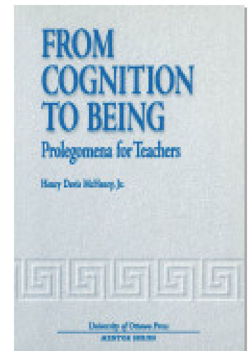
1. OUR PICTURE OF LANGUAGE



Published by

McHenry, Henry Davis.
From Cognition to Being: Prolegomena for Teachers.
University of Ottawa Press, 1999.
Project MUSE. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.6563.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6563

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)

1
OUR PICTURE OF LANGUAGE

> Philosophers reduced the scope of their inquiries so much that Wittgenstein... said "the sole remaining task for philosophy is the analysis of language." What a comedown from the great tradition of philosophy from Aristotle to Kant!
>
> —Steven Hawking[1]

> I conclude that there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language users master and then apply to cases.
>
> —Donald Davidson[2]

Even such a contemporary master of the use of invented pictures to handle reality as Steven Hawking still sees language as reality's little brother. He looks back to the tradition, both empiricist and rationalist, of investigating a nature independent of and vaster than the human. Even for us lay people, this tradition is so intrinsic to our way of being in the world that we seldom see any other possibility. This is why the task of "analysis" seems so fundamental. If we are given a world, a reality with the components we recognize (tables and chairs, trees, people...), then the job of cutting that reality up into appropriate parts and figuring out how these relate to each other seems like the most important job we can do. But this job goes along with a particular picture of language's nature and function. It is not even that we assume the subordination of language to reality: I am supposing that our very ways of being with other people,

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)

thinking and speaking, hoping and wishing, opining and despairing, are tied up with the presumption that what language does is abstract from reality, from what there is in nature, and then describe it. For the most part, it is rather as if this notion assumes us, takes us up into itself like the atmosphere; it is part of the sustaining air we breathe. For a précis of this state of affairs—our respiration of and in language—see Walker Percy's essay "The Mystery of Language."[3] Percy says that we are breathing cause and effect; I agree and only add that we are breathing another colorless, odorless gas as well, called reference.

There is fresher air. Though it has taken the better part of a century, it is fairly well accepted nowadays in linguistic circles that language works because of social convention. I can remember the precise moment when I first got this idea clearly; it was like finding a new walking stick, of exactly the right length and suppleness and elegance. I didn't know yet where I might be walking with the aid of this stick, but it looked very useful indeed. I owe the idea to one of my first teachers in the English Department at the University of Virginia; he showed it to us in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist working in Geneva during the first decade of this century. Saussure's work has since served in several intellectual traditions, most notably as the foundation of what was called structuralism. In Wittgenstein, to whose conversation Chapter Four is devoted, cousins of Saussure's ideas shifted the ground underneath philosophy.

To say that meaning occurs because of social convention is to say that there is no necessary relation between a sign and what it signifies; the signifier is, as Saussure asserted, arbitrary. (What breathy emphasis my teacher gave to the word "arbitrariness"! He spoke as if here were the knot of our whole intricate relation to the world.) Saussure does not mean that the arbitrariness of the sign results from a kind of willful or capricious act. His idea might have been better rendered by a word like "accidentality." (Somewhere P. F. Strawson remarks that a sign gets established because it works, and then it works because it is established. In the two-year-old's developing speech, one can watch as this contingency of sign practice flowers in the milieu of shared human doings.) The arbitrariness of the sign might be exemplified as follows. Look first at words in different languages for what we see as the same idea. The word *arbre* works just as well for the community that uses it as the word *tree* does for its users, though the two words obviously bear no formal relation to each other. Neither word, then, corresponds in its shape or sound to any characteristic of the idea that it evokes. Or look at the way we can, on the spur of the moment, use any sound to serve the purposes of communicating: imagine a child, alone in his sandbox, building a sand castle. His father comes into the vicinity, strikes a pose of obvious astonishment, and says "Goo gah!" Beaming, the child responds "Goo gah goo gah!" In class later that day the

teacher, as an experiment, asks his students to open the doodahs of the classroom to let in a little more air.

