On Locke’s Theory of Ideas

Each word in this sentence, while not entirely devoid of meaning, cannot communicate the message I wish to convey without the other words in this sentence. When you read full sentences, you do not picture or contemplate each word individually; this would be exhausting, and rather frustrating. In reading the first sentence, you did not create a mental image for “I”; the word “I” fulfills its role in the sentence without creating a strong idea of the person to whom “I” refers.

What is important, then, is not the individual words themselves, but the way in which they are put together. Locke posits that every word generates an archetypal “idea” in the mind encountering it, similar to Plato’s Theory of Forms: unparalleled archetypes of shapes we recognize in other, imperfect objects. While this view may hold true for individual nouns, adjectives or conjugated intransitive verbs (for example, “ball”, “blue”, “I run”), where these individual tokens are on their own an entire unit of meaning, it simply does not work in longer, more complex sentences. Nor does it work with prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and intransitive verbs; while I understand the uses of "the", it has no meaning without a noun.

The theory that each individual word in a sentence generates an individual idea does not take linguistic differences into account. The English sentence “I am a student” is expressed in two words in Russian (я студент[ка]: Ya student[ка]), yet both have the same meaning and express the same idea. It is absurd to suggest that an English speaker has four individual ideas for this sentence, whereas a Russian
speaker has only two. Indeed, only one idea is communicated. Furthermore, the words that are used to explain an idea may be entirely different from language to language. In English one says "I have arrived" or "I arrived". In French, however, one says "Je suis arrivé(e)" which literally means "I am arrived". However, no native English speaker pictures possession of arrival; and no native French speaker views the state of being arrived as part of his or her identity. The idea communicated is that the speaker has arrived; the individual words used in a particular language are mere tools to communicate this idea.

An idea, in Locke’s sense of an archetype or Form, can only be expressed by a single noun, noun phrase, adjective, or a short conjugated intransitive verb. When words are put together in longer, more complex sentences, they create abstract ideas; the composite meaning of the words in a sentence is different from the individual meanings of each word used. A sentence is one, or perhaps a few, abstract ideas, rather than a string of individual ideas. In this understanding, meanings are ideas in Locke’s sense—as long as meaning is understood to be the result of an entire unit of speech, be it a word, meaningful word pairing, or a sentence, and not each individual word itself.