locke himself said about the signification of a word. An indication that Ashworth may be misreading Locke comes in her claim that Locke does not speak of signification in terms of meaning (or, if he does, Ashworth says it is only in a careless and casual manner). As discussed above, this claim is strongly refuted by the textual evidence. Locke's own extensive discussion of signification can be taken as giving us a sure enough guide to his meaning.

[4] For example, Grice's notion of 'what is said' has been extensively discussed, but the only sure guide to interpreting a particular theorist's use of this notion is by careful consideration of what the theorist writes.

[5] See also Dawson (2007, chapter 1) for discussion of this period.

Ashworth's discussion is in part influenced by her concern that Locke's account fails to satisfy the basic requirements of a 'theory of meaning'. In the following section I argue that Ashworth's concerns are not necessary.

3. The meaningful use of ideas

One of Ashworth's reasons for rejecting a 'meaning' interpretation of Lockean signification is that she doesn't think that ideas can play a particular type of meaning role. Ashworth refers to the kind of 'theory of meaning' that is attributed to Locke 'by Alston and others' (1984: 64). Her explication of this approach to meaning is not clear but she does say that

> a theory of meaning is one which explains what type of entity it is that words are related to and which assigns a denotation to the referring phrases in question. (ibid.: 53; cf. Alston, 1964: 16-19)

This indicates that by word meaning Ashworth is thinking of a putative entity that determines whether a word applies to a particular thing or not. An idea, arguably, cannot play this role, and I take Ashworth to be indicating this when she states that '[t]he presence of ideas as identifiable mental units is neither necessary nor sufficient for the meaningful use of language' (1984: 54). This type of negative evaluation is well known in particular in relation to commentary on Wittgenstein. Both Kripke (1982: 42) and C. McGinn (1984: 119) refer to what they call the classic, or traditional, 'empiricist' approach to word meaning, this being characterized as an account in which an image determines the meaning of a word (that is, determines what the word applies to). But a picture, or, indeed, any Lockean 'idea', does not really do anything by itself at all. If we consider a particular idea, and a given range of objects in the world, nothing is yet achieved with respect to determining which of those objects stand in the required 'semantic' relation to the idea. More work needs to be done and this shows that an idea in itself is not capable of playing the meaning

role, where that role is understood in terms of determining to which things a word applies.

However, even allowing that ideas are limited in this way, we can still ask whether Locke is committed to this approach to the meaning role. I do not believe that this is the case. His account points to a different type of role, in which the requirement is that the ideational component is sufficient for enabling something to be conveyed by a use of the word. Losonsky (1994: 130) seems to express something along these lines, speaking of a 'minimal, pre-theoretic conception of meaning' that can be characterized as: 'meaning is whatever makes language intelligible to us as well as others'. There is no need to presuppose that what it is that makes a use of a word intelligible is something that has to play the role of providing a fully determinate application condition. Locke's account shows a way in which an idea-based approach to signification has the resources to provide an explanation of what it is that makes the use of some words intelligible.

The first part of his account relates to our ability to remember such things as, for example, particular shapes and colours, whether these shapes or colours are those of particular things or are common to a group of things. Infants can observe 'that there are a great many other Things in the world, that in some common agreements of Shape, and several other Qualities, resemble their Father and Mother', and they thereby 'frame an *Idea*, which they find those many Particulars do partake in …' (III.iii.7; for other shape examples, see III.v.13; III.vi.29; III.ix.15; III.xi.19, 21). This ability, which we might think of (for a simple shape example) in terms of becoming aware of and memorizing a particular shape, is described by Locke in terms of the framing of an idea (abstracted from other ideas II.xi.9; III.iii.8-9; III.iii.13). Once such an idea has been separated out from the wealth of perceptual inputs that we experience, we can store the idea in the mind. That is to say, we can remember a particular shape (I.ii.15; II.x.2-3; cf. I.ii.20). As well as shape, Locke also appeals to our ability to remember particular colours (II.xi.9; III.ii.3; III.vi.29; III.ix.15; III.xi.19) or tastes (III.iv.11) or sounds (III.v.13). Combinations of ideas, forming a complex idea, can likewise be 'lodg'd in my Memory' (III.x.33). It is interesting to note here that an ability to focus on and remember particular features

of our experience (cf. Locke's discussion in II.x.1-10) is very strongly supported by work in cognitive psychology. [6]

Once an idea (or complex of ideas) has been remembered, it can be associated with a word. Ideas are 'lodged in the Memory, and Names got to them' (I.ii.15; cf. III.ii.1; III.x.33). As noted in the previous section, Locke typically describes this in terms of a word as being 'annexed' to an idea.

