

# “Language Phenomena” under the Standard of “Experience” A Reinterpretation of Locke's View on Language

Lizhong Tan<sup>a\*</sup>, Fuping Xiao<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Humanities and Education, Foshan University, Jiangwan 1st Road, Foshan 528000, China

<sup>b</sup> Foreign Language School, Xihua University, Pidu, Chengdu 610039, China

<sup>a</sup>Email: lztan@126.com

<sup>b</sup>Email: deepforests@126.com

## Abstract

Within the framework of John Locke's empiricism, language phenomena, as objects of human cognition, are confined to the existence of natural languages. At the level of words, they primarily manifest in the form of "sound," and their meaning construction still follows the dialectical unity of "idea-word." If we reposition language phenomena under the standard of "experience," such language phenomena should then be characterized as part of psychological experience and natural experience, that is, the psychological form of language and the natural form of language. The psychological and natural forms of language phenomena are unified in the process of experience occurrence, stipulated by the rational experiencer, which thereby determines the source of meaning and the form of expression of language phenomena.

**Keywords:** Language; Experience; Meaning.

## 1. Introduction

When we talk about the rapid development and outstanding achievements of language philosophy in the last century today, we naturally attribute it to Frege's pioneering contributions, as well as a large number of important thinkers such as Russell, Dummett, Davidson, Quine and others' fruitful work. Whether it is Frege himself or later inheritors and advocates, the characteristics of language analysis have always been reflected in their creative research, and the status of holistic concepts and propositional language performance has been highlighted.

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\* Corresponding author.

Of course, when we link the tradition of language analysis with Frege's pioneering contributions, we do not want to regard Frege as the absolute starting point of the language analysis tradition and ignore its historical development process; otherwise, the assertions about the history of language analysis will lack the conditions for establishing scientific validity, and the judgments about analytic philosophy or language philosophy will only be an arbitrary subjective need, a thinking caprice lacking objectivity and scientificity, and it will not become a solid foundation for further research. In fact, while emphasizing the characteristics of language analysis in Frege's philosophy and the pioneering contributions of Frege's thoughts and theories, we do not deny or ignore the historical reasons that promote the formation of Frege's linguistic thoughts, especially those outstanding linguistic theories of famous thinkers; once we return to the issue of the inheritance of Frege's thoughts, those historical influencing factors will shine again. In the contemporary research trend of Frege's thoughts and his philosophy of language, Locke's view of language philosophy is an important object that must be paid attention to. As long as we face Frege's theory and return to the analytical methods and content of language philosophy research, we will find that the language analysis in Frege's philosophical research directly inherits Locke's philosophical thoughts and language analysis methods, and the language analysis characteristics of Frege's philosophical research come more from Locke's philosophical thoughts and language analysis methods than from his own mathematical research. There is no doubt that Locke's view of language has become the cornerstone of the rise of modern philosophy of language, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" has started the evolution of modern philosophy of language [1: xii].

The linguistic empiricism of Locke's philosophy and its basis of knowledge existence are that we never forget the basis of "empirical occurrence" when facing the natural process of "language phenomena", or that the experience of linguistic phenomena leads to our linguistic knowledge and the process and content of linguistic interpretation. It also leads to the road of rationalism in which the form of natural language and the form of ideas can be unified.

## **2. The "Voice" and "Words" in the World of Locke's Language**

To re-enter the world of Locke's philosophy of language, we need to confront two interrelated dimensions within his view of language: the dimension required for social interaction and the dimension produced by natural forms. From a social perspective, the subject of linguistic experience can only be an individual as a rational being, only a member of a social group. Such a subject of linguistic experience, in the process of forming social groups, always follows their own willingness to communicate and understand, and without exception, relies on the tool of language to achieve communication goals; of course, as a member of society, the subject of linguistic experience or the speaker must also serve as the bearer and witness of the natural process, and any description of the subject of linguistic experience that is purely in terms of society or purely in terms of nature would deviate from the true status of the language experiencer. If we base our understanding on the conditions of linguistic experience as a natural physiological outcome, we will immediately realize the material foundation created by the natural process, such as the vocal organs we possess: the larynx and vocal cords, the oral and nasal cavities, and so on. It is based on such physiological foundations that the sounds involved in linguistic experience have a material source, and moreover, such sounds are distinguished from pure natural sounds because of the linguistic attributes of humans themselves. Human speech or pronunciation does not require a natural response or understanding. If there is some kind of non-human language in the natural world, then such language can only be

based on our imagination and analogy of language, and its essence is still the behavior of human attempts to extend the definition of language to the world. In the practical experience of language, we always like to attribute language to natural objects, such as the language of mountains and rivers, the language of the sky, the language of flowers and plants, the language of birds, etc. In fact, in the sense of the natural level, we have not extended our linguistic functions or attributes to those natural objects; language is still the possession of humans themselves, still the transmission of meaning through human voice.

