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The Symbol Model vs. Language as Constitutive Articulate Contact

John Stewart

Since the mid-twentieth century, postmodern philosophers of various stripes have been questioning the efficacy of representational accounts of knowledge and representational accounts of language. In one influential volume, Richard Rorty exploits the metaphor of "mirroring" to expose serious problems inherent in the widespread beliefs held by philosophers and many other human scientists that

> [t]o know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. [and that] Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so.)[1]

Rorty combines insights from Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey to argue persuasively that it is a mistake to understand knowing as "mirroring" something separate from the knower. He points out that these three philosophers expressed this insight primarily as a claim about the nature of language. The three "hammer away at the holistic point," Rorty writes, that words do not take their meanings "by virtue of their representative character" or "their transparency to the real." To profit from these thinkers' works, "we have to understand speech not only as not the externalizing of inner representations, but as not a representation at all."[2]

Both Rorty's supporters and his critics have recognized that arguments like his against "systematic" theorizing and for a conception of phi-

losophy as "the conversation of humankind" turn on a radical rethinking of the nature of language. For example, Richard J. Bernstein locates both the impetus for and the resistance to much of postmodernism in what he calls "Cartesian Anxiety," the conviction that either there is a fixed foundation for knowledge—objectivism—or we cannot escape the intellectual and moral chaos of relativism.[3] With the help of Rorty, Gadamer, Habermas, and Arendt, Bernstein argues that this anxiety can only be dissolved by adopting "a dialogical model of rationality" anchored in a view of language as *praxis*. Cultures need "to foster and nurture those forms of communal life in which dialogue, conversation, *phronesis*, practical discourse, and judgment are concretely embodied in our everyday practices. This is the *telos* that is common to the visions of Gadamer, Habermas, Rorty, and Arendt."[4] Importantly, both poles of Bernstein's Cartesian dilemma depend on representationalist assumptions. Objectivism relies on the assumption that knowledge and language can represent "reality" accurately, and relativism terrifies because it asserts that there is no bedrock reality for knowledge and language to represent. Thus, Bernstein argues, the escape from this anxiety begins with the recognition that knowledge and language are not representational but constitutive, which is to say that human worlds are coconstructed in the everyday practices of "dialogue, conversation, *phronesis*, practical discourse." On his view, language does not "represent" aspects of these human worlds; as praxical dialogue it brings them into being.

These arguments against representationalism echo and develop Martin Heidegger's claim that "Language is the house of Being." As Heidegger put it, "In its [language's] home [the hu]man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of Being insofar as they bring the manifestation to language and maintain it in language through their speech."[5] Two centrally important claims are made here. The first is that language "accomplishes the manifestation of Being" rather than *representing* Being that has somehow already and elsewhere been accomplished. This is a radically different picture from the one developed in most western language scholarship. As Heidegger noted, Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* established the classical, representational view of language, which was that "the letters are signs of sounds, the sounds are signs of mental experiences, and these are signs of things." Due to Aristotle's influence, "The sign relation constitutes the struts of the structure [of language]. . . . It has remained the standard for all later considerations of language, although with numerous modifications."[6] Heidegger believed that it was important to attend to this classical view because it prevents language scholars and laypeople from recognizing that "*The essential being of language*

is Saying as Showing. [and] Its showing character is not based on signs of any kind."[7] In other words, Heidegger argued that the dominant, representational model of language obscures the extent to which language is constitutive.

Heidegger's second centrally important claim was that this constitutive character of language can be grasped only when language is understood as *process* or *event* rather than *system*. This means, first, that "If we take language directly in the sense of something that is present, we encounter it as the act of speaking, the activation of the organs of speech, mouth, lips, tongue. Language manifests itself in speaking. . . ."[8] But in addition, "speaking is at the same time also listening. . . . Listening accompanies and surrounds not only speaking such as takes place in conversation. The simultaneousness of speaking and listening has a larger meaning. Speaking is of itself a listening. Speaking is listening to the language which we speak."[9] Thus in several of Heidegger's works, language was described as *coconstitutive* or *communicative*. Rather than being treated as a "system" that "represents" meanings, thoughts, or things, language became the interpersonal speaking-and-listening event that accomplishes the manifestation of Being. In other words, the phenomenon that has classically been viewed as (the system of) language was refigured as *speech communicating*.

Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer affirms and develops his mentor's insights when he criticizes the representational *"concept of language* that modern linguistics and philosophy of language take as their starting point," because it inadequately captures "the language that lives in speech."[10] Gadamer emphasizes that from his perspective language "is no longer a system of [representational] symbols or a set of rules of grammar and syntax,"[11] and that "as long as [language] is even conceived as a symbolic form, it is not yet recognized in all its true dimensions."[12] In several of his works Gadamer mounts a sustained critique of representational accounts of language and an argument for understanding how language occurs as dialogue or conversation in which "matters of fact (*Sacheverhalte*)" and other features of human worlds are coconstituted in address-and-response.[13] A number of twentieth-century philosophers have echoed aspects of Gadamer's, Heidegger's, Bernstein's, and Rorty's views, so that there is now a widespread recognition that at least several versions of postmodernism centrally involve a critique of representational accounts of the nature of knowledge and the nature of language.[14]

Heidegger's comments about "sign relations" and Gadamer's reference to the model of language as "a symbolic form" demonstrate that a central target of this general critique is the view that language is a *semiotic system*, that is, a system of signs and/or symbols. Since signs and symbols are

universally understood as entities that somehow "stand for" or "depict" something else, critiques of representational accounts of the nature of language are critiques of accounts of language as a semiotic system. But oddly enough, this point has not been widely recognized. Despite the prominence and plausibility of postmodern arguments against representationalism, scholars in many disciplines continue to characterize language semiotically. 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 schools of thought, from ancient Greece through the Middle Ages *and up to the present time* [italics added]. 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*.[15]

Although Kristeva acknowledges at least one other point of view "based on a philosophical critique of the very concept of the sign,"[16] she nonetheless treats semiosis as one essential feature of language.

Scholars in several disciplines concur with Kristeva about the fundamentally semiotic nature of language. For example, sociologist Norbert Elias maintained that to understand virtually anything, 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."[17] 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, Elias wrote, "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."[18] Psycholinguist Charles E. Osgood echoed the same sentiments when he defined what he took to be the six essential criteria that characterize language. The fourth is The Semantic Criterion, which holds that the production of identifiably different and nonrandomly recurrent physical linguistic forms (e.g., words) follows nonrandom rules of reference to events in other channels. "This criterion," Osgood explained, "implied 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*."[19]

Some contemporary communication scholars also persist in the belief that their object of study is a representational, semiotic system. For exam-

ple, in a widely cited essay, Gary Cronkhite argues that the discipline of communication is united by its focus upon "human symbolic activity," and that "all words, with the possible exceptions of onomatopoeic [sic] words, are pure *symbols*."[20] Cronkhite acknowledges criticisms of the referential nature of "treatments of meaning as symbolic," but he claims to avoid this problem by asserting that "a *symbol system* (e.g., the English language) represents *systems* of environmental, social, and cognitive entities and relationships in far more complex ways than direct symbol-referent correspondences."[21] In a similar vein, Michael T. Motley begins his examination of the construct of communicative intent with a review of "some extremely common, if not quite universal assumptions found in even the most elementary discussions" of his subject matter.[22] 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," Motley notes. And "the cognitive process of preparing a message 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. . .*"[23] (pp. 2–3).

