

John Locke: A Critical Analysis of the Nature of Language and Its Evolution

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ABSTRACT

The *Nature of Language* of John Locke's (1632-1704) is the masterpiece to steer human knowledge. Locke worked in every branch of philosophy and elucidate the importance attached to it. Locke's philosophy of mind is often regarded as the origin of modern conceptions of personal identity and the psychology of the self. John Locke advocated that any knowledge of the world could only be gained by experience and reflection on experience. John Locke is remembered as the pioneer of Enlightenment in England and France. Locke has also contributed to the branch of epistemology and empiricism.

KEYWORD

Enlightenment, epistemology, empiricism, perception, conception.

John Locke (1632-1704) was the most adored philosopher and celebrated figure of seventeenth century. Locke was born on 29th August 1632, in a small thatched cottage by the church, nineteen kilometres from Bristol. His parents were Puritans. Locke went to prestigious Westminster school in London. His study was sponsored by Alexander Popham a well-established political personality of the age. After completion of his school education in Westminster, he was admitted to Christ church, Oxford. Richard Lower, his school friend introduced Locke to medicine. Locke pursued his study in medicine. He became the member of the Royal Society and studied experimental philosophy. Locke was awarded a bachelor's degree in February 1656 and master's degree in June 1658. He achieved a bachelor of medicine degree in February 1675. In addition to his friend Lower, he came into contact with Robert Boyle, Thomas Wills and Robert Hooke, the noted scientists and thinkers of the age. Locke also studied the Islamic scholars Ibn Tufayl. Locke was influenced by Tufayl concerning his perspectives on philosophy. Locke is widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers and called as the "father of liberalism." His writings influenced Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke's contributions to classical republicanism and liberal theory are reflected in the United States Declaration of Independence. Locke propounded the philosophy of mind. It is the origin of modern conception of personal identity and the psychology of self. Locke defines the *self* as "that conscious thinking thing which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain. Locke explained the gradual unfolding of thing of conscious mind. Locke did not find himself comfortable to accept both the Augustinian view of man as originally sinful and the Cartesian position, which advocates that man innately knows basic logical proposition.

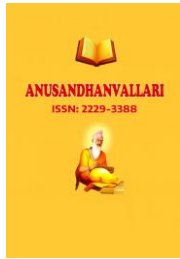
Locke's work *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) played a prominent role in advancing the role of reason in every sphere of life. It became the most famous work and subsequent editions were published within a very short interval. Three revised editions of the works came out in quick succession. The editions were repeated in 1664, 1665 and 1668. John Locke felt that any knowledge of the world begins in sense perception. Locke's philosophy of language, Book-III (Chapters- 9 & 10) became the path finder to establish the vital role played by the language on our life. In these two chapters, Locke prescribed the role of language in five important spheres of life.

- A theory of general words
- Universal theory of words
- Conceptualism theory of words
- Logical or operative words
- Theory of imperfection and abuse of language.

Locke studied every branch of knowledge, the contemporary readings of his treatise established his relation with epistemology and the theory of knowledge. He opined that any knowledge of the world could only be gained by experience. Locke in the chapter, *The Nature of Language* has tried to study the relation between sound, word, and language. The conception of sound comes with the birth of a human being. The sound often becomes without meaning because it happens to be arbitrary. The sound uttered by a baby is spontaneous and without meaning. It becomes meaningful when certain signification is attributed to the sound. The next journey of sound to a word is completed when the word becomes meaningful. The collection of meaningful words helps in making sentences. The people living in different geographical locations of the world have their own history. They have social and cultural significance of their region. As a social animal, man has developed language. God has given blessings to human mind to design language as an instrument for fruitful communication in the society. The man is social, educated, cultural and intellectual living being entirely different from other animals. The man has created meaningful word with assigned meaning to a sound to communicate among themselves. The articulation of a sound by a parrot cannot become language. In case of man sound which is articulated has sign of certain internal conceptions. It makes them stand as a mark of the ideas within the periphery of mind. The articulation of sound by man conveys his thoughts to the listeners. A sound comprehends several meanings when articulated, Locke analysed the word in general as well as in particular context also. When a word is used it comprehends several things but when it is analysed in particular context, only then the word meaning is signified. The idea differs in various ways in articulating the sound. Further the context also plays a vital role to determine the meaning of the sound. Locke felt that every article which has been named evoke certain ideas, simultaneously there are certain words or sounds which deliver no idea. Locke analysed the word in general and also in particular context. A word gives idea. The idea differs in various ways. Further the context also has important role in shaping the meaning of the word. In this connection Locke has given the example of the word 'Nihil' in Latin and also in English. In English the word 'Nihil' evokes the idea of ignorance and barrenness. But in Latin it has a philosophical meaning of annihilate something that rejects the idea of existence. The meaning of the words are attached with conception. The perception and idea have dominant role to define the boundary of the word. When the word is articulated by the speaker the image is formed in the mind by the listener. The words which excite the senses are called sensory words. For example, the word like 'imagine', 'apprehend', 'comprehend', 'adhere', 'conceive', 'instil', 'disgust', 'disturbance', 'tranquillity' and others are the words taken from the operational frame work of sensible things.