The human voice itself should serve as the initial form and fundamental content of language. It cannot depart from the material foundation created by nature. The display of language as the transmission of meaning through the human voice cannot lack the connection between this sound and inner thought, or rather, language manifests its essential existence in the representation of concepts. If the acoustic phenomenon of human language could not be perceived as an object by perspectives, auditory angles, or other organs, nor connected to the inner thoughts of the language actor, then such an acoustic phenomenon would become "identical" with the pure sounds of nature. Clearly, such an assumption contradicts the reality of our human linguistic existence and experience. In the reality of linguistic experience, our articulation is not a purely natural behavior; its purpose is to express our thoughts and concepts through such articulation, reflecting the significance of both internal and external cognition. Therefore, the articulation in the sense of language is less a natural physiological act of humans and more an act for the expression of human thoughts and concepts. Within the phenomenal system of linguistic experience, the most familiar phenomenon we possess is the connection between phonetics and concepts, that is, we express our inner concepts through the sounds we make. Such phonetics, in Locke's view, is a form of words, a pre-literate symbol form. Once we establish in our linguistic empirical practice a symbol form corresponding to the sound form, we can say that the content of articulation should not only be reflected in the form of hearing but also in the form of vision. The status of phonetics as an objectified entity will become more concrete and diverse, resulting in the emergence of written word forms. If the combination of human voice with physiology demonstrates the achievements of natural evolution, then the combination of this voice with thoughts and concepts shows the evolutionary achievements of human society itself. Only as the combination and unification of these two achievements does the voice transform into our linguistic object, and the linguistic object marks our conceptual content. Locke believed that when people created word symbols, they also created the corresponding relationship between symbols and "concepts," which, of course, "is not a natural connection [2: 389-90]."

### **3. "Experience" Conditions of Language Phenomena: Conceptual Forms and Natural Forms**

If we refer to all linguistic manifestations of experiential processes as linguistic phenomena, then such a world of phenomena must include parts that are forms of sound and symbols. At the same time, linguistic phenomena should also encompass the linguistic phenomena of psychological experiential processes, meaning that impressions and concepts, as psychological objects, should also be considered as expressions of linguistic phenomena. Regarding concepts, they serve as a form of psychological language object, or what can be called "conceptual language." Clearly, when we shift from the concept of language to the concept of linguistic phenomena, the scope of linguistic phenomena extends from the natural object level to the internal psychological level. In terms of the conceptual form of linguistic phenomena, it is both the psychological object or internal linguistic form of the individual language actor and the linguistic form of the social group. On the material

foundation where conceptual language arises and exists, the individual language actor must be an inevitable prerequisite. Only conceptual language originating from individuals can lead to the common linguistic forms in human society. The ultimate guiding principle for an individual's conceptual form lies in becoming another's conceptual form. Only by continuously realizing this "guidance" can an individual's conceptual form be considered "conceptual." Any "individual conceptual language" in an absolute sense, apart from existing as a kind of fantasy, will not add any objects to our cognition of linguistic phenomena. The characteristics of conceptual language always manifest as an intrinsic form of linguistic phenomenon, and such an intrinsic form or content can be completely marked and named by external sounds or symbols. Once such marking and naming turn from potential to reality, the language actor's internal conceptual language must become another's conceptual language, forming a conceptual language commonly owned by the social group.