Some prominent writers have set out systematically to correct what they acknowledge are oversimplifications in semiotic characterizations of language and communication. For example, semiotician Umberto Eco attempts to articulate key features of what he calls a "general semiotics" that embraces "text, semiosis, significant practice, communication, discourse, language, effability, and so on."[24] 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 to 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."[25] 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."[26]

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."[27] 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."[28] 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" (Cronkhite's referentialism) ultimately reaffirms most features of historical analyses, including the ontological claim that in the process of semiotic 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 dominant, simplistically representational 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 linguistique 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. Cronkhite and Motley cite with approval C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards's classic, *The Meaning of Meaning*, but their views of communication move significantly beyond the telementational 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 and many other philosophers, linguists, semioticians, and communication theorists share some common commitments. These commitments make up what I call the symbol model, the model summarized by the claim that language is fundamentally a semiotic system, a system of signs and/or symbols.

Some scholars who embrace this perspective, including D. S. Clarke, the author of chapter 7 of this book, argue against using the term "sym-

bol" to label such a model. They take pains to distinguish generally be-
tween signs and symbols, and to differentiate among specific types of signs,
for example, "decisigns," "natsigns," and comsigns."[29] Thus, these writers
claim, it is both imprecise and misleading to group semiotic programs
together under the *symbol* model" rubric. But as the citations from Os-
good, Elias, Cronkhite, and Motley indicate, "symbol" is the term most
frequently used by scholars in a variety of disciplines to characterize the
basic nature of language. Scores of these writers continue in the 1990s to
argue that the human animal is distinctive because of its ability to "sym-
bolize" and that language is essentially, in Kenneth Burke's words, a "con-
ventional, arbitrary symbol system."[30] Thus I have chosen the term "sym-
bol 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.

As I have already indicated, the first commitment of the symbol model
is an ontological one. These accounts presume that there is a fundamental
distinction between two realms or worlds, the world of the sign and the
signified, symbol and symbolized, name and named, word and thought,
aliquid and *aliquo*. 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 differ-
ent from, and most often ontologically subordinate to, whatever they sig-
nify 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 in-
separable, or even, in some cases, that there is no distinction. But once the
semiotic assumption has been made, a structural a priori has been estab-
lished, and even those who argue for inseparability must struggle to make
their accounts of language coherent with what has been termed the
"Janus-faced" character of language.[31] 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
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 (phonemes, morphemes, words,
utterances, speech acts) that are its atoms or molecules. The third com-
mitment 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.[32] 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. Some version of these five commitments is entailed by the decision to characterize language semiotically. In other words, *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 reviews of the history of linguistics demonstrate in detail, this claim embodies the ontology first established in Platonic and Aristotelian formulations of the nature of language.[33] The basic distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic worlds was articulated explicitly in the influential Aristotelian formula that Heidegger cited: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words."[34] This became the medieval canon linking *aliquid* and *aliquo*, which was developed into John Locke's claim that words are "signs" that signify "ideas," and the connection in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* between "propositions" and the "objects of thought" that they "picture."[35] In Kristeva's words cited earlier, the distinction is between "language" and "real facts." Elias distinguished between "symbols" and "physical reality" or "a heap of matter." 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." Cronkhite's terms are "symbols" or "symbol systems" and "environmental, social, and cognitive entities," 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)." 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, which would mean, in the present vocabulary, that they were parts of *one* world. This claim was central to Saussure's argument that language is constituted solely of *differences* among units in the single system. But despite the conceptual centrality of this claim, Saussure contradicted it by treating

concept and sound image as ontologically distinct, both when he discussed the fact that sound images were "temporal" but ideas were not,[36] and when he argued that there is a *representational* relationship between concept and sound image.[37] This set of moves is typical. Theorists who treat language semiotically sometimes acknowledge the potential problems created by their commitment to two worlds, but when they explore in detail the nature of the "symbol" or "signifier" and the "symbolized" or "signified," in virtually all cases they postulate at one point or another an ontological distinction between them.

Once the existence of two realms or worlds has been posited, and one wishes to carry on the conversation, one requirement for coherence is that the theorist explain the nature of each world—what each is made up of or resembles. Most language scholars have approached this issue by beginning with analysis rather than synthesis, which has led them to identify the *units* that purportedly constitute 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, coherence further 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 *system* 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 orient to this system. Commitment #5 is a response to this question: Humans use the system instrumentally to accomplish their goals.

