

# A RIDICULOUS PLAN

## Locke and the Universal Language Movement

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### I

‘I am not so vain to think’, wrote Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) ‘that any one can pretend to attempt the perfect reforming the languages of the world, no not so much as that of his own country, without rendring himself ridiculous’.<sup>1</sup> It seems highly probable that among the objects of Locke’s scorn were the universal or philosophical language planners, whose extravagant movement was approaching its unhappy end when he was formulating his masterpiece in the 1670s and ’80s. This article investigates what it was about their plans that made Locke jeer. While their schemes varied considerably, all were broadly concerned to map precisely and transparently the order of thoughts and things, often by means of ‘real characters’—written signs which can be understood by people who speak different languages.<sup>2</sup> These projects were informed by a diverse and overlapping assortment of motivations and beliefs, such as irenicism, millenarianism, and Latitudinarianism, but two ambitions run prominently, if not

<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 509 (III.xi.2). Quotations from the *Essay* are de-capitalized and de-italicized.

<sup>2</sup> It was Francis Bacon’s mention of real characters which apparently sparked interest in them. He describes them as characters ‘which represent neither letters nor words, but things and notions’ (*De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, 14 vols., ed. James Spedding, Robert Ellis, and Douglas Heath (London: Longmans, 1857), iv. 439). Cf. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *Francis Bacon: The Oxford Authors*, ed. B. Vickers (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 120–299, at 230.

completely, through the movement.<sup>3</sup> The first looked to restore the Adamic harmony between language, mind, and world, whereby words would deliver knowledge of nature, and thereby read God's other book in an act of piety. The second was that language should be universal. While the two overlap, in so far as the unity of the world vouchsafes semantic uniformity, and while commentators have often, and rightly, paid attention to the first of these ambitions, I am going to focus on the second.<sup>4</sup> The goal to renovate a language which could be understood by all was nurtured in the shadow of Babel, and sparked by those injunctions of Francis Bacon which shaped the movement as a whole. Certain passages of *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), and especially of its Latin version, *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum* (1623), exhorted philosophers to inquire further into 'the notes of things and cogitations'.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Bacon proposed that a 'philosophical grammar' might serve as 'an antidote against the curse of the confusion of tongues'.<sup>6</sup> In his *Academiarum examen* (1654), John Webster agreed that a 'universal character' would repair 'the ruins of Babel'.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> On the religious impulses which 'animated' the artificial language movement (228), and for a comprehensive and masterful reconstruction of the movement as a whole, see Rhodri Lewis, *Language, Mind and Nature: Artificial Languages in England from Bacon to Locke* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007). For a further general account, see James Knowlson, *Universal Language Schemes in England and France 1600–1800* (Toronto: UTP, 1975). For a distinctive interpretation of the relationship between the movement and 'the cultural politics of seventeenth-century England' (9), see Robert E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-Century England* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> On the language planners' deep preoccupation with nature see, for example, M. M. Slaughter, *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> *The Advancement of Learning*, 231; cf. 230–3; *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum*, 438–48.

<sup>6</sup> *De dignitate et augmentis scientiarum*, 440–1.

<sup>7</sup> 'Academiarum Examen, or, The Examination of Academies' in *Science and Education in the Seventeenth Century: The Webster–Ward Debate*, ed. Allen G. Debus (London: Macdonald, 1970), 67–192, at 106–7.

otherwise often distinctive voice of George Dalgarno chimed in with the promise in his first broadsheet, *Character Universalis* (1657), that by means of his ‘universal character’, ‘men of all nations may enjoy the benefit of conversing one with another’.<sup>8</sup> And in his dedicatory letter to leading lights of the movement John Wilkins and Seth Ward, which prefaces his second broadsheet (*Tables of the Universal Character*, 1657), Dalgarno explained that what follows is intended ‘towards the releife of the confusion of languages’.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on widespread, often tacit, suppositions, the planners premised their belief in the possibility of a shared language on the assumption that the entities which words represent are shared, that the meanings of words are the same for all.

It is my contention that, while Locke’s doubts about the reform of language were legion,<sup>10</sup> and while he would have broadly rejected the natural philosophical ambitions of the language planners, it was their assumption of semantic universality which was part of what was in his sights when he mocked the pretensions of those who ‘attempt the perfect reforming the languages of the world’. This article begins with an examination of the network of linguistic,

<sup>8</sup> *Character Universalis/A New Discovery of the Universal Character*, in *George Dalgarno on Universal Language: The Art of Signs (1661), The Deaf and Dumb Man’s Tutor (1680), and the Unpublished Papers*, ed. David Cram and Jaap Maat (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 83–6, at 85. For an excellent analysis of Dalgarno’s sophisticated and distinctive position in the movement, see David Cram and Jaap Maat, ‘Introduction’ in *George Dalgarno on Universal Language*. See also Cram, ‘Language Universals and 17th Century Universal Language Schemes’, in *Rekonstruktion und Interpretation: Problemgeschichtliche Studien zur Sprachtheorie von Ockham bis Humboldt*, ed. Klaus D. Dutz and Ludger Kaczmarek (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1985), 243–57.