The naturalization of conceptual language and the symbolization of signs involve the establishment of a system of natural language phenomena. The systematicity, completeness, and clarity of this system's establishment directly determine whether such a system can play the role that language itself should play. Take words as an example; the word symbols or sound markers in the system of natural language phenomena represent not so much the names of various natural objects, but rather the forms of conceptual language in human psychological experience. If there is a one-to-one correspondence between the objects in the external natural world and the forms of internal conceptual language, then the quantity of conceptual language should be equal to the quantity of all entities in the natural world—that is, every individual in the natural world would have a corresponding conceptual form with its name. By transforming these conceptual forms into word symbol forms in natural language phenomena, words end up representing both their respective conceptual languages and the natural objects they refer to. If such a three-stage process truly occurs in our linguistic experience—from object to conceptual language to word symbol—it can be seen as a standard and ideal outcome. In this process, there is no ambiguity in language, nor is there a lack of word symbols, conceptual language, or referents. The existence of an object implies the existence of a conceptual language and, consequently, a natural word symbol. However, in the reality of linguistic experience, such scenarios are heavily laden with idealism and imagination unless the mental and conscious processes of language agents as rational subjects are completely programmed, and unless the matching of word symbols in conceptual language is also entirely programmatic.

Conceptual language as an object of psychological experience can be a psychological form that refers to natural individual entities, but it is not merely about their referential forms. That is, when conceptual language indicates the naming of natural entities, we also use it to convey much more than just naming. This conceptual language that transcends simple naming stems from the necessary function of human understanding. If we call the natural language symbols obtained from individual reference proper names, then the part that goes beyond the individual level involves complex conceptual language such as class words and concept words. Proper names correspond to natural object entities, but class words point to groups or collections of natural object entities. Thus, as word symbols, class words can serve as names for general conceptual languages in our psychological experience. The emergence and application of class words not only express the different forms of conceptual language existence but also simplify and clarify the word system of natural language phenomena. The logical relationship of their semantics has been further analyzed under the framework of modern logic by philosophers of language following Locke.

Proper nouns and common nouns in Russell's view correspond to singular terms and general terms. "Anything that can be counted as one, I call a term [3:47]." Russell's terms are divided into two categories: one is things (thing), the other is concepts (concept). "The former is represented by proper nouns, the latter by other words [3:48]." In fact, Russell's "other words" here are equivalent to "common nouns" or "conceptual language" objects. Whether as sound markers of words or as symbol markers of words, they cannot determine their status as proper nouns or common nouns at the level of pure natural language phenomena, because any division of language phenomena separated from the subject of language behavior becomes meaningless, not to mention the cognition of language phenomena. Therefore, the words for names do not tell us the difference between simplicity and generality, nor do they tell us what they actually mark or should mark. If words originally exist in this world as autonomous entities, then such words would only be unknown objects for humans, clearly, such an assumption contradicts the empirical reality of language phenomena. Although the phenomenon of words with its own symbolic form cannot convey the difference between simplicity and complexity, the display of words to humans is always as the result of the experience of language phenomena, and such result forms necessarily belong to rational subjects as language actors. Thus, the indifference in the pure symbolic sense implies the difference in conceptual expression, as well as the difference between the meaning of proper nouns and common nouns. Such differences are not completed through the word symbols themselves, but through the experiential creation and application process of word symbols, whose fundamental source lies in the linguistic intelligence function of humans and the determination of conceptual language.

When we regard the concept of psychological experience and language as a linguistic phenomenon, such a phenomenon is not to be established in the sense of natural objects, but rather to explain that the content existing as a linguistic phenomenon does not all belong to natural processes. The process of psychological experience also has the manifestation of a linguistic phenomenon, that is, the existence of the form of conceptual language. If there is a difference between the psychological form of linguistic phenomena and the form of word symbols, it is the difference between psychological objects and their external linguistic markers. However, by the standard of "experience," both are considered as objects and results of linguistic experience. The standard of experience becomes the premise for us to measure and classify linguistic phenomena here. The experience of linguistic phenomena includes both the external presentation of natural processes and the internal presentation of psychological processes. As a result, the process from conceptual language to word symbols becomes a process from one kind of psychological linguistic phenomenon to a natural linguistic phenomenon. If we extend such a relationship to the connection of natural objects, then in the connection of conceptual language, there is also the link of natural objects, that is, the world of natural objects - the world of conceptual language - the world of phonetic words and symbols. The connection and existence of these three links depend on the occurrence of linguistic phenomena experience and on the application of the language user's linguistic ability. Whether it is in the relationship between linguistic phenomena and natural objects or in the relationship between various forms of linguistic phenomena, the practical application of linguistic ability must be taken as the premise and foundation for establishing all phenomena and relationships. Only based on such a foundation can the analysis and research of linguistic phenomena be resolved into the full picture and true revelation of the existence of language. When facing the world of natural objects, we cannot escape our relationship with natural objects, and the indispensable ability to establish this relationship is our own linguistic perceptual ability and linguistic intellectual ability, or,

