Neo-Lockean Semantics: An outline

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Meaning, understanding, sense etc.

- *Meanings* are properties of linguistic signs that explain why we *understand* each other.

- *Understanding* is a complex process that has no natural end-point. (What is it to “identify” a referent? Which inferences must be drawn? Etc.)

- It is necessary to postulate mental entities that mediate between meanings and referents, inferences etc. Those entities are called *senses, concepts, ideas* etc.

- While understanding is a real-world phenomenon for which we have various types of (indirect) evidence, neither meanings nor concepts are like that.

- For all we know about what happens in the brain during understanding, our knowledge about a linguistic sign is a distributed, multi-modal activation pattern.

- Shortcomings of model theoretic semantics:
  - Intensions fail to explain what the *content* of a sense (concept, idea) is
  - No explanation of why people apparently fail to apply even the most basic logical laws
Locke’s ideas

- For Locke, linguistic signs evoke ideas.
- These ideas, however, are very different from Aristotle’s, Plato’s etc. ideas: they are similar to Frege’s “images”, i.e., they correspond to what we now know about how people understand expressions: multi-modal memory traces.
- Locke touches upon the most important facts about ideas, e.g., their associations, the factors determining association strength, acquisition, modalities etc.
Some consequences

- The relationship of linguistic expressions and referents (inferences etc.) is much more indirect than in model theoretic semantics. For example, it does not make much sense to say that “sentences have logical (e.g., inferential) properties”, because they do not. Only propositions do, and it is not always clear what propositions a sentence may evoke.

- Because of this indirection, *models* of “external” worlds cannot be used directly. Mental models, rather than models of the realm where referents reside, make direct sense in accounting for the interpretation of linguistic signs.

- *Compositionality* (a notoriously problematic principle) is to be revised, because it relies on meanings: It should be reduced to the *principle of analogy* (a general cognitive principle).

- As a consequence, the *bottom-up* character of interpretation need not be assumed, which makes it possible to treat “intensional phenomena”.