❀ Chapter 1

The Symbol Model and the Nature of Language

I sometimes look into the eyes of a house cat. What occurs is surely more than simply my projection. The returning look almost asks, "Can it be that you mean me? Do I concern you? Am I here for you? What is it about me?" The sun of reciprocity seems to rise, and then almost immediately to set. Feline eyes shift, and the twitch of ears and tail indicate that over there, brutish normalcy has resumed. I may continue to address the animal, but my glance is no longer *met.* [1]

Historically, many thinkers have characterized this kind of event as one of "understanding," which seems clearly to be part of my experience, but not of the cat's. Understanding, writes Hans-Georg Gadamer, is a fundamental endowment of humans, one that appears to distinguish us not only from domesticated pets but also from even our dolphin and primate cousins. Efforts to explain understanding almost universally rely on the construct "linguisticality" or "language." As Gadamer puts it, "above all, [understanding] takes place by way of language and the partnership of conversation."[2]

Efforts to describe language, in turn, typically exploit some version of the semiotic assumption that language is fundamentally a system of signs or symbols. For example, according to contemporary linguist Julia Kristeva: "The idea that the fundamental core of *la langue* resides in the *sign* has belonged to various thinkers and

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schools of thought, from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages and up to the present time. In fact, every speaker is more or less conscious of the fact that language symbolizes or *represents* real facts by *naming* them. The elements of the spoken chain—for the moment let us call them words—are associated with certain objects or facts that they *signify*."[3]

On this point, language scholars of various stripes concur with Kristeva. According to psycholinguist Charles E. Osgood, for example, it is important to answer the question "What is a Language?" to address such other important questions as "Do certain nonhuman animals 'have' a language? . . . When does a developing child 'have' a language? [and] How may languages have developed in the human species?" Osgood argues that the basic question can best be answered by enumerating six essential criteria, the fourth of which he calls *the semantic criterion*, which holds that the production of identifiably different and nonrandomly recurrent physical forms follows nonrandom rules of reference to events in other channels. "This criterion," Osgood explains, "implies that for anything to be a language it must function so as to *symbolize* (represent for the organism) the non-necessarily-*here* and the not-necessarily-*now*."[4]

Sociologist Norbert Elias also maintained that the distinction between symbol and reality is fundamental to human sense making. To understand virtually anything, Elias wrote, humans must be able to distance themselves from physical reality: "they must, as it were, mentally ascend to a level of synthesis above that of its existence here and now as a heap of matter." Various types of symbolic representations allow humans to do this, and languages are the most important. The need for communicable symbols "extends to the whole fund of knowledge of a language community and ultimately of humanity, including functions, situations, processes, and symbols themselves." In fact, "communication by means of symbols, which may differ from society to society, is one of the singularities of humankind. . . . One may rightly say that all this is obvious."[5]

Communication theorist Michael T. Motley accentuates the apparent obviousness of this claim about language as he begins his examination of the construct of intent with a review of "some extremely common, if not quite universal assumptions found in even the most elementary discussions of communication." The first of these virtually universal postulates is that "communication is characterized by symbolic behaviors, that is to say, that communication involves the transmission and/or reception of symbols." "Traditionally, *symbols* have been defined as signs arbitrarily related to their referents," he notes. And "the cognitive process of preparing a mes-

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sage for transmission to another requires, among other things, that we select signs from among a repertoire of possibilities. Signs thus selected and transmitted *function as symbols*."[6]

Some language theorists set out to correct what they acknowledge are oversimplifications in semiotic characterizations of language and communication. For example, Umberto Eco attempts to articulate key features of what he calls a *general semiotics*, which embraces "text, semiosis, significant practice, communication, discourse, language, effability, and so on."[7] A central part of Eco's work is meant to "disentangle" the concept of sign "from its trivial identification with the idea of coded equivalence and identity" and restore the centrality of *interpretation* to what he calls the *semiosic process*. Eco demonstrates that the essential feature of the sign has been expressed in the antique formulation *aliquid stat pro aliquo,* something stands for something else. The symbol has been characterized similarly, he notes, although this construct typically foregrounds the vagueness and openness of *aliquo*: "with symbols and by symbols one elucidates what is always beyond one's reach" (p. 130). Using the example of a badge worn at one's buttonhole, Eco emphasizes that something is a sign or symbol "only inasmuch as it *does not stand for itself*. It does not stand for its molecular composition, its tendency to fall down, its capability of being packaged and transported. It stands for something which is outside itself" (p. 20).

