

Families differ profoundly, yet the terminology of family proves strong enough to encompass their wide arrays of relationships. This final chapter returns to language as the source of these strengths (and potential weaknesses): what dynamics of terminology and representation closely mirror the energetic, restrained, and agentic aspects of familial life and, to extrapolate further, of political life within and between communities?

This connection between familial relationships and linguistic theory emerges in part from the problematic similarities and incommensurabilities that language allows; both contain many of the same false oppositions of freedom and rules, commitment and creativity, community and difference. Internal rules or grammars of language teach something about familial roles and political logics. One kind of utterance having a normative and signficatory coincidence with another (though each may point to entirely different regulatory and policy ends) illuminates aspects of intention, collectivity, and individuality that exemplary cases of family have already highlighted.

This connection also draws upon and revives certain contentions within political theory, laying out the phratric likenesses between contentions within 1970s social philosophy and the arguments so far made in this book. The debates that emerged from the recognition that both politics and philosophy take place within and through language are neither dead nor gone, but oftentimes merely forgotten. That language participates in what J. L. Austin memorably termed “speech acts” was recognized as a social and political claim early on by theorists such as John Searle and Charles Taylor, but what became of those recognitions remains implicit in many of the continuing debates concerning methods and empiricism.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, it remains important to remember that community and difference already always exists within language: languages are communal and collective, and yet they allow, even encourage, original and strange perlocutions and illocutions. How we create these relationships depends on a creative combination of bodies, silence, communication, motions, judgments, and, yes, language. Language, state, and family remain in whirling, complex, and unpredictable networks of meanings; the infinite task of understanding these meanings and the relationships between them can often best be illuminated through their difficulties and disorders. Thus, we begin with a linguistic apologue.

#### “IT DEPENDS ON WHAT THE MEANING OF ‘IS’ IS”

Once upon a time, a president of the United States had the temerity to state that the same word can have different meanings to different people, sometimes in the same sentence. This particular linguistic incommensurability, the president’s critics quickly recognized, leads to a number of difficulties for many who want language to unproblematically represent specific political projects. In this case, he overtly argued that words, which we expect to always mean the same thing, in fact function in parallel or even divergent ways, especially when the stakes are greatest. The president faced strong criticism for his contention that what appeared to be the same word could have different denotations, depending on the context of its articulation; critics felt that such an assertion also implied acceptance of the dictum that words “can mean whatever anyone wants them

to mean.” Such an idea—that the same word, the same idea, could have entirely different meanings to different people depending on their backgrounds or objectives—was considered hazardous and threatening to a country whose historical unity is popularly thought to rest not on racial commonality, or collective history, but on the very words of the Constitution. That the president of the United States implied this linguistic pluralism made his contention all the more egregious.

This contention, of course, refers to a speech by Abraham Lincoln. In the Baltimore Address, made at the height of the Civil War, Lincoln described the problems that came from using the same word to different ends. “The word,” he began “has never had a good definition of the word ‘liberty,’ and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men’s labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name—liberty.”<sup>2</sup>

For Lincoln, clearly one of these definitions of “liberty” held moral superiority. But his larger point, that the term and the concept worked as justifications for both sides, remains. Lincoln’s understanding of the rhetorical use of this word highlights a particularly problematic issue in the political uses of language. Lincoln recognized that both sides in the Civil War were fighting for “liberty,” but whereas one side emphasized the individual and political liberty of enslaved black Americans, the other side struggled for the personal and legal liberty to continue to enslave those same people. Both sides could (and did) argue that liberty stood central to the very Constitution of the United States, and both would be (and were) right. Both could contend that the causes of the war arose from their attempts to defend or promote that liberty, and again both would be right.

This is not merely a difference in grammatical usage, or meaning, or definitions. “Liberty” means “liberty,” and liberty itself is worth going to war for; everyone, Lincoln included, agrees on that.<sup>3</sup> The fact that these definitions differ does not keep the word from being used. Or, in other

words, the reality that each side seeks a different result does not negate the fact that both sides are fighting for liberty. Similarly, these fictional interlocutors agree that the threat to human liberty has caused the Civil War. But that the South and the North both fought for liberty clearly does not mean that they were in agreement.

This last chapter turns to the example of linguistic incommensurability because of its direct (though only occasionally causal) relationship to theoretical dynamics which the examples concerning silence, dogs, and caregiving highlight, and which this book has tried to emphasize as having important political consequences. The first of these, already obvious, is that language serves as a location where incommensurability already always exists. That different meanings emerge from similar words delegitimizes and fragments language no more than the differences between family members make them less of a family. The second concerns the familiarity of these debates: unlike the demands of the mainstream of political and ethical philosophizing, linguists have long recognized these fundamental indeterminacies. To note that language operates in multiple ways in different contexts has proved far less contentious than the idea that community connections can vary and diverge, but it has been argued over nevertheless. And the third restates the error of the presumption against which this book aims: that all forms of community arise from identical experiences, judgments, interpretations, and ideals. Communities, in this erroneous view, only exist when all of their members see and hear things precisely the same way. The claims here about families are not entirely new; they in part relocate linguistic theory to quotidian practices.

