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THE LANGUAGE ANIMAL

THE FULL SHAPE OF THE HUMAN LINGUISTIC CAPACITY

Contents

Preface

This is a book about the human linguistic capacity. In it I attempt to show that this is more multiform than has usually been supposed. That is, it includes capacities for meaning creation which go far beyond that of encoding and communicating information, which is too often taken as its central form.

My inspiration has been the views on language developed in the 1790s in Germany, the time and place where what we think of as German Romanticism flowered. The main theorists I have drawn on are Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt—hence my name for the theory I have taken from them, the "HHH".

The contrast case to this outlook is one which developed in the great thinkers of early modernity, rationalist and empiricist, which were also responsible for the modern epistemological theories which grew out of, and sometimes partly against, the work of Descartes. The main early figures in this tradition which I cite here are Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac. Hence the shorthand title "HLC".

This theory seems impossibly unsophisticated to thinkers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, influenced as we have all been by Saussure, Frege, and to some extent Humboldt. But certain of its key assumptions have survived into analytic post-Fregean philosophy, as well as some branches of cognitive theory.

So an important part of my task in this book has been to refute the remaining fragments of the legacy of the HLC, by developing insights out of the HHH. The result (I hope) is a much more satisfactory, and therefore varied (if less tidy), account of what the human linguistic capacity consists in.

My original intention in embarking on this project was to complement this development of the Romantic theory of language with a study of certain strands of post-Romantic poetics, which I see as closely linked. I

started on this in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and in face of numerous self-interruptions, I have only got as far as completing the first part, plus a scattering of studies which could help constitute the second.

I have therefore decided to publish this book on the linguistic capacity, and to continue my work on the Romantics in order to complete the second part (I hope), as a companion study to this one. I will from time to time in this book indicate what that second study may contain. But I hope that this work will be sufficiently interesting on its own to justify its separate publication.

I have greatly benefitted from discussions with a host of thinkers, mainly from the network around the Centre for Transcultural Studies, in particular, Akeel Bilgrami, Craig Calhoun, Dilip Gaonkar, Sean Kelly, Benjamin Lee, and Michael Warner.

I would also like to thank Muhammad Velji for his great work in helping to prepare the manuscript for publication, and in pointing out lacunae that needed filling, particularly in finding adequate English translations of quotes in other languages, not to speak of other improvements; finally I owe him thanks for drawing up the index.

PART I

Language as Constitutive

1

Designative and Constitutive Views

1

How to understand language? This is a preoccupation going back to the very beginning of our intellectual tradition. What is the relation of language to other signs? To signs in general? Are linguistic signs arbitrary or motivated? What is it that signs and words have when they have meaning? These are very old questions. Language is an old topic in Western philosophy, but its importance has grown. It is not a major issue among the ancients. It begins to take on greater importance in the seventeenth century, with Hobbes and Locke. And then in the twentieth century it becomes close to obsessional. All major philosophers have their theories of language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Davidson, Derrida, and all manner of "deconstructionists" have made language central to their philosophical reflection.

In what we can call the modern period, from the seventeenth century, there has been a continual debate, with philosophers reacting to and feeding off each other, about the nature of language. I think we can cast light on this debate if we identify two grand types of theory. I will call the first an "enframing" theory. By this I mean that the attempt is made to understand language within the framework of a picture of human life, behavior, purposes, or mental functioning, which is itself described and defined without reference to language. Language is seen as arising in this framework, which can be variously conceived as we shall see, and fulfilling some function within it, but the framework itself precedes, or at least can be characterized independently of, language.

The other type of theory I want to call "constitutive". As this word suggests, it is the antitype of the enframing sort. It gives us a picture of language as making possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings, and hence as not explicable within a framework picture of human life conceived without language.

These terms mark a major issue at stake between the two theories. But as it turns out, they are divided on a number of other major questions, and the two approaches can be contrasted on a number of other dimensions as well, and so they are sometimes referred to as the "designative-instrumental" and the "constitutive expressive" theories respectively. And besides this, they even end up differing on the contours and limits of what they are trying to explain, viz., language; as well as on the validity of atomistic versus holistic modes of explanation. They belong, in fact, to very different understandings of human life. But we have to enter the labyrinth at some point, and I will do so at first through this contrasting of enframing versus constitutive, and gradually connect up with the other dimensions of controversy later.

2

The classical case, and most influential first form of an enframing theory, was the set of ideas developed from Locke through Hobbes to Condillac. I have discussed this in "Language and Human Nature."[1] Briefly, the Hobbes-Locke-Condillac (HLC) form of theory tried to understand language within the confines of the modern representational epistemology made dominant by Descartes. In the mind, there are "ideas". These are bits of putative representation of reality, much of it "external". Knowledge consists in having the representation actually square with the reality. This we can only hope to achieve if we put together our ideas according to a responsible procedure. Our beliefs about things are constructed; they result from a synthesis. The issue is whether the construction will be reliable and responsible or indulgent, slapdash, and delusory.

Language plays an important role in this construction. Words are given meaning by being attached to the things represented via the "ideas" which represent them. The introduction of words greatly facilitates the combination of ideas into a responsible picture. This facilitation is understood in different ways. For Hobbes and Locke, they

allow us to grasp things in classes, and hence make possible synthesis wholesale where nonlinguistic intuition would be confined to the painstaking association of particulars. Condillac thinks that the introduction of language gives us for the first time control over the whole process of association; it affords us "dominion over our imagination" [*empire sur notre imagination*].[2]

The constitutive theory finds its most energetic early expression in Herder, precisely in a criticism of Condillac. In a famous passage of the treatise on the *Ursprung der Sprache*, Herder repeats Condillac's fable —one might say "just so" story—of how language might have arisen between two children in a desert.[3] He professes to find something missing in this account. It seems to him to presuppose what it's meant to explain. What it's meant to explain is language, the passage from a condition in which the children emit just animal cries to the stage where they use words with meaning. The association between sign and some mental content is already there with the animal cry (what Condillac calls the "natural sign"); the prelinguistic infants, like other animals, will cry out in fear when they are faced with danger, for instance. What is new with the "instituted sign" is that the children can now use it to focus on and manipulate the associated idea, and hence direct the whole play of their imagination. The transition just amounts to their merely tumbling to the notion that the association can be used in this way.

This is the classic case of an enframing theory. Language is understood in terms of certain elements: ideas, signs, and their association, which precede its arising. Before and after, the imagination is at work and association takes place. What's new is that now the mind is in control. Thus the cry of fear can be used to communicate the presence of danger to another, as a voluntary and not just a reflex action; as a way of designating danger, it can be used in reasonings about the antecedents and consequences of certain forms of threat.

This control itself is, of course, something that didn't exist before. But the theory establishes the maximal possible continuity between before and after. The elements are the same, combination continues, only the direction changes. We can surmise that it is precisely this continuity which gives the theory its seeming clarity and explanatory power: language is robbed of its mysterious character and is related to elements that seem unproblematic.

Herder starts from the intuition that language makes possible a

different kind of consciousness, which he calls "reflective" [*besonnen*]. That is why he finds a continuity explanation like Condillac's so frustrating and unsatisfying. The issue of what this new consciousness consists in and how it arises is not addressed, as far as Herder is concerned, by an account in terms of preexisting elements. That's why he accuses Condillac of begging the question. "The Abbot Condillac … had already presupposed the whole of language as invented before the first page of this book" [*Der Abt Condillac … hat das ganze Ding Sprache schon vor der ersten Seite seines Buchs erfunden vorausgesetzt*].[4]

What did Herder mean by 'reflection' [*Besonnenheit*]? This is harder to explain. I have tried a reconstruction in "The Importance of Herder."[5] We might try to formulate it this way: prelinguistic beings can react to the things which surround them. But language enables us to grasp something *as* what it is. This explanation is hardly transparent, but it puts us on the right track. To get a clearer idea we need to reflect on what is involved in using language.