Eco argues that the problem with the classic formula is that it obscures the importance of human interpretation in semiosis, where interpreting a sign means defining "the portion of continuum which serves as its vehicle in its relationship with the other portions of the continuum derived from its global segmentation by the content. It means to define a portion through the use of other portions, conveyed by other expressions" (p. 44). The outcome of this interplay among signs is the elucidation of reality, which Eco calls *the world* or "the pulp itself of the matter which is manipulated by semiosis" (p. 45). In the final chapter of *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco describes the "seven semiotic requirements" that actually make a sign a sign, the first six of which are aspects of the *aliquid stat pro aliquo* formulation and the seventh of which is the aspect of interpretation. Thus Eco's project to revise the oversimplified identification of semiosis with "the idea of coded equivalence and identity" ultimately reaffirms most features of historical analyses, including the ontological claim that in the process of semiosic representation, human meaning connects with "the pulp itself of the matter which is manipulated by semiosis." In other words, this prominent and influential effort to revise the philosophical foundation

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of semiotics—the concept of the sign—ultimately concludes that a sign is indeed, at its root, "something that stands for something else."

As these and other writers develop their views of the nature of language, substantive differences arise. Kristeva often relies on Saussure's *Cours de linguistic générale*, but she also distances herself from some of its conclusions. Elias rejects aspects of the Cartesian-Kantian analyses that inform many of the semiotic accounts of language that preceded his. Motley cites C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards's classic, *The Meaning of Meaning*, but his view of communication moves significantly beyond the telementational, conduit-metaphor[8] perspective outlined in that work. Eco concurs at some points with Kristeva and Elias and disagrees with them at others. It is clear, in short, that semiotic accounts of language are not all of a piece; they differ in important ways, and each of these authors would accept some claims made in complementary writings and reject others.

The Symbol Model

Despite their substantive differences, however, these authors share some common commitments. These make up what I call the *symbol model*, the view that language is fundamentally a semiotic system, a system of signs and/or symbols.

Some language scholars who embrace a semiotic perspective explicitly avoid "symbol" terminology. They take pains to distinguish generally between signs and symbols and to differentiate among specific types of signs, for example, "decisigns," "natsigns," and "comsigns."[9] These scholars would argue that it is both imprecise and misleading to group semiotic programs together under the "*symbol* model" rubric. But as the citations from Osgood, Elias, and Motley indicate, and as will be further demonstrated in Chapters 2, 3, and 5, *symbol* is the term most frequently used by scholars in a variety of disciplines to characterize the basic nature of language. Scores of communication theorists, linguists, philosophers, semioticians, and others continue to argue that the human animal is distinctive because of its ability to "symbolize" and that human language is essentially a "system of symbols." Therefore I have chosen the term *symbol model* to label not only these programs but also those that foreground "sign" rather than "symbol" vocabulary, because both sets of approaches adhere in varying degrees to five interrelated theoretical commitments.

The first commitment of the symbol model is an ontological one. These accounts presume a fundamental distinction between

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two realms or worlds, the world of the sign and the signified, symbol and symbolized, name and named, word and thought, *aliquid* and *aliquo*. As I indicated, although writers have described significant—although sometimes contradictory—differences between signs and symbols, these two phenomena are ontologically similar because they are both primary semiotic units, which means that they are viewed as fundamentally different from whatever it is that they signify or symbolize.

Descriptions of the symbol model's two realms or worlds differ, and in some cases theorists argue that they are virtually indistinguishable or inseparable. But, once the semiotic assumption has been made, a basic structural a priori has been established, and even those who argue for inseparability must struggle to make their accounts of language coherent with what is often termed the *Janus-faced* character of language. I call this basic ontological claim the commitment to *two worlds*. It holds that there is a difference in kind between the linguistic world, or the world of "signifiers," and some other world, that of "things," "mental experiences," "ideas," "concepts," or some other "signifieds."

The four additional commitments that make up the symbol model follow from this one. Commitment 2 is the belief that the linguistic world consists of identifiable units or elements (e.g., phonemes, morphemes, words, utterances, speech acts) that are its atoms or molecules. The third commitment is the claim that the relationship between these units of language and the units that make up the other of the two worlds is some sort of representational or symbolizing relationship.[10] Commitment 4 is the belief that these ontologically distinct, representationally functioning units make up a system, the system called *language*. The final commitment asserts that language is a tool or instrument humans use to accomplish their goals. One central claim of this book is that some version of these five commitments is entailed by the decision to characterize language semiotically. In other words, I argue that *some version of these five commitments necessarily follows as a consequence of using "sign" or "symbol" vocabulary to describe the nature of language.*

Commitment 1: Two Worlds

These five commitments are interrelated in several ways. First, as I noted, the two worlds claim is most basic. As Chapter 2 demonstrates in detail, this claim embodies the ontology first established in pre-Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelian formulations of the nature of language. The basic distinction between the linguistic world and

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the mental (nonlinguistic) world was embodied in the influential Aristotelian formula: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words."[11] This became the medieval formula linking *aliquid* and *aliquo.* In Kristeva's words cited earlier, the distinction is between "language" and "real facts"; for Osgood, the two worlds consist of "physical forms" and "events in other channels" or present "symbols" and "the not-necessarily here and the not-necessarily now." Elias distinguished between "symbols" and "physical reality" or "a heap of matter"; and, for the most part, Motley is satisfied with the distinction between "symbols" and "referents." In places, Eco speaks of two different "portions of the continuum," but at others he distinguishes between the sign and "the world (the continuum, the pulp itself of the matter which is manipulated by semiosis)" (p. 45). This sample of perspectives illustrates some of the diversity that characterizes expressions of the commitment to two worlds.