<sup>9</sup> *Tables of the Universal Character* in *George Dalgarno on Universal Language*, 87–105, at 89. While I often run ‘universal language theorists’ together, in so far as they believed in the possibility of a *universal* language, it is important to remember the great variegation in the movement; on this and on Ward’s ‘radical’ stance in particular, see David Cram, ‘Universal Language, Specious Arithmetic and the Alphabet of Simple Notions’, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft*, 4 (1994), 213–33.

<sup>10</sup> On Locke’s wide-ranging anxieties about language, and their place in early-modern linguistic concerns, see Hannah Dawson, *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007).

epistemological, and ontological assumptions which led theorists so confidently to presume that there is one, collective set of meanings. I then analyse why Locke found this confidence excessively presumptuous, and thereby demolished a foundation of the universal language movement.

## II

I shall identify three reasons why the artificial language planners were committed to semantic universality: first, mental and natural uniformity; second, the simplicity and passivity of ideas, sometimes combined with an apparently essentialized view of the world; and third, an objectifying and generalizing attitude towards meaning.

Turning to the first of these, the planners believed that there could be universal communication because the concepts and things that constitute the meanings of our words are shared by everyone. Here, they were repeating a commonplace of seventeenth-century philosophy of language, and, as so often with seventeenth-century philosophy more generally, one that was derived from Aristotle. At the beginning of *De Interpretatione* he had laid down a symmetrical relationship between words, concepts, and things which became axiomatic :

Words spoken are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul; written words are the signs of words spoken. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *On Interpretation*, trans. Harold P. Cooke (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1938), 115–79, at 115. On the widespread acceptance of this gobblet of Aristotle's, see Marie-Luce Demonet, *Les voix du signe: Nature et origine du langage à la renaissance (1480–1580)* (Paris: Champion, 1992), 88.

This view presented both a problem and a solution for the universal language theorists. As a consequence of their conventionality, words differ between cultures. However, both the concepts and the things which words signify are the same for all cultures. Together, mental homogeneity and the unity of the objective world offer the possibility of universal communication. Indeed, given the representative theory of language to which all early-modern philosophers subscribe, the uniformity of those entities which words represent is the basis for communication of any kind, and is therefore indispensable to early-modern linguistic theory as a whole.

The fact of semantic universality is so well established that it provides a self-evident premise for a range of arguments. Descartes wields it to rebut an objection of Hobbes to his *Meditations* (1641). In order to deny that reasoning ‘depends on names’, Descartes, somewhat misunderstanding his objector’s point, asks rhetorically: ‘who doubts that a Frenchman and a German can reason about the same things, despite the fact that the words they think of are completely different?’<sup>12</sup> In *De Homine* (1658), revealing just how wrongly Descartes had read him, Hobbes himself deploys the truism of semantic regularity to prove that linguistic signs cannot have a natural connection to what they signify. ‘For who could have it so when the nature of things is everywhere the same while languages are diverse?’<sup>13</sup>

While the unity of the world (if not the nature of its ingredients) was not in question, there were various and often conflicting beliefs about how it is that people come to have the same ideas, and in what these ideas consist. Some believed that our ideas are produced by external objects operating on the senses, some believed that they are born with us or developed by our minds, and many subscribed to a

<sup>12</sup> *Objections and Replies in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 vols., trans. John Cottingham, et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), ii. 63–383, at 126.

<sup>13</sup> *Man and Citizen (De Homine and De Cive)*, ed. Bernard Gert (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 39.

mixture of these beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Some claimed that our ideas about things in the world resemble those things, while others believed that the relation is merely causal.<sup>15</sup> But most agreed, even as scepticism lapped at the reliability and even the regularity of perception, that ideas themselves—whether innate or sensory, objective or subjective—are shared by their human owners.<sup>16</sup> In his *De veritate* (ed. 1, 1624), Herbert of Cherbury gives a particularly robust account of ‘common notions’. ‘A rose’, he declares, ‘produces the same effect now as it did of old in Pergamum’.<sup>17</sup> ‘Since’, he reasons, ‘the common notion of a rose coincides in man’s experience, all men will agree with me that objects which affect the whole of the faculties in the same manner produce the same results. I measure, therefore, the entire race by myself, and I assert that the same faculties have been imprinted on the soul of every normal person in all ages.’<sup>18</sup> The identity of ideas is secured, therefore, by the identity of the human mind, or as Herbert says, ‘the due conformity of the faculties’.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> On the problematic, but nonetheless useful rationalist/empiricist distinction, see Michael Ayers, ‘Theories of Knowledge and Belief’, in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, 2 vols., ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers, (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), ii. 1003–61, at 1003–8; and at 1028–30.