You ask me what kind of shape this is, and I say "a triangle". Let's say it is a triangle. So I get it right. But what's involved in getting it right in this sort of case? Well, it involves something like knowing that 'triangle' is the right descriptive term for this sort of thing. Perhaps I can even tell you why: "see, the thing is bounded by three straight sides". But sometimes I recognize something and I can't say very much if anything about why. I just *know* that that's a classical symphony we're hearing. Even in this case, however, I acknowledge that the question "why?" is quite in order; I can imagine working further on it and coming up with something, articulating what underlies my confidence that I've got it right.

What this brings out is that a certain understanding of the issue involved is inseparable from descriptive language, viz., that the word can be right or wrong, and that this turns on whether the described entity has certain characteristics. A being who uses descriptive language does so out of a sensitivity to issues of this range. This is a necessary proposition. We would never say that a being like a parrot, to whom we can attribute no such sensitivity, was describing anything, no matter how unerringly it squawked out the "right word". Of course, as we prattle on, we are rarely focusing on the issue of rightness; we only do so when we get uncertain and are plumbing unexplored depths of

vocabulary. But we are continuously responsive to rightness, and that is why we always recognize the relevance of a challenge that we have misspoken. It's this nonfocal responsiveness which I'm trying to capture with the word 'sensitivity'.

So language involves sensitivity to the issue of rightness.[6] The rightness in the descriptive case turns on the characteristics of the described. We might call this "intrinsic rightness". To see what this amounts to, let's look at a contrast case. There are other kinds of situations in which something we can roughly call a sign can be rightly or wrongly used. Suppose I train some rats to go through the door with the triangle when this is offered as an alternative to a door with a circle. The rats get to do the right thing. The right signal behavior here is responding to the triangle positively. The rat responds to the triangle door by going through it, we might say, as I respond to the triangle by saying the word.

But now the disanalogy springs to light. What makes going through the door the right response to the triangle is that it's what brings the rats to the cheese in the end-chamber of the maze. The kind of rightness involved here is one which we can define by success in some task, here getting the cheese. Responding to the signal plays a role in completing the task, and that's why there's a "correct use" of the signal. But this is a different kind of rightness from the one involved in aligning a word with the characteristics of some described referent.

But, one might object, doesn't the rat do something analogous? Doesn't it recognize that the triangle indicates "cheese"? It is after all responding to a characteristic of the triangle door, even if an instrumental one. The rat, we might say, aligns its action with a characteristic of this door, viz., that it's the one behind which the cheese always is. So perhaps we might better "translate" his understanding by saying that the triangle indicates "rush through here". But this shift in translation alerts us to what is wrong with this assimilation. There are certainly characteristics of the situation in virtue of which "rush through here" is the right response to a triangle on a door. But getting the response right has nothing to do with identifying these characteristics or any others. That's why the question, under what precise description the rat gets it right—"that's where the cheese is", or "where reward is", or "where to jump", or whatever—is pointless and inapplicable.

What this example brings out is the difference between responding

appropriately in other ways to features of the situation, on one hand, and actually identifying what these features are, on the other. The latter involves giving some definition, some explicit shape, to these features. This takes us beyond merely responding to them; or, otherwise put, it is a further response of its own special kind. This is the response we carry out in words. We characteristically define the feature in applying the word, which is why this application must be sensitive to issues of intrinsic rightness, to the fact that the word applies *because* of the defined features, else it is not properly a word.[7]

By contrast, let's call what the rat responds to a 'signal', marking by this term that the response involves no definition of features, but rather rushing through to reward. Otherwise put, where responding to a signal plays a role in some task, correct signal behavior is defined by success in that task. Unless this success is itself defined in terms of getting something intrinsically right—which is not the case for winning through to cheese—correct response to the signal need involve no definition of any particular characteristics; it just involves reacting rightly, and this is compatible with recognizing a whole host of such characteristics, or none at all: the rat just knows to rush through here; it knows from nothing about descriptions and qua what it should rush it.

The rightness involved in description is crucially different. We can't just define it in terms of success in some task—unless we define this task itself in terms of what I called above intrinsic rightness. In other words, intrinsic rightness is irreducible to what we might call task rightness simpliciter: the account in terms of some task only works for language if we have already incorporated intrinsic rightness in our success criteria.[8]

We might make this distinction in another way, in terms of notions of "awareness". For a nonlinguistic animal A, being aware of X consists of X's counting in shaping A's response. A characteristically responds to X in a certain way: if X is food, and A is hungry, A goes for it, unless deterred; if X is a predator, A flees; if X is an obstacle, A goes around it, and so on. By contrast, linguistic awareness of X can't be reduced to or equated with its triggering a particular response, or range of responses, in certain circumstances. We could think of this as an awareness which is independent from, or can sit alongside of, response triggering. But it would be better to say that awareness involves a new kind of response, linguistic recognition, which cannot be reduced to or equated with any

behavioral response.

We can have this linguistic awareness even while inhibiting our standard behavioral response (I can see that you're a dangerous character, but I stop myself fleeing); or even if I make this response, linguistic recognition involves something more than so responding. Of course, other animals can also have behaviorally inert awareness of some normally arousing object if the conditions aren't right: the animal sees prey, but it is replete, and doesn't react. But in the analogous human case, there will normally be the response I'm calling linguistic recognition.

This linguistic awareness is of a different kind than the response-triggering mode; it's a more focused awareness of this object, as rightly called W. It involves a kind of gathering of attention which Herder describes as "reflection", or "*Besonnenheit*", in the passage in which he introduces this term.[9]

To return to our example above of the rats learning how to get to cheese, we can see the possible ambiguity in the use of expressions like "knows that this is the proper door to rush through". Applied to the rat in the above example it can just mean that it knows how to respond to the signal. But in another context, we might mean something like "knows how to apply the description 'the proper door to rush through' correctly". The point of the above discussion is to show that these are very different capacities. Having the first capacity doesn't need to involve aligning any signs with reality on grounds of the features this reality displays; having the second essentially consists in acting out of sensitivity to such grounds. In the second case a certain kind of issue must be at stake, animating the behavior, and this may be quite absent in the first.

A confusion between these two bedevils a number of discussions about animal behavior, most notably the controversy about chimp "language". We can prescind from all the arguments whether the chimps really always sign in the appropriate way, concede the case to their protagonists, and still ask what is going on here. That an animal gives the sign 'banana' only in the presence of bananas, or 'want banana' only when it desires one, doesn't by itself establish what is happening. Perhaps we're dealing with a capacity of the first kind: the animal knows how to move its paws to get bananas, or attention and praise from the trainer. In fact, the sign is aligned with an object with certain

features, a curved, tubular, yellow fruit. But this doesn't show that that's the point of the exercise; that the animal is responding to this issue in signing.

But only in the latter case would the chimps have "language" in something like the sense we do. In the former, we would have to see their signing behavior as more of a piece with the clever instrumental performances that we know chimps can master, like manipulating sticks, and moving boxes around to get at things out of reach, which Köhler described.[10] One kind of achievement need be considered no more properly "semantic" than the other.

Whereas to be sensitive to the issue of intrinsic rightness is to be operating, as it were, in another dimension. Let me call this the "semantic dimension" (or more broadly, the "linguistic dimension"—I shall discuss the relation between these two in section 3). Then we can say that properly linguistic beings are functioning in the semantic dimension. And that can be our way of formulating Herder's point about "reflection". To be reflective is to operate in this dimension, which means acting out of sensitivity to issues of intrinsic rightness.