Eco's is not the only work in which this commitment to two worlds appears to be modified or even rejected, only to resurface. Early in the *Cours* , for example, Saussure labeled the two phenomena *concept* and *sound image*, and claimed that both were psychological entities. But, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3, Saussure subsequently treated concept and sound image as ontologically distinct, both when he discussed the temporality of the latter and when he outlined the representational relationship between them. This set of moves is typical. Theorists who treat language semiotically sometimes acknowledge the potential problems created by their commitment to two worlds, but in virtually all cases, they postulate at one point or another a fundamental distinction between linguistic phenomena, on the one hand, and nonlinguistic phenomena, on the other.

Once the existence of two realms or worlds has been posited, and one wishes to carry on the conversation, one requirement for coherency is that the theorist explain the nature of each world—what each is made up of, looks, or sounds like. Most language scholars have approached this issue by beginning with analysis rather than synthesis, which has led them to identify the *units* that purportedly make up each world. Thus arises commitment 2, to some form of atomism. Then, once one has asserted the existence of two different worlds consisting of two different sets of units, coherency demands that one explain how units in one world relate to units in the other. This question has been answered with the claim that one set of units somehow *represents* (signifies, symbolizes) the other—commitment 3. At this point, language has been characterized as a semiotic sys-

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tem consisting of units in one world that in some way represent units in another—commitment 4. Given the existence in the human world of this more-or-less objective system, coherence then demands that one give an account of how humans relate to this system. Commitment 5 is a response to this question: Humans use the system instrumentally to accomplish their goals.

Commitment 2: Atomism

As I noted, the commitment to atomism is embodied in the decision to begin with analysis rather than synthesis, that is, to approach language by dividing it into units. This move has been popular since the first primitive pictographs isolated some visible features of notable events and the letters of the first alphabets designated specific sounds or phonemes. In each case, consequential decisions were made to mark some elements of communicative experience *and to ignore others.* For example, pre-Socratic Greeks graphically represented not only distinctions between closely related consonants such as /p/ and /b/, but also between related vowels such as /e/ and /æ/. But, although their system marked differences between voiced and unvoiced consonants and front, medial, and back vowels, it included no units to highlight the differences between, for example, a threatening greeting and a welcoming one or a serious question and an ironic one. Thus the atomism commitment has not only focused attention on parts rather than wholes, it has also highlighted some kinds of parts and ignored others with as much or more semantic and pragmatic importance. Although it would constitute another major project, it would be illuminating to trace the implications of these early choices through the history of theorizing about language.

The commitment to treat language atomistically has been most apparent in theorists' dependence on examples of single words to support their claims about the semiotic character of language. The literature is replete with claims that *horse, tree, ox, chair, table, cat, hat*, and *mat* are all paradigm examples of units of language that, when analyzed carefully, will reveal the basic character of language itself. At best, of course, these analyses can account for only some aspects of the operation of one category of language units, concrete nouns. To generalize from these to language itself, theorists have had to assume that concrete nouns were the paradigmatic units of language and that all other units can be compared to or contrasted with them. From at least Aristotle forward, abstract nouns, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and so on have been analyzed in terms

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of or in ways parasitic on the analysis of concrete nouns. As Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate, critics have noted the indefensibility of this way of proceeding, and as a result, especially in the twentieth century, some theorists have concentrated on phonemes, utterances, or speech acts. But these phenomena are also typically treated as discrete units that, in various combinations, make up language. In this way, commitment 2 persists even in some of the most recent accounts of language.

Commitment 3: Representational

The commitment to representationalism follows directly from the first two commitments. Given two worlds or realms, each made up of units, one is led to ask how units of one relate to units of the other. Familiar interpersonal experience has often appeared to offer a hint: Names represent individual persons; therefore, early theorists speculated, is it not probable that other words function similarly? Fortunately, it almost immediately became apparent to most theorists that it would be difficult to locate the "thing named" for many categories of words, including negative terms, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. But unfortunately, rather than reexamining the basic assumption that words function representationally, scholars typically have looked for ways to salvage their semiotic analyses. As already noted, one strategy has been to argue that problematic words only represented by virtue of their connection with other, concrete and positive words. This strategy led to tortuous efforts to analyze "categorematic" and "syncategorematic" terms that peaked in the late Middle Ages. A second strategy has been to generate various kinds of entities for these problematic terms to represent, such as John Locke's "the absence of something," which, he postulated, was the representamen or thing named for the word *nothing*.[12] Early in this century Gilbert Ryle labeled this strategy *the 'Fido'-Fido fallacy*, because it holds that every meaningful expression must signify an extralinguistic correlate, as "Fido" signifies Fido.[13] But Ryle failed to point out that his criticism undermined not just referential theories of word meaning but all semiotic, representational accounts of language. Partly as a result, these accounts persist.