<sup>15</sup> The question of the relationship between thoughts and objects in early-modern philosophy has occasioned much debate; see, for example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: PUP, 1980); John W. Yolton, ‘Representation and Realism: Some Reflections on the Way of Ideas’, *Mind*, 96 (1987), 318–30; Michael Ayers, ‘Ideas and Objective Being’, in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ii. 1062–1107.

<sup>16</sup> Among the extensive literature on the rediscovery of ancient scepticism is the classic account by Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). The importance of scepticism as a driving force in early-modern philosophy is undergoing some helpful revision; see, for example, Ayers, ‘Theories of Knowledge and Belief’, 1008.

<sup>17</sup> *De veritate*, trans. Meyrick H. Carré (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1937), 79. Building on a Stoic tradition, Herbert also includes innate propositions, such as ‘nature does nothing in vain’ (132), among his common notions.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 78–9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 78.

The universal language theorists rehearse this basic position. In perhaps the most flamboyant contribution to the movement, *An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668), Wilkins declares that ‘as men do generally agree in the same principle of reason, so do they likewise agree in the same internal notion or apprehension of things.’<sup>20</sup> These, rather than dictionaries of current words established on unphilosophical foundations, are to ground his project. His first task is to enumerate them as far as possible in the ‘universal philosophy’, in order that his language will map on to ‘the nature of things, and that common notion of them, wherein all mankind does agree’.<sup>21</sup> While Dalgarno disagrees with Wilkins about the scientific scope of language, denying that the mind, and therefore language, could ever access the real nature of things, he holds firm to the principle of mental universality. In his second broadsheet, *Tables of the Universal Character* (1657), he explains that language discovers ‘the most intimate motions and conceptions of the soule, by which all humane societies are united’.<sup>22</sup> This focus on the universal order of thought had been envisaged by Descartes in his own proposal for a philosophical language. With characteristic self-assurance, he had stated to Mersenne in 1629 that it would be made up of ‘all the thoughts

<sup>20</sup> *An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, ed. R.C. Alston (Menston: Scolar Press, 1968), 20. On Wilkins’s central contribution to the movement see, in addition to works cited above: Benjamin DeMott, ‘Science Versus Mnemonics: Notes on John Ray and on John Wilkins’ “Essay toward a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language”’, *Isis*, 48 (1957), 3–12; DeMott, ‘The Sources and Development of John Wilkins’ Philosophical Language’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 57 (1958), 1–13; Joseph L. Subbiondo (ed.), *John Wilkins and 17th-Century British Linguistics* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1992); Sidonie Clauss, ‘John Wilkins’ Essay Toward a Real Character: Its Place in the Seventeenth-Century Episteme’, in *Language and the History of Thought*, Library of the History of Ideas, XIII, ed. Nancy Struever (Rochester: RUP, 1995), 27–35.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 1; Epistle to the Reader.

<sup>22</sup> *Tables of the Universal Character*, 90.

which can come into the human mind'.<sup>23</sup> Running through the artificial language projects is the commitment to a determinate collection of meanings or concepts, which sometimes refer to things and then with varying degrees of penetration, and which are common to all people. These semantic units correspond to the projectors' 'radical' words, as they call them.<sup>24</sup> And the challenge, as Descartes puts it, is to identify 'what are the simple ideas in the human imagination out of which all human thoughts are compounded'.<sup>25</sup>

Descartes's presentation of the building blocks of his universal language as 'simple' brings me to the second reason why theorists so blithely imagined that people share the same basic concepts: in so far as they are simple, these concepts are almost passively conceived and are therefore the same for all. Being barely acted on by the mind, they remain consistent across minds. Again, Aristotle had laid part of the groundwork for this immaculate view of the elements of thought. He had written that 'a noun or a verb by itself much resembles a concept or thought, which is neither combined nor disjoined'.<sup>26</sup> While Aristotle, Aquinas, and some of their philosophical successors had posited ways in which the mind actively abstracts universal concepts from particular perceptions, they tended to suggest the commonality and relative passivity of these universals.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, the impression of concepts as singular and

<sup>23</sup> *Philosophical Letters*, trans. and ed. Anthony Kenny (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 5.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Dalgarno, *Tables of the Universal Character*, 93; Wilkins, *An Essay towards a Real Character*, 299.

<sup>25</sup> *Philosophical Letters*, 6.

<sup>26</sup> *On Interpretation*, 117.