Commitment #2: Atomism

As was noted, the commitment to atomism is embodied in the decision 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 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 atten-
tion 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. This reductive feature of the atomism commitment is one
reason the symbol model distorts the phenomenon it purports to explain.

The commitment to treat language atomistically has been most appar-
ent in theorists' dependence on examples of single words to support their
claims about the semiotic character of language. The literature from pre-
Socratic times to the present is replete with claims that "horse," "tree,"
"ox," "chair," "table," "cat," "hat," and "mat" are all paradigm examples of
units of languate that, when analyzed carefully, will reveal the basic char-
acter of language itself. At best, of course, these analyses can only account
for some aspects of the operation of one category of language units, con-
crete 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, conjunc-
tions, and even sentences and propositions have been analyzed in terms of,
or in ways parasitic on, the analysis of concrete nouns. Several critics have
noted the indefensibility of this way of proceeding, and, as a result, espe-
cially in the twentieth century, some theorists have concentrated on pho-
nemes, 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. 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. Everyday experience has often appeared to offer
a hint: Names represent individual persons; therefore, early theorists spec-
ulated, isn't it 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, includ-
ing negative terms, articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. But unfor-
tunately, rather than reexamining the basic assumption that words func-
tion representationally, scholars typically have looked for ways to salvage
their semiotic analyses. One strategy has been to argue that problematic
words only represented by virtue of their connection with other, concrete
terms. This strategy led to the tortuous efforts to analyze "categorematic"
and "syncategorematic" terms that peaked in the late Middle Ages. A sec-

ond approach 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."[38] Gilbert Ryle labeled this strategy "the 'Fido'-Fido fallacy," because it holds that every meaningful expression must signify an extra-linguistic correlate, as "Fido" signifies Fido.[39] 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* ("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. 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 a process, event, or mode of human being. In the late nineteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt attempted to redirect language scholarship by arguing that theorists should focus on *energeia* or *activity*, not *ergon*, or *product*.[40] But he stopped considerably short of accomplishing this redefinition, 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 is that he wanted to emphasize how each linguistic unit is meaningful only in relation to the other units making up its system. As noted earlier, 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. This move perpetuated a subject-object relationship between linguists and language, and it is this feature of commitment #4 that, I believe, has most distorted subsequent language study.

The reason the system commitment distorts language study is that it attempts to separate the analyst from the phenomenon being analyzed— language—even though the only way to analyze language (or any other topic)[41] is linguistically, discursively, communicatively, "in" language. This commitment, in other words, presupposes an impossible distinction be- tween linguistically constituted beings and language, as if the human an- alyst could function as purely *res cogitans* examining and manipulating an equally pure *res extensa*—language. I argue more fully later in this chap- ter that although it may appear initially plausible to conceive of language as an object of study that is unproblematically accessible to investigation by human subjects, the pervasively linguistic nature of human being makes this subject-object approach to language ultimately incoherent.

Commitment #5: Tool

The tool commitment makes this subject-object focus explicit. Adher- ence to this commitment emerged relatively late in the development of the symbol model. Virtually all classical authors acknowledged that language is used in various ways. But the contemporary emphasis on language as an instrumental tool reflects the Enlightenment proclivity for analyses that begin with the Cartesian *cogito* and the irreducible distinction between the 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 that 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 pur- pose 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."[42] As this commitment has been worked out, language has often been treated as an instrument uniquely available to humans and the primary reason for humans' superiority over 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. As Cronkhite and others acknowledge, 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, Ryle, Austin,[43] and Searle,[44] and the hermeneutic efforts of Heidegger, Gadamer, 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.