3

Herder's theory of language is holistic in the way that the traditional view he was criticizing was not. Indeed, it is holistic in more than one way; but at the moment I want to stress that one cannot enter the linguistic dimension by the acquisition of a single word. Entering this dimension, being able to focus on objects by recognizing them, creates, as it were, a new space around us. Instead of being overcome by the ocean of sensations as they rush by us, we are able to distinguish one wave, and hold it in clear, calm attention. It is this new space of attention, of distance from the immediate instinctual significance of things, of focused awareness, as I described it above, which Herder wants to call "reflection".[11]

This is what he finds missing in Condillac's account. Condillac does have a more sophisticated idea of the move from animal to human signs than Locke. Animals respond to natural and "accidental" signs (e.g., smoke is an "accidental" sign of fire, and clouds of rain). Humans have also "instituted" signs. The difference lies in the fact that by means of these latter humans can control the flow of their own imagination,

whereas animals passively follow the connections which are triggered off in them by the chain of events.[12]

There is obviously some link between Herder's description of our interrupting the "ocean of sensations" and this Condillaquian idea of taking control. But what is still missing in the French thinker is any sense that the link between sign and object might be fundamentally different when one crosses the divide. It is still conceived in a very reified way, typical of the followers of Locke, a connection which is there in a thing-like fashion, such that the only issue allowed is whether it drives us or we drive it. Condillac belongs to the mode of thought which conceives language as an instrument, a set of connections which we can use to construct or control things. The point of language is to give us *empire sur notre imagination.*"[13] Locke is the great source of this reifying language. He often uses images of construction out of materials when speaking of the mind.[14] That a wholly different issue about rightness arises escapes him.

To raise this issue is to swing our perspective on language into a quite new angle. But this issue is easy to miss. Condillac was unaware that he had left anything out. He wouldn't have known where Herder was "coming from", just as his heirs today, the proponents of chimp language, "talking" computers, and truth-conditional theories of meaning, find the analogous objections to their views gratuitous and puzzling. That is why Herder stands at a very important divide in the understanding of language in our culture.

To appreciate this better, let's examine further what Locke and Condillac were missing, from Herder's standpoint. Their reified view of the sign didn't come from their taking the external observer's standpoint on language, as the people I have just described as their heirs do in our day. On the contrary, they wanted to explain it very much "from the inside", in terms of the agent's experience of self. They weren't trying out a behaviorist theory à la Skinner, in which linguistic rightness played no role. Rather they assumed this kind of rightness as unproblematically present. People introduced signs to "stand for" or "signify" objects (or ideas of objects), and once instituted these plainly could be rightly or wrongly applied. Their "error" from a Herderian perspective was that they never got this constitutive feature into focus.

This failure is easy, one might almost say natural, because when we

speak, and especially when we coin or introduce new terms, all this is in the background. It is what we take for granted or lean on when we coin expressions, viz., that words can "stand for" things, that is, that there is for us such a thing as irreducible linguistic rightness. The failure is so "natural" that it has a venerable pedigree, as Wittgenstein showed in introducing a passage from Augustine as his paradigm for this mistake.

What is being lost from sight here is the background of our action, something we usually lean on without noticing. More particularly, what the background provides is being treated as though it were built in to each particular sign, as though we could start right off coining our first word and have this understanding of linguistic rightness already incorporated in it. Incorporating the background understanding about linguistic rightness into the individual signs has the effect of occluding it very effectively. As the background it is easy to overlook anyway; once we build it into the particular signs, we bar the way to recognizing it altogether.

This is a fault of any designative theory of meaning. But the reification wrought by modern epistemology since Descartes and Locke, that is, the drive to objectify our thoughts and "mental contents", if anything made it worse. The furniture of the mind was accorded a thing-like existence, something objects can have independent of any background. The occluding of the background understanding of the linguistic dimension by incorporating it into reified mental contents prepared the way for an elision of it altogether in those modern behaviorist and semi-behaviorist theories which try to explain thought and language strictly from the standpoint of the external observer. The associations of thing-like ideas were easily transposed into the stimulus-response connections of classical behaviorism. An obvious line of filiation runs from Locke through Helvétius to Watson and Skinner.

In this context, we can see that any effort to retrieve the background had to run against the grain of this important component of modern culture, the epistemology which was most easily associated with the scientific revolution. In fact, some of what we now recognize as the most important developments in philosophy in the last two centuries have been tending toward this retrieval, culminating in the twentieth century in different ways in the work of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, to name the most celebrated variants. If I consider Herder a hinge figure, it is because he had an important place as one of the origin points of this

counterthrust, in particular in relation to our understanding of language. This is not to say that he went all the way to this retrieval. On the contrary, as we shall see later on, he often signally failed to draw the conclusions implicit in the new perspective he adopted; but he did play a crucial role in opening this perspective.

There have been two very common, and related, directions of argument in this counterthrust, both of which can be illustrated in Herder's views on language. The first consists in articulating a part of the background in such a form that our reliance on it in our thought, or perception, or experience, or understanding language, becomes clear and undeniable. The background so articulated is then shown to be incompatible with crucial features of the received doctrine in the epistemological tradition. We can find this type of argument with Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty in the twentieth century. But the pioneer in this kind of argument, in whose steps all the others have followed, is Kant.

The arguments of the transcendental deduction can be seen in a number of different lights. But one way to take them is as a final laying to rest of a certain atomism of the input which had been espoused by empiricism. As this came to Kant through Hume, it seemed to be suggesting that the original level of knowledge of reality (whatever that turned out to be) came in particulate bits, individual "impressions". This level of information could be isolated from a later stage in which these bits were connected together, for example in beliefs about cause-effect relations. We find ourselves forming such beliefs, but we can, by taking a stance of reflexive scrutiny which is fundamental to the modern epistemology, separate the basic level from these too hasty conclusions we leap to. This analysis allegedly reveals, for instance, that nothing in the phenomenal field corresponds to the necessary connection we too easily interpolate between "cause" and "effect".[15]

Kant undercuts this whole way of thinking by showing that it supposes, for each particulate impression, that it is being taken as a bit of potential information. It purports to be about something. This is the background understanding which underpins all our perceptual discriminations. The primitive distinction recognized by empiricists between impressions of sensation and those of reflection amounts to an acknowledgment of this. The buzzing in my head is discriminated from the noise I hear from the neighboring woods, in that the first is a

component in how I feel, and the second seems to tell me something about what's happening out there (my neighbor is using his chain saw again). So even a particulate "sensation", really to be sensation (in the empiricist sense, that is, as opposed to reflection), has to have this dimension of "aboutness". This will later be called "intentionality", but Kant speaks of the necessary relation to an object of knowledge. "Now we find that our thought of the relation of all knowledge to its object carries with it an element of necessity" [*Wir finden aber, dass unser Gedanke von der Beziehung aller Erkenntniss auf ihren Gegenstand etwas von Notwendigkeit bei sich führe*].[16]

With this point secured, Kant argues that this relationship to an object would be impossible if we really were to take the impression as an utterly isolated content, without any link to others. To see it as about something is to place it somewhere, at the minimum out in the world, as against in me, to give it a location in a world which, while it is in many respects indeterminate and unknown for me, cannot be wholly so. The unity of this world is presupposed by anything which could present itself as a particulate bit of "information", and so whatever we mean by such a particulate bit, it couldn't be utterly without relation to all others. The background condition for this favorite supposition of empiricist philosophy, the simple impression, forbids us giving it the radical sense which Hume seemed to propose for it. To attempt to violate this background condition is to fall into incoherence. Really to succeed in breaking all links between individual impressions would be to lose all sense of awareness of anything. "These perceptions would not then belong to any experience, consequently would be without an object, merely a blind play of representations, less even than a dream" [*Diese <sc. Wahrnehmungen> würden aber alsdann auch zu keiner Erfahrung gehören, folglich ohne Objekt und nichts als ein blindes Spiel der Vorstellungen, d.i. weniger als ein Traum sein*].[17]

So Kant by articulating the background understanding of aboutness sweeps away the empiricist atomism of experience. I want to suggest that Herder does something analogous. By articulating the background understanding of the linguistic dimension, he also undercuts and transforms the designative theory of language dominant in his day. And to make the parallel closer, one of the features swept away is precisely its atomism, the view that language is a collection of independently introduced words. I will return to this shortly.