Locke had seen this much when he looked at language in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. But in Saussure's use the idea of arbitrariness brings more with it. It is not just that we can couple any sound with a meaning, or with a "referent"—it is also that the sounds do not work by referring to the objects. It was clear to my students that a doodah was a window because opening one would let in more air. The cluster of signs—open, doodah, let in, air—worked together against (or within) a background of common practice. Saussure's crucial insight was that to use language is not to arrange sounds or marks so that they correspond with things in the world and in ourselves. Rather, it is to navigate within a constellation and among constellations, not of stars but of arbitrary "values." On this view, the system of tools that comprises our language is like an immense network of commodities and exchanges among commodities. Words, sentences, parts of speech, grammatical patterns, shrugs, even silence—all are commodities with relative value. That is, each of these commodities has its value neither because of anything inherent in its structure or essence, nor by virtue of the content of its referent, but because *all the other elements have what value they have*. As vowels and consonants define each other in the stream of speech, so do nouns and verbs, requests and assertions, black and white, red and pink: they set each other apart, imbibing meaning through association and contrast. A value is defined by its simultaneous similarities to and differences from other values in the system that the values make up. It would be equally correct to say the system makes up the values.[4] The parts of speech and the whole of speech arise together interdependently.

We may immediately think: surely some commodities—gold or diamonds, say, or wheat—have intrinsic worth, intrinsic value. But how would we say what that value is? Isn't it what we can buy with the commodity, what we can exchange it for, compare it with, or use it to do? Gold is trading today at, say, three hundred eighty-five dollars an ounce. But what is a dollar worth? Well, it's worth 1/385 of an ounce of gold. In the system of monetary values as it stands today—in today's state of the system of monetary values—gold and currency stand in the ratio 1 to 385. (That, of course, was the ratio when I began this chapter. As I complete the book, it stands closer to 1 to 335.) We specify one unit in terms of other units. The money value of wheat is the wheat value of money, and we measure the prospect of satisfying our appetite just as readily in terms of our income level as of the level of flour in the bin. Another example or two will make this notion of a system of values clearer. I will follow Saussure almost verbatim.

First, consider the case of the express train from Geneva to Paris that leaves every day at 8:45 p.m. Is this the same train every day? We say so,

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)

even though locomotive, cars, and personnel may all be different from one day to the next. "The 8:45 express to Paris" is a name we give to a place in a system, here the system marked out in the railroad timetable. What gives the express its identity is the hour of its departure, its origin and destination, and all the other circumstances that distinguish it from other expresses, and other trains, and other modes of transportation. Similarly, if Elm Street is demolished, say to upgrade utilities underneath, and then rebuilt, with wider sidewalks and a landscaped median where before there was none, we might remark with pleasure how nicely the city planners have restored Elm Street, though nothing of the old street remains. What makes it Elm Street is its position relative to College, Grove, and High Streets, not anything in its material or even its proportions. We call it Elm Street because we can use that name to locate ourselves in the city, to navigate. We have a map of the city, on paper or in our head, and the name Elm Street holds a unique place in the system of which the map is one portrayal.[5] Or suppose our purpose is to play a game of chess: does it matter if we have lost one of the knights? Of course not. We simply put down a bottle cap in the place of the knight, and play on. We *call* it the knight without a second thought, simply by continuing our play.[6] For my child, any stick is a sword; any place, inside or outside, Sherwood Forest. When he pretends, what he's doing is setting up a system of arbitrary values, defined as elements of the game he wants to play.

All of these are examples of what Saussure calls "semiological systems." Semiology (from Greek *semeion*, sign) is the name of a science that Saussure envisioned and inaugurated, studying our use of systems of values, "the life of signs within society."[7] In any semiological system, as we see, the elements hold each other in their places in equilibrium—this is what it is for meaning to be given by "value."

