LOCKE ON THE ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE
Terence Moore

Terence Moore explores ideas from John Locke on language.

Down the centuries a Holy Grail for some linguists has been to find the origins of language. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus, in the fifth century BC, tells the story of an Egyptian Pharaoh's attempt to discover the first, original language. Psammetichus devised an experiment that required taking two new-born children and isolating them in an uninhabited region in the care of a shepherd. The shepherd was instructed not to speak a word in their hearing. Psammetichus hoped that the words the children first spoke, once past the age of babbling, would count as the world's original language. His hope was fulfilled when the shepherd reported both children had run towards him, stretching out their hands and calling 'Bekos'. 'Bekos' was the Phrygian word for 'bread'. For Psammetichus it was Q.E.D.

In the seventeenth century a different view of the origins prevailed. Most of Locke's contemporaries believed the Grail was to be found in the first Book of Moses, entitled Genesis, Chapter 2, v. 19–20. There a prelapsarian Adam had spoken.

> And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air and the beasts of the field.

Locke naturally knew the verses but did not agree with the views they expressed. To know is not to believe. Locke believed the links between words and meanings were not divinely inspired but arbitrary. This belief was restated by the nineteenth-century Swiss linguist, popularly known as the 'Father of modern linguistics', Ferdinand de Saussure. The first of his two basic principles was: 'Principle I: The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign'. Locke, however, a man of fundamentals, in his account of arbitrariness broadens and deepens its significance for our understanding of our actual use of language. Locke also foreshadows Saussure's second basic principle: Principle II: The Linear Nature of the Signifier. Unlike Saussure, Locke goes on to explore the implications of linearity for the crucial distinction between the way we perceive and the way we must talk about what we perceive. For Locke the fact that perception is holistic and speech linear has far-reaching consequences both for the use and for the understanding of each other's language

On the Origins of Language: A Grail Abandoned

Locke: If our topic for this evening is 'A Grail abandoned', I first need to know precisely what this abandoned Grail is.

Moore: Of course. The Grail, as I understand it, is the quest for the origins of language.

Locke: And why do you say the Grail has been abandoned?

Moore: It was the Linguistic Society of Paris that did it. At their meeting in 1866 they expressly prohibited any discussion of the origins of language. Speculation was too wild, they said, too short of evidence, too unscientific. Gestures, natural cries, animal calls were all unproven contenders. Naturally the prohibition didn't have an immediate effect. But over time and with the ideas of Saussure a new issue, the systemic or structural nature

of language became the focus of attention, leaving speculations on the origins of language to wither on the vine.

Locke: But if it's withered on the vine why do you want us to pursue it?

Moore: Because there was a particular view of the origins that was widespread in the seventeenth century and you didn't agree with it. The reasons you didn't agree tell me a great deal about your thoughts on the nature, use and signification of language. The widespread view in your century – a view as I say you didn't share – held that prelapsarian Adam was the original creator of language. We might call it the Creationist view. Human beings, many of your contemporaries believed, owed the origins of language to Adam, the first great Name-giver!

Locke: You're thinking of the way the first book of Moses was interpreted. Genesis, Chapter II, verses 19–20. It runs, if my memory serves me well:

'Out of the ground the Lord formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.'

Moore: I'm impressed. Your memory is certainly serving you well. Although few nowadays would subscribe to the Genesis account of the origins of language, many would, perhaps unwittingly, accept its tacit underlying assumption.

Locke: Its tacit underlying assumption being . . .?

Moore: That language is essentially a naming process.

Locke: They'd be wrong, of course. Whatever our definition of language is, it is not a simple naming process.

Moore: Yet I suspect that many people in your time did firmly believe it was. What's also interesting is that it reminds me that in the seventeenth century reading individuals had two significant books to read: one was the Holy Bible and the other was what we might call the Book of Nature, the book Boyle, Newton, you and the Fellows of the recently founded Royal Society for Improving Natural Knowledge were busily writing. Yet you clearly knew the first Book well too.

Locke: To know is not necessarily to believe.

Moore: But many surely did. Take your friend from school days Robert South. He was enthusiastic about Adam's linguistically creative act. At the very least it resolved for him as it did for others the question of the origins of language.

Locke: It's true. Robert and I were both at Westminster. But he was a couple of years younger than I. He was a man of the Church who believed the Genesis account of the origins of language and praised Adam to the skies.

Moore: I have here a passage of a sermon South once preached at St Paul's that supports your view of him. Let me read it to you.

'Adam came into the world a philosopher, which sufficiently appeared by his writing the nature of things upon their names; he could view essences in themselves, ... An Aristotle was but a rubbish of an Adam, and Athens but the rudiments of Paradise.'

