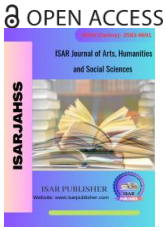
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The Relation Between Thought and Language: Locke's Theory of Meaning and Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument

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Abstract: Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* treats words as outward marks of inner ideas. That position seems to imply that language is private. Wittgenstein's private language argument in the *Philosophical Investigations* challenges the implication at its root. This paper looks at the tension inside Locke's theory of meaning and at Cook's reading of Wittgenstein, with recent scholarship in view. Locke's ideational theory faces a structural conflict. It holds that thought is unknowable, and it also holds that words express ideas. Wittgenstein's treatment of private language is better understood as a grammatical investigation than as a single argument. Its aim is to dissolve the temptation to treat sensations as private objects. Ying Li's recent work (2024) shows that Locke is not the private-language theorist he is often taken to be: the meaning of words is settled by public use. Recent research tends to read the private language argument as a grammatical therapy for the urge to privatize thought, not as an empirical thesis about language.

Keywords: Locke; Wittgenstein; private language; ideational theory of meaning; grammatical proposition.

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1. Introduction

From the ancient Greek idea that thought is the house of being to Heidegger's later claim that language is the house of being, Western philosophy has moved from ontology through epistemology to the philosophy of language. Language has gained status along the way. In the Greek tradition it remained largely in the background; by the twentieth century, the philosophy of language had become first philosophy. Locke is among the earliest philosophers in this turn to give language systematic attention, devoting an entire book of the *Essay* to the topic. Wittgenstein, whose early *Tractatus* and later *Philosophical Investigations* take radically different attitudes toward language, is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in the field.

The relation between thought and language runs through this transformation. Does thought come before language? Can language express thought? Is there thought independent of public language? This paper takes Locke's *Of Words* (Book III of the *Essay*) and Cook's "Wittgenstein on Privacy" as its core texts. The first represents the classical position of the ideational theory of meaning; the second offers a systematic reading of Wittgenstein's private language argument. Working directly from Wittgenstein's own writings would raise two problems. The *Philosophical Investigations* was compiled and published by his students, and Wittgenstein's method—going behind theories to return to the sources of philosophy, "back to the rough ground"—requires an interpreter's guidance. Cook states that he is not defending

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Wittgenstein's views but only clarifying them, and his reading is generally regarded as one of the more faithful ones.

2. Divine Gift or Human Artifact: Two Views on the Origin of Language

Locke holds a divine-gift view of language. In the *Essay* he writes that God "not only made him a social creature, but furnished him also with language." Language, on Locke's account, has two features. It consists of articulate sounds, and people use those sounds as marks of internal conceptions, making inner thoughts known to others and enabling communication.

Wittgenstein holds an artifact view. In his later philosophy, language is no longer the garment of thought; it is thought itself, part of a form of life. The relation between thought and language is reversed. Thought is possible only within language-games; it does not come first and then find expression. This position challenges Locke's theory of meaning at its foundation.

Recent work has deepened the issue. Ying Li's (2024) close reading of the relevant passages in Locke's *Essay* shows that Locke distinguishes two levels of signification. Words are artificial signs of ideas, and ideas are natural signs of external things. Words are therefore signs of signs, referring indirectly to external things. Locke also acknowledges that "the meaning of words is ultimately established by the common use of words by people." On this reading, Locke does not necessarily endorse the privacy of language. Public use is the ultimate source of word-meaning.

3. The Meaning of Words: Locke's Contradiction and Wittgenstein's Dissolution

Locke's central thesis is that "the use, then, of words, is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification." At the same time, he admits that ideas "are all within his own breast, invisible and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear." The two statements sit uneasily together. If thought is unknowable, how can words express it exactly?

The tension shows up in Locke's discussion of "gold." When one person uses the sound "gold," it stands for a complex idea of "a shining yellow and a very weighty substance." Another person may mean "a body . . ." and still another may add "malleability." Locke seems to imply that the origin of language is private, since different people attach different ideas to the same word. The inference leads toward the possibility of a private language, although Locke himself never uses the term.

Wittgenstein responds with a single remark: "What appears meaningless does not appear to be meaning" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §500). His point is that if the meaning of a word depends on a private inner idea that cannot be publicly verified, then the meaning cannot function in the language-game. Lin Yunqing (2024) puts it this way: the definition of a private language shows that the private speaker has no natural expression for his sensations, which means he has no criterion of correctness for his sensation-vocabulary. A word without a criterion of correctness is meaningless; this is a grammatical rule. Meaning is not a pre-existing entity. It is generated in public use.

4. Private Language: From Private Sensation to Grammatical Therapy

The concept of a private language is already implicit in Locke's ideational theory, but its formal definition comes from §243 of the *Philosophical Investigations*: the individual words of this language "are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language." Wittgenstein's question is not whether we can talk about sensations in our own language—obviously we can. It is whether there is a language that in principle only its user can understand.