Are scholastic systems semiological systems? Let us look at, for example, letter grades. "A" means "Excellent", "B" means "Good", "C" Fair, "D" Poor, "F" Failure. This system works well, particularly if you add the possibility of "+" and "–" to the letters. But it works, as we all know, by comparison within the group of students in a particular class at a particular school, as well as by reference to more objective standards. Bill gets a B on his paper partly because Jill's paper earned an A, and Will's a C, and so on. That is, A means Excellent in comparison and contrast with other performances, and it is some human speaker who makes the comparisons. (Standardized "objective" tests are no less exemplary of the dependence on human speaking, human judgment, as the controversy over the fairness of the S.A.T. (Scholastic Aptitude Test) shows. The test is "objective" and "standardized" for a chosen speech community, which may coincide with a particular socio-economic class. The question becomes not "Are they objective?" but "Who chooses to use them, and for

what purposes?") Someone has to have the final *say* about what grade is given—or several someones. This is as it should be. But it does not mean that so-called "objective" tests are really subjective. I am not really interested here in the subjective-objective polarity as a scale for measuring educational phenomena. Instead I am looking at the social context, the semiological system where, with its myriad correlated distinctions, the subject/object dichotomy, along with the letter grades and the rest of our vocabulary, channels our collective practice.

Though my own final say is often influenced by how much effort I think has gone into a student's work, how much improvement is evident, I am always grading with one eye on the "objective" (standard) descriptions of "A work" or "C work" promulgated by my institution and the other on the particular history of the student in question, sometimes as plaintively urged by himself. In other words, I am making active use of the system of values that encompasses the letter grades, the verbal descriptions, and my conversations with others in my community. I am saying what the case is for each of my students' work, but I can say it only within, and in the terms presented by, a system of values. And—this is crucial—that system comes out of colloquy, conversation: with other teachers, with the students themselves, with the reputation and aspirations of the institution, including its published grading standards, and so on. The system not only comes out of colloquy but lives in it, moment by moment.

If a new category were added to the five conventional ones—say, "S" for Superlative—I would have to re-calculate everything, for the equilibrium between the values would have been disturbed. Middle-grade work could now be assigned either a B or a C, and I would have to make a new set of decisions, of comparisons and contrasts. The value of a B would not be the same in the two systems. How would I go about using the new system, making those life-or-death decisions about where to rank student performances? I would find out how other teachers were using it, how the administration intended for it to be used, how the students expected it to be used, and so on. I would engage in colloquy to reach some kind of agreement with my associates.[8]

The prime fact about any semiological system, Saussure says, is that it exists only by virtue of the tacit social agreement present in colloquy, in conversation; this is true particularly of the most pervasive semiological system, language:

> Contrary to all appearances, language never exists apart from the social fact... Its social nature is one of its inner characteristics... In fact, every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behavior or—what amounts to the same thing—on convention.[9]

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)

It is the working *for us* that is the crucial issue. The military has developed a special vocabulary, and special conventions, for radio communication, a slang that helps messages get through noise and jamming: it works where our ordinary language would not. It works, as all languages do, because its speakers share a system of tools for accomplishing things of interest to them. Suppose you are piloting a small fighter plane returning through a thunderstorm to your carrier after a nighttime exercise. As the fuel in your tanks runs lower, you radio ahead to the unseen control tower on the ship: "Bingo fuel," you say. In answer, you hear through the popping and crackling a signal fading in and out: "landing three twenty," it says. "Report angels three five miles." You or I might not be able to understand a message from a field radio back to the command post, for we do not share in the conventions that make it up. Of course, we might be able to figure it out, decode it, based on our knowledge of English and any related experiences we may have had with similar codes. But there is a difference between such an armchair exercise and the airman's actual use of the system in navigating toward a safe landing. It is not just that more is riding on the correct interpretation. For in the actual use, Bakhtin would say, the message is not language but "utterance in *anticipation of an active responsive understanding*." Its meaning is shaped not only by the structure of significations built into the system but by that anticipation, like an electric circuit where current is set flowing by voltage. Convention is code plus something. Convention is coming-together, *con-venire*, the shape of participation. Convention is child's play. We play the game by setting up the rules and the pieces, then launching out into the air.