Locke describes the remembered ideas (which capture particular features from our perceptual experience) as providing us with 'patterns' that can be used for sorting things into types. Locke speaks of things as being found to 'agree' with (or as 'conforming' to) these patterns (II.xi.9; III.iii.6, 8, 13, 15, 18; III.vi.1, 7, 30, 36, 39). That is to say, having memorized a shape (or colour or texture, or whatever), on perceiving an object we can decide whether or not the object has that shape or colour or texture. When an object agrees with an idea the object can be named by the word (if there is one) that is annexed to the remembered idea (II.xi.9; III.iii.12-13, 15; III.vi.1; IV.vi.4). The picture suggested by this is that the memory of an idea or complex of ideas, which provides us with a kind of pattern, is a memory that is ultimately based on some repeatable configuration that arises in our experience. This could be derived from experience of a particular shape or colour, or it could be derived from a more complex type of basic experience (see for example Locke's discussion of the ideas of power and succession, II.vii.8-9, or solidity, II.iv.1).[7] The remembered configuration provides a 'medium' (cf. III.iii.13) in terms of which a given perceptual experience can be classified depending on whether or not what is experienced (some particular object, for example) conforms to that pattern.

[6] L. Barsalou writes: 'Once an aspect of perception has been selected, it has a very high likelihood of being stored in long-term memory. On selecting the shape of an object, attention stores information about it. From decades of work on episodic memory, it is clear that where selective attention goes, long-term storage follows, at least to a substantial extent' (1999: 583).

[7] Stuart (2008) notes that Locke's account of abstraction is limited in scope. But, as well as abstraction, Locke also, in practice, speaks in terms of particular patterns of interaction that we recognize as we experience objects over time.

Several points can be made about this account. First, there may be a concern that the account points us to the perhaps implausible notion that the process of deciding whether or not something agrees with a pattern involves, at some stage, a conscious recall of the pattern itself. That is to say, at some point we replay the idea that a word signifies to ourselves (maybe we inwardly picture a shape or colour, for example), and then make a conscious comparison between the replayed idea and something that we currently perceive. Locke himself possibly did think in terms of conscious recall and comparison. He speaks of words that 'readily excite' and 'revive' in us the ideas for which they stand (III.ii.6, 8; IV.xviii.3), and describes 'understanding' as including, as one of its parts, the 'The Perception of the signification of Signs', this standing prior to 'The Perception of ... Agreement or Disagreement' (II.xxi.5; see Kretzmann, 1968: 192).[8] But in general this picture is an unlikely one. I can recognize a tune by virtue of having a memory of the tune; it does not follow that I first have to inwardly recall the tune and then compare that with what I hear.[9] On the other hand, if I do not know the tune, in the sense of not having at some point heard and memorized it, I will not be able to recognize the tune. I suggest that the general framework of Locke's account, with its reference to patterns and agreement, does not force us to suppose that the account requires a conscious recall of the idea associated with a particular word. No commitment is required here beyond the entirely plausible claim that we can remember features of things and, by virtue of that memory, make judgements as to what other things have those features.

Neither, I suggest, is the account susceptible to Bennett's (1972: 13-16) criticism that it explains our ability to classify objects on the basis of an unexplained ability to classify ideas. The particular idea we use to judge whether an object is horse-shaped, for example, does not itself have to be located by first working out which of our shape memories is of the appropriate shape to be labelled the horse-

[8] Berkeley in *Alciphron* VII criticizes the thought that each word must 'suggest a distinct idea' to the hearer. Locke himself observes, though making a different point from Berkeley, that we often don't bother to formulate the idea fully to ourselves but make do just with the name (IV.v.4; IV.vi.1).

[9] Though perhaps there are times when we *do* do something like that.

shaped idea. Rather, all that is required is that we remember to what shape the word 'horse' is annexed (cf. Ott, 2004: 69f.). The relation between a word and an object to which a word is applied is based, according to Locke's account, on the object's exhibiting the remembered pattern. This is different from the relation between a word and the word's primary signification, which is based on setting up a connection, which has to be memorized, between the word and a particular idea.[10]