The second main direction of argument in the counterthrust to Cartesianism or empiricism has been the attempt to place our thinking in the context of our form of life. The original early modern epistemologies gave a notoriously disengaged picture of thinking.[18] This was no accident. The foundationalist drive, the attempt to lay bare a clear structure of inference on the basis of original preinterpreted bits of evidence, pushed toward a disengagement from embodied thinking, and the assumptions buried in everyday custom.[19] The move toward a more situated understanding of thinking is evident enough in the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. But Herder is one of its pioneers. He constantly stresses that we have to understand human reason and language as an integral part of our life form. They cannot be seen as forming a separate faculty which is just added on to our animal nature "like the fourth rung of a ladder on top of the three lower ones." We think like the kind of animals we are, and our animal functions (desire, sensibility, etc.) are those of rational beings: "in every case the whole, undivided soul takes effect" [*überall … wirkt die ganze unabgeteilte Seele*].[20]

These two directions, retrieving the background and situating our thinking, are obviously closely interwoven. In fact, it is the firm belief in situated thinking which leads Herder to his articulation of the linguistic dimension. Just because he cannot see language/reason as a mere add-on to our animal nature, he is led to ask what kind of transformation of our psychic life as a whole attends the rise of language. It is this question to which "reflection" is an answer. To see our thinking as situated makes us see it as one mode among other possible forms of psychic life. And it is this which makes us aware of its distinctive background.

It is by embarking on these two related directions of argument that Herder brings about a rotation of our thought about language, so that we see it from a new angle. A good illustration of this is Herder's grasp of holism. One of the most important, and universally recognized, consequences of Herder's discovery was a certain kind of holism of meaning. A word only has meaning within a lexicon and a context of language practices, which are ultimately embedded in a form of life. Wittgenstein's is the most celebrated formulation of a thesis of this kind in our day.

This insight flows from the recognition of the linguistic dimension as Herder formulated it. Once you articulate this bit of our background understanding, an atomism of meaning becomes as untenable as the parallel atomism of perceptions does after Kant. The connection can be put in the following way:

To possess a word of human language is to have some sense that it's the right word, to be sensitive, we said above, to this issue of its irreducible rightness. Unlike the rat who learns to run through the door with the red triangle, I can use the word 'triangle'. That means that I can not only respond to the corresponding shape, but can recognize it as a triangle. But to be able to recognize something as a triangle is to be able to recognize other things as nontriangles. For the description 'triangle' to have a sense for me, there must be something(s) with which it contrasts; I must have some notion of other kinds of figures. 'Triangle' has to contrast in my lexicon with other figure terms. But in addition, to recognize something as a triangle is to focus on a certain property dimension; it is to pick the thing out by its shape, and not by its size, color, composition, smell, aesthetic properties, etc. Here again, some kind of contrast is necessary.

Now at least some of these contrasts and connections we have to be able to *articulate.* Someone can't really be *recognizing* 'triangle' as the right word if they have absolutely no sense of what makes it the right word; for instance, if they don't even grasp that something is a triangle in virtue of its shape, not its size or color. And one cannot have any sense of this, if one cannot say *anything* whatever, even under probing and prompting. There are cases, of course, where we cannot articulate the particular features peculiar to something we recognize, for example a certain emotional reaction to something, or an unusual hue. But we know to say that it is a feeling or a color. And we can state its ineffability. The zone where our descriptions give out is situated in a context of words. If we couldn't say any of this: even that it was a feeling, couldn't even say that it was indescribable, we couldn't be credited with linguistic consciousness at all; and if we did utter some sound, it couldn't be described as a word. We would be out of the linguistic dimension altogether.[21]

In other words, a being who just emitted a sound when faced with a given object, but was incapable of saying why, that is, showed no sign of having any sense that this is the (irreducibly) right word, other than

emitting the sound, would have to be deemed to be merely responding to signals, like the animals I described earlier. (Think of the parrot.)

What flows from this is that a descriptive word, like 'triangle', couldn't figure in our lexicon alone. It has to be surrounded by a skein of terms, some which contrast with it, and some which situate it, place it in its property dimension, not to speak of the wider matrix of language in which the various activities are situated where our talk of triangles figures: measurement, geometry, design; and where description itself figures as one kind of speech act among others.

This is what the holism of meaning amounts to: that individual words can only be words within the context of an articulated language. Language is not something which could be built up one word at a time. Mature linguistic capacity just doesn't come like this, and couldn't; because each word supposes a whole of language to give it its full force as a word, that is, as an expressive gesture which places us in the linguistic dimension. At the moment when infants start to say their "first word", they are certainly on the road to full human speech, but this "first word" is quite different from a single word within developed speech. The games the infant plays with this word express and realize a quite different stance to the object than the adult descriptive term. It's not a building block out of many of which adult language is gradually built. I shall return to this below.

But this exactly was the error of the traditional designative view. For Condillac, a one-word lexicon was quite conceivable. His children acquire first one word, then others. They build language up, term by term. That's because Condillac ignores the background understanding necessary for language; rather, he builds it unremarked into the individual words. But Herder's articulation of the real nature of linguistic understanding shows this to be impossible. Herder rightly says in the passage I quoted earlier that Condillac presupposes *"das ganze Ding Sprache."*[22]

This expression seems happily to capture the holistic nature of the phenomenon. And yet, here too, Herder disappoints in the conclusions he actually draws in his passage on the birth of language. His "just so" story after all tells us of the birth of a single word. And at the end of it, he unfortunately throws in the following rhetorical question: "What is the whole of human language but a collection of such words" [*was ist die ganze menschliche Sprache als eine Sammlung solcher Worte*]?[23]

And yet I'd like to credit him again with putting us on the track to holism. Not only because it is clearly implicit in what he did articulate; but also because he himself made part of the mediating argument.

He sees that the recognition of something as something, the recognition which allows us to coin a descriptive term for it, requires that we single out a distinguishing mark [*Merkmal*]. The word for X is the right word in virtue of something. Without a sense of what makes it the right word, there is no sense of a word as right. "Distinctly in an immediate way, without a distinguishing mark? No sensuous creature can have outer sensation in this way, since it must always suppress, so to speak destroy, other feelings, and must always recognize the difference between two things through a third thing" [*Deutlich unmittelbar, ohne Merkmal? so kann kein sinnliches Geschöpf ausser sich empfinden, da es immer andere Gefühle unterdrücken, gleichsam vernichten und immer den Unterschied von zweien durch ein drittes erkennen muss*].[24]

So Herder's articulation of the linguistic dimension, properly understood, and as he began to work it out, shows the classical designative story of the acquisition of language to be in principle impossible. This story involves in a sense a deep confusion between the mere signal and the word. For there *can* be one-signal repertoires. You can train a dog to respond to a single command, and then add another one, and later another one. In your first phase, whatever isn't your one signal isn't a signal at all. But there can't be one-word lexica. That's because getting it right for a signal is just responding appropriately. Getting it right for a word requires more, a kind of recognition: we are in the linguistic dimension.