The play tower I built for Dustin in our backyard is a platform raised on four-by-four stilts, with a railing around three sides. From it depend certain ropes, swings, and a ladder, providing a fixed number of options for playing. Up to a point, the child can invent with his playmates different games using the limited inventory of elements—he can re-invent the swing and ladder to figure in a different story line. And even though the structure of the play tower is fixed, so that there comes a time when the child bumps against its limits, we can (if Daddy feels playful) add a cargo net or a door, opening new possibilities for his operations. The play tower is not only a fixed structure; it is an ongoing invention as well. The latest addition is a pair of wooden pineapples, which he spotted at the building supply store and mounted on top of the railing on one side, thus framing a barrier rather than an entry. It is not, architecturally, a fully grammatical statement, but the whole structure is an improvisation, after all, and the whimsy of pineapples adds appropriately to its fabric.

Within the system of ordinary natural language, though, the game feels different. Here, neither the military's outlandish standardization nor the child's improvisation holds sway. At the beginning of a school year,

flush with the possibility of breakthrough, we aspire for our students to take charge of their language, re-inventing the stubborn structure of English so as to surprise their teachers with brilliant, original, and moving compositions. But by about February we are beginning to wish that they would just learn the grammar, for God's sake, and leave invention off until they have. They have bumped up against the limits of the structure, but have no power to break up the agreements nailed into the system of our grammar—to build a new playhouse—and so have nowhere to go except into rote memory work, or the pleasant drudgery of Harbrace grammar drills. And we have nowhere to go along with them.

To help our students cope with language arts, we ordinarily define the noun as the name of a person, place, or thing, and the verb as designating action or state of being; it is easy to see those definitions as specifying intrinsic characteristics of nouns and verbs. In the language we speak and write—we think of it as *the* language—and particularly in the language we teach, there are, in addition to definitions, rules of grammar and principles of composition and rhetoric; and players cannot make up the rules, any more than the definitions, by themselves. We must adopt the conventions, the grammar, the vocabulary, which we find already in play. We are stuck with a language-game that was already invented when we joined it. Or so it appears. Saussure's work begins to suggest a way around the dead end, a way to recover the voltage that makes the current possible.

To recognize the path he offers, we have to give up the idea that there is such a thing as language. (Don't worry: after we give it up, we get it back in a different way.) "Contrary to all appearances," Saussure says, is the fundamental sociality of language. Now, ordinarily, we have taken language to be a structure governed by rules—in Davidson's words, a "clearly defined shared structure which language users master and then apply to cases." But in Saussure's picture, language is a system of conventions made by and maintained in usage. Of course, if one wants to communicate effectively (especially in school essays) one must conform at least minimally to the norms set out in the grammar. But Saussure makes a key distinction between this imperativeness, this compulsion by norm, and the "principles of regularity" that merely describe the patterns of usage, the arrangement of arbitrary terms in a semiologic system.[10] For a "law" of language, he says, is "a simple expression of an existing arrangement... [it] reports a state of affairs; it is like a law that states that trees in a certain orchard are arranged in the shape of a quincunx."[11] This kind of law is *not* imperative. The trees could have been planted in a circle, if that shape served the purposes of the orchardist and his family. No imperative, nothing intrinsic, determines the value of gold; but its price is determined in a market. Values live in a social matrix. Saussure's picture of the socially

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)

conditioned interdependence of arbitrary signs throws the apparent structure of language up like a projection on a scrim in a theater, an airy luminosity behind which we can see ourselves as the speakers who enact the language. Now, perhaps it is just these speaker-actors, acting for themselves rather than abiding by the structure, who can work at mastering the rules, the ones for whom grammar is not a barrier but just another tool. Isn't it as if some students, some of the time, *choose* to do well? Some students, even, seem to choose excellence for themselves all of the time. We are working on enabling that choice.

Now when we are telling students about the rules of grammar, we may indeed be under the imperative of collective usage: we and they have no room here to invent anything on our own. Isn't it so in your classes? The students figure they have to do it the way the book says or they will get points taken off; and the teacher is obliged to take off points for mistakes. For once we have agreed on a single set of rules and game pieces, it looks as if the game *must* be set up in just the way we have set it up. "The basics" are bedrock now. Don't some students just seem to opt out of this game, perhaps with varying degrees of truculence or despair? Proposing a different basics for us to go back to, Saussure insists on the way arbitrariness and sociality work together in language:

> the arbitariness of the sign helps us understand why it is the social fact alone that can create a linguistic system. Sociality (*la collectivité*) is necessary to establish those values whose only reason for existence is in usage and general agreement...[12]

There is available here a different attitude toward the basics of grammar; for the rules derive from and need our being together, just as the play tower needs our ongoing invention. Saussure is not proposing that we abandon the use or the teaching of grammar, nor is he suggesting that we ought to change the rules every now and then just for fun. Whimsical pineapples are to be used with caution. The Saussurean teacher will still take off points for mistakes in grammar. Instead, Saussure is distinguishing the kind of "basics" that semiology is from the kind of "basics" that grammar is, just as one can distinguish the dwelling from the house. There is a way of looking at and dealing with the house that gives it as an object, a structure of materials; and there is another way of looking that gives it as a possibility for dwelling in together, for engagement, for inventing a family life. Both ways are valid; both are useful. But the Saussurean teacher will take off points in a different way, with a different glint in her eye.[13]

Another of Saussure's marvellous analogies amplifies his suggestion of the way language might be viewed as a human, and humane, system, a structure of differences (of *distinctions*) rather than of rules:

> Visualize the air in contact with a sheet of water; if the atmospheric pressure changes, the surface of the water will be broken up into a series of divisions, waves; the waves resemble the union or coupling of thought with phonic substance [which is language]... Language might be called the domain of articulations... Each linguistic term is a member, an *articulus in which an idea is fixed in a sound and a sound becomes the sign of an idea.*[14]

It is easy to study the substance and structure of the waves, the articulated matter of the grammar as we find it. And we are pulled by our epistemology, by the assumptions built into our very vocabulary, to analyze substance and structure. There is nothing wrong with analysis, of course; it is our bread and butter. But here we find the possibility of going behind the grammar, as it were, to ask what is the changing atmospheric pressure that makes the waves? What wind makes articulation? In Saussure's picture, it is sociality: being together. This is a different realm than the description and transmission of structured information; living in the context of sociality, our choices have different import. Here we are not only correct; we are engaged. Saussure is distinguishing for us a domain whose dimensions are not marked out in rules at all, but in *responsibility*, in dialogue that is continuing promising, continuing commitment.

Approaching a red light at a busy intersection, we do not need to ask *how* it means; we need give ourselves no choice but to obey its imperative. Confronting the given grammar, we are apt to lose sight of the radical arbitrariness of linguistic values, which operates within the radical sociality of language. Thus a "statement" that reads *we have chosen to do things this way* comes to be read *things must be done in just this way.* Given a wheel that rolls—words and sentences that allow us to achieve certain of our purposes—we lose the possibility of re-inventing the wheel. Here, in this lost realm of possibility, perhaps, is the "comedown" that injures our freedom, steals our dignity, and blocks us from being with our children.

Once we set up a convention for dealing with each other, we fall into it. That is, once we agree that a certain set of values works for articulating things of concern to us, that apples are not oranges and neither is a tree a street—then we are both free and not free: free to *speak* now, to articulate as powerfully as our conventional system provides, but not free to articulate anything that lies outside the system. Like children inventing the game at each moment, we are in Sherwood Forest with our swords at the ready, and what we are on the lookout for is the Sheriff's men. But just for this reason, what we are eager to participate in is a sword fight. To us adults, the language can appear not as an invented game, a system with arbitrariness and sociality at its heart, but as an index to the very shape and structure our world, including our relations with each other, must inexorably take. Of course a tree is not a street; what adult would suggest

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)

otherwise? But perhaps that is not the most important thing. Letter grades work well most of the time, but in occasional cases, this sword is too dull to suit our purposes—or too sharp. We feel we cannot use it to make the difference we intend to make for a student. In such a case we may either do the best we can with the system we have inherited, or invent a new system, some other agreement with our students about how we measure their performance. And what about our other scholastic systems? How do they serve our intentions, our commitments? A system gives us a conversational channel that we use to talk with our students and among ourselves: how educative are these conversations? Perhaps it is not only the system that nourishes, but the inventing of the system.