Cook reads Wittgenstein against the background of Descartes' skeptical experiment. Even if one had "no hands, no eyes, no flesh, and no sensations," one could still understand privately and speak a language inwardly. Cook restates the basis of the private language argument as "no one can know what another person's sensations are like," and from there analyzes the concept of knowing. He distinguishes two kinds of knowing. "I know I am in pain" and "I know it is raining outside" belong to different grammatical categories. The first is not a cognitive statement about an object; it is an expression of pain itself.

Cook's central tool is the shadow analogy. No one can have another person's shadow, but this does not mean that no one can know something about another person's shadow, since shadows are publicly visible. Likewise, not being able to feel another's pain does not imply not being able to know or understand it. The unfeelability of sensation is a remark about the mode of sensation, not about linguistic meaning.

Recent work has carried this line further. Michael Hymers, in his 2025 monograph *Wittgenstein on Private Language, Sensation and Perception*, argues that Wittgenstein's critique "is not an attempt to refute the possibility of a private language of sensation, still less is it intended to accomplish this task by means of a single argument." Instead, it "presents a battery of arguments, suggestions, questions, examples, and thought experiments aimed at dissolving the temptation to regard sensations and perceptual experiences as private objects occupying a private phenomenal space." The private language argument is grammatical therapy, not empirical refutation. It does not try to prove that private sensations do not exist. It reveals that the assertion

"sensations are private objects" is not a meaningful proposition.

5. The Language-Game View: Misuse of the Genitive and the Trap of Analogy

Cook uses the everyday sentence "he has his father's physique" to analyze the grammatical roots of philosophical confusion. In this sentence, "physique" does not refer to a possessable and transferable object in the way that "house" does in "he has his father's house." The rules governing "physique" and the rules governing "house" belong to different language-games. Applying the steps of one language-game to another generates philosophical confusion.

Russell's crocus analogy makes the same mistake. Russell tries to use the spatial distinction between "my crocuses" and "my neighbor's crocuses" as an analogy for the distinction between "my pain" and "another's pain." But crocuses are public objects, whereas the privacy of sensation is precisely what needs to be explained. The metaphor presupposes what it is meant to prove.

Cook concludes that "the steps which constitute one language-game are not necessarily steps in another." This judgment rests on Wittgenstein's therapeutic method in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which uses the innocence of children to reflect the authentic nature of language. Philosophical confusion often stems from the cross-game misuse of grammatical rules.

6. Rule-Following and the Cancellation of Private Language

Kripke, in *On Rules and Private Language*, reinterprets Wittgenstein's argument through rule-following. His core thesis is that if following a rule must be tested in public practice, then private rules detached from a community are impossible—and private rules are the presupposition of a private language. The 2025 collection *Kripke's Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language at 40*, published by Cambridge University Press, brings together thirteen new essays assessing the continuing influence of Kripke's reading. Issues first raised by Kripke, such as the normativity of meaning and the prospects for reductionism about meaning, remain unresolved.

A 2024 master's thesis in the Wanfang database notes that Kripke sees a skeptical difficulty in rule-following. Even when behavioral outcomes are the same, we can still suspect that different rules were followed. Kripke's solution is not to look for linguistic entities corresponding to sentences but to look at the assignment of meaning in specific uses of language. This use theory is consistent with Wittgenstein's core insight that meaning is use.

Weng Zhenghsi and Liu Guibiao (2026), in a recent lecture, argue that the later Wittgenstein takes form of life as the ultimate foundation of linguistic meaning. This provides intersubjective consistency and publicity, preventing linguistic meaning from sliding into relativism. The publicity of language, on this view, is not an optional feature. It is the fundamental condition for the possibility of meaning.

7. Conclusion

Several conclusions follow.

Locke's ideational theory of meaning contains an internal contradiction. Locke holds that thought is unknowable, and he also maintains that words can express ideas. Ying Li's (2024) recent research shows that Locke ultimately appeals to the common use of words to establish meaning, and that he is therefore not the private-language theorist he is often taken to be.

Wittgenstein's study of private language is a grammatical investigation, not an empirical argument. Lin Yunqing (2024) characterizes it as a grammatical investigation: the private speaker lacks criteria of correctness, which renders the private sensation-vocabulary meaningless. Hymers (2025) further shows that its aim is to dissolve the philosophical temptation to objectify sensations, not to refute the possibility of a private language.

The meaning of sensation language does not depend on private objects. Wittgenstein's beetle-in-the-box shows that the meaning of sensation words lies in their use within public language-games, not in whether there is a beetle in the box. Even if everyone's box contains different things or nothing at all, the word "beetle" can still function as an effective sign in communication.

The impossibility of private rules implies the impossibility of a private language. Kripke's rule-skepticism reveals the internal contradiction in the concept of privately following a rule, and the concept of form of life provides the ultimate foundation for the publicity of linguistic meaning.

The debate has not concluded. As one scholar notes, Wittgenstein's argument may take on a different appearance in non-Indo-European contexts. Japanese, for example, has two systems for expressing pain, one subjective and phenomenal, the other objective and nominal. Others are re-examining the private language argument from the perspective of artificial intelligence, where the computability of rule-following gives the classical issue a new significance.

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