The holism of meaning has been one of the most important ideas to emerge from Herder's new perspective. Humboldt took it up in his image of language as a web.[25] And it took its most influential form early in the last century in the celebrated principle of Saussure: "in language there are only differences without positive terms" [*dans la langue il n'y a que des différences sans termes positifs*].[26] What this slogan means is that we can't understand linguistic meaning as an alignment of sounds (words) and things; rather we align differences in sound with differences in signification. So in English the distinction in sound between "b" and "p" yields in a given context the distinction in sense between "but" and "put". In other words, a term gets its meaning only in

the field of its contrasts. In this form, the principle has achieved virtually universal acceptance. It is an axiom of linguistics.

Humboldt's image of the web brings out the fact that our grasp of any single word is always situated within our grasp of the language as a whole, and the multiple rules and connections that define it. So when we coin a new verb, and by adding "-ed" put it in the past tense, everyone understands what is being said; and thus also, we have for any word some notion of how it relates to others, for instance, what combination with others in a proposition would make sense, as we see from the paradigm of absurdity which Chomsky made widely familiar: "colorless green ideas sleep furiously". In another famous image, Humboldt likens the mention of a word to the touching of a note in a keyboard instrument. This resonates through the whole instrument.[27]

But perhaps its most powerful application in philosophy is in the work of late Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's devastating refutation of "Augustine's" designative theory of meaning constantly recurs to the background understanding which we need to draw on to speak and understand. Where the traditional theory sees a word acquiring meaning by being used to name some object or idea, and its meaning as then communicated through ostensive definition, Wittgenstein points out the background of language which these simple acts of naming and pointing presuppose.[28] Our words only have the meaning they have within the "language games" we play with them, and these in turn find their context in a whole form of life.[29]

This holism of meaning is inextricably connected to the fact that human beings as linguistic animals also live in a bigger world, which goes beyond the episodic present. Their present experience is accompanied invariably by the sense that it was preceded by a personal and social history; that it will be followed by a future; and that what happens in their immediate predicament takes place in a broader context of space. Indeed, we can say that humans live not only in the immediate situation, but also in a vast cosmos or universe, stretching out in time and space from our momentary surroundings. The further reaches of this cosmos may have been more conjectured or imagined than known for much of human history, the product of myth and wild surmise; but this larger context is inescapable.

But the broader context is also social: we live among relatives, and in

a village, perhaps also a nation. Within these contexts, familial or societal, we interact with people through different roles; we carry on different activities, which create different contexts. All this is captured in language, for instance the language of kinship, that of the different political and social positions—police officer, doctor, president; that of different activities and spheres—like the political, the economic, the religious, entertainment, and so on. It is not just that these roles, spheres, relations wouldn't be possible without language (I will return to this point later on). It is also that the holism of language means that we cannot but have a sense of how these roles and spheres are meant to relate to each other: how some are distinct from others, for example parent and child; or a context of serious negotiation versus one of play, or work as against recreation, and so on. To learn the language of society is to take on some imaginary of how society works and acts, of its history through time; of its relation to what is outside: nature, or the cosmos, or the divine.

But my principal point here is not that these words for roles, relations, activities, spheres, allow each of these severally to be part of our world, but rather the holistic point that our language for them situates them in relation to each other, as contrasting or alternating, or partially interpenetrating. To grasp them in language *is* to have some sense of how they relate. This relationality may be more or less articulate in one or other of its aspects, may be more or less clearly defined. But some sense of it is always present in human life qua linguistic.[30]

This is part of what Heidegger wanted to evoke in his famous phrase about language as the "house of being". A house is an environment in which things are arranged by our action and design, different rooms for different uses, for different people, or different times; or for storing different kinds of things; and the like. So the way in which the language we speak at a given time relates things, disposes of them, is seen as a kind of active arrangement. Such a relating is essential to language.[31]

But what gives especial force to this image is our seeing this disposition as one of different human meanings. Our sense of the meanings of things in their different dimensions is carried in our language. But what might make us uneasy with this expression is the fact that we have developed uses of language which allow description and explanation of things which are no longer characterized in terms of human meaning: paradigmatically, post-Galilean natural science. As one

Rats responding to triangles, and birds responding with cries to the presence of predators, meet this criterion. An account in terms of a simple task suffices. Where it fails to, we enter the linguistic dimension. This can happen in two ways. First the task itself can be defined in terms of intrinsic rightness; for instance, where what we are trying to do is describe some scene correctly. Or else, where the end is something like articulating our feelings, or reestablishing contact, the failure occurs at another point. As goals, these don't on the face of it seem to involve intrinsic rightness. But the way in which the correct sign behavior contributes to fulfilling them does.

Thus when I hit on the right word to articulate my feelings, and acknowledge that I am motivated by envy, say, the term does its work because it is the right term. In other words, we can't explain the rightness of the word 'envy' here simply in terms of the condition that using it produces; rather we have to account for its producing this condition—here, a successful articulation—in terms of its being the right word. A contrast case should make this clearer. Say that every time I get stressed out, tense and cross-pressured, I take a deep breath, and blow it explosively out of my mouth, 'how!' I immediately feel calmer and more serene. This is plainly the "right sound" to make, as defined by this desirable goal of restored equilibrium. The rightness of 'how!' admits of a simple task account. It's like the rat case and the bird case, except that it doesn't involve directing behavior across different organisms, and therefore doesn't look like "communication". (But imagine that every time you feel cross-pressured, I go 'how!', and that restores your serenity.) That's because we can explain the rightness simply in terms of its bringing about calm, and don't need to explain its bringing about calm in terms of rightness.

This last clause points out the contrast with 'envy' as the term which articulates/clarifies my feelings. It brings about this clarification, to be sure, and that's essential to its being the right word here. But central to its clarifying is its being the right word. So we can't just explain its rightness by its de facto resolving, say, the state of painful confusion I was in. You can't simply make this de facto causal outcome criterial for its rightness, because you don't know whether it's clarifying unless you know that it's the right term. Whereas in the case of 'how!', all there was to its rightness was its having the desired outcome; the bare de facto consequence is criterial. That's why normally we wouldn't be tempted

to treat this expletive as though it had a meaning.

Something similar can be said about my restoring the intimacy between us by saying "I'm sorry". This was "the right thing to say", because it restored contact. But at the same time, we can say that these words are efficacious in restoring contact because of what they mean. Intrinsic rightness enters into the account here, because what the words mean can't be defined by what they bring about. Again, we might imagine that I could also set off a loud explosion in the neighborhood, which would so alarm you that you would forget about our tiff and welcome my presence. This would then be, from a rather cold-blooded, strategic point of view, the "right move". But the explosion "means" nothing.

What this discussion is moving us toward is a definition of the linguistic dimension in terms of the (im)possibility of a reductive account of rightness. A simple task account of rightness for some sign reduces it to a matter of efficacy for some nonlinguistic purpose. We are in the linguistic dimension when this kind of reduction cannot work, when a kind of rightness is at issue which can't be cashed out in this way. That's why the image of a new "dimension" seems to me apposite. Sometimes the rightness is a matter of correct description, and then we can speak of the "semantic" dimension. But linguistic rightness is more multifaceted than can be captured by semantics alone.

To move from nonlinguistic to linguistic agency is to move to a world in which a new kind of issue is at play, a right use of signs which is not reducible to task rightness. The world of the agent has a new axis on which to respond; its behavior can no longer be understood just as the purposive seeking of ends on the old plane. It is now responding to a new set of demands. Hence the image of a new dimension.[35]

Condillac as we saw missed this dimension. And what perhaps contributed to this occlusion was his starting point in his account of the origin of language. His explanation begins with "natural signs", things like cries of pain or distress. Their right use in communication could only be construed on the simple task model. Language arose supposedly when people learned to use the connection already established by the natural sign, between say, the cry and what caused the distress, in a controlled way. The "instituted sign" is born, an element of language properly speaking. Herder, as we just saw, cannot accept that the transition from prelanguage to language consists simply in a taking

control of a preexisting process. What this leaves out is precisely that a new dimension of issues becomes relevant, that the agent is operating on a new plane. Hence in the same passage in which he declares Condillac's account circular, Herder reaches for a definition of this new dimension, with his term 'reflection'.