<sup>27</sup> On the abstraction of universals from particulars, see, for example, Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (London: Heinemann, 1960), 259; Thomas Aquinas, 'Commentary on the *Physics* I.I', in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. Ralph McHenry (London: Penguin, 1998), 439–44; Francisco Suarez, *Suárez on Individuation: Metaphysical Disputation V: Individual Unity and Its Principle*, trans. Jorge J. E. Gracia



inert was entrenched in the textbooks (if not the more discursive treatises) of logic.<sup>28</sup> This discipline was part of the bedrock of early-modern education and—with its comprehensive taxonomies of words and what they signified, and its predicamental series—a crucial source for philosophical language projects such as that of Wilkins.<sup>29</sup> Logicians traced an arc of increasing complexity in which solitary apprehensions are cumulatively operated on by the mind. Textbooks began with an analysis of simple terms or conceptions, proceeded to explain how these concepts are combined into propositions, and finally showed how these propositions might be joined into chains of reasoning. For our purposes, it is important to note the comparative inaction that is involved in simple conception and the kind of concepts that are produced. In his *Institutionum Logicarum* (1668), Franco Burgersdijk explains that a simple concept is one that is ‘apprehended without complex thought, without affirmation or negation’.<sup>30</sup> Peter Berault’s *Logick or the Key of Sciences* (1690) evinces the supine character of this first ‘action’ of the mind, the extensive scope of the simple concepts therein conjured up, and also the dogged persistence of these commonplaces: ‘a simple conceit or view of a thing presented to our spirit, without affirming or denying any thing of it; as for example, body, man, God, Angel, &c’.<sup>31</sup>

There are two kinds of simple concept that I want to single out. First, there are what we might call cultural concepts, concepts that

(Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 1982), 30–3.

<sup>28</sup> For an involved dialectical treatment of the mind-world continuum, see Martinus Smiglecius, *Selectis disputationibus et quaestionibus illustrata* (Ingolstadt, 1618), 9–16.

<sup>29</sup> Dalgarno is the most explicitly ambivalent about the realism and even the instrumental use of the predicamental method. On his disagreement with Wilkins on this matter see Cram and Maat, ‘Introduction’ to *George Dalgarno on Universal Language*, 28–9.

<sup>30</sup> *Institutionum logicarum. Synopsis, sive, Rudimenta logica* (Cambridge, 1668), 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Logick or the Key of Sciences: And the Moral Science, or, The way to be happy, the former directing our understanding how to reason well of all things, and the latter guiding our will to an honest and vertuous life* (London, 1690), 6.

relate to our human life, such as ‘*respublica*’,<sup>32</sup> ‘table’, ‘house’,<sup>33</sup> ‘pickling’, ‘contract’ and ‘calumny’,<sup>34</sup> to take examples from Burgersdijk, Francis Lodwick, and Wilkins. The second kind of simple concept, and the kind that dominated the logics, we might call natural concepts. These are concepts of things or substances, such as ‘horse’ and ‘man’, to take two common examples from Peter du Moulin’s *Elements of Logick* (1624).<sup>35</sup> Explanations varied as to why substance concepts are simple, but the starkest explanation came from the Aristotelian realists. According to them, each individual has a substantial form or essence that inheres in its matter, that it shares with other members of its class, and that human beings, through repeated experience of it, can perceive. Each substance has an ‘essential difference’, as Du Moulin puts it. ‘Man’, for example, is distinguished from other animals by being ‘a reasonable creature’.<sup>36</sup> ‘Rationalitie belongs to mans essence’ agrees Thomas Spencer in his *Art of Logick, Delivered in the Precepts of Aristotle and Ramus* (1628).<sup>37</sup> While the realist positions were modified by shades of nominalism, as philosophers wrangled over the extent to which these universals existed objectively or not, the impression given in logic textbooks was of a world, at least as it was understood by the mind, constituted by simple and automatically perceived essences which are therefore the same for all.

One might expect the universal language theorists, especially those caught up in the ‘new’ philosophy of matter in motion, to

<sup>32</sup> Burgersdijk, *Institutionum logicarum. Synopsis*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Francis Lodwick, *The Ground-Work, or Foundation Laid, (or so intended) For the Framing of a New Perfect Language: And an Universall or Common Writing*, in *The Works of Francis Lodwick: A Study of his Writings in the Intellectual Context of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Vivian Salmon (London: Longman, 1972), 203–22, at 211.

<sup>34</sup> Wilkins, *An Essay towards a Real Character*, 261; 263; 273.

<sup>35</sup> *Elements of Logick*, trans. Nathanael De-Lawne (London, 1624), 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 48. Cf. Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, in *Selected Writings*, 30–49, at 36.