A third strategy has been to distinguish various kinds of representational relationships, including those that are logical, psychological, cultural, or communicative. Wittgenstein argued in the *Tractatus*, for example, that words were representations in the sense of the German term *Darstellung* ("model," "presentation," "exhibition"—a logical representation) but not in the sense of *Vorstellung*

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("picture"—a sensory representation). But this distinction did not alter the basic structure of the symbol model. Virtually all contemporary dictionaries, encyclopedia, and glossaries define a symbol as *something that stands for or represents something else.*[14] And the claim persists in each articulated version of the symbol model that the representing unit from $world_1$ in some way stands for (signifies, symbolizes, represents) another unit from $world_2$.

Commitment 4: System

Theorists frequently overlook the significance of the fact that semiotic characterizations of language picture it as a system rather than either as an event or as a mode of human being. In Chapter 2 I review Wilhelm von Humboldt's nineteenth-century effort to redirect language scholarship by emphasizing that what was being studied was en*ergeia* or *activity*, not *ergon*, or *product.* I also note how Humboldt stopped considerably short of this goal. And even after his efforts, the inclination to treat language as a system has consistently hypostatized the process, frequently under the rationale that this is the only way to treat it systematically, objectively, or "scientifically." Again, Saussure's work exemplifies this tendency. He acknowledged distinctions among human language ability (*langage*), the system of language (*langue*), and speech (*parole*) and noted that historically, the actuality of *parole* always comes first. But he also insisted that linguists concentrate on *langue*, the system of language. One reason Saussure focused on language as a system was that he wanted to emphasize how each linguistic unit is meaningful only in relation to the other units making up its system. This insight was one of his primary contributions to modern linguistics and laid the foundation for structuralist theories of language and culture. But Saussure also restricted linguistics to the study of *langue* because, he claimed, it was the only phenomenon that was orderly enough and accessible enough to be studied *scientifically*.[15] This move perpetuated a subject-object relationship between linguists and language, and it is this feature of commitment 4 that, I believe, has significantly distorted subsequent language study.

Commitment 5: Tool

Explicit adherence to the tool commitment emerged relatively late in the development of the symbol model. Virtually all classical authors acknowledged that language is *used* in various ways. According to

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Cicero, for example, there were three: to instruct, to delight, and to move hearers. But the modern and contemporary emphasis on language as an instrumental tool reflects the Enlightenment proclivity for subject-object explanations, similar to those reflected in the system commitment. Such analyses begin with the Cartesian *cogito* and the irreducible distinction between the human subject and the objects that subjects allegedly encounter, construct, and manipulate. From the perspective of commitment 5, language is one of the more-or-less objectifiable tools subjects use to accomplish their goals.

Historically, of course, the primary use of the language tool has been viewed as the communication of thoughts or ideas. Among others, Locke underscored the importance of the communicative function of language, and the eighteenth century theorist John Horne Tooke would not even grant "language" status to the solitary mental naming that some of his predecessors had analyzed. Horne Tooke argued that the fact that the purpose of language is "to communicate our thoughts" should "be kept singly in contemplation," but that unfortunately this fact "has missed all those who have reasoned on this subject."[16] As this commitment has been worked out, language has often been treated as an instrument uniquely available to humans and the primary reason for our superiority over all other animals.

I emphatically do not mean to claim that any contemporary language scholar explicitly accepts the simplistic word-idea relationship that Aristotle or Locke outlined or, Kristeva's comment notwithstanding, the notion that there is a one-to-one correspondence between word and thing, idea, response, or meaning. These simple referential versions of the symbol model have been fatally discredited by many modern and contemporary scholarly programs, including the analytic critiques of Wittgenstein,[17] Ryle,[18] Austin,[19] and Searle,[20] and the hermeneutic efforts of Heidegger,[21] Gadamer,[22] and other postmodernists. But as I noted in relation to Ryle's criticism of the " 'Fido'- Fido fallacy," the connection has not consistently been made between these discredited referential theories and the general practice of characterizing language as a semiotic system. In other words, many scholars appear not to recognize how some version of the symbol model inheres in every semiotic account of language or communication. This is because, when language and communication scholars adopt "sign," "symbol," and "symbolizing" vocabulary, they are led by this vocabulary toward positions strikingly close to the discredited referential versions of the symbol model.