Research into how children learn words for artifacts provides some interesting evidence for the plausibility of at least the basic outline of Locke's account. Studies over the past twenty years have repeatedly shown that children can use simple cues, such as shape and texture, to guide their application of words to objects (e.g. Booth et al., 2005; Smith, 2001). A child if shown an object (such as a tractor), and told its name ('tractor'), may subsequently extend the word to further things by using the shape of the original object as a guide for applying the word to new objects. In Locke's terms, the child stores an idea of the shape of the object in their mind, learns to connect a word with that idea, and then sorts things on the basis of whether or not the things conform to the pattern that has been remembered. Locke himself notes that, for substance words, reference merely to shape or colour can often '*do well enough,* to design the Things Men would be understood to speak of' (III.ix.15; cf. III.xi.19-21), and that paring words with 'little Draughts and Prints' can be a very effective way of teaching the signification of those substance words that stand for things 'which are known and distinguished by their outward shapes' (III.xi.25). Locke suggests that when Adam was first shown gold, he abstracted just a few salient qualities, such as colour, weight, hardness, and annexed to them the name 'gold', thereby providing a basis for denominating things

[10] A referee for this journal suggests that this misses Bennett's point, which is that 'to re-identify *is* to classify: re-identifying any enduring item A is classifying occasions as A-encounters' (Bennett, 1972: 16). Whether a consistent response, involving recognition of sameness, to a given type of environmental input entails classification is surely open to question. But more to the point, Bennett appears to assume a questionable parallel between re-identifying something and the kind of ability implicated in our ability to remember an idea (perhaps consider IV.i.4).

as gold (III.vi.46-7; cf. III.ii.3).[11] This is not a full account of a word's signification (cf. III.vi.29-30), but it does help bring to the fore the use that can be made of simple perceptual cues for guiding our use of at least some types of word.

With Ashworth's notion of meaning in mind, it is helpful to note that the account does not require that the remembered idea in itself *determines* to what objects the word applies. The criterion for 'agreement' with a pattern is not going to be fully determinate. In general, it is easy to suspect that no pattern will have an entirely determinate relation to the objects that could plausibly be said to agree with the pattern. But this does not prevent something like a remembered shape from enabling a word to be used to communicate, hence as fulfilling Losonky's pre-theoretic suggestion that 'meaning is whatever makes language intelligible to us as well as others' (1994: 130). A child could say 'There is a tractor coming down the road', and thereby communicate something about how the world is, on the hypothesis that the child and the person spoken to both make use of a memory for a shape as a guide for applying the word 'tractor' to objects in the world.

4. Does Locke think that words refer to ideas?[12]

Losonsky (1994; 2007) supports the claim that Locke's account of primary signification relates to linguistic meaning. But Losonsky also argues that Locke is, to some degree, guilty of the charge of semantic idealism, in which words are treated as referring (in part) to the ideas they signify. Mill criticized the way in which Locke's account seems to make ideas, rather than things, the referents of our words: 'When I say, "the sun is the cause of day", I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of day' (*System of Logic* 1.2.1). Losonsky argues that Mill overstates his case and that Locke does not suppose that words refer *only* to

[11] Thanks to a referee for this journal for providing this reference.

[12] This section has profited considerably from the criticisms that a referee for this journal had of an earlier version.

ideas; they also refer to external things (2007: 310). But Losonsky agrees that, in addition, part of the meaning Locke would assign to 'the sun is the cause of the day' is ideational in focus:

> [T]he proper Lockean paraphrase is that what I mean, in part, when I say "The sun causes the day" is that my idea of sun is regularly connected with the idea of day, which is more plausible than Mill's incomplete paraphrase. (2007: 311)

Losonsky argues that while this element of semantic idealism is indeed part of Locke's account, and does reflect some confusion, this is not necessarily a totally absurd feature as long as we construe it in this appropriately qualified way (2007: 311).

Losonsky's argument for an element of semantic idealism in Locke is summarized in the following passage:

> Locke himself simply does not distinguish between sense and reference, and consequently Locke cannot be absolved fully of the charge of semantic idealism. After all, Locke does state quite simply that "Words … are names of *Ideas*" or "referr" to ideas. (ibid.: 310)

I will break this down into two types of claim, one relating to Locke's use of 'referr' (section 4.1), the other relating to Locke's description of words as 'names of ideas' (section 4.2). I will argue that neither type of evidence provides adequate support for the claim that Locke is guilty of a degree of semantic idealism.