The Model's Primary Limitation: The Natural Language Problem

Despite the variety of critiques of representational views of language, few scholars have emphasized how difficult it is to apply the symbol model to the phenomena it purports to depict. 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 readily and fruitfully fit paradigmatic examples of its explanadum. 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. 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." Artificial constructions such as these can often clarify their authors' claims, but they cannot test them. Like focusing on concrete nouns, the tendency to use only hypothetical examples has

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

But a group of researchers who call themselves conversation 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 parentheses. Below is an excerpt from a conversation analyst's transcript of a naturally occurring interchange that 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 mIL-lion 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.

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

14. John: 'S so many people.

15. Judy: Um hmm[45]

As the reader no doubt can sense, this transcript captures something much closer to language as it actually occurs than the examples commonly used by philosophers, linguists, and semioticians. 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 negotiating their respective identities as they are in making assertions. Questions are at least as important as answers, and pause, stress, rhythm, 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, this example is surely more paradigmatic than the hypotheticals typically discussed, and, as a relatively "spontaneous" and "natural" instance, it warrants close attention.

The reader may also sense what outcome will result from testing the symbol model by applying it here. But hopefully without belaboring the obvious, 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.

Several of the concrete nouns in these examples appear to be accurately described by the symbol model. "Bicycles," "campus," "people," and perhaps "year" could 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. But to acknowledge that these words may be thought of as signs or symbols of things or concepts is still to leave unexplained the majority of the words and phrases in these examples. 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—"So."[46] 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 in order 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 in order 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 state 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. Notice, also, how the effort to describe this specific "intent," or "concept" depends on a model of the mind that is manifestly 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 but also with contemporary philosophical anthropology.[47] Today, virtually every schoolchild knows that the mind is not 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 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 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. Since "So" is more informal than either "Hence" or "Therefore," the mental states would obviously differ. On the other hand, in order 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 to 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," in order 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 without using words, 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," wouldn't this mental state 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 this example. In utterance #1 this list includes "what," "do," "THI::NK," "about," "the," and "on." There are at least an additional sixty-six words here that could be similarly analyzed.

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 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't this hoary ontological conundrum 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,"[48] and when he emphasized that each linguistic unit is meaningful only in relation to the other units making up the circumscribed system. But 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 be coherent to claim both that two related phenomena are of the same ontological status and that the relationship between them is representational. If the purported relationship is a signifying or symbolizing one, then the phenomena need to be different in kind. This is why the two worlds commitment is so fundamental to the symbol model: This ontological difference is inherent in the meaning of "representation."

This coherency difficulty probably explains why theorists who claim at one point that signifier and signified are similar tend subsequently to treat them as ontologically distinct. And this is the second reason why the representational problem cannot be solved this way: This strategy presages a contradiction. Both Émile Benveniste and Kristeva make this point about the *Cours*. As Benveniste explains,

> Even though Saussure said that the idea of "sister" is not connected to the signifier *s-ö-r*, he was not thinking any the less of the *reality* of the notion. When he spoke of the difference between *b-ö-f* and *o-k-s*, he was referring, in spite of himself, to the fact that these two terms applied to the same *reality*. Here, then, is the *thing*, expressly excluded at first from the definition of the sign, now creeping into it by a detour, and *permanently installing a contradiction there* [italics added].[49]

Saussure appears to have noticed this permanent contradiction, that is, that he could not maintain both his claim that *signifiant* and *signifié* were

equally psychological and his commitment to there being a representational relationship between them. So later sections of his work acknowledge the necessity of the ontological difference. Eco's analysis cited earlier contains the same contradiction. At one point Eco speaks of the two aspects representationally linked by the sign as different "portions of the continuum," and subsequently he claims that one is linguistic and the other is part of "the world" or "the pulp . . . of the matter."