Apart from the sensory words, certain words have dual character. These words have dual meaning as these words have been attached to both inward and outward connection of the mind. When these words are articulated they operate both on the internal level of the mind and simultaneously the external elements of the words are projected. It is exhibited from their pronunciation. For example, if the word 'quarrel' is pronounced, the internal operation of the mind begins and the scene of quarrel appears before eyes. It is the perception of mind. The sensory perception plays a dominant role in the process of formation of words. Further the words are sometimes used at operational level and also at experimental level. To understand the force of the language one should know the nature of the word to be used properly.

Man is cultural, social and intellectual living being. He formed a society. So it became inevitable for the man that he should find certain signs for those visible and invisible ideas. Sound came first to exist. From sound



the word was signified. The gathered signification gave identity to the words. From word the meaning was extracted. The words make sentence. The sentences spoken by men became the medium of communication. The communication of thoughts through language is the necessary medium for the society to exist. The signification of the sound and language stand to fulfil the need of context. It is illustrated through certain ideas that always lie in the mind. There should be fine communion between speaker and listener. The language should be perceived by both of them. In an evolution of language certain words and sounds are ingrained in the memory of both the speaker and listener. The words are voluntary signs and they gain meaning when it is transferred to the listener. So the words are conveyed through conception. Locke has given the example of gold. It is difficult to comprehend the meaning of gold if the person has no knowledge about the physical constitution of gold. Every individual will develop his own perception of gold according to his own ability. He may be ignorant, a learnt or average man. When a child hears about the gold he may think it a bright shining yellow coloured metal and he will compare it with a peacock's tail. Another learnt man may think it in a complex way. He will perceive gold as a body of bright yellow flexible metal which is heavy. The person will form the idea of gold in his own perspective. Words are employed by people to denote ideas. When the speaker speaks certain words he ensure himself the listener will understand it.

Each of these uses equally the word gold, when they have occasion to express the idea which they have applied it to: but it is evident that each can apply it only to his own idea; nor can he make it stand as a sign of such a complex idea as he has not.¹

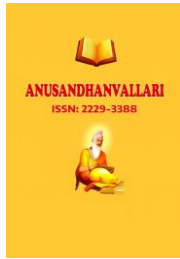
If the discourse is made between two different minds and if anyone fails to get the meaning of the word than the communication lands into the territory of imagination. This stage is called the area of miscommunication. The communication has important role to play between the speaker and listener. The words are employed to exercise ideas. The idea comes out from the mind as it has been deeply embedded in the psyche of man. Words are voluntary. They achieve the meaning when the speaker assigns it and the listeners accept it.

But so far as words are of use and signification, so far is there a constant connexion between the sound and the idea, and a designation that one stands for the other; without which application of them, they are nothing but so much insignificant noise. (105)

Locke further argued that the formation of words have always excited curious mind. A word must be accepted by a community and nation with fruitful meaning to develop it into a language.

And therefore the great Augustus himself, in the possession of that power which ruled the world, acknowledged he could not make a new Latin word : which was as much as to say, that he could not arbitrarily appoint what idea any sound should be a sign of in the mouths of and common language of his subjects (105-106).

The chapter IX of Locke's *The Nature of Language* deals with the imperfection of words. Here Locke elucidates that the collection of words gave birth to meaningful sentence, later it help in the emergence of language. There are certain words which have doubtful origin and uncertain signification. The imperfection arises because of the ambiguity in our own thoughts. These words are voluntary and sometimes remain indifferent to any idea. The man uses whatever the words he may please, but signification is embedded with his memory. There will be no imperfection in word if the speaker constantly uses the same word and that word provokes the same idea for it. But if he fails to understand the idea conveyed to imperfection to comprehend the ideas. The language is the vehicle to transfer our thoughts. It can be classified into two prominent groups.