These practices take place in our lives, within our moral formulations; no degree of incommensurability between persons obscures the fact that we usually consider ourselves part of ethical systems. Were that not the case, the emotions that come out of political and moral debates would not be so raw. We care deeply about moral formulations, which are after all the places of meaning in which we  *dwell* ; on the other hand, it is vital that our regard for our own historically arbitrary accidents not get in the way of conceptualizing alternative possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

## RELATIONSHIPS

Linguistic differences, in other words, constitute relationships: relationships internal not only to words but also to the people living in those words' worlds. The very connections between them are their very differences; the power of a word rests not in its isolation from others, nor in its universality, but in its reverberances and resonances alongside others.

These relationships are not polysemy, where a seemingly identical word has related but different meanings. Nor are they identical to (though they are partially based upon) the idea of “essentially contested concepts,” introduced by W. B. Gallie in 1955. For Gallie, and those social scientists who later applied his ideas, the contestation internal to certain concepts leaves them indeterminate but also underpins the moral dedications people have to them. For example, one interlocutor could mean by “democracy” a formal mechanism whereby voters appoint and remove their governments, while another means equality between all citizens, while a third means the “continuous active participation of citizens in political life at all levels.”<sup>5</sup> In examining the particularities of contestation, Gallie points to the conditionalities of language—the necessary openness of certain terms to strategic usage, pragmatic considerations, and conceptual idealization. Gallie also recognizes the importance of adscititious effects upon language: while empirical events and logical arguments do not make concepts uncontested, they can have a “definite logical force” which refigures the notional playing field.<sup>6</sup>

For many political and social theorists, Gallie's insights served to politicize language. Both William Connolly and John Gray, for example, see Gallie's charges as necessitating new conceptions of linguistic politics, the former celebrating its encouragement of critical modes of life, the latter subtly decrying it as leading irreducibly to an incoherent liberalism. For Connolly, conflicts over the uses of “partly shared appraisal concepts are themselves an intrinsic part of politics” and should be recognized as such by social scientists; for Gray, contestability cannot be about criteria but must be exemplary of “conflict between adherents of mutually unintel-

ligible worldviews” and should be discouraged as erosive of community.<sup>7</sup> Both, however, recognize that Gallie’s thesis depends both on a level of linguistic incommensurability and a mode of intersubjective communication whereby each contestant understands the claims made by the other. For Gallie the importance emerges from this interrelationship; the fervor of the disagreement arises from each understanding the differences.<sup>8</sup> Defining “freedom” in profoundly different ways (such as “freedom from want” and “freedom to vote”) makes such words not contested but merely different.

They are different because they are thought to point to different things. Their valences divaricate, and no contestation results. The common distinction in semiotics between “reference” and “meaning” (e.g., “New York” and “the Big Apple” prove dissimilar in their connotative meaning, but not in the city to which they refer) is not the topic here. Instead, it is those times when two groups of people think they are using a word in the same way (a “correct” way, needless to say) and yet fundamentally disagree about the term’s substantive implications. Such oppositions constitute disagreements about both meaning and referentiality in a larger sense, that the same term may hide the fact that different groups may know and understand the nature of “New York” in incommensurable ways.

In an earlier chapter, disagreement over the commonality of a concept—namely, of the term “marriage”—caused political disjuncture, but here the different implications of the same term conjoins community and incommensurability in another way. This chapter addresses the stakes in a claim such as Lincoln’s “we all declare for liberty.” These stakes are especially high in a country such as the United States, whose founding and continuation are widely conceived as textual and documentary, and where these texts and documents require explication through institutional means (for example, the courts). The import of words literally comprises the definitions which constitute the United States: laws, policies, administration, and contracts are all composed of words whose meanings remain (at least potentially) contested. The problem of overt difference in meaning thus becomes fundamental for politics in such a society, particularly for those who want to map language unproblematically onto epistemology to master constructions of law and policy.

## UNIVERSAL MEANINGS

One approach for resolving this problem has been, simply, to argue that one of these meanings of “liberty” is fundamentally, absolutely, definitionally wrong. The South, one could argue, was not making true claims to liberty, for any political system based on the enslavement of human beings can never occasion liberty. Liberty must always mean the same thing in an objective and universal sense, or else a political order founded upon liberty cannot continue. Differences in definition are fundamentally errors—whether moral, logical, lexical, or interpretive.

This kind of linguistic universalism, which asserts words as having true and integral meanings, explains Lincoln’s dilemma in two different ways. Both approaches are common and dependent on a widespread comprehension of language usage. The first of these understands words as directly and clearly referencing things. The second, recognizing that what appears to be the same word can be employed in different ways, argues that usage and context are the final arbiter in language and sees those particular language functions as being performed by fundamentally different words. This second approach is somewhat dependent on the first (and is more complex as well).