In short, protests that the two worlds commitment of the symbol model is no longer a part of serious language theorizing, and therefore that any attempt to test it against living language is irrelevant or unfair, can only be sustained if one ignores a substantial part of the significant contemporary literature in philosophy, linguistics, semiotics, and communication theory. *"Up to the present time* (italics added)," Kristeva writes, "every speaker is more or less conscious of the fact that . . . the elements of the spoken chain . . . symbolize or *represent* real facts by *naming* them." "Language," claims Osgood, functions "to *symbolize* (represent for the organism) the non-necessarily-*here* and the not-necessarily-*now*." The fact that symbols enable humans to distance themselves from "existence here and now as a heap of matter" is "obvious," according to Elias. And even as Eco resists the "trivial identification [of the sign] with the idea of coded equivalence and identity," he develops an account that is dependent on the same theoretical commitment that undergirds the "trivial" view he resists; namely, that language essentially involves the occurrence in an interpreting human being of a representational relationship between some *aliquid* and some *aliquo*. These citations are only a sample of the expressions of the two worlds commitment that influential scholars in several disciplines have made through the past decade. The ontological difference basic to the symbol model is alive and well, and yet this feature of semiotic characterizations of the nature of language cannot coherently be applied to concrete instances of the phenomenon it purports to describe.

Before assessing the applicability of the remaining theoretical commitments, I want to underscore the hermeneutic approach to validity that guides my analysis. A realistic or idealistic approach would argue that the symbol model is "accurate" or "inaccurate," "true" or "false." It would do so by identifying the independently existing, specifiable phenomena against which one could juxtapose the model in order to determine how well the model captured or corresponded to these realities. To test the symbol model in this way, one would need a supply of words, representeds, and manifest relations between them. But the process of testing the first commitment of the symbol model on these examples has clarified that the model cannot be verified in this way because the signified is generally unspecifiable. There is, in other words, a shortage of identifiable phenomena against which to test the model's correspondence, due primarily to

the impossibility of maintaining a subject-object relationship with one's language. As a result, I argue, one would be well-advised to give up the correspondence criterion and instead to ask how coherent, plausible, and applicable the symbol model is. These are the questions that guide a hermeneutic validity test. As Gadamer puts it, from this perspective the hermeneutic theorist is primarily interested in what a model comes to in its being worked out.[50] My primary argument is that the symbol model does not fare well as it is worked out and that the model has very limited applicability and equally limited plausibility and coherence. When those who propound it attempt systematically to trace out its implications and applications, they typically find themselves in one of several argumentative, theoretical, and/or philosophical cul-de-sacs similar to those just encountered in the attempted analysis of "So." And they are in good company; these intellectual and practical dead ends have been occupied by some of the West's most respected thinkers. The problem, I argue, is not a lack of rigor or imagination. The problem is the model: Language cannot be coherently, plausibly, and usefully described as a system of symbols.

Efforts to test the other commitments of the symbol model lead to a similar conclusion. As noted earlier, the atomism commitment pictures language as made up of identifiable units, often words. Leaving aside, for a moment, the difficulties of determining exactly what a word is, the bulk of the discourse in this example of conversation is both hearable and seeable as made up of grammatically identifiable individual units. But several utterances do not fit this pattern, for example "Duzit" (line 5), "unno" (1.11), and "'s" (1.14). How can the commitment to atomism be applied to elements that appear to be combinations of the basic units specified by the model? In addition, the brackets between lines 4–5, 6–7, and 9–10 indicate overlapped talk. Commitment #2 would indicate that Judy is simply saying "he:h" at the same time John is saying "Duzit" and is saying "-ne an" at the same time John is saying "Oh riLleh," and that one can appropriately understand this language by examining these individual words or individual sentences. But a conversation analyst would respond by repeating the argument outlined earlier against the efficacy of word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence analysis and for the claim that more is revealed in these instances of language by attending to the molar rather than the molecular units. Moreover, most conversation analysts would not treat the larger units as signifiers and thereby get caught in the search for signifieds. Instead, the claim might be made, for example, that the overlap as a whole is a notable unit, because all three talkovers are interruptions of the female by the male. Such analysis might also point out that Judy's "-hh.h and gi(h)ve up!" in turn 9 after John's overlap could be traceable in part to his overlap, not just to the previous words in her utterance or his locution