It is time to review where we have been so far. Convention, the social agreement that arises in speaking, gives us a world to live in together. But the same power of convention can, so to speak, hide itself from speakers, if not from linguists, while they use the language to communicate in the ordinary way. By *referentiality* (or *representation*), I mean a way of using language that gets its authority from a powerful unspoken convention: the assumption that most words refer to things, and that our job as speakers is to make our words, and the ways we structure them, conform as accurately as possible to the nature and structure of the world "out there." This assumption, this picture, gives us a way of being with language; it generates a conversation and a kind of conversation. With this assumption unnoticed as the atmosphere we breathe, as the background hum of the city we live in, we talk with each other in a certain way, about certain things, our being together shaped and guided by a mostly unseen force. This assumption is at the center of the clearing from which trails lead off through the forest, trails that make up the culture of referentiality. It is referential language whose mere "analysis" Hawking decries; structured language that Davidson says is not there anyway. It is the picture of language as a referential structure, and its associated culture of knowledge, which I think we need to distinguish from the background and look at carefully. I am betting that if we do, we will give ourselves the chance to re-invent our culture.

If I were as bold as Davidson, I would claim that there is no such thing as knowledge. This might be somewhat self-defeating as well as offensive, though, since the ultimate claim would have to be that there is no such thing as anything (any thing)—which may not be a useful conclusion. But I think is it useful to raise the question of what knowledge is, rather than take it for granted that we already know. For I do want to claim that knowledge is not the kind of thing we have been supposing.

So there is a difference between handed-down traditions and made-up traditions, funded knowledge and discovered knowledge, explanation and invention. To get at that distinction, in the following chapters I pro-

pose to investigate teaching and learning *conversations*: coupled speaking and listening that have power to lead participants out into a newer world. And to begin setting up this investigation, we now leap ahead for a moment to Heidegger, for whom "conversation" means more than taking turns at the microphone:

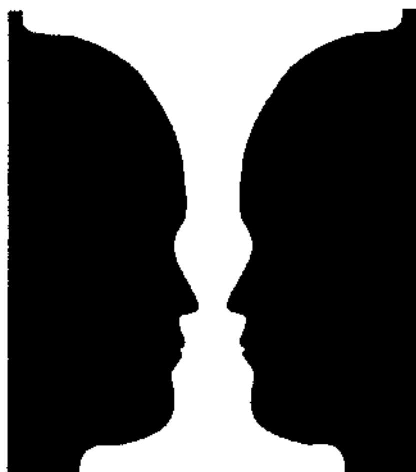
> It is the custom to put speaking and listening in opposition: one man speaks, the other listens. But speaking is at the same time also listening.
>
> Listening accompanies and surrounds not only speaking such as takes place in conversation. Speaking is of itself a listening. Speaking is listening to the language which we speak.[15]

What it means to speak into a listening, while "listening to the language which we speak," bears much study. For one thing, Heidegger means something non-ordinary by "speaking," by "listening," and by "language" here. The language is not a vocabulary plus a set of rules for syntax, not the object studied by linguistics. It is more like a community, in Bakhtin's sense of a communion of speakers and listeners: it is a space we live in, not an object we manipulate. When speakers and listeners are engaged in languaging, Heidegger suggests, they are breathing a certain air.

For example, contrast what you usually do and say at a cocktail party with what you usually do and say at a school board or PTA meeting. In each situation, Heidegger would say, speaking/listening creates and lives in a community that promotes certain kinds of expression, certain kinds of talk and actions, and rejects others. As a room with period furniture calls up certain associations, each situation calls forth certain possibilities for self-expression. As the terrain of a site and the character of a neighborhood offer possibilities to the architect, so the cocktail party or the board meeting offer a certain atmosphere; and by living in the house, attending the event, you breathe its possibilities—whether they give joy or a headache. It is not that you are not free to behave in whatever ways you see fit. It is that you do see fitting ways of participating in the different atmospheres, and those ways, in normal circumstances, get engaged in your behavior.