4.1 Locke's use of 'refer'

Losonksy appeals to the fact that Locke 'does state quite simply' that words 'refer' to ideas (he cites II.xxxi.6 and III.iv.17), but this is misleading. Locke typically uses 'refer' in ways that do not correspond to the notion of reference that would be

relevant for the charge of semantic idealism. An initial hint that his usage is often importantly different is that while the interpretation required for semantic idealism is typically phrased with an intransitive use of 'refer' (words/people refer to such-and-such), Locke mostly uses 'refer' in a transitive sense (an agent refers something to such-and-such). For example, he uses 'refer' in the sense 'to submit … to a higher authority for consideration' (OED): 'The Painter agreed to refer himself to the Judgment of a blind Man' (III.iv.12); there are '*Laws* that Men generally refer their Actions to, to judge of their Rectitude, or Obliquity' (II.xxviii.7).

The main sense in which Locke uses 'refer' falls under the broad paraphrase given by the OED as: *to relate one thing to another*. Several different nuances of meaning (not always easily separable) fall under this general paraphrase. One of these nuances is 'to trace (back), assign, attribute, impute (something) to a person or thing as the ultimate cause or source' (OED). This seems particularly applicable to Locke's discussion of mixed modes, where he writes that apart from 'Men's voluntary Combinations' we 'have nothing else to refer these our *Ideas* of mixed Modes to as a Standard' (II.xxxii.12; see also II.xxxi.1, 3; III.v.6; III.v.12; III.v.14; III.xi.17; IV.iv.5). Mixed modes are combinations of ideas that the mind has arbitrarily put together 'without reference to any Archetypes' (III.xi.15), 'without Patterns, or reference to any real Existence' (III.v.3). In these passages Locke is describing the lack of relatedness that mixed modes have to any archetype; that which we 'refer' our ideas of mixed modes to - that which we trace them back to - consists of our own voluntary combinations of ideas, these being the source of the complex idea. By contrast, 'Our complex *Ideas of Substances,* [are] … *referred to Patterns in Things themselves*' (II.xxxii.18; cf. III.ix.20; IV.iv.11). That is to say, our ideas of substances are put together on the basis of how we experience things to be (and so are subject to modification as we learn more about things, III.vi.29-30).

A further nuance to the general sense *to relate one thing to another* is 'to regard or classify as naturally belonging to or relating to' (OED). This nuance seems particularly relevant in several passages where Locke describes different ways in which people make questionable assumptions about the relation that holds between

words and ideas (or external things).[13] He speaks of people as giving words 'secret' or 'tacit' references (II.xxix.10; II.xxx.1; III.ii.4; III.x.19), meaning something like an unexpressed supposition that a particular word-idea (or word-thing) relatedness holds. The sense once again is transitive, indicating an act of the mind in which two things are treated as related. In each case Locke suggests that there are grounds for doubting the relation.

One example of this relates to Locke's wish to emphasize that we cannot simply assume that we use words with the same meanings that other people use them with (see Guyer, 1994). Locke describes this assumption in terms of giving a word a (secret) 'reference' to some other thing (III.ii.4), that is, to some other thing than the particular idea that the speaker has in their own mind (cf. III.ii.2). This secret reference is glossed as how people '*suppose their Words to be Marks of the* Ideas *in the Minds also of other Men*' (III.ii.4; on this supposition see also II.xxxii.10; III.x.22). Locke can also describe this (with ideas, not words, the things being referred) as when 'the Mind refers any of its *Ideas* to any thing extraneous to them' (II.xxxii.4), this being explained as

> [w]hen the Mind supposes any *Idea* it has, *conformable to* that in *other Men's* Minds called by the same common Name; *v.g.* when the Mind intends, or judges its *Ideas* of *Justice, Temperance, Religion*, to be the same, with what other Men give those Names to. (II.xxxii.5)

Locke's immediate point here (see II.xxxii.4, 10) is that the possibility of truth and falsity with respect to ideas (or, the condition for ideas to be 'confused', II.xxix.10-12) only comes into play when particular links are assumed to hold between an idea and a given word. It is the supposing or intending of such links that is indicated by saying that the mind (tacitly) refers words to ideas or ideas to words (for this converse statement, see II.xxix.10; it is more or less implied in II.xxxii.5 quoted above).

[13] Thanks to a referee for this journal for pointing out that I need to account for these passages.

A second example of how the mind gives words ‘a secret reference to other things’ (other than our own ideas) is that of how people ‘*often suppose their Words to stand also for the reality of Things*’ (III.ii.5). Parallel passages (III.x.14-16, 25, 30; cf. II.xxxii.5) suggest that the concern is with the tendency people have to suppose that just because a general term is in common use some aspect of the external world can therefore be taken for granted to correspond to the term. Locke describes this as a 'great *abuse of Words*', the '*taking them for Things*', which he explains as the unfounded supposition that terms such as 'vegetative soul' are 'conformable to Nature, and are the Representations of something that really exists' (III.x.14). The fact that a given word is in use, annexed to an idea, does not in itself show that anything in reality conforms to that idea. But this is the supposition people tend to make and it is this that Locke can describe as the making of a ‘secret reference’ to another thing.