As I also noted earlier, one of the primary goals of the following chapters is to support this claim. But before reviewing the con-

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ceptual history of the symbol model, proposing an alternative, and testing it, it may be useful to make explicit some other conceptual difficulties inherent in the symbolic view of the nature of language.

Some Limitations of the Symbol Model

The Reflexivity Problem

Although Kristeva focuses primarily on historical description, she discusses a number of language *practices*, including psychoanalysis, oratory, and literature. She notes that when discussing practices, the meaning of the term *language* does not correspond to that of the system described by grammarians. But, she maintains, all these practical applications do have in common "the fact of being a system of signs."[23] As a result, it would seem reasonable to expect that Kristeva's sketch of language as a system of signs should be applicable to the practice in which she engaged as she wrote it.

As noted earlier, Kristeva asserts, "In fact, every speaker is more or less conscious of the fact that language symbolizes or *represents* real facts by naming them. The elements of the spoken chain—for the moment let us call them words—are associated with certain objects or facts that they *signify*."[24] If we are to accept this account of the symbol model, we should be able to apply the view of language it presents to this instance of language itself. In other words, it should be possible to analyze these two sentences into the elements that are associated with certain objects or facts they signify. Moreover, if Kristeva has accurately captured part of the essential or basic nature of language, the process of applying her insight should reveal something coherent and nontrivial about (a) language or (b) this particular example of discourse. Let us, therefore, try applying Kristeva's analysis to her own two sentences.

If she believes that her analysis actually describes only "elements of the *spoken* chain," then it is inappropriate to examine these written sentences. Her writings clearly indicate, however, that she would agree that some version of the symbol model also applies to written language.

The units or elements of language, she argues, "are associated with certain objects or facts that they signify." But are they? In these sentences, the words *speaker, words*, and *objects* appear to support her contention. Although they are general labels, each appears to be associated with a potentially definable "object" that it could be

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said to "signify": *speaker*, with a human engaged in uttering; *words*, with utterance or discourse units surrounded by time or white space; and *objects*, with those features of the human environment that are visible, tangible, and stable. Some difficulties arise with this line of reasoning, due to the lack of consensus among grammarians and linguists over exactly what constitutes a *word*, and among philosophers about the technical definition of *object*. But if we avoid insisting on too much precision, there appears to be a rough and ready sense in which these words label, point to, or represent (signify) certain nonlinguistic entities.

This is, however, a very imprecise analysis for a topic this important. Moreover, it is difficult to apply this analysis to almost any other words in these two sentences. What objects or facts are signified by *in, every, is, or, of, the, that, symbolizes, real, naming, let, call, are, with, certain*, or *they*? For example, certainly no one would claim that some object is signified by the word *in*. But could it be said to signify a "fact"? May *in* be said to represent a certain state of affairs, for example, the state of affairs of being enclosed or delimited? Obviously this cannot be the case here, because *in* is functioning as part of the idiom *in fact*. Are we thus to conclude that Kristeva's claim applies only to nonidiomatic terms? And must we now look for an object or fact for the words *in fact* to signify? Where would such a search lead? Or is it more reasonable to conclude that Kristeva's claim about language in general cannot be applied to this specific instance of language?

Indexical terms, such as *the, that*, and *they*, present another set of difficulties. One central feature of such words is that they are context dependent, which means that unless the context is both specified and concrete, there could not possibly be any object or fact for them to signify. Problems arise partly because in actual sentences the context is frequently either incompletely specified or anything but concrete. In Kristeva's sentence, the antecedent of *they* is *words*, so, one would surmise, she would claim that *they signifies words*. This analysis would be neat and complete, were it not for two subsequent problems. The first involves the aforementioned difficulty of defining the term *words*. Because of this difficulty, the claim that this term signifies *words* does not constitute a claim about any clearly definable "object" or "fact," unless one is to conclude that the signified is the token (that is, this particular instance of the printed word) of *words*, in which case the claim is trivial. A second problem is that the claim that the word *they* "signifies" the word *words* amounts only to a grammatical or syntactic observation about how the two words are functioning. Nothing nontrivial can be claimed

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on this basis about "the world," "objects," "facts," or anything outside language.

What about the word *symbolizes*? Does this term signify a definable object or fact? Certainly not an object. So how might one describe the "fact" that "symbolizes" signifies by naming? Let us try, {the act of using an object or word to stand for something else}. It would be consistent at least with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to call the combined states of affairs described in these brackets a "fact." Moreover, one could conceivably argue that this is the fact that the term *symbolizes* signifies. In this analysis, Kristeva's claim is that the system of language (*la langue*) engages in the act of using words to stand for something else. In addition, language does this by *naming* these "real facts."