On my reconstruction, Herder's 'reflection' is to be glossed as the semantic (and more generally, the linguistic) dimension, and his importance is that he made this central to any account of language. Moreover, Herder's conception of this dimension was multifaceted, along the lines of the broad conception of rightness above. It didn't just involve description. Herder saw that opening this dimension has to transform all aspects of the agent's life. It will also be the seat of new emotions. Linguistic beings are capable of new feelings which affectively reflect their richer sense of their world: not just anger, but indignation; not just desire, but love and admiration. For human beings an emotional response is inseparable from a certain characterization of the situation which elicits it. But linguistic beings can be sensitive to distinctions which are lost on prelinguistic animals. Important among these are distinctions involving moral or other values. Prelinguistic animals treat something as desirable or repugnant by going after it or avoiding it. But only language beings can identify things as *worthy* of desire or aversion. For such identifications raise issues of intrinsic rightness. They involve a characterization of things which is not reducible simply to the ways we treat them as objects of desire or aversion. They involve a recognition beyond that, that they *ought* to be treated in one or another way. So we may ascribe anger to a nonhuman animal, but indignation requires the recognition that the object of our ire has done something wrong, unconscionable. To admire someone is more than being impressed by them, it is experiencing them as having exceptional virtues, or achievements.

Being in the linguistic dimension not only enables a new kind of awareness of the things which surround us, but also a more refined sense of human meanings, and hence a more complex gamut of emotions. And in this domain, unlike in that of purely external objects, a changed or clarified understanding of meanings will mean a changed or clarified emotion. That is why, in my example above, when I come to see that I am actuated by envy, my feelings characteristically change.

The linguistic dimension also made human agents capable of new

kinds of relations, new sorts of footings that they can stand on with each other, of intimacy and distance, hierarchy and equality. Gregarious apes may have (what we call) a "dominant male", but only language beings can distinguish between leader, king, president, and the like. Animals mate and have offspring, but only language beings define kinship. And it is obvious that our understanding of footings and relations, like our vocabulary of feelings, is deeply intricated in our grasp of value, moral or other.

This discussion brings us back to the central thesis that I want to draw out of Herder, the one that justifies the label 'constitutive'. I have been arguing above that operating in the linguistic dimension is an essential condition of counting as a being which uses language in the full sense. No language without linguistic dimension of irreducible rightness. But the crucial Herderian thesis also inverts this relation: no linguistic dimension without language. This may seem a trivial consequence of the way I have set up this discussion. If we define the linguistic dimension as sensitivity to certain issues concerning the (intrinsically) right use of *signs*, then it follows tautologically that it requires language to be.

But the point I'm trying to make here goes well beyond tautology. The claim is that our sensitivity to these issues of rightness arises out of and along with our ability to express it. This sensitivity is articulated in certain responses, including the various uses of words and articulate speech; but also, as we shall discuss more fully below, gesture, mimicry, the fashioning of images and symbols, and the like. This range of expressive activities, as we can call them, serves not only to communicate this sensitivity to others. The articulation serves just as much and equiprimordially to realize this sensitivity in ourselves. This is at the core of Herder's "expressivism".

Here he inaugurates a theme which has been developed in recent times by Merleau-Ponty. In his chapter on language in *La Phénomènologie de la Perception,* Merleau-Ponty focuses on what seems the mystery of new expression, and the creation of new meanings. We see what happens with gestures. A new gesture, or a style of moving and acting in our surroundings, can express and thus reveal the possibility of a new way of being, conferring new meanings on the things which surround us. There might be someone whose whole stance,

most notoriously perhaps from Wittgenstein. These arguments are sometimes construed as deployed from an observer's perspective: how could you tell for any creature you were studying whether it was defining features or attributing properties, as against just treating things functionally in relation to simple ends, unless this being had language? [44] But Wittgenstein actually uses it at a more radical level. The issue is not: how would some observer know? But how would the agent itself know? And what sense would there be in talking of attributing properties if the agent didn't know which? Wittgenstein makes us sensible of this more radical argument in *Philosophical Investigations* I.258 and following: the famous discussion about the sensation whose occurrences the subject wants to record in a diary. Wittgenstein pushes our intuitions to the following revelatory impasse: what would it be like to know what it is you're attending to, and yet be able to say absolutely nothing about it? The answer is, that this supposition shows itself to be incoherent. The plausibility of the scenario comes from our having set it up as our attending to a *sensation*. But take even this description away, leave it absolutely without any characterization at all, and it dissolves into nothing.[45] Of course, something can defy description; it can have a je ne sais quoi quality. But this is only because it is placed somewhere by language. It is an indescribable *feeling*, or *experience*, or *virtue*, or whatever. The sense of being unable to say wouldn't be there without the surrounding sayable. Language is what constitutes the linguistic dimension.

We could sum up the point in this way. Herder's analysis establishes a distinction between (Ro) the case where an agent's (nonsemantic) response to an object is *conditional* on its having certain features, and/or *because* of certain features (the rat rushes the door when this has a triangle on it, because this has been paired with reward), and (Rs) the case where the agent's response consists (at least partly) in *identifying* the object as the locus of certain features. It is Rs that we want to call responding to a thing *as* that thing. Once these two are distinguished, it is intuitively clear that Rs is impossible without language. This is what Wittgenstein's example shows up. He chooses an exercise (identifying of each new occurrence whether it is the same as an original paradigm) which is inherently in the Rs range, and we can see straight off that there is no way this issue could even *arise* for a nonlinguistic creature.

This in turn throws light on the other facets of the linguistic

Index

Accessive disclosure, 40, 44, 45, 47, 190

Affordance, 147–149, 153, 155. *See also* Gibson, James J.

Animal (non-human), 5, 8–12, 17, 18, 21, 23n, 28, 30, 31, 37, 41, 44, 45, 46, 51, 52, 55, 57, 62, 84, 86, 90, 91, 95, 117, 123, 134, 139, 148, 150, 153, 196, 197, 200, 251, 254, 259, 275n, 276, 284, 285, 334–336, 338–342; bird, 9n, 25, 26, 85, 105, 139, 173, 323; dog, 20, 62, 87, 88, 134–137, 148, 150, 153, 173, 175, 191, 200, 258, 285, 335; rat, 7–10, 17, 25, 26, 32

Anscombe, Elizabeth, 16n, 146n

Arbitrary (or unmotivated) terms, 106, 110, 132, 136, 152, 154, 171, 173, 333, 334; arbitrariness of language, 3, 105, 106, 108–110, 130, 132, 136, 137, 158, 173, 174, 178, 190

Aristotle, 85, 105, 139n, 186, 204, 205 211, 215, 297, 298, 316, 326, 338

Art, 49, 78, 79, 169, 186, 192, 194, 213, 214, 234–239, 247–251, 255, 261, 299, 305, 316, 333, 334, 342; music, 49, 99, 169, 213, 229, 230, 236, 238, 240–250, 333, 339; novels, 46, 47, 78, 79, 89, 169, 178, 190, 237, 238, 240, 244, 248–251, 262, 298, 299, 302, 306, 307n, 310, 312, 314, 319; painting, 24, 156, 238–240, 242, 244–247, 249, 333

Articulate/articulation, 18–20, 23n, 24–26, 29, 33, 38, 43, 44, 47, 49, 81, 90–98, 106, 113, 135–139, 144–148, 152, 153, 158, 159, 164, 167–171, 174, 176–180, 187, 188–192n, 196, 197, 200, 202, 223–232, 234–237, 250–256, 259–262, 269, 273, 281, 282, 286, 299, 314, 329, 334