<sup>37</sup> *The Art of Logick, Delivered in the Precepts of Aristotle and Ramus*, ed. R.C. Alston (Menston: Scolar Press, 1970), 164.

reject the simple ideas of substances that flow from the old hylomorphic world. Instead, they seem to replicate the essentialized taxonomies of simple concepts. In addition to cultural notions like ‘liberty’, ‘reputation’, and ‘prosperity’,<sup>38</sup> they wheel in simple substances. In his *Ground-Work, or Foundation Laid ... For the Framing of a New Perfect Language: And an Universall or Common Writing* (1652), Lodwick explains how proper nouns are to be organized under their ‘species or individuums’, such as ‘man’ or ‘horse’.<sup>39</sup> Wilkins draws up his ‘tables of substance, or the species of natural bodies’, fitting ‘all simple things and notions’ into his massive classification.<sup>40</sup> He talks as though ideas of substances were singular and common to all, referring, for instance, to ‘that conceit which men have in their minds concerning a horse or tree’. It is, he says, ‘the notion or mental image of that beast, or natural thing’.<sup>41</sup> Wilkins’s bugbear, John Webster, although coming from an explicitly anti-Aristotelian place, had also joined in the chorus when he had explained how, with a Baconian universal character of the ideal kind, on seeing the sign for ‘man’, ‘the intellect [would] receive but only the single and numerical species of that which it represented and so one note serve for one notion to all nations’.<sup>42</sup> The widespread appeal to conceptual simplicity, and the Aristotelian ontology which often and broadly underpinned it, may have been employed by many of the language planners in purely instrumental or provisional ways.<sup>43</sup> Indeed it was rejected outright by Dalgarno in *The Art of Signs* (1661). Sounding distinctly like a

<sup>38</sup> Wilkins, *An Essay towards a Real Character*, passim.

<sup>39</sup> *The Ground-Work*, 211. On Lodwick more generally, see Vivian Salmon’s helpful commentary in *The Works of Francis Lodwick*.

<sup>40</sup> *An Essay towards a Real Character*, Epistle to the Reader.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

<sup>42</sup> *Academiarum Examen*, 107.

<sup>43</sup> See for example Lewis, *Language, Mind and Nature*, 88–9 on Wilkins’s provisional employment of the Aristotelian predicaments.

‘scientific revolutionary’, he redefined a ‘form’ as ‘nothing other than the sum total of all the accidents of a given thing’, and denied that his universal language could or should fathom the depths of reality, being instead bound to ‘a great deal of arbitrariness’.<sup>44</sup> However, while he generally repudiated the Aristotelian predicamental series as a foundation for his language, even he was sometimes in its thrall.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, he developed his own taxonomies of radical words, such as ‘beast’ and ‘past’, whose simplicity might not bear scrutiny.<sup>46</sup> It was this simplicity, and the universality which follows, which were crucial to the artificial language projects. And for the most part, regardless of the more considered epistemological beliefs of the language planners, the men and dogs that reasoned and barked their way across the pages looked like the generic and automatic entities that populated the logics.

The impression that the meanings of words are shared by all was further strengthened by the way in which they were reified and objectivized. While they were often identified with concepts, the universal language theorists along with their contemporaries tended not to reflect on the fact that these concepts must belong to someone. Rather than locating them in the minds of individuals, they were described as, for example ‘the notions or conceptions in mans understanding’,<sup>47</sup> or ‘the common notions and conceptions of the mind’.<sup>48</sup> By being depicted generically, the concepts which words were said to signify cease to seem like the subjective thoughts of different men which, according to some lights at least, they must be. Instead, they seem like public objects available to all. Moreover,

<sup>44</sup> *The Art of Signs*, in *George Dalgarno on Universal Language*, 136–289, at 205; and 195.

<sup>45</sup> On Dalgarno’s ambivalence towards the predicamental method, see Cram and Maat, ‘Introduction’, in *George Dalgarno on Universal Language*, 39. Cf. Dalgarno, *The Art of Signs*, 177–89.

<sup>46</sup> On Dalgarno’s lexicon of radical words, see Cram and Maat, *op. cit.* 40–7.

<sup>47</sup> Du Moulin, *Elements of Logick*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Dalgarno, *Tables of the Universal Character*, 95.

in the artificial language plans, as in early-modern philosophy of language more generally, the mentalism to which everybody subscribed was liable to be erased by a dualist image of *verba* and *res*. While this bipartite paradigm of language, nurtured in the rhetorical tradition and translated by commentators into ‘words’ and ‘subject-matter’, flourished alongside the Aristotelian triptych described above,<sup>49</sup> sometimes the lines between these two templates were blurred, and writers who began by—or who should have been—talking about concepts *and* things slipped into talking merely about *res* or things, a sleight of hand rendered all the more problematic in the English translation. This often latent slippage is made explicit in Du Moulin’s *Elements of Logick*, which starts quite properly with the statement that he will deal with ‘simple notions’.<sup>50</sup> Soon after, however, we hear that ‘there are as many simple notions as there be things in the world’,<sup>51</sup> which is followed by an analysis of the ‘things’ which words signify. ‘*Horse, man, tree*’, for example, are the kind of words under which ‘we comprehend all horses, men, trees’ and other ‘universall things’.<sup>52</sup> Towards the end of the century, in Berault’s *Logic*, we witness the same swift skip from a consideration of ‘our mind’ to ‘things’.<sup>53</sup> In grammars, boys had it drummed into them that ‘a noun ... nameth a thing’, as Charles Hoole recites in his *Latine Grammar* (1651).<sup>54</sup> Repeating this mantra

<sup>49</sup> On the happy co-existence of these two paradigms see Brian Vickers, “‘Words and Things’—or “‘Words, Concepts, and Things’”? Rhetorical and Linguistic Categories in the Renaissance’, in *Res et Verba in der Renaissance*, ed. Eckhard Kessler and Ian Maclean (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 287–335. Cf. A.C. Howell, ‘*Res et Verba*: Words and Things’, in *Seventeenth-Century Prose: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Stanley E. Fish (New York: OUP, 1971), 187–96.