It is difficult to determine how to assess this claim. In the first place, it strains credulity to postulate that "language," which, recall, is an objectifiable "system," can itself perform the intentional act of naming. But it is even more difficult to comprehend what it could mean to say that the word *symbolizes* in this sentence (or perhaps in the system of language?) is functioning to represent the fact presented in brackets *by naming it*. A name designates ostensively. It points to the thing or person named. Does *symbolizes* function this way here? When one comprehends this part of these two sentences, is it because one has been pointed toward the act in brackets by being given its name?

As I noted earlier, difficulties such as these have been acknowledged for at least 2500 years. Aristotle identified precisely this problem with *of, the, that*, and *they*, and Ryle and many other twentieth-century language analysts have also highlighted these problems. But Aristotle's solution, and the solutions of many subsequent language theorists, have virtually all been centrally dependent on the very semiotic commitments that create the problem in the first place. When one attempts to test these commitments by *applying* the claim that language is made up of word units functioning representationally, one is led inexorably to questions like the ones raised here. Often the difficulty with these questions is not so much that they have one answer as opposed to another, but that one does not quite know how to go about answering them. How does one think about the object or fact allegedly signified by *in* or *is*? Could it actually be the case that words other than nouns represent by naming? It is easy to understand Wittgenstein's conclusion in the *Philosophical Investigations* that questions like these can emerge only when language "goes on a holiday." And yet philosophers, linguists, and other theorists continue to make assertions about the nature of

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language that cannot possibly be true of the very language used to make the assertions themselves.

The Natural Language Problem

On the one hand, it is completely reasonable to expect internal consistency in a philosophical or theoretical formulation. On the other hand, the practice of attempting to hoist a theorists on her or his own petard has a long, but not particularly distinguished history. The reader of this analysis of Kristeva's sentences may have the nagging sense that something slightly unfair has happened and, more important, that somehow the central issue has not really been addressed. As a result, I propose to shift focus to two instances of naturally occurring conversation.

Clearly, *any effort to define or characterize the nature of language should be informatively applicable to instances of language's natural occurrence.* The theoretical formulation, in other words, should apply readily and fruitfully to paradigmatic examples of its explanandum. It is equally clear that *the paradigmatic instance of language is conversation,* verbal-nonverbal exchange between humans in real time, either face-to-face or mediated by some electronic modality (e.g., telephone). This is the activity humans engage in characteristically, routinely, naturally, and constantly. Some version of it makes up the lion's share of most humans' personal and occupational lives.[25] Unfortunately, this point appears to have been lost on many language theorists, who concentrate instead on examples devised to support their arguments. Philosophers have typically generated armchair examples about the present king of France or the morning-and-evening star, and linguists and semioticians have speculated about whether green ideas sleep furiously and have attempted to analyze such pseudo-utterances as "Hello, Tom. This is Bill. I promise you that John will return the money." A typical recent analysis works with such examples as

Tom opened the door
Sally opened her eyes
The carpenters opened the wall
Sam opened his book to page 37
The surgeon opened the wound.[26]

Artificial constructions such as these can often clarify their authors' ideas, but they cannot test them. Like focusing on concrete nouns, the tendency to use only hypothetical examples has, I believe, con-

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tributed to the persistence of the symbol model despite its manifest inapplicability.

But a group of researchers who call themselves conversation or discourse analysts do examine discourse much closer to actual conversation. They use audio and sometimes video recordings to create detailed transcripts that embody a much fuller sense of living language than do examples generated by even the most creative armchair theorist. These scholars employ a variety of print conventions to indicate such nonverbal features of spoken language as vocal emphasis, pause, and overlapped speech. For example, capital letters designate emphasis, one or more colons indicate a prolonged sound or syllable, brackets enclose overlapped talk, and pauses are marked by either a dot or a count of seconds in parenthesis. Here are two brief transcripts by conversation analysts of naturally-occurring interchanges which should provide a reasonable test of the symbol model:

Example 1. Two College Students

1. John: So what do you THI::NK about the bicycles on campus?
2. Judy: I think they're terrible.
3. John: Sure is about a MIL:LION of 'em.
4. Judy: eh [he:h]
5. John: [Duzit] SEEM da you: there's a lot more people this year?
6. Judy: The [re-] ye:ah, for su:re
7. John: [Go-] GOD, there seems to be a mILlion people
8. Judy: Yeah. (1.0) YE:ah, there's: way too many. I can't- at tIMEs the
9. bicycles get so bad I just got off mi [ne an] hh .h and gi(h)ve up!
10. John: [Oh riLleh]
11. John: I unno when I DODGE one then I have to DODGE another one 'n
12. its an endless cycle.

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13. Judy: Yeah (1.0) oh they're TERrible.

