

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy

Hannah Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

LOCKE, LANGUAGE AND EARLY-MODERN PHILOSOPHY

In a powerful and original contribution to the history of ideas, Hannah Dawson explores the intense preoccupation with language in early-modern philosophy, and presents a groundbreaking analysis of John Locke's critique of words. By examining a broad sweep of pedagogical and philosophical material from antiquity to the late seventeenth century, Dr Dawson explains why language caused anxiety in writers such as Montaigne, Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Gassendi, Nicole, Spinoza, Pufendorf, Boyle, Malebranche and Locke. *Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy* demonstrates that new developments in philosophy, in conjunction with weaknesses in linguistic theory, resulted in serious concerns about the capacity of words to refer to the world, the stability of meaning, and the duplicitous power of words themselves. Dr Dawson shows that language so fixated all manner of early-modern authors because it was seen as an obstacle to knowledge and society. She thereby uncovers a novel story about the *problem* of language in philosophy, and in the process reshapes our understanding of early-modern beliefs about nature, epistemology, morality and politics.

HANNAH DAWSON is Lecturer in Intellectual History at the University of Edinburgh.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy
Hannah Dawson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

IDEAS IN CONTEXT 76

Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy
Hannah Dawson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

IDEAS IN CONTEXT

Edited by Quentin Skinner and James Tully

The books in this series will discuss the emergence of intellectual traditions and of related new disciplines. The procedures, aims and vocabularies that were generated will be set in the context of the alternatives available within the contemporary frameworks of ideas and institutions. Through detailed studies of the evolution of such traditions, and their modification by different audiences, it is hoped that a new picture will form of the development of ideas in their concrete contexts. By this means, artificial distinctions between the history of philosophy, of the various sciences, of society and politics, and of literature may be seen to dissolve.

The series is published with the support of the Exxon Foundation.

A list of books in the series will be found at the end of the volume.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy

Hannah Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

LOCKE, LANGUAGE AND EARLY-MODERN PHILOSOPHY

HANNAH DAWSON

University of Edinburgh



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy
Hannah Dawson
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521852715

© Hannah Dawson 2007

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-85271-5 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external
or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any
content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy

Hannah Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

for Joy Denyer

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page x</i>
<i>Notes on the text</i>	<i>xii</i>
Introduction	I
PART I LANGUAGE IN THE <i>TRIVIUM</i>	II
1 Language in logic	13
2 Language in grammar	41
3 Language in rhetoric	64
PART II PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENTS OF THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE	89
4 The relationships between language, mind and word	91
5 Semantic instability: a containable threat	129
6 Under cover of sensible and powerful words	154
PART III LOCKE ON LANGUAGE	183
7 Words signify ideas alone	185
8 Semantic instability: an inherent imperfection	210
9 A life of their own	239
10 Locke in the face of language	277
<i>Bibliography</i>	305
<i>Index</i>	349

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy

Hannah Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgements

A number of friends and institutions have helped me write this book and it is an enormous pleasure to acknowledge them here. In the first place, I am indebted to the British Academy Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding the PhD out of which the book arises, and to Christ's College, Cambridge, for the sunlit home in which I wrote much of the thesis. I am also indebted to Queens' College, Cambridge, for the junior research fellowship, the top-floor rooms and the stimulating interdisciplinary culture which facilitated the conversion of thesis to book. I thank the librarians of the British Library, of Cambridge University Library and of Duke Humfrey's Library, for their good humour and professionalism.

In the production of this book, Cambridge University Press has been brilliant. The reports by their anonymous readers were exceptionally useful, and I have done my best to incorporate their suggestions. Åsa Söderman has been a wonderful copy-editor, at once sensitive and astute. Jackie Warren has been both tolerant and helpful. And as for Richard Fisher, it has been a pure delight to get to know at first hand his legendary unflinching cheer and consummate efficiency. His patience and compassion have gone beyond the call of duty and I am forever obliged to him.

In ways that are too various to enumerate here, but that involve kindness, conversation, criticism, books, bibliographies and laughter, I am hugely grateful to the following scholars: John Allison, Terence Ball, Richard Bourke, Brendan Bradshaw, Leo Cadogan, Daniel Carey, Janet Coleman, David Cram, Emma Gilby, Angus Gowland, Mark Goldie, Lilja Gretarsdottir, Lena Halldenius, James Harris, Ross Harrison, Susan James, Natalie Kaoukji, Sachiko Kusukawa, Cees Leijenhorst, Rhodri Lewis, Ian Maclean, Noel Malcolm, Ian McBride, Murray Milgate, Craig Muldrew, Jim Murphy, Eric Nelson, Ian Patterson, William Poole, Richard Rex, John Rogers, Sami Savonius, Richard Scholar, David Sedley, Sandy Stewart and Richard Yeo.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85271-5 - Locke, Language and Early-Modern Philosophy

Hannah Dawson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Acknowledgements*

xi

I am especially grateful to Annabel Brett, who introduced me to the rewards of intellectual history, whose perception and support over the years have awed and nourished me, and whose answers to my questions never fail to hit the mark. I would also like to single out John Dunn, who continues to bring Locke into focus for me. I owe serious debts to those generous citizens who took time to read parts, or even all, of the book, and whose incisive comments enabled me both to clarify my arguments and to avoid some (doubtless not all) embarrassment: Stefan Collini, Sandra Dawson, Vlad Eatwell, Rebecca Langlands, Richard Serjeantson and Tristram Stuart.

Michael Moriarty and Jim Tully examined my PhD, and I cannot thank them enough for their scrupulous observations, their transformative enthusiasm and, most of all, the imagination they brought to bear on my work, opening my eyes to its wider implications and setting me on a new path.

It is difficult to find words adequate to express my greatest debt. With generosity, readiness and heart-warming optimism, Quentin Skinner has scrutinised every draft of every chapter of this book, attending to both the particular and the general, wielding all the time his erudition and acuity. There is something magical about his power as a teacher: his clarity is infectious, his counsel is liberating, and his confidence brings one closer to being worthy of it.

While one of the joys of academic existence is that colleagues are also friends and that the grim line between work and life is at best non-existent, I want to end by thanking all those comrades from a slightly distinct sphere without whose sociability and tomfoolery I would have struggled to discern the point of anything. I thank in particular Vlad Eatwell, Henry, Sandra, Rebecca and Tom Dawson, and finally my grandma, Joy Denyer, to whom I dedicate this book with all my love.

Queens' College, Cambridge

Notes on the text

REFERENCES

I use the author-date system to refer to both primary and secondary materials. In the case of Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, I also give the book, chapter and section references, in that order, to provide a clearer sense of where we are in the work. In facsimile editions of works where the editor's pagination differs from the original, I cite the original pagination. In the case of Locke's manuscripts, where his own pagination goes awry and the editors have added consistent numbering, I cite the editors' pagination first, followed by Locke's in brackets.

TRANSCRIPTION

While, in the main, I preserve the spelling and punctuation of the texts cited in the bibliographies, I sometimes disrupt it in order to smooth out my prose. For example, I modernise early-modern orthographical traditions, such as the use of the long 's'. Very rarely, in order to integrate quotations into my sentences, I make a grammatical alteration to a word, for example 'defrauded' becomes 'defrauds'. I thin out the profusion of capital letters and italics in early-modern works.

TRANSLATION

When quoting from texts written in languages other than English, I use the translations cited. Where none are available or appropriate, I make my own. Where I disagree with the translation, or do not think it captures the force of the original, I supply the original words, sometimes suggesting an alternative translation.