our ability to describe the "object-self" relationship in language, which includes the ability to describe psychological experiences in language and natural experiences in language. The former's descriptive behavior is manifested as the content depiction and display of the mind's "blank slate." Although we cannot speak of the spatiotemporal attributes or natural attributes of conceptual language, only with the existence of conceptual language do we gain a true description of events in the natural world, and the natural world thus has the characteristics of objects, the characteristics of psychological conceptual language, and the characteristics of phonetic words and symbols.

In the traditional sense, language has been defined in a concrete and restrictive manner, primarily pointing to the existence of natural language phenomena, thus categorizing the concept of psychological experience as non-linguistic content. In fact, this is where the confusion in understanding the scope of language lies. When we consider the concept of linguistic phenomena from the perspective of how we describe the natural world and its outcomes, what presents itself before us is the antithesis of nature and language: on the side of language, the existence of natural linguistic phenomena clearly does not represent the entirety of language. While systems of symbols such as phonetics, characters, and sentences inherently belong to the category of linguistic phenomena, the forms and content that describe the natural world do not exclusively belong to the processes of nature. This is because such processes also occur within people's psychological experiences, and moreover, the description of these psychological experiences is more original, more authentic, and more comprehensive. Whether we look at mature forms of description (such as concepts) or primary forms (such as direct impressions), the content we refer to as "concepts or impressions," when existing as objects of psychological experience, are not rendered illusory due to their intrinsic and hidden nature. In fact, our "concepts or impressions" definitely exist as psychological content, and such content serves as a marker for the occurrence of experience. It can be an initial stage of impression or sensation, or a clear stage of conceptual definition. Although we may not be clear about the form of mind used to complete such mental depiction, nor the tools relied upon by our neurons for information transmission, the emergence of psychological content itself already explains the process of psychological experience in describing the natural world. Observing from the characteristics of description, marking, and communication of linguistic phenomena, the existential form of concepts, that is, conceptual language, is an internal linguistic phenomenon with the characteristics of psychological experience. Therefore, when we view the existential form of concepts from the perspective of linguistic phenomena, concepts also possess the expressive characteristics of linguistic phenomena in the mind. They are not spoken forms, nor written forms; they are forms of thought, successfully transforming natural objects into a psychological language form that is "our own." Only with the formation of conceptual language in the mind does the cognitive landscape of the natural world become real, and only with the formation of conceptual language does the human capacity for language and its functions gain an effective pathway for explanation.

#### **4. The Semantic Theory of Linguistic Phenomena: Natural Language Words and Concepts**

When we discuss the description and communicative status of linguistic phenomena, what is reflected are two processes concerning psychological experience and natural experience. Clearly, the description and cognition of the natural world cannot be separated from these two processes. The "having" of the natural world should present content under the premise of the existence of language actors, just as the "having" in the world of linguistic

phenomena. Whether there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two involves how we define the "having" of the natural world. If we restrict it to natural objects alone, then such natural "having" is obviously far from matching the "having" of linguistic phenomena. Therefore, from the perspective of linguistic experience, the "having" of the natural world is by no means merely a reference to natural objects; it should also involve various aspects related to the existence of natural things, such as time, quality, relationships, motion, change, concealment, and so on. Moreover, when we regard our own linguistic behavior as actions within the world, such behavior also possesses the existence characteristics of natural subjects. Thus, our linguistic behavior is not only describing the facts of the natural world but also describing the facts of our own subjective actions. Of course, such "facts" always exist as facts of the world. Only in this way can the "having" of the natural world and the "having" of the linguistic phenomena ultimately display a completely corresponding relationship. "Propositions are images of reality [4:42]," and "reality" is the fact of the world. Therefore, our conceptual language is far more than a description of natural objects, and our linguistic symbols are far more than proper names for natural things. Whether looking at the internal form of psychological experience or the external form of natural experience, linguistic phenomena always provide us with much more information than just naming natural things. This leads us to face complex situations in the construction of meaning in linguistic phenomena, with a typical case being the issue of assigning meaning to word symbols in natural language phenomena.