A third example (not clearly indicated in III.ii.4-5, but see II.xxxi.6-7; III.vi.49; III.ix.11-12; III.x.17-19; IV.vi.4; cf. II.xxxii.4-6) is where the mind tacitly refers a substance word to a ‘real essence’. The concern here seems to be that people often use their substance words with the supposition that the word relates to a real essence, an essence that they suppose accounts for why a thing belongs to a particular sort (II.xxxi.7; for nominal essence as the basis for sorting things into substances, see III.vi.7, 27ff.) We cannot have any idea of a supposed real essence of a substance (II.xxxi.6; III.iii.17; III.vi.22, 49; III.x.17-19); hence the (tacit) act in which the mind ‘refers' a substance word to such an essence is chimerical (II.xxx.1; cf. III.ii.2).[14] We cannot relate a word to something else when that something else is a putative essence of which we can have no ideas at all.[15]

In the examples given so far, the typical phrasing is ‘the mind refers words to such-and-such’ or, in the passive, ‘words are referred to such-and-such’. The

[14] This is the context for some of Locke’s statements that words signify ‘nothing but’ our ideas (II.xxxi.6; III.ii.4-5; III.iv.1; cf. IV.vi.4), suggesting that these statements are aimed against the supposition that a word can stand for that of which we have no idea at all.

[15] A further nuance of 'refer' is 'to bring into relation with’: '*The nature* ... *of Relation*, consists in the referring, or comparing two things, one to another' (II.xxv.5; see also II.xxviii.1, 3).

transitive form conveys a sense in which two different things are being considered, in the referring, as related one to the other. There are though a few passages where we find an intransitive use of 'refer'. As far as I can tell these are limited to II.xxv.4; II.xxvii.1; II.xxviii.6; II.xxxi.5; III.iv.17; III.v.12; III.vi.22. But even here we do not find clear examples of a use of 'refer' that matches the sense relevant to establishing the charge of semantic idealism. For example: 'the notion of a *Father* … refers only to an act of that thing called Man' II.xxv.4. A natural reading for 'refer' here is something like 'to be concerned with' rather than 'designates' (both these intransitive senses are given by the OED), and the same holds for II.xxvii.1 and II.xxxi.5.

An instructive example is given in III.vi.22:

> There are Creatures in the World, that have shapes like ours, but are hairy, and want Language, and Reason. … If it be asked, whether these be all *Men*, or no, all of human *Species*; 'tis plain, the Question refers only to the nominal Essence.

Perhaps this is open to an interpretation in which Locke is taking the question 'whether these be all *Men*' to be a question not about whether those creatures belong to a particular sort but as (only?) about the complex idea that constitutes the nominal essence (on nominal essence see III.iii.12-15). But the natural interpretation, one that also fits the context, is one in which Locke is making a contrast between two possible foundations - nominal essence or 'the supposed real Essence' (III.vi.22) - for establishing what sort an item belongs to. The question 'whether these be all Men' is not about nominal essences, but the basis for establishing whether or not a creature is human does indeed relate to, is concerned with, the nominal essence and not some supposed real essence of a substance. Similarly, III.v.12 is concerned with the basis for sorting when it speaks of the patterns in the mind to which 'we referr' for sorting things under names for mixed modes.

The intransitive use of 'refer' in II.xxviii.6 is another interesting example, speaking of the '*Moral Rules*, or Laws, to which Men generally refer, and by which

they judge of the Rectitude or Pravity of their Actions …'. The context supports the claim that this is the correlate of the first (transitive) sense of 'refer' that I illustrated, 'to submit to a higher authority for consideration' (the OED notes that this has an intransitive use). This correlated sense is indicated by surrounding texts, such as mention of '[t]he *Laws* that Men generally refer their Actions to, to judge of their Rectitude, or Obliquity' (II.xxviii.7, cf. 4, 9).