14. John: 'S so many people.

15. Judy: Um hmm[27]

Example 2. Caller to Poison Control Center (Excerpt)

1. P.C.: P*o*ison Control = Can I h*e*lp yo:u.

2. Caller: hhh Uh-yes I wz wondering- uhm could *Raid* hh uhm ( ) effect the

3. bra:in permanently d'y'know.

4. (0.3)

5. P.C.: Oka:y C'n y' tell me the reason why y'wanna// know tha:t.

6. Caller: Well y'see uhm ( ) my husband sprayed this house that we have

7. out in Romulus he- he- thought he wz being b*u*gged. (0.2) suh he

8. wen' out n' 'e got four cans ( ) of Raid. =

9. P.C.: = What type of Raid.

10. (1.2)

11. Caller: Gee I don' even know. = I ih-ih-j's says y'know ( )

12. Raid like y know fer killing b*u*gs. = uhm hhh I'm not even too

13. sure which one he go:t. (0.4) N 'e got four cans 'a this 'n 'e

14. spr*a*:yed the whole house 'n carpeting rilly th*i*ck with this. hhh A:n

15. then he uh:m (0.5) did it th*a*t morning but then he went t'b*a*ck ( ) in

16. the house like that afternoo:n, an he was in that house *a*ll day 'n

17. all night. =

18. P.C.: = How long ago was dis. =

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19. Caller:	= Now this here happened uh- Saturday morning, I gotta call from
20.	him ah- cuz he 'ed said he was seein' things 'n 'e was kinda acting
21.	w*e*ird, j'know.[28]

As the reader no doubt can sense, these transcripts capture something much closer to language as it actually occurs than the examples commonly used by philosophers, linguists, and semioticians to support their claims about the nature of language. Of course, this is "informal" language, which means, among other things, that it functions only partly in the service of "propositional content" or "truth value." The interlocutors are as engaged in making contact and negotiating their respective identities as they are in asserting. Questions are at least as important as answers, and pause, stress, and rhythm—and in Example 1, facial expression, proximity, gesture, movement, and various unmarked features of vocal intonation—contribute significantly to conversational outcomes. But if one is interested in language as it is lived, these examples are surely more paradigmatic than the hypotheticals typically discussed, and as relatively "spontaneous" and "natural" instances, they warrant close attention.

The reader may also sense what outcome will result from testing the symbol model by applying it to these examples. But without belaboring the obvious, I hope, let us ask whether the language displayed here appears to fit the description of the nature of language offered by those who characterize it as a system of signs or symbols functioning representationally and instrumentally.

As in Kristeva's prose, many of the concrete nouns in these examples appear to be accurately described by the symbol model. *Bicycles, campus, people, Raid, brain, house, Romulus, cans, bugs, carpeting*, and even *Saturday* or *Saturday morning* could all conceivably be thought of as language units that label, signify, represent, and in some cases even name objects or events in the interlocutors' nonlinguistic worlds. As I explain in Chapter 4, one could seriously question the extent to which several of these concrete nouns label "nonlinguistic" entities. For example what exactly "is" *Raid, Romulus, carpeting*, and *Saturday morning*? These questions notwithstanding, however, to acknowledge that these words may be thought of as signs or symbols of things is still to leave unexplained the majority of the words and phrases in these examples.

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And it is much more difficult to generate coherent and useful insights by applying the symbol model to them.

For instance, consider just the first word of the first utterance in Example 1—*So*. What might this unit of language signify or symbolize? If a theorist committed to the symbol model agreed that this were a suitable unit to analyze, he or she might argue that this word represents John's desire or intent to introduce his question with something like the equivalent of *hence* or *therefore*. John begins his utterance this way to connect it with whatever preceded it, and he chooses the word *So* because of its informality. Thus the word symbolizes a "concept," "idea," or an aspect of the speaker's preceding emotional and mental state, and this state is specifiable, given the communicative context.

On its face, this account is plausible enough. But for it to be consistent with the two worlds commitment of the symbol model, the mental state must actually be specifiable and must be ontologically different from the word. Consider the first requirement: Is it specifiable? Could one describe a discrete mental state that actually could be said to precede the utterance of *So*, and that would be signified by this specific utterance? Certainly this task would be difficult. One first wonders how to describe this specific a mental state. Some mental states can be easily, if a bit loosely, characterized as, for example, the states of "feeling worried" or "intending to be on time." But how might one go about describing the mental state signified by John's utterance of the word *So* in this context? Perhaps one could characterize it as one of informal-transitional-introductory temporalizing or as encouraging-tentative-inclusive friendliness. But such abstract descriptions hardly satisfy the requirement to define the specific phenomenon that is the signified of this word. Note, also, how the effort to describe this specific "intent," or "concept" depends on a model of the mind that is probably indefensible. To accommodate the commitment to two worlds, one has to view the mind as a container of some sort filled with entities of very puzzling ontological status. To develop this kind of model, cognitive functioning has to be hypostatized in ways that clearly conflict not only with the results of current cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence research (see Chapter 5), but also with contemporary philosophical anthropology. Today, virtually every school child knows that the mind is not coherently describable as a container filled with the kinds of entities that are required by the symbol model.