<sup>50</sup> *Elements of Logick*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Logic or the Key of Sciences*, Epistle Dedicatory, 10.

<sup>54</sup> *The Latine Grammar fitted for the use of schools. Wherein the words of Lillie’s Grammar are (as much as might be) retained* (Menston: Scholar Press, 1969), 20. Cf. John

in *The Universal Character* (1657), Cave Beck explains how ‘a noun is a word, signifying a thing’.<sup>55</sup> Concepts seem to vanish. When Thomas Sprat pleads for a return to the time ‘when men deliver’d so many things, almost in an equal number of words’, he is complicit in the widespread elision of the difference between concepts and things.<sup>56</sup> Sprat’s vision of a mimetic relation between *res* and *verba* evokes another way in which meanings came to seem objective. By being closely linked to, even identified with, visible, palpable words, meanings take on the shape of their partners. Simple *verba* are said to represent simple *res* with such perfection that the two seem to fuse together. For example, in his *Systema Logicae* (1600), Bartholomaeus Keckermann declares that ‘a simple thing is that which is expressed with one word, such as man’.<sup>57</sup> By such ellipses, meanings take on the sensible qualities of words. This process of semantic ossification is also effected when meanings are slotted into graphic boxes, as though they were objects, as in the trees of Porphyry which were stamped throughout logic textbooks, or in the great ark of tables which unfold on the pages of Wilkins’s *Essay*. When Jonathan Swift parodied the universal language theorists as communicating by means of actual things that they carried around with them, he had clearly missed, among other things, the mentalism of the movement.<sup>58</sup> However, his satire does capture the objectivizing appearance of seventeenth-century attitudes towards meaning and of the universal linguists in particular.

Stockwood, *Certaine grammar questions for the exercise of young Schollers in the Learning of the Accidence* (London, 1590), sig. B3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> *The Universal Character, By which all the Nations in the World may understand one anothers conceptions, Reading out of one Common Writing their own Mother Tongues* (London, 1657).

<sup>56</sup> *History of the Royal Society*, ed. Jackson I. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones (London: OUP), 113.

<sup>57</sup> *Systema Logicae* (Hanau, 1600), sig. A4<sup>r</sup>: ‘res simplex est, quae unice voce exprimitur, ut homo’.

<sup>58</sup> *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg (New York: Norton, 1970), 158.

### III

Locke interjects with two stunning and related claims. Drawing heavily on the anti-Aristotelian epistemologies of his contemporaries, his first claim is that words signify ideas *alone*.<sup>59</sup> If our ideas of substances do not capture their real essences, and indeed if there are no real essences as such but only particular and fluid arrangements of matter, then our words, which express our thoughts, can do no more.<sup>60</sup> In addition to compromising the reach of natural philosophy, Locke thereby jeopardizes the link between words and the world which was one of the means by which the commonality of meaning was secured. His second claim is more innovative and, for our purposes, more important: he points out that if words signify ideas, as was generally conceded, then they must signify the ideas of someone. The meanings of people's words, being only their ideas, are therefore bound to differ as much as their ideas differ. And as we shall see below, according to Locke, while ideas need not in theory diverge between people, they do in practice. Locke therefore explodes the easy presumption of semantic universality. He takes the commonplace that language reflects the mind and, in the context of his distinctive epistemology, pushes it to its logical conclusion: in the case of the most significant words, people often have radically different ideas in their minds and therefore, as a matter of course, cannot communicate. This devastating inference puts pressure on any language, and reduces to the risible all hopes of a universal one.

The argument begins with Locke echoing a well-worn truth: 'the use then of words, is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas

<sup>59</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 405 (III.ii.2); p. 407 (III.ii.5); pp. 438–71 (III.vi).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 440–2 (III.vi.3–6); p. 461 (III.vi.33).

they stand for, are their proper and immediate signification'.<sup>61</sup> He then picks his way painstakingly through the small print of the wisdom of his age: 'words in their primary or immediate signification', he writes, 'stand for nothing, but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever, or carelessly those ideas are collected from the things, which they are supposed to represent'.<sup>62</sup> By drawing attention to the fact that a man cannot apply words 'to any thing else, but the ideas, that he himself hath',<sup>63</sup> Locke personalizes the anonymous concepts we met above. He underlines the necessary subjectivity of meaning, and in doing so attacks the breezy generalities of his predecessors, who had talked about 'the mind' that language represents.