Finally we can come back to Losonsky's argument from Locke's use of 'refer'. Losonsky cites two texts. In one of these, II.xxxi.6, Locke notes that when people suppose that names for substances 'stand for Things, as supposed to have certain real Essences … they must consequently referr their *Ideas* to such real Essences, as their Archetypes' (II.xxxi.6). I have accounted for this (transitive) use of 'refer' in terms of the mind supposedly relating a complex idea to the (here unknowable) standard on which the idea is modelled. In the second text we do have an intransitive use (the one example I have not yet discussed): Locke states that the names of substances and mixed modes differ in that 'those *of mixed Modes* stand for *Ideas* perfectly *arbitrary*: Those *of Substances*, are not perfectly so, but *referr to a pattern*' (III.iv.17). The evidence I have cited very strongly suggests that this is an intransitive correlate to statements such as 'Our complex *Ideas of Substances,* [are] … *referred to Patterns in Things themselves*' (II.xxxii.18). To say that a substance word refers to a pattern is to say that the word should be traced to this pattern if we wish to understand the basis of the complex idea that is annexed to the word. The texts Losonsky appeals to, and the other texts I have considered, do not support the claim that Locke's use of 'refer' indicates a referential word-idea relation.

4.2 Names signify ideas, names signify things

While Locke's use of 'refer' is not grounds for positing a referential word-idea relation, this still leaves untouched the second part of Losonsky's argument, namely, that 'Locke does state quite simply that "Words … are names of *Ideas*" ' (2007: 310). Losonsky is apparently taking Locke's statement as an indication that Locke took an idea to be 'named' when a word is used, in the sense that the word will be used to

speak (in part) about the signified idea. My argument against this has three parts. First, I note that there is no requirement for Locke to treat the word-idea relation as referential. Second, evidence from his use of relational terms suggests that he kept the referential perspective separate from his understanding of the word-idea relation. While this points away from a referential interpretation of the name-idea relation, some aspects of the evidence might also support such a construal. In the third part of the argument I consider this, but conclude that the construal remains unlikely.

First, the way in which Locke describes the role of the word-idea relation does not require that this relation be seen as referential. By being annexed to an idea, a word can be a 'sign' of that idea: a word acts 'to make known [the signified idea] to others, not by any natural signification, but by a voluntary imposition' (III.x.5; cf. III.iv.11). For this to happen, language users need to know what idea is affixed to a particular word, this being the condition for understanding to arise:

> Men learn Names, and use them in Talk with others, only that they may be understood: which is then only done, when … the Sound I make by the Organs of Speech, excites in another Man's Mind, who hears it, the *Idea* I apply it to in mine, when I speak it. (III.iii.3; see also III.ii.6; III.ix.4; III.x.29; III.xi.25)

The requirement here is not that the name refers to the idea but that the use of a word be taken as a sign that the hearer is to 'frame' or 'revive' the appropriate idea in their mind (III.iv.12; IV.xviii.3). It is uncontroversial that language users need to be aware of and process the meaning of a word that has been used, so this is not relevant to the claim of semantic idealism.

A referential relation is, though, naturally seen as holding in the relation between words and things that arises on the basis of the word-idea relation: 'our Words signifie nothing but our *Ideas*, yet [are] designed by them [that is, by our ideas] to signifie Things' (IV.v.8; for this use of 'designed' cf. II.xxx.2). Things come to 'have a right to' (III.iii.12) or to be 'intituled to' (III.vi.5) a name by virtue of agreeing

with the signified idea, and we ordinarily suppose that it is to such things that we use the word to refer. Notice that, for Locke, the word-idea relation is not established on the basis of this kind of agreement but simply (in an envisaged original naming situation) on the basis of a choice: Adam had the 'Liberty … of affixing any new name to any *Idea*' (III.vi.51). It is clear that Locke envisages the word-idea relation in a way that is quite different from how he sees the word-thing relation, and this leaves open the possibility that he did not extend the referential nature of the latter into his understanding of the former.

This possibility is strengthened by looking, second, at a notable asymmetry in Locke's use of terminology for the word-idea and word-thing relations. It is true that Locke can use 'signify' and 'stand for' for the word-thing relation, but simply listing these texts obscures the huge disparity in the frequency of his use of these terms for the word-thing relation in comparison with the word-idea relation. His use is overwhelmingly weighted to the word-idea relation. In Book III, there are over 350 uses of these terms (or cognates) for the word-idea relation, but merely a handful of texts for the word-thing relation (and sometimes these are uncertain).[16] Locke's interest in 'signification' relates almost entirely to what it is that makes words significant (rather than being empty sounds) and his answer to this starts with the relation between a word and an idea.[17]