If we only establish the meaning of linguistic symbols based on "referential theory," many symbols would not refer to anything and would not express meaning. For example, words that signify "emptiness," "non-existence," "absence," as well as those representing "time," "state," "possibility," "thought," "abstraction," etc., cannot find corresponding entities in the world of natural objects. In fact, our linguistic experience cannot eliminate the expression of meaning for these words. Their meaning is imparted just like proper names, consistently manifested in the expressions of language users. That is to say, they actively convey our thoughts or conceptual language. Objects related to time, quality, relation, motion, change, obscurity, etc., occupy a cognitive status as part of the natural phenomenal world. Of course, such natural phenomena are not objects in the sense of empirical intuition, because any attempt to establish them as external sensory natural objects would be futile, even though we acknowledge their place in the factual landscape of the natural world. Therefore, if we leave the task of assigning meaning to words or phonetic symbols in natural language phenomena to "referential theory," we would render a significant portion of linguistic symbols useless or meaningless, a conclusion that is clearly unconvincing. If the correspondence between linguistic symbols and natural objects is difficult to determine due to the intervening thought process, should we consider the correspondence between linguistic symbols and the content of thought? In fact, when we experience linguistic symbols like "emptiness," "non-existence," "absence," "time," "state," "possibility," "belief," "abstraction," etc., we do not directly perceive corresponding natural objects, but this does not mean there is a lack of related facts or that we lack corresponding conceptual language. From the perspective of the psychological experience of linguistic phenomena (conceptual language), their absence signifies both the lack of cognition of natural objects and natural facts, as well as the creation and cognition of natural linguistic phenomena (phonetics, words, etc.). The existence of linguistic symbols as natural linguistic phenomena inherently implies the occurrence of linguistic experience, which happens according to the requirements of conceptual language. If conceptual language originates from the cognition of the natural world, then natural linguistic phenomena derive from the existence and cognition of conceptual language. Although we regard both

conceptual language and natural language as linguistic phenomena, they have a causal relationship in their initial formation: the intrinsic linguistic phenomenon determines the natural linguistic phenomenon. With this, our contemplation of the meaning of linguistic symbols can shift from the perspective of natural objects to that of conceptual language. Conceptual language, which is the outcome of the cognition of the natural world (the linguistic phenomenon of psychological experience), becomes the fundamental reason for the acquisition of meaning by linguistic symbols. As early as the end of the 17th century, Locke proposed a similar view, although he did not categorize the content of psychological experience as part of linguistic phenomena but rather as "ideas" that oppose linguistic phenomena. Locke believed that the meaning of words in the linguistic world lies in referring to "ideas," and words only have meaning when they refer to "ideas." When people create word symbols, they also establish a correspondence with "ideas," which, of course, is "not a natural connection [2: 389-390]." Although Locke's "theory of meaning" was later rejected by Frege's anti-psychologism, Locke's theory itself has a solid empirical foundation in linguistic phenomena. No matter how psychological "ideas" or conceptual language may be, our linguistic symbols always relate to their own "knowledge" in application, and "knowledge" itself indicates the "presence" of an object of psychological experience—a psychological language form with characteristics such as description, manifestation, reference, and transmissibility, that is, conceptual language.

If we merely aim to establish a scientific language system by rejecting the linguistic phenomena of psychological processes, as well as the significance of conceptual language, we will ultimately fail to achieve the so-called objective and fair linguistic science. In fact, rejecting the significance of conceptual language or psychological linguistic phenomena means setting aside or ignoring the rational subjective factors that establish the meaning relationship between natural language phenomena and the natural object world. It is about discovering scientific language within static natural language phenomena and further discovering the existence and logic of the natural object world. This is an ideal that can help us resolve some confusions in linguistic phenomena experiences and provide us with new perspectives for considering issues in linguistic phenomena. At the same time, it is also a relative ideal, a study of linguistic phenomena that leaves out the psychological experience of the language user. Even if its results are scientific, it does not provide a once-and-for-all solution to all problems encountered in linguistic phenomena experiences. In summary, after our journey through modern linguistic philosophy's language analysis, reinterpreting Locke's "idea" means returning to the experiential reality of linguistic phenomena and restarting the source of meaning for "conceptual language" in natural linguistic phenomena.