Semantic instability is not a theoretical necessity, however. For Locke, the irrepressible fact that words signify the ideas that people happen to have does not preclude them from having the same ideas as each other. Indeed, if it were *a priori* impossible to communicate, this would make a sinful mockery of God's 'sociable' design for men.<sup>64</sup> He gave them language 'to be the great instrument, and common tye of society'.<sup>65</sup> Developing the intuitions of his forebears, Locke reasons that due to the similarity of our perceptual faculties, it is highly likely that we have the same basic perceptions (both internal and external) and can therefore communicate.<sup>66</sup> So axiomatic is shared perception as a premise for communication, that Locke uses it to prove the perfection with which God has calibrated our senses, and the impiety and self-destructiveness of wishing them sharper. A man born with 'microscopical eyes', for example, 'would be in a quite different world from other people: nothing would

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 405 (III.ii.1).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 405 (III.ii.2).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 402 (III.i.1).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 303 (II.xxiii.12).



appear the same to him, and others: the visible ideas of every thing would be different. So that I doubt, whether he, and the rest of men, could discourse concerning the objects of sight; or have any communication about colours, their appearances being so wholly different.’<sup>67</sup> Locke therefore appears to agree with his predecessors that from the uniformity of our minds flows the uniformity of our ideas and therefore the meanings of our words.

However, it is in Locke’s recasting of ideational simplicity that he conducts his revolution. Like his forebears, he asserts that ‘in the reception’ of simple ideas, ‘the mind is wholly passive’.<sup>68</sup> It has ‘no power to make any one [simple idea], but only receives such as are presented to it’.<sup>69</sup> Aside from the uniform and therefore unproblematic operation of abstraction,<sup>70</sup> the mind does not act on simple ideas. As a consequence they are the same for all, and in turn ‘men, for the most part, easily and perfectly agree’ in the signification of their names.<sup>71</sup> So far, so familiar. Locke’s fatal blow consists in his

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 163 (II.xii.1).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 429 (III.v.2).

<sup>70</sup> Locke introduces the process of abstraction with the example of ‘whiteness’, an example of a simple idea which he later claims is shared by all (*Essay*, p. 159 (II.xi.9); p. 427 (III.iv.15–16)). However, while Locke wants to present abstraction unproblematically, commentators have long noted problems with it. For our purposes, it is important to note that while the abstraction of simple ideas may be a uniform process, it is hard to see how the abstraction of complex ideas cannot fall foul of the heterogeneity which I outline below. On this tension in Locke’s epistemology, compare for example his unworried account of the abstraction of the general idea ‘man’ at p. 411 (III.iii.7) with his repeated anxiety about the instability of the complex idea ‘man’ at pp. 450–5 (III.vi.22–7). Locke’s easy invocation of abstraction may be another testament to the unthinking repetition of one’s intellectual heritage. On difficulties with Lockian abstraction more generally, see Michael Ayers, *Locke*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1991), 259–63; Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 35–9; Jonathan Walmsley, ‘Locke on Abstraction: A Response to M.R. Ayers’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 7 (1999), 123–34; ‘The Development of Lockean Abstraction’, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 8 (2000), 395–418.

<sup>71</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 427 (III.iv.15).

claim that, unlike for his apparently Aristotelian forebears, these simple ideas are not of things like ‘man’, or ‘liberty’, but of sensations like ‘white’ or ‘bitter’.<sup>72</sup> According to Locke, people do not share precisely the kinds of ideas which logicians and universal language theorists had passed off as simple, as candidates for radical words and the foundation for a renovated Babel. These ideas, Locke objects, are in fact ‘complex’. That is to say, they are made, not given, and might therefore be made differently.

We remember that there were two types of concept that logicians and language planners alike presented as simple: natural concepts such as ‘man’, and cultural concepts such as ‘justice’. Locke peels back the sturdy, unitary, and familiar names to reveal an anarchic multiplicity of ideas beneath.

Turning first to ideas of substances, Locke, following numerous new philosophers, repudiates the Aristotelian view that the world is constituted by substantial forms or essences. He proposes instead that it is probably made up of corpuscles in various and changing arrangements and that our indigent human minds have little access to it. The only knowledge we have of it comes through our senses in the form of the aforementioned simple, sensible ideas, such as ‘red’. On noticing that certain simple ideas regularly appear together, we assume that they are caused by some ‘substance’, but do not know the real constitution of the underlying cause, how it relates to the sensible ideas it produces in us, nor which precise set of simple ideas ought to be included in its ‘nominal essence’.<sup>73</sup> Far from being simple and steady, our ideas of substances are heterogeneous and unstable. We are not passive in their receipt, but positively join together disparate ideas, exercising a degree of choice, and as our unique experience of the world suggests that we should. They therefore tend to diverge as much as our particular encounters with the world diverge. Locke exemplifies his point with