If we ask "What sets the conditions in which students engage in learning with teachers engaged in teaching?"—the question of the architecture and neighborhood of teaching and learning—we are led past concern with the intellectual structure and content of lessons into awareness of the power of context to shape perception, understanding, and action. Cocktail party, board meeting, site, and neighborhood—all these are contexts in which meaning occurs, and in which action arises. Surely we have all seen those optical illusions where the outline of a candlestick or a vase can be made to change into a picture of visages facing each other:

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)



What happens here is that you shift the context around the drawing—and you shift it merely by speaking to yourself "face" or "candlestick," perhaps by tracing the outline with your finger while saying "this is the base of the candlestick" or "here is the nose." As you shift the context given by your looking in this way, the structure of the lines—their spatial relationship to each other—remains constant. But the *function* of the lines—their meaning, what they add up to—shifts with the context, with your looking and speaking. Let me quote another explanation of one of these "optical illusions" from the contemporary philosopher Hilary Lawson, for there is more at issue here than an amusing game.

If we draw Wittgenstein's rabbit on the page thus:

> no one will deny that it is a rabbit, even if a magician can produce a duck instead. What was once a rabbit is now a duck, and just as we could describe the rabbit with its whiskers and floppy ears, we can now describe the duck. And how has the magician achieved this? With the spell that is the word "duck." Are we not all magicians at play in the spells that we call language?[16]

In the spell of an atmosphere, a magnetic field, we teach and learn. Does an educative way of being together arise, like a magnetic field, along with our way of listening for and speaking with each other? Is there a possibility and power in classroom languaging, beyond the true picturing of the world, beyond the effective expression of feelings, a magnetic power like that of the context-giving word?

"All life is figure and ground," intones a character in a novel by Samuel Beckett. Did he mean to reduce the overwhelm of modern experience to the pallid generalization that what we see depends on the context in which we see it? Or is there some exhausted irony here, as if being alive involved something more than figure–ground relationships, if only we could get what it is? What there may be, in addition to figure–ground relationships, dependence of content on context, is freedom, that is, responsibility. We need ways of being responsible together. The word responsibility comes from the Latin *spondere*, which means to promise, pledge, or warrant. To be responsible is, then, as for the signers of the Declaration of Independence, to take up a promise, mutually to pledge that the world shall be as you say it shall be. The signers were the authors of political freedom; they made themselves up as the authority in a world that thereby became their home. True, they were authorized by their position in the society of the colonies, their shared background, to make themselves authorities. But what made them *responsible*? Was it the background information they shared? How did they invent the country they lived in? How shall we?

With this question in mind, we may be interested in a story told by Dostevsky in his *Diary of a Writer*. Listen for what it says about the atmosphere we breathe when we give up our reliance on structured referential language.

> One Sunday night I happened to walk for some fifteen paces next to a group of six drunken workmen, and I suddenly realized that all thoughts, feelings, and even a whole chain of reasoning could be expressed by that one noun, which is moreover extremely short. One young fellow said it harshly and forcefully, to express his utter contempt for whatever it was that they had all been talking about. Another answered with the same noun but in a quite different tone and sense—doubting that the negative at-

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-15 07:09 GMT)

> titude of the first one was warranted. A third suddenly became incensed with the first and roughly intruded on the conversation, excitedly shouting the same noun, this time as a curse and obscenity. Here the second fellow interfered again, angry at the third, the aggressor, and restraining him, in the sense of "Now why do you have to butt in, we were discussing things quietly and here you come and start swearing." And he told this whole thought in one word, the same venerable word, except that he also raised his hand and put it on the third fellow's shoulder. All at once a fourth, the youngest of the group, who had kept silent till then, probably having suddenly found a solution to the original difficulty which had started the argument, raised his hand in a transport of joy and shouted... Eureka, do you think? Found it? Found it? No, not Eureka at all; nor did he find anything; he repeated the same unprintable noun, one word, merely one word, but with ecstasy, in a shriek of delight—which was apparently too strong, because the sixth and the oldest, a glum-looking fellow, did not like it and cut the infantile joy of the other one short, addressing him in a sullen, exhortative bass and repeating... yes, still the same noun, forbidden in the presence of ladies but which this time clearly meant "What are you yelling yourself hoarse for?" So, without uttering a single other word, they repeated that one beloved word six times in a row, one after another, and understood one another completely.