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[16] Words as standing for/signifying a 'sort': III.i.6; III.iii.12; III.v.1; III.vi.1, 19, 25, 30, 33; III.ix.17; III.xi.19. Words as standing for/signifying (external) things: III.i.3, 5; III.vi.25, 39, 42; III.x.4; III.xi.24-25. There are scattered examples in the other books. See in particular IV.v.8. In the light of IV.v.6-9, it might be that II.xxxii.19; IV.v.2, 5; are to be understood of ideas not things. In Books I and II there are about fifteen examples such as I.iii.19 ('sin' signifies ill actions), II.vii.2 ('pleasure' and 'pain' signify 'whatsoever delights or molests us'), II.ix.1 ('thinking' signifies an operation in the mind). The force of some of these is debatable given that Locke often seems to have phrased his reference to ideas in a loose way (see e.g. III.i.5; III.ii.3, 8; III.ix.17; IV.viii.6). In several places Locke criticizes the supposition that a word can stand for or signify the reality of a thing or the real essence of a substance (II.xxxi.6; III.ii.5; III.vi.49-50; III.ix.12; III.x.17-18, 21, 32; IV.iv.13; IV.v.4; IV.vi.5, 8).

[17] Locke describes words as 'signs' of ideas but it is difficult to find examples where he describes a word as a sign of an external thing (maybe II.xxix.10; III.x.25). For an 'idea' as a sign of a thing, see IV.xxi.4, for which cf. III.iii.11; IV.v.2.

When we consider the terms Locke more typically uses for the word-thing relation, such as ‘denominate’ and ‘call’, we find the opposite: these terms are used overwhelmingly for the word-thing relation and only very occasionally for the word-idea relation.

There are about sixty occurrences of 'denominate' in the *Essay* - e.g. taking other people's property is denominated stealing (II.xxviii.16), the parcel of matter on my finger is denominated gold (II.xxxi.7) - and in almost every case it is only the item that a word refers to (in the standard sense) that receives denominations. A word such as 'gold' is used to denominate not its primary signification but the thing that agrees with the primary signification (cf. II.xi.9; II.xxxi.3). As far as I can tell there are only three places where 'denominate'/'denomination' is used for the word-idea relation.[18] Locke's use of 'call' is similar in that the large majority of its several hundred occurrences relate to the word-thing relation. What we call by a word is the standard referent of the word: we call some things 'man, 'cat', parrot' (II.xxvii.8), other things 'sensible qualities' (II.i.3), other things 'ideas' (II.viii.8),[19] and so on. Locke does use ‘call’ for the word-idea relation though this is infrequent (I return to this below).

We find, therefore, a clear difference of distribution between 'signify'/'stand for', which are used predominantly for the word-idea relation, and 'denominate'/'call', which are used predominantly for the word-thing relation.[20]

While we cannot tie down Locke’s use of words into neat packages, the overall distribution shows that he shifted terminology quite dramatically away from

[18] II.xi.14 (?); II.xxiii.6; III.v.10. At II.xxxii.4 we find the statement that '*Ideas* themselves come to be denominated', but the context shows that this is elliptical for 'come to be denominated *true or false*' (for decisive parallels see II.xxxii.1-4, and for the ellipsis see II.xxvi.1).

[19] The claim is not that ideas cannot be referred to but that words do not refer to their primary signification. Strictly speaking, by 'word-thing relation' I mean the relation between a word and what the word would standardly be taken as referring to, which for a phrase such as 'idea of gold' can include ideas.

[20] A few other terms are used (infrequently) for both relations: ‘apply to’ (III.ii.3; III.iii.2), ‘design’ (II.xxix.7; III.vi.30), ‘mark’ (III.ii.2; III.i.3), ‘comprehend under’ (III.vi.21; IV.vi.4), ‘express’ (III.ii.3; III.vi.33).

'signify' or 'stand for', and towards 'call' or 'denominate', when discussing the type of relation for which a referential claim is most natural. This suggests that 'signify' may not have carried with it, for Locke, a strong correlation with the referential perspective. Locke's discussion of signification starts with the relation between words and ideas, and the primary focus in this discussion is on what makes words (which are otherwise just empty sounds) 'significant'. This is a broader question than that of reference. Given that words are significant they can be used in relation to external things, and Locke extends 'signify' – though it is not much more than an occasional echo - to this word-thing relation. To project a referential aspect into Locke's view of the word-idea relation on the basis of his use of 'signify' seems as little justified as would be, on that same basis, to project the 'affixed, annexed to' aspect of the word-idea relation into his view of the word-thing relation. Words connect to ideas and can be used to refer to things. Locke's use of 'signify' does not undermine this distinction.