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 487 (III.ix.18).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. pp. 442–4 (iii.vi.6–8); pp. 481–6 (III.ix.11–17).

the idea of gold. For a boy who notices only ‘the bright shining yellow colour’, that colour simply is his idea of gold and the meaning of the word, which he applies equally to ‘the same colour in a peacocks tail’.<sup>74</sup> Someone who is more familiar with the substance might combine the following simple ideas: ‘a body, bright, yellow, fusible, and very heavy’.<sup>75</sup> A jeweller might add ‘malleability’.<sup>76</sup> It is because the complex ideas of substances are ‘made by the mind, and not by nature’ that they are ‘so various and different in several men’.<sup>77</sup> This leads Locke to conclude glumly that ‘I believe it is very seldom that in Speaker and Hearer, they stand for exactly the same Collection’.<sup>78</sup>

The situation is even worse for what I have called cultural concepts, or ‘mixed modes’ as Locke calls them, such as ‘beauty’, ‘theft’, ‘murder’, and ‘apotheosis’. As with ideas of substances, the simple presence of their names is misleading, since they are in fact the wilful combinations of men and therefore liable to diversify. Unlike ideas of substances, however, mixed modes are not ideas of natural things and as a result suffer no objective block on their proliferation. While ideas of substances vary in their precise make-up, their semantic latitude and the identity of their constituent parts is controlled by the world which causes them.<sup>79</sup> So while ‘no body joins the voice of a sheep, with the shape of a horse; nor the colour of lead, with the weight and fixedness of gold’, no such objective constraints bind the mind’s construction of mixed modes.<sup>80</sup> These are ‘not only made by the mind, but made very arbitrarily, made

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 406 (III.ii.3).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p. 453 (III.vi.26).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p. 487 (III.ix.18).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. 428 (III.iv.17).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 455 (III.vi.28).

without patterns, or reference to any real existence’, with the result that they multiply wildly.<sup>81</sup> Locke singles out moral ideas as some of the most important—and most vexed—mixed modes. ‘These ideas of men’s making, are, by men still having the same power, multiplied *in infinitum*.’<sup>82</sup> This boundlessly plural moral prospect seems to contradict Locke’s robust belief in the universal and immutable natural law which obliges men, which is the indispensable foundation to his political theory in the *Second Treatise*, and which he announces with great fanfare in the *Essay* itself as capable of demonstration. However, while the divine law is ‘the only true touchstone of moral rectitude’,<sup>83</sup> and theoretically accessible to all through the exercise of reason,<sup>84</sup> Locke fears that in practice people do not labour at moral knowledge but that instead swarms of customs and competing ideologies dominate the normative landscape. It is precisely the reason why morality is capable of demonstration—that moral ideas are ‘not of nature’s, but man’s making’ and therefore ‘perfectly known’<sup>85</sup>—that is simultaneously the reason for their unfettered propagation.

Locke leaves no level of moral and cultural life uninfected. He begins his attack on semantic universality by pointing to the differences between communities. Concocted in the crucible of specific cultures, mixed modes embody the ‘customs and manner of life’ of a particular country, such as a ‘triumph’, a ‘resurrection’, or an ‘ostracism’.<sup>86</sup> This is why languages are not inter-translatable: one only needs to observe, Locke says, that ‘great store of words in one language, which have not any that answer them in another’, to

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p. 429 (III.v.3).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p. 480 (III.ix.9).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* p. 352 (III.xxviii.8).

<sup>84</sup> *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 271.

<sup>85</sup> *Essay*, p. 516 (III.xi.15; 16).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 432–3 (III.v.8).

discover the depth of ideational incommensurability.<sup>87</sup> Pressing on into the intra-cultural sphere, Locke uncovers a patchwork of complex ideas. ‘Though the names glory and gratitude be the same in every man’s mouth, through a whole country, yet the complex collective idea, which every one thinks on, or intends by that name, is apparently very different in men using the same language.’<sup>88</sup> Locke takes one last step into the mire of semantic promiscuity when he reflects on the rapidly changing minds of individuals, and therefore on the mutations of ideas in one and the same person. ‘Moral words,’ he ventures, ‘have seldom, in two different men, the same precise signification; since one man’s complex idea seldom agrees with another’s, and often differs from his own, from that which he had yesterday, or will have to morrow.’<sup>89</sup>

Under Locke’s unblinking gaze the static units of meaning, which had fitted neatly into the leaves of logics and artificial language schemes, threatened to dissolve. A combination of semantic individualism (on which all early-modern philosophers would have had in some way to agree) and a non-essentialized world of matter in motion (on which many early-modern philosophers broadly agreed), were enough to jeopardize the shared ideas on which the universal language projects were founded. The addition of Locke’s redefinition of conceptual simplicity made them appear impossible.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 432 (III.v.8).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 479 (III.ix.8).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 478 (III.ix.6).

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