

Intro to Philosophy of Language Chapter 1: Locke & Natural Language

Introduction

- How language relates to the world?
 - John Locke
 - Language concerns things in our minds
 - Words are signs, the meaning of words is a matter of convention
 - "[...] words [...] come to be made use of by men, as the signs of their ideas; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition, whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea."
 - J. S. Mill & Frege
 - Language concerns things in the world
- Lockean view of language
 - Eight Significant Assumptions
 - (L1) The nature of language is defined by its function
 - (L2) The function of language is to communicate
 - though he agrees that language can be used "for the recording of our own thoughts"
 - (L3) What language is meant to communicate is thought
 - (L4) Words signify or mean the components of what language is meant to communicate
 - (L5) The components of thought are 'IDEAS' (technical term)
 - The Lockean IDEA is a kind of mental image
 - IDEA is "invisible and hidden from others"
 - IDEAS are representations of other things
 - (L6) One person's IDEAS cannot be perceived by another
 - (L7) The relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary
 - no natural connection between sounds and IDEAS
 - (L8) Words are not intrinsically meaningful

Meaning and Signification

- a word first - directly/immediately - means an IDEA in the mind of its user, and secondly - indirectly/mediately - means the thing which that IDEA represents
- [p.9] "[A] word is [...] also some kind of sign of whatever it is that the concept is a concept of" 有些没看懂
- Does words mean IDEAS?
 - 1 No, this view is unnatural. For instance, the word 'gold' means gold, the metal, not any IDEA or concept of it
 - 2 Yes, the word 'gold' means the metal, but as we use it, it expresses our concept of the metal
 - 3 Locke's own view: words are meant to signify IDEAS. It's a part of the meaning of words that they signify IDEAS.

Difficulties with the Lockean Conception of Language

- It makes communication impossible
 - 1 To understand the speaker is to know which IDEAS are signified by her words
 - 2 By (L8), words are not intrinsically meaningful, so to know which IDEA is signified we need to know the relation between the signifier and the signified
 - 3 By (L6), IDEAS themselves cannot be perceived by the hearer
 - 4 Thus, we need some dependable & reliable relation between particular words and particular IDEAS such that based on them we can make an inference
 - 5 But by (L7), relation between words and IDEAS are arbitrary
 - 6 Therefore, we can never know what someone means when she speaks
- Related Arguments
 - Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument
 - Quine's Indeterminacy of Word Meaning Mapping Problem
 - Quine's 粉红小兔兔
 - An infinite number of hypotheses about word meaning are logically possible given the data the child has.
 - Quine's Gavagai Argument (1960)
 - Responses
 - Lexical Constraints: children have innate knowledge of how the lexicon work
 - Whole-Object Assumption
 - Assumption of Mutual Exclusivity
 - Pragmatic Reply: word meaning = communicative intentions ≠ infinite logical hypotheses
 - Children seem to have innate knowledge of the Gricean Maxims: Children know a new word has a new meaning because they assume the speaker is trying to communicate and thus would not have used an unfamiliar term if a familiar one would have sufficed
 - Children figure out the meaning of the new words by figuring out the communicative intentions
- Psychological associations which a word might have for particular people are irrelevant to the meaning of the word [p.12]
 - Meaning is connected with understanding
 - Can we modify (L6)? One person's IDEAS cannot be perceived by another
 - No if we want to stick to the "mental image" view
 - Should we stick to the mental image view? — Difficulties with the mental-image view
 - works for expressions like 'Paris', 'your mother', and imaginary entities 'Batman'
 - speakers have variation in images of words like 'car' and 'house' due to different experience
 - does not work with common nouns
 - No single image can cover all features of the noun. E.g. 'triangle' could correspond to a mental image of an 'equilateral triangle' or an 'isosceles/scalene triangle'
 - Can we modify (L5)? The components of thought are IDEAS
 - (L5*) The components of thought are concepts
 - Frege accepts (L5*) instead of (L5)
 - Linguistic view on Concepts — Prototype Theory
 - Can we change (L3)? What language is meant to communicate is thought
 - (L3) as embedded in the Lockean individualist conception of communication
 - Each person starts off as an autonomous individual among other autonomous individuals, and the fundamental goal of communication is such that each individual needs to find out what the other individuals are thinking (so they can form society which leads to mutual benefits) [p.13]
 - collaborative view
 - the basic purpose of communication is to inform one another of how things are in the world
 - (L3*) What language is meant to communicate are facts
 - (L3*) leads to the world-oriented conception of language
 - (L5**) The components of facts are objects and properties
 - "Socrates" would mean a particular person, Socrates the philosopher, instead of an image of that person or a concept of that person

Words and Sentences

- Words, instead of letters or sounds, are the atomic components of sentence as far as meaning is concerned [p.15]
 - because sentence meaning depends systematically on words, but word meaning does not depend systematically on letters
 - Doubting the words-are-atomic-elements view
 - But how about compound words like "ice-pack" or affixes (un-, -ness, -pre)?
 - we can say that compound words are actually two words, and affixes are words themselves
 - Maybe words are not arbitrary signs
- Unity of the proposition
 - proposition means sentence — 这点我不太同意, proposition does not have the surface structure of sentences
 - Locke: Words are names of IDEAS [p.17]
 - various IDEAS are joined together in actions of the mind by, e.g. affirming (is) or denying (is not) — "Socrates is waspish", the speaker affirms waspishness of Socrates
 - DOES NOT explain how the action of mind creates unity. It delays the problem by saying that the unity in mental judgments/thoughts is more basic

Locke's Less Disputed Assumptions

- (L1) The nature of language is defined by its function;
(L2) The function of language is to communicate.
 - Literature, e.g. poems
 - There are other uses of language that are not concerned with communication
- (L7) The relation between words and what they signify or mean is arbitrary;
(L8) Words are not intrinsically meaningful.
 - Questioning (L7)
 - 1 there are language universals, e.g. the phonetic universals in language acquisition
 - 2 The "meaning" of a poem depends on the sound of its vowels and consonants, its rhythm, its etymology, etc, which should be irrelevant to meaning
 - Questioning (L8)
 - The existence of dialects and variations within the same language renders the Lockean conception of words unnatural 但是俺不这么觉得