Assertions, 34, 44n, 62n, 63, 71, 72, 75–78, 116, 120, 124–128, 141, 154, 169, 172, 174, 175, 234–241, 244, 247–249, 251, 292, 293, 297, 299, 316, 333, 341n

Atomism, 4, 16, 17, 21n, 49, 106–111, 116, 118, 188; holism, 4, 12, 17–23, 49, 50, 87, 94, 97, 99, 173, 229, 256, 257; holism of meaning, 18, 20, 21. *See also* Meaning

Augustine, 13, 21, 232

Austen, Jane, 299

Austin, J. L., 120, 134, 264, 268, 275

Autobiographical memory, 65, 66, 318

Autonomous discursive practice (ADP), 127, 128, 172. *See also* Brandom, Robert

"Avuncular" relation, 266, 269, 270, 280, 286

Axial revolutions/age, 79, 203, 335n, 340

Bach, Johann Sebastian, 245, 248

Background, 13–17, 19, 21, 29, 34, 35, 47, 87, 93, 94, 106, 123, 143, 172, 189, 196, 210, 221, 262, 285, 287, 302, 303, 307, 310–312, 321, 339

Bakhtin, Mikail, 60, 61, 270, 306n, 329

Balzac, Honoré de, 24, 299

Barth, Karl, 212

Baudelaire, Charles, 45n, 165n, 186, 190, 228, 232, 319, 326, 345

Beckett, Samuel, 237

Being in the world, 38, 40, 90, 98, 189, 236, 239

Bellah, Robert, 79n, 335, 336n

Benjamin, Walter, 159n, 164n, 319, 325

Bentham, Jeremy, 77

Benveniste, Émile, 59n, 116, 264, 265, 268

Bergson, Henri, 319n, 326

Bildung/bildungsroman, 298, 304, 312, 315, 318

Biographical transition, 185, 299, 300, 307, 309–313, 315, 317, 318

Boas, Franz, 323

Body, 30, 31, 38–44, 48, 76, 149, 156, 159–162, 229, 231–234, 250, 251, 333, 334; embodiment, 16, 31, 42–44, 99, 110, 149, 160, 161, 225, 234, 272, 273, 329, 333, 334, 337, 344

Bootstrapping, 81, 278, 283

Bourdieu, Pierre, 42, 43, 224, 272, 273, 277

Brandom, Robert, 21n, 36, 120–122, 124–129, 131, 172, 174–176

Calhoun, Craig, 272n, 273

Cassirer, Ernst, 49, 263

Children, 5, 19, 22, 41, 42, 52–54, 57–68, 88, 92, 146n, 147–150, 156, 179, 206, 209, 229, 231, 232, 235, 262, 271, 283n, 318, 330, 342

Chimpanzee language, 10–13, 55, 62n, 84–87, 123. *See also* Primate language

Chomsky, Noam, 21, 88, 115, 123, 177, 332

Chopin, Frédéric, 236, 240, 245, 248, 249

Christian, 69, 96, 167, 168, 203, 212–214, 219–222, 228, 233, 257, 307, 310, 343

Collingwood, R. G., 239, 295, 297n

Communion, 50, 55, 62, 63, 65–67, 90–93, 159, 160, 168, 181, 206, 231, 244, 262, 334, 335, 342

Condillac, Étienne Bonnot de, 4–6, 12, 13, 19, 27, 36, 39, 48, 51, 52, 83, 103, 109, 110, 117, 129, 135, 334

Constellations of meanings, 23, 131, 151, 154, 155, 184, 217, 219, 221, 232, 256, 257, 307, 310, 312n; skeins of meanings, 18, 184–188, 195, 200, 201, 218, 219, 224, 227, 254, 256, 258, 260, 307, 308, 327

Constitution, constitutive, 31n, 35, 60, 75, 89, 97, 104n, 115, 116, 118, 140, 220, 221, 242, 260, 266, 275, 276

Constitutive powers of language, 13, 30, 32, 33, 35, 37, 40–42, 55, 66, 67, 72, 79, 90, 93, 98, 146–149, 169, 176, 291, 292, 317; general power, 45–49, 188–191, 197, 199, 200, 223–226, 234–237, 247, 251, 252, 255, 258–264, 288; special powers, 48, 194, 264, 269, 279–285, 287, 288

Constitutive theory, 4, 5, 28, 33, 36–39, 40n, 48, 51, 83, 190, 234, 237, 252

Continuist perspective, 6, 85–89, 92, 197, 203, 275n

Contrast, field of, 18, 20, 22, 25, 26, 94, 130, 135, 136, 154

Conversation, 46, 48, 50, 53, 56–59, 67, 70, 71, 93, 99, 144, 235, 265, 333, 342

Cosmos, cosmic, 22, 23, 37, 47, 64, 73, 79–81, 94, 97n, 110, 216, 232, 260, 274, 280, 284, 288, 316, 319n, 325, 326, 337, 343, 344

Covering law model, 293, 296, 299

Cratylist, 106, 128, 133, 136, 140, 145, 169–173, 262, 286; anti-Cratylist, 106, 108–111, 116, 117, 136, 145, 174

Creating, creativity of language, ix, 22, 29, 36, 39, 47, 57, 62, 78, 90, 98, 99, 117, 119, 136, 137, 142, 145, 146, 152, 157, 174–176, 178, 187, 192n, 223–225, 232, 261–265, 269, 278, 280, 282, 284, 288, 291, 317, 330, 333, 344

Croce, Benedetto, 239, 241

Davidson, Donald, 3, 59, 122, 125–128, 132, 141, 142, 162, 228, 280, 284, 285

Derrida, Jacques, 3, 31

Descartes, René, 4, 13, 64, 104, 107, 110, 111, 116, 163, 231; Cartesian, 16, 31n, 65, 116, 162, 163

Designative theory, 4, 13, 16, 19–21, 48, 105, 109, 110, 113, 191, 226, 252, 254, 255, 258–261, 287, 322, 337, 345

Diachronic embedding, 291, 299–301, 303, 307–313, 315, 317

Dilthey, Wilhelm, 217n

Disclosure, 40, 47, 48, 95, 96, 123, 152, 160–165, 169, 178, 232, 236, 249

Discourse, 40, 49, 71, 74, 75, 87n, 89n, 98, 99, 103, 132, 144, 157, 169, 170, 176, 220, 264, 267, 269, 270, 279–288, 291, 314, 316–318, 328–330, 333, 337, 338

"*discours mixte*", 169, 226, 255, 259, 338. *See also* Ricoeur, Paul

Disengaged, 16, 31, 311, 329

Donald, Merlin, 11, 52n, 60n, 68–76, 235n, 337

Helvétius, Claude Adrien, 14

Herder, Johann Gottfried, ix, 5, 6, 9–14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 27–34, 36, 37, 39, 48, 49, 51, 52, 79, 83, 94, 103, 106, 117, 174, 190, 235, 261, 269, 342

Hermeneutics, 126, 161, 205, 208, 211, 216–221, 225–227, 252–258, 315–317, 328, 338, 341; of suspicion, 252, 255. *See also* Gadamer, Hans-Georg

Heteroglossia, 60, 61, 270, 329n. *See also* Bakhtin, Mikail

HHH, ix, 48, 50, 83, 88, 94, 116, 117, 125, 146, 174, 234, 343, 345

History, 22, 43, 74, 79, 99, 128, 152, 166, 172, 206, 216–219, 224, 227, 239, 242, 253, 256, 259, 273, 274, 284, 287, 295–299, 301, 309, 315, 316, 337–340