If the landscape of the natural world can become the landscape described in natural language phenomena, such empirical reality can only be based on the existence of conceptual language, or, the status of the language actor as a rational being primarily determines the psychological experience form of language phenomena (conceptual language). Then, it is the natural objectification of the conceptual language form, that is, the formation of natural language phenomena. Any attempt to establish the autonomy of language existence independent of rational subjects can only be an illusion, an illusion that endows language phenomena with agency. Regardless of how we humans name or categorize the developmental stages of language phenomena, they are always the inevitable result of our own existence and expression. It can lack the symbolic form of written language, it can lack the vocal form of spoken expression, but it must not lack the form of psychological experience, that is, the form of conceptual language; without conceptual language, there is no experience of the natural world, nor is there experience of natural language phenomena. Therefore, the existence of conceptual language as an internal language



phenomenon is the most direct determinant for the meaning bestowed in natural language phenomena. When we name the language form of psychological experience as an internal language phenomenon, we are based on the premise of "experience," not the dualistic model of "mind-matter." The goal is to emphasize the human characteristics of language existence and to emphasize the experiential form under the unity of language existence. In this sense, the semantic landscape of natural language phenomena corresponds more to the objects of psychological experience than to natural things. Once we link the semantic reference of natural language phenomena with conceptual language, the referential objects of natural language can no longer be the objects of nature, thereby involving another form of existence within the unity of language phenomena, namely the language form of psychological experience.

In the experiential use of natural language phenomena, once the conceptual language correspondence theory of phonetic or lexical symbols is adhered to, we will clearly establish the subjectivity of language actors in communication and understanding. Specifically, such a conceptual language correspondence theory can resolve issues related to the clear understanding and expression of referential meanings of phonetic or lexical symbols, such as "thought," "collection," "message," "time," "book," "woman," "child," etc. Evidently, the psychological linguistic turn of phonetic or lexical symbols can avoid the dilemma of expressing meaning in the absence of physical objects, allowing both tangible and intangible, abstract and concrete entities to be designated by phonetic or lexical symbols. Regarding the naming of natural language phenomena, it belongs not only to proper nouns but also to general nouns that denote categories, collections, and abstractions. If the clarity of proper nouns and their conceptual language correspondence is due to the intuition of physical object referents, then the clarity of general nouns and their conceptual language correspondence depends on the constitution of the conceptual language itself, as well as its formation process. Of course, whether it's the clarity of proper noun expression or that of general nouns, the direct objects involved should be a conceptual language of psychological experience, or a linguistic landscape of psychological processes. Only when such a linguistic landscape becomes a clear object (perhaps we are yet to understand the psychological substance that constitutes this object) can the intended expression of related phonetic or lexical symbols achieve clarity. Therefore, the clarity or ambiguity-free representation of phonetic or lexical expressions has become the standard and goal for the application of natural language phenomena, as well as the external manifestation of successful communication of the linguistic phenomenon of psychological experience (conceptual language). The fixed and clear presentation of all physical objects in natural language phenomena, as well as the fixed and clear presentation of meanings of all non-physical objects, cannot have any other source besides the conceptual language spring within the psychological experience of language actors; the experiential linguistic phenomenon is not only about the natural world but also about the language actors themselves.

In summary, under the standard of experience, linguistic phenomena should reflect a unity that returns from natural processes to psychological processes. When people create the phonetic and lexical symbols of natural language phenomena, they also create corresponding psychological language phenomena. The correspondence between the two is based on a unified relationship of language existence, an arbitrary relationship that is "not a natural connection [2: 389-90]". The significance of natural language phenomena lies in referring to psychological language phenomena, and natural language phenomena only have their own meaning representation when connected with internal language forms (such as conceptual language). Therefore, in the experience of language

actors, the world of linguistic phenomena is both a natural process and a psychological process, and the decision to correspond and unify these two processes stems from the application of human linguistic sensibility and linguistic intellectual abilities, "We always exist in the application of this ability [5: 25]".

What Locke's view of language enlightens us is the empiricism vision of thinking about the existence of language and the empiricism display of "what is language". The process of Locke's linguistic experience is that we are constantly experiencing the hardships and puzzles of language phenomenon cognition, constantly marking the knowledge of language phenomenon and constantly exploring the basis of language phenomenon experience; It is only in such a process that we are so surprised to find that linguistic existence does not exist far from our own empirical world, but in the process of our experience. Our linguistic knowledge originates from the empirical function of linguistic ability, and determines the relationship between linguistic existence and linguistic actors through the occurrence of a linguistic phenomenal experience.

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