What do you hear as the moral of this story, the point of my quoting it in the context of schooling? At first I decided I could not use it here, because it does not quite say what I want it to say, does not accomplish what I intend here at the end of the first chapter on our picture of language. For it might be read as demonstrating the banality of how intonation and gesture can alter a word's meaning. Or as suggesting the dubious proposition that we should accept profanity as the most basic level of human communication. Or, considering the purpose of the whole book, will the passage suggest that teachers should get their students involved with each other and with the subject by getting them drunk? Like the revel on Pompey's galley in *Antony and Cleopatra*, this little vignette might be taken to imply that being with others, even if they are friends, requires washing the brain so that it grows fouler.

But if we listen *from* the question, "How do we invent countries to live in together?"—listen with that question in the background—we can hear in Dostoevsky's story another story, in which the drunkenness, like the differences in their ages and temperaments and the fact that it is Sunday night and they must go to work the next day, is part of the background of the subjects' being together. Presumably Dostoevsky is recording an ac-

tual incident here, but the drunkenness of the workers, mentioned in a word at the outset, seems not to figure in the foreground of the story at all, as if it were merely a metaphorical marker meant to set up the atmosphere of the story, like a dark and foggy street lit by a sullen lamp. What happens on that drunken street then is all the more remarkable: no structure but being together; communion enables communication. Of course we immediately ask "Oh, but surely the structure of the language was already present, so that each repetition of the 'beloved word' was really an ellipsis, which the listener could reconstitute, just as, after all, Dostoevsky did in overhearing?" Saussure prompts us to respond to this obviously devastating query: "But where did the structure of the language *come from*? How did it get there to begin with? Are the workmen only using a given structure, or are they also coming together in a function, re-inventing their colloquy at each step? Perhaps it is too pat to notice that, in the paragraph before this one, Dostoevsky speaks of the one short word as a whole language, which "if it were altogether nonexistent, *il faudrait l'inventer*." If we had no beloved words, we would have to invent them. Invented words are beloved. The story does not have to be solely about drunken profanity. As I listen to it, it speaks of being together and inventing.

We have already come a long way, partly following and partly inventing the road through these mountains. We came by way of Saussure so as to establish a bit of a roadway to follow, a way leading past the rules on the surface of language into a domain where dialogue is the modulation of our relatedness. The word "dialogue" says *speaking across* and *speaking through*: we speak to each other through speaking. While this looks at first glance like a circular banality, Bakhtin would remind us that in dialogue we encounter each other as integral and unrepeatable, as authentic persons (*per + sonare*, to sound through). We come to be in a colloquy, which may be as wordless as the brimming glance between parent and child and as worded as a sonnet. Somewhere between these two kinds of poem we teachers live among the children. Saussure says nothing about poetry, at least nothing outright. But he opens a road that can lead us back through our traditional ways of knowing, as they were established by Descartes and Locke (among many others), on our way to that bridge that Wittgenstein built between knowing and being together.

NOTES

1. In *A Brief History of Time*.
2. Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in Ernest LePore, ed. *Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 446.

3. Chapter 7 of *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Noonday Press, 1975).
4. "...language is a system of pure values which are determined by nothing except the momentary arrangement of its terms." Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, eds., trans. W. Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 80. Cf. "assembly of being" in Levinas (note 10 of Introduction); and cf. Kenneth Burke:

   > "...each thing [is] a set of interrelated terms all conspiring to round out their identity as participants in a common substance of meaning." (*A Rhetoric of Motives* [University of California Press, 1969], 22-3)

5. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, eds., trans. W. Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) [henceforth *CLG*], 108.
6. Saussure, *CLG*, 110.
7. Saussure, *CLG*, 16.
8. Saussure, *CLG*, 159.
9. Saussure, *CLG*, 77, 68.
10. Saussure, *CLG*, 93, 86.
11. Saussure, *CLG*, 92.
12. Saussure, *CLG* 157.
13. See, for example, the story called "When a Teacher's Red Pen Can Liberate," in *Education Week*, March 31, 1993.
14. Saussure, *CLG*, 112.
15. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row Perennial Library, 1971), 123.
16. Hilary Lawson, *Reflexivity: the post-modern predicament* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 128.