Evidence from the distribution of terminology does though cut in two directions. On the one hand, as just discussed, it suggests that there is no strong pressure to construe the claim that words signify ideas in a referential way. Describing a word as a 'name' of an idea need only be taken to indicate that, in virtue of the idea being annexed to it, the name can be used as a sign of (as standing for, signifying) the idea in the non-referential sense described above.

On the other hand, Locke does, as mentioned, occasionally use 'call' when describing the word-idea relation. For example, he speaks of 'that complex *Idea* which I, or any one else calls Gold' (III.vi.19), of the 'complex *Idea* which is called a *Man*' (IV.viii.6).[21] Here we have a phrasing and a terminology that appears to support the claim that Locke supposes that when we use a word such as 'man' we are (in part) speaking about the idea that the word 'man' signifies – an idea that we call by that name. Further, there are a few passages where Locke could be seen as

[21] The following is a fairly comprehensive list of passages where similar phrasing occurs: II.xviii.3; II.xix.1; II.xx.4; II.xxi.1; II.xxii.9; II.xxvi.1; II.xxix.6; 11; II.xxxi.2, 9; II.xxxii.5, 9, 10, 15, 25; III.vi.44; III.x.32, 33; IV.i.4; IV.iii.19; IV.iv.9; IV.vii.12, 13, 16-18; IV.viii.12; IV.xi.2, 9.

actually implementing this in his use of language. He can write: '[T]he *Idea* which an *English*-man signifies by the Name *Swan*, is white Colour, long Neck, red Beak, black Legs, and whole Feet ...' (II.xxiii.14; see also II.xxvi.1; IV.vi.9, 15; IV.vii.12; IV.viii.6). The phrasing appears incongruous, but the suggestion would be that this is an example of Locke actually using words as the semantic idealist construal of his theory would predict: by 'long neck' he means (in part) the idea of a long neck, and so on.

I do not think, though, that these passages, coupled with the description of words as names of ideas, provide strong enough grounds to make the referential construal of the word-idea relation likely. The texts I have isolated do not form part of a clearly marked theme in the *Essay*. They are rather anonymous and seem merely to be casual (and sometimes confused) variants embedded within the text. If these are indications that Locke thought of the word-idea relation in a referential way, they are infrequent and lack saliency.

There are more systematic parts of the *Essay* in which Locke agrees that we can, in some circumstances, speak of ideas by using the names of ideas, but this is an observation about a few unusual contexts of language use.[22] In his discussion of 'trifling propositions' (IV.viii) Locke suggests that there are various types of proposition that, while appearing (in form) to convey an increase in knowledge, are in reality merely about the ideas signified by the words used (as happens, he says, when a predicate signifies an idea that is already part of the idea signified by the subject term, IV.viii.5). Locke treats such propositions as a misuse of words: a person 'trifles with Words, who makes such a Proposition', and they add up to no more than when a person 'goes to explain his Terms, to one who is supposed ... not to understand him' (IV.viii.7). Locke's discussion suggests that, apart from

[22] A different type of case occurs when discussing knowledge. Locke speaks in terms of the 'ideas' that our mind is 'employed about', these being the materials we operate on in our thinking (II.i.1-2; II.xi.4, 6; II.xii.8; II.xxv.9; IV.xvii.10). In this context, Locke does sometimes speak of the ideas that a proposition is 'about' but the perspective is not referential. Rather, it is an indication of what ideas the mind will be operating on in coming to an understanding of the proposition and in assessing it for truth or falsity (see especially I.ii.23; also I.ii.12, 15-16; IV.vii.4, 15; IV.xi.14).

statements that are explicitly about terms, it is only some degenerate types of statement that should be taken as about signified ideas and these types ought, at least in many cases, to be avoided.[23]

In conclusion, I do not think that the evidence appealed to by Losonsky is good enough to support the claim that Locke held to a degree of semantic idealism. Without adequate further support, the description of a word as a 'name' of the idea to which it is annexed cannot be taken as indicating that use of the word referentially names the idea. Because a word names an idea a word can be used as a sign of an idea, but this is understood by Locke in terms of language users realizing that the idea to which the name is annexed needs to be revived in the mind. Locke's general use of words, and the differences in how he envisages the word-idea relation in comparison with the word-thing relation, provide good evidence for a non-referential reading.[24]

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[23] There are times when it is helpful to indirectly indicate a signified idea. 'Sometimes the *naming the Subject, wherein [a] simple* Idea *is* to be found, will make its name be understood' (III.xi.14). Implicit in his remarks on definitions (e.g. III.iv.6-15) is that it is by means of naming subjects wherein ideas are found that we come to understand what the definition is telling us about the signification of a word.

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