What about the distinctiveness of this mental state? Is it clearly different in kind from the utterance that allegedly signifies it? And can it coherently be said to *precede* the utterance of *So* in such a

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way that *So* can *represent* it? One way to test whether this is the case is to ask if the same mental state could occur in the absence of this word. Is the mental state that is the alleged signified of *So* the same or different from the one that would accompany John's utterance in this context of *Hence* or *Therefore*? On the one hand, the answer seems simple. Because *So* is more informal than either *Hence* or *Therefore*, the mental states would obviously differ. On the other hand, to verify this response, one would have to be able to call up these mental states in the absence of these words or their synonyms and assess their relative formality—and their other distinctive features. But it is extremely difficult to determine how one might call up the mental state of, for example, informal-transitional-introductory temporalizing without the word *So*, to see (hear?) whether it is identical to or different from a closely related mental state. In fact, the problem is even more basic: How does one go about calling up mental states in the first place? And if one can in fact perform this activity, could a mental state that is "called up" for the purpose suggested here be identical to the mental state spontaneously experienced by John in this conversation? As "an example called up for purposes of analysis," would this mental state not differ from the original one? It is difficult to tell how even to begin to respond to such questions, and yet they are necessarily raised by the theoretical commitments that make up the symbol model.

A version of this same analysis could be applied to virtually any of the other words that are not concrete nouns or pronouns in these two examples. In utterance 1 of Example 1 this list includes *what, do, THI::NK, about, the*, and *on*. At least an additional 184 of the 282 words in these two instances of discourse could be similarly analyzed.[29]

But again, all this may seem a little silly. As I noted earlier, no contemporary scholar would seriously contend that one can specify any sort of one-to-one correspondence between specific signifier and specific signified. Surely the current understandings of language held by philosophers, linguists, semioticians, and communication theorists have progressed far beyond such a Lockean conceptualization. Contemporary scholars who subscribe to the symbol model might well argue that semiosis is basic to language, but they also insist that the process is much more complex and subtle than is implied by the simplistic analysis proposed and critiqued in the immediately preceding paragraphs.

For one thing, it is sometimes argued, individual words are not the units of signification in these examples. Phrases are, or idioms, or propositions, or sentences, or utterances. The signifier in line 1

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of Example 1 is not the single word *So*, but *So what do you THI::NK* or perhaps the entire utterance, *So what do you THI::NK about the bicycles on campus?* This move appears to avoid the worst difficulties created by word-by-word analyses. But it does not solve the problem, because these difficulties simply resurface at another point in the analysis. The shift from words to word or sound groups does not do away with the requirement to identify the ontological status of the signified. Assuming that it is nonlinguistic, one must again treat it as some sort of mental or cognitive state. And it is obviously just as difficult to specify the mental state signified by the phrase or sentence as it is to specify the mental state signified by a single word. It is also just as difficult to argue that the mental state signified by a phrase or sentence is distinct from the words that allegedly signify or symbolize it.

But what if it is not nonlinguistic? Can this hoary ontological conundrum not be dissolved by simply acknowledging that both signifier and signified are of the same ontological status? Saussure made exactly this move when he specified that "the two elements involved in the linguistic sign are both psychological"[30] and when he emphasized that each linguistic unit is meaningful only in relation to the other units making up the circumscribed *system*. But, as I explain in more detail in subsequent chapters, there are two closely related reasons why the problem cannot be solved this way.

First, *one cannot coherently abandon a commitment to there being an ontological difference between signifier and signified while maintaining that a representational relationship exists between the two.* Representation, in other words, is a relationship that exists between two dissimilar phenomena. A symbol is something that stands for something *else*. A flag can represent a country; a graphic image—for example, a silhouette of a long-haired person wearing a skirt—can signify that a restroom is for women; an attorney can represent a client; and it can even be initially coherent to claim that a word signifies or symbolizes a thing, idea, or feeling. But a flag cannot *stand for* another flag, and a warning symbol cannot *signify* another warning symbol. Moreover, whenever one human represents another, he or she does so by virtue of the difference between them—one is elected and the other a constituent, or one is professionally certified for the service and the other in need of it. And no morpheme, word, or phrase can coherently be said to *stand for* another morpheme, word, or phrase. Even synonyms are mutually substitutable but not *representationally* related. As a result, it cannot make sense to claim both that two related phenomena are of the same ontological status and that the relationship between them is representa-

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