Locke: I never thought of Robert as a philosopher of language. My concern with the views he expressed was that he was always inclined to take words literally. What mattered for Robert and for those who shared his views was that the relation between word and object was divine, God-given.

Moore: You of course didn't agree.

Locke: No I didn't. The trouble with Robert's lot was that they acted as if the Bible authorized for all time the view that Adam's words for the names of the beasts of the field and the fowl of the air also carried with them the knowledge of each species and its essence.

Moore: Can I put that another way? According to Robert, Adam in giving names to the beasts of the field and the fowl of the air was doing a lot more than just naming them. Words were not just vocal labels. Adam, Robert claimed, was also 'writing the nature of things upon their names' and was able to 'view their essences in themselves'. On this view Adam's language, believed to be Hebrew, was an essential source of knowledge of the nature of things.

Locke: So they believed. What they didn't take into account were two fundamental shortcomings in their approach. First, as you said, they treated language as if it were just a nomenclature, a list of names for things. Second, they assumed the giving of names to things was a simple task, which couldn't be further from the truth.

Moore: What did your Mentor, another Robert, think?

Locke: Robert Boyle! He was a leading writer of your second Book, the Book of Nature, whilst also being very knowledgeable about the first. You should read his book, *Seraphic Love*. Robert was clear. He spelt out his anti-Creationist view in *The Excellence of Theology*.

Moore: Indeed he did. I have a passage from it here. It runs:

'I will not urge the received opinion of divines that before the Fall … Adam's knowledge was such that he was able at first sight to give each of the beasts a name expressive of its nature; because I could never find, in spite of some skill in the holy tongue, that the Hebrew names of animals mentioned in the beginning of Genesis argued a clearer insight into

their natures than did the names of the same or other animals in Greek or other languages.'

That makes it pretty clear he was firmly rejecting words themselves as a path to promoting natural knowledge. The Royal Society's motto, 'Nullius in Verba' spelt out the path the Fellows were determined to follow.

Locke: Remind me, how did you understand, 'Nullius in Verba'?

Moore: You may recall my rough paraphrase ran, 'Take nobody's word for it'. Fellows of the Royal Society believed observation, conjecture and experiment, not the verbal pronouncements of authorities, offered a better way to advance our knowledge of the world.

Locke: Of course, I remember now. My objection to the Creationist view was actually much more fundamental than Robert Boyle's.

Moore: Go on.

Locke: I believe it is the arbitrary nature of the relation between word and object, between signifier and signified, that ultimately undermines the view of Adam as the great originator of language.

Moore: 'Signifier' and 'Signified'. Have you been reading my English copy of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's 'Cours de Linguistique Générale'?

Locke: Yes. I have in fact. I think he shares some of my views, but sees their significance differently. However, we profoundly differ on others.

Moore: Did you know that Saussure never wrote the 'Cours'?

Locke: What do you mean?

Moore: The 'Cours' was published posthumously. It was written up from notes of two former students, Charles Bally and Albert Schehaye, who had attended a series of

lecture Saussure gave in Geneva, 1910–11, as far as I remember.

Locke: So we don't know exactly what Saussure said.

Moore: We know approximately.

Locke: Which is of course all we generally know of the writings of earlier authors.

Moore: But to cut the chase. Which of his views do you share?

Locke: I suppose his first two Principles. Principle I: The Arbitrary Nature of the Sign. Principle II: The Linear Nature of the Signifier. I do think he misses their fundamental significance, particularly on the question of linearity.

Moore: Shall we come back to that later. Let's consider first the arbitrary nature of the links between words and meanings. Your view certainly distances you from those who, like Robert South, held the Creationist view of the origins of language. For them the link wasn't remotely arbitrary but divinely given. If the Creationist view were right, there would be only one language. No Babel. But you thought . . .

Locke: I thought what I wrote in Book III of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, that we need public words to express our private thoughts, imaginings, feelings. The words that perform that task arise, not by any natural connection between a specific word and a particular idea, but by an arbitrary link between word and idea, between word and imagining, between word and feeling. More importantly, Saussure doesn't note that the arbitrary nature of the sign bears upon the origins of meanings in our heads.

Moore: I don't follow.

Locke: Well, consider the 'common Acceptation' for the meaning of words.

Moore: The meaning we unthinkingly believe we all agree on.

Locke: Exactly, unthinkingly. However much public use brings about a feeling of a 'common Acceptation', there's something that's too easily forgotten.

Moore: Namely.

Locke: The subjectivity of meaning. Because of the way each of us individually has to grow meanings for words, there is bound to be, in the last resort, a private, subjective element to our meanings. That subjectivity is particularly apparent in the different ways in which we understand what I call 'General terms': words like 'Justice', or words for emotions such as 'Love'.

Moore: It sounds as though it may help to recall your insight: Words don't mean, individuals mean by way of words.