- Civil and Philosophical

The civil use of the words mean the transfer of thoughts and ideas for general conversation, business and commerce. The civil use of words in language is related to the ordinary purposes pertaining to the need of the society. Secondly philosophical words are related to academic affairs for teaching, preaching and communication. Here the words are used to denote the precise notion. It is used to express general proposition.

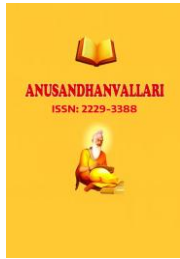
The imperfection in word arises because of the lack of comprehension between the speaker and listener. The sound and word are without independent status. The word achieves the signification from the imposition of meaning used by man. If the sounds and words are not articulated perfectly, it lead to imperfection. If the listener becomes indifferent to any communication after hearing it from the speaker, it signifies the words spoken by the speaker is incapable to excite the mind of the listener. Every sound which becomes word is independent. The word becomes meaningful after signification. The imperfection comes when a word is not used in proper sense. The meaning of the word is limited to its boundary but sometimes the meaning expands beyond periphery. It is also one of the reasons of imperfection. When the complex word combines with large number of ideas put together, it leads to imperfection. The complex word has to exercise too much to give proper meaning and it leads to ambiguity. There is no certain rule to ascribe a single meaning to the word. Sometimes the word also fails to prevent real sense of the meaning for which they are used for exact purpose. If a blind man is taught about the different kinds of colours, the imperfection will arise because of his non function of sensory organs. The deaf will fail to comprehend the meaning of the word. The word will not imply the proper signification because of the physical deformity. When the word conveyed by the speaker fails to excite the listener, then it leads to the region of failed communication. Locke puts his discourse:

But when a word stands for a very complex idea that is compounded and decompounded, it is not easy for men to form and retain that idea so exactly, as to make the name in common use stand for the same precise idea, without any the least variations. (109)

He further puts the argument that mixed word cannot be standardized and man adjust and rectify their signification according to his purpose. He can use the signification of word for his designed purpose. The words like 'shame', 'while' and 'banter' convey different meaning to different speakers and listeners. The listener will accept the meaning according to his need and maturity. These words combine the collection of ideas and their signification differ to every listener. The word 'sacrilege' present complex idea which is invisible in physical action but dynamic in mental action. The word 'murder' can be interpreted according to the listener's mental maturity. Locke says:

They have their union and combination only from the understanding which unites them under name: but, uniting them without any rule or pattern, it cannot be but that the signification of the name that stands for such voluntary collections should be often various in the minds of different men, who have scarce any standing rule to regulate themselves and their notion by, in such arbitrary ideas. (110)

The word in civil discourse carry different meaning than philosophical discourse. When a children learns language, he speaks both seen and unseen words. He learns simple words without difficulty. The sensory words perceived by senses like sweet, milk, sugar, salt, white black, cat and dog are easy to understand. The words related to morality and values are difficult to comprehend. These words can be learnt by observation and industry.



In a familiar discourse it is difficult to gauge the signification concerning honour, faith, character and relation. Similarly the religious scriptures have layers of meaning. The meaning of religious texts differ from interpreter to interpreter. So to avoid such kind of misunderstanding of ancient literature, Locke advised precaution.

Our good or evil depending not on their decrees, we may safely be ignorant of their notions: and therefore in the reading of them, if they do not use their words with a due clearness and perspicuity, we may lay them aside. (113)

Apart from this problem of signification in religious words, Locke observes that the names of the substances have a double reference in their use. The physical making of the substance can be perceived by the sense i.e. eyes. But it is entirely different from the philosophical use of the word. The objectivity cannot be prescribed to a substance. The gold has complex composition. The people buy gold keeping different qualities attached to it. The gold is identified by its solubility, ductility and shining. Locke further says that the signification of the substance differ according to their use. The words used for civil purpose confines to one meaning but the philosophical use is different. The philosophical meaning of gold has no comparison with material use of gold. The phrase 'golden chance' has no use of metal gold. Similarly the use of 'iron hand' has nothing to do with the metal iron. A businessman uses liquor for wine but the learnt physician uses the word to signify the amount of liquid flowing in the body.

Locke, has taken the serious issues of the notion and function of language. The word, sentence, language, and context are inseparable to comprehend it properly. Locke's thought-provoking treatise *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) proved a milestone to enrich the philosophical discourse of language and communication.

Reference:

1. *Great European Thinkers A Window to Continental Philosophy* Ed. Bijoy K. Danta Farheena Danta (Eastern Publishers (India), Guwahati, 2010) P. 103 All subsequent references to the book will be incorporated in the text.