HLC, ix, 4, 36, 39, 48–50, 83, 89–93, 98, 103, 106, 111, 112, 116–124, 128–131, 133, 135, 138, 140, 146, 147, 154, 170, 178, 179, 186n, 187, 189, 191, 192n, 200, 254, 259, 262, 284, 285

Hobbes, Thomas, ix, 3–5, 48, 77, 83, 84, 103–106, 108, 109, 117, 129, 131, 135, 145n, 158, 160, 161, 258

Hölderlin, Friedrich, 58, 67, 97n

Hominid, 52, 54n, 68, 86, 117, 334, 335, 337

Hopi, 322, 325–327

Humboldt, Wilhelm von, ix, 20, 21, 24, 48, 49, 83, 115, 122, 174, 177, 178, 189, 197, 258, 261

Hume, David, 14, 15n, 16, 121, 122, 204–210, 219, 221, 292, 295n, 296, 316

Husserl, Edmund, 7n, 112

Hutcheson, Francis, 204, 205

Icon, 74, 87, 98, 99, 130, 169, 247, 275n, 333, 334

Idiolect, 59, 61

Incarnate emotions, 198, 232

Incommensurability, 92, 320, 322, 325, 326. *See also* Whorf, Benjamin Lee

Inductive generalizations, 75, 106, 297, 298, 300, 309, 313–316

Infancy, 5, 11n, 19, 44, 54–57, 65, 66, 148, 150, 296, 300; baby, 55, 57, 66, 317

Instrumental, language as, 4, 7, 10, 12, 48, 90, 94, 105, 107–110, 117, 179–182, 254–257, 345

Interactional text, 270, 271, 283n

Jakobson, Roman, 116, 144n

James, Henry, 299

Joint attention, 50, 57, 58, 65, 66, 90, 184, 190, 231, 265, 335, 342. *See also* Communion

Kant, Immanuel, 14–17, 114, 122, 201, 210–213, 222, 233, 239, 282

Keats, John, 202, 222, 303n

Kierkegaard, Soren, 209, 315, 319

Know-how, 134, 148–150, 170, 296, 300

Korsgaard, Christine, 210

Ladder of articulative expressions, 17, 224–227, 234, 250, 252, 259

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson, 146, 150, 153, 154, 156–159, 162n, 163, 175

Lamarck, Jean-Baptiste, 56, 70

"Landscapes" of meaning, 39, 195–197, 200, 217, 219, 221, 224, 227, 240, 332. *See also* Constellations of meanings

Language game, 21, 36, 47, 113, 116, 127, 172, 261

"*Le symbole donne à penser*", 169, 226, 299, 314

Life meanings. *See* Meanings

Linguistic/semantic dimension, 11–14, 16–20, 25, 27–33, 37, 45, 47, 52, 99, 150, 200, 229, 234, 251, 261, 262, 274, 284

Lipuma, Ed, 276, 278, 279, 283

Locke, John, ix, 3–5, 12–14, 16n, 36, 48, 59, 77, 81, 83, 84, 103, 106–112, 114, 117, 129, 131, 132, 135, 158n, 161, 162

Locutionary, 120, 121, 138, 268; illocutionary, 84, 98, 120, 268; perlocutionary acts, 120, 268

Logos, 73, 74, 79, 338

Lucy, John, 88n, 179, 322

Macho, 38, 40, 41, 48, 76, 98, 223–225, 235, 251

MacIntyre, Alasdair, 336n

Mackie, John, 204

Mallarmé, Stéphane, 30, 97n

Mann, Thomas, 302–310

Marx, Karl/Marxism, 213, 220, 226, 284, 288, 316

Mauss, Marcel, 277

McLuhan, Marshall, 86

Mead, George Herbert, 64–67

Meanings: human meanings, 23, 28, 41, 44, 46, 48, 49, 84, 91, 92, 98, 125, 148, 149, 153, 154, 161, 172, 180, 182, 185, 188, 193n, 194n, 199, 218, 226, 237, 252, 253, 255, 257, 259–262, 286–288, 300, 313, 314, 326–329, 332, 333, 336–338; life meanings, 31, 86, 91–92, 182, 254–258, 336, 339; liminal meanings, 23n, 94n, 95, 97n, 334; meaning creation, ix, 225, 249; meaningful human life, 3, 4, 63, 82, 90, 91, 125–128, 165, 185–189, 191, 195, 200–205, 207, 210, 211, 216, 220, 221, 228, 240, 245, 253, 257, 296, 301, 303, 312n, 313, 319; metabiological meanings, 91, 92, 181, 184–190, 192, 194–196, 199, 200, 226, 250, 254, 255, 262, 344, 345; monological/dialogical, 34, 50, 51, 56, 59, 64–67, 108, 318, 333, 334; thick meaning, 128, 160, 262, 284

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 14, 25n, 29–31n, 93, 98, 146, 149, 174, 301n

Metabiological meanings. *See* Meanings

Metaphor, 23n, 30, 76–78, 107, 130, 137–142, 145, 154–165, 168–176, 178, 190, 211, 224, 228–232, 234, 250, 261, 272n, 282, 333, 334; attacks on metaphor, 77, 105, 106, 129, 141, 142, 154; dead (dying) metaphors, 139n, 142–144, 165, 172, 183

Metaphysics, metaphysical, 64, 81, 116, 121, 122, 125, 126, 129–131, 204, 226, 237, 279, 304, 325, 327, 337, 338

Metapragmatic, 35, 44, 266, 280, 286

Mill, John Stuart, 7n, 112

Milton, John, 242, 341

Mimesis, mimetic, 60n, 63, 68–72, 74, 76, 77, 87, 235

Moss, Lenny, 54n, 85n, 341n, 342n

Motor intentionality, 53n, 149–151, 156, 161

Murdoch, Iris, 55n, 209

Mystery, mysterious, 6, 29, 110, 117, 119, 124, 126, 128, 148, 240, 262, 263n, 341

Myth, mythic, 22, 64, 70–79, 279, 280, 337, 343

Names/naming, 21, 31, 36, 49, 71, 93, 94, 104–106, 109, 110, 118, 130, 133, 134–138, 146, 152, 157, 173, 174, 187, 191, 192, 200, 203, 224, 228, 231, 232, 250, 254–258, 262, 266, 280–284, 287, 332, 333

Narrative, 71, 2, 75, 76, 156, 173, 216, 243, 291–293, 295n, 299, 302, 316, 337

Nature, 22, 69, 79n, 97n, 106, 107, 125, 145n, 204, 211–216, 249, 258, 286, 287, 321, 343; human nature, 4, 213, 279, 326, 339; naturalism, 121, 126, 131, 341n

Neologize, 37, 137, 145, 152, 154, 188, 200, 247, 285

Network models, 137n, 143n, 151, 152n, 154, 155n. *See also* Pawelec, Andrzej

Newton, Isaac, 316, 327

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 140, 165, 166, 208, 215, 219–221, 226, 228, 257, 305, 310

Norms, normativity, 44, 59–61, 63, 69, 73, 76, 81, 91, 112–114, 118, 124–133, 145, 171, 172, 175, 182, 193, 195, 201, 219, 230, 259, 270, 271, 274, 275, 278–287, 333, 336

Novalis, 344

Objectivist, 91, 92, 114, 124, 125, 128, 132, 149, 153, 173, 182, 202, 204, 249, 250, 257, 262, 303, 320, 329, 337

Ontogenesis, 11n, 44, 52, 55, 61, 63, 66, 68, 111, 112, 261, 335, 342

Parole parlante/parole parlée, 25n, 30, 93, 94, 98, 146. *See also* Merleau-Ponty, Maurice

Pawelec, Andrzej, 137n, 143n, 152n, 154, 155

Performative, 35, 74, 80–82, 89, 210, 264, 267–269, 274, 275, 278, 280, 284; backward