Locke: That's about it. But it gets worse.

Moore: How worse?

Locke: Do you remember Saussure's diagram of the sign?

Moore: The picture of a tree followed by the word 'tree', and a picture of a handsome horse followed by the word 'horse'.

Locke: That's there, but the important, misleading, diagram is the one illustrating the relation between concept and sound image.

Moore: Word and meaning as you would put it. What's misleading about it?

Locke: Well, look at it.
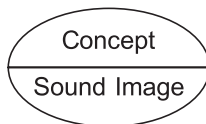
Doesn't it suggest that what the word, the sound image, marks is one concept implying that that concept will be the same for all users of the word? It's far too neat. It's as if Saussure is replacing the false idea of words as a nomenclature, a list of things in the world, by the equally false idea of words as a nomenclature of ideas about the world.

Moore: You're right. It's far too tidy. Give me instead your knot and bundle image of the relation between words and their meanings. Saussure's diagram illustrates an entirely different relation, one exactly the opposite of your position.

Locke: Precisely. I have tried to convince you that for me the word, the knot, ties a bundle of Ideas, or concepts, which may partly overlap, partly be different from the bundle of ideas it marks for you.

Moore: Don't worry. I am convinced.

Locke: Saussure is right, of course, about the arbitrariness of the links between words and ideas, but fails, as I see it, to follow through on the consequences.

Moore: The chief consequence being of course that the same word can tie different bundles in different minds, and different bundles in the same mind at different times.

Locke: Exactly.

Moore: You did say you also had concerns about his Principle II: The Linear Nature of the Signifier.

Locke: Again he's right of course. Language is inescapably linear. But it is the significance of that linearity that Saussure, as I read him, misses.

Moore: What do you think he misses?

Locke: Let me digress briefly so as to answer properly. I've been reading about an essay of Condillac's I found on your shelves.

Moore: That must be Condillac's 'Essai sur les origins des connaisances humaines', 1746.

Locke: That's it. I suspect Condillac and I would have got on famously. He says things I might have said.

Moore: For example?

Locke: Listen to this. 'We never step outside ourselves, and we never perceive anything but our own private thoughts.' Doesn't that sound like me?

Moore: The focus on the private and the subjective does, I agree, have resonances with sentences of yours in Book III of the *Essay*, except Condillac perhaps is more emphatic. The general thrust though is certainly Lockean.

Locke: How often did I say, 'Words in their primary or immediate Signification stand for nothing but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them'?

Moore: Repeatedly. We could have used Condillac's sentence as an epigraph for one of our earlier Conversations.

Locke: Do you mean the one on an untenable dualism – objective versus subjective. You're right. Condillac would undoubtedly deny the possibility of total objectivity.

Moore: But I believe he would have approved of the scale of subjectivity, we talked about. Where did Condillac stand on Principle II: Linearity?

Locke: More or less where I stood. But he tells a better story.

Moore: Go on, I like stories.

Locke: Well, you'll recall Condillac was at one time tutor to the young Prince of Parma. To drive home the importance of Linearity Condillac stood the lad in front of a shuttered window. He then briefly opened the shutters to give the Prince a view of the landscape. After closing the shutters Condillac asked him to describe what he had

seen. Inevitably the Prince was forced into analysing the scene he'd briefly seen into chunks of linear language. What Condillac was doing was driving home the critical distinction between perceiving and talking about what is perceived. In short, he was showing by demonstration that while perception is holistic, speech is linear.

Moore: Saussure certainly didn't follow through on the significance of Principle II for the use of language. You're right of course. In using language, we can't help but decompose into parts what our senses deliver as a whole.

Locke: And those parts are decomposed into parts, and those parts into other parts, offering by way of recomposition endless creativity. I'm indebted to Condillac for sharpening up my understanding of the significance of the inescapable linearity of language.

Moore: You may be pleased to know he said he was indebted to you, in particular for your *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Locke: I'm pleased, very pleased.

Moore: You said earlier that, apart from Saussure's Principle I on the arbitrary nature of the links between words and ideas, and his Principle II on Linearity, your view of what students of language should be studying differed profoundly from his. What difference do you have in mind?

Locke: That's easy. I think the difference is encapsulated in the opening sentence of his Chapter V. Pass me the 'Cours' and I'll read it to you. Thanks. It runs: 'My definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organism or system – in a word, of everything known as "external linguistics"'. Among the aspects he excluded was the very one that concerned me most – words, their meanings, and how far we can hope to understand each other.

Moore: How ironic. The so-called Father of modern linguistics excludes one of language's great fundamentals. That seems a good conclusion to rest on. I've learnt a great deal from you, and not just about why you abandoned the Grail, the quest for the origins of language. Till next time.

Terence Moore is a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge. *tm15@cam.ac.uk*