In the most basic and common (though wrong) interpretation, the learning of language is seen as learning the proper names of things. Language forms a representation of the external world: one sees a chair and (after a period of learning) soon learns to associate the word “chair” with the seen object. As a theory of language, this assumption has one notable virtue: it is simple. It holds that words have referents, and the deciphering of proper objects presents the only difficulty of interpretation that might arise.

By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this approach became known, in Gottlob Frege’s and Wittgenstein’s terminologies, as the “referential theory” or the “picture theory” of language. For most people unfamiliar with the complexities of linguistic theory, this theory tends to model the relationship between words and meanings. It does hold true for most nouns, usually (though mistakenly) thought of as the most archetypal kinds of words; the annals of linguistic theory are full of discussions

about “this desk” or “that chair.” But turning to other words, the troublesome nature of the picture theory quickly becomes apparent.

Picture theory’s paradigmatic explanatory power of all language has deep and intractable roots. It emerges, as J. L. Austin argues, from the confusion of words with names, as if those tall, woody plants have been baptized “trees.”<sup>9</sup> The human naming of things and creating of words seems to denote the managerial role of language. Indeed, the originary power and primacy of the picture theory of language emerge from the passages in Genesis where Adam takes possession of the world and language simultaneously by being given the responsibility to name “every beast of the field and every fowl of the air.”<sup>10</sup>

Matters of law and policy thus often presume that words have a true, direct, pictorial meaning. Made up as they are primarily through language, such overtly political sites of interpretive contention become a battlefield of linguistic theories. If a correct, true, and intended meaning exists “behind” (as though there is a spatial relationship to language) a law or Constitutional amendment, then courts’ and editorialists’ interpretive questions have ultimate answers. There will be correct and incorrect meanings, not politically contested uses of language.

The attempt to discover and recover “original intent” proves paradigmatic in these cases.<sup>11</sup> Underlying this interpretative approach is the idea that, with enough historical, psychological, and excursive information, one can determine the precise and absolute meaning of words. A question of Constitutional doctrine? Then the answer lies in the state of mind of the Constitution’s framers. A query concerning the current application of a law? Then one must look at the intention of the congressional committee that drafted it. By simplifying the search for meaning and locating it solely in the author, one is told clearly where to look. A significant disadvantage is that the author may be inaccessible: dead, as in the case of the authors of the Constitution, or a conglomeration of authors that cannot ever be reconstructed, such as a congressional committee.<sup>12</sup>

Original intent involves manifold and legendary problems, which prove distracting here.<sup>13</sup> But one must note that its underlying appeal comes from the possibility of discovering an unarguable authority. Placing the

ultimate responsibility of meaning in the hands of the author solves the ambiguity of language by discovering a source of authority external to the words themselves. It thus presumes a correct and apolitical interpretation, equally discoverable and distinguishable to all who do the proper research, and thus displaces the search for these references from traditions and personal motivations.<sup>14</sup>

Metaphor openly and obviously threatens direct referentiality. Simile, metonymy, synecdoche, irony: these tropes, bitterly contested in semiotic theory, all share the problem of substitution. Indistinctly defined words challenge the picture theory of language, because they often appear to transfer meaning in particular or even contrary ways. Moreover, there appears to be no direct purpose for them; a metaphor, for example, more clumsily refers to something than does a directly connotative word.

Universalists have long identified metaphor as a specifically political problem. In *Leviathan*, for example, Hobbes argues that using words “metaphorically; that is for a purpose other than what they are ordained for” is an abuse of language equal to lying or slander.<sup>15</sup> Language, in Hobbes’s conception of a rational social system, creates the necessary foundation of order. Fundamentally used to remember and transmit ideas and information, it must be defended against those who would undermine that transmission by confusing its substance. As in the semiotic theories of Hobbes and Frege, such tropes today loom as disruptive to law and policy. Laws by their very nature lack irony or metaphor; such constructions undermine the transparency to which law allegedly aspires. If the best policies ought to be straightforward, coherent, and direct, more complex theories of language threaten politics.

It is difficult to disagree with this perspective; an ironic law would cause unending grief.<sup>16</sup> The concern is not that judges, for example, will miss the metaphorical aspects of laws, but that they will assume a straightforwardly representative nature for legal language. Such an arid model of language misses how language actually works, and is based on an ideal of what words do that (even were it possible to achieve) would be thin and uninteresting. This model is not only wrong, it blinds its adherents to

the constitutive nature of language. If words merely reflect a given, pre-existing reality, then those using those words merely put into language the truths which surround them. Criminals, heroes, governments, states, morality, violence, law: language and the people who wield expressions assume that they merely refer to already existing things in the world, rather than conjuring and commissioning them. And who can differ from the implications of words and phrases such as “terrorism” or “the legitimate use of force” and be willing to support the former or oppose the latter?

But one can still hold that words have universalizable, intrinsic meanings without subscribing to a picture theory of language. (Even if a theory where words directly reference things is rejected, a theory supporting the primacy of usage and context can still explicate meaning as “true.”) One can deny that either of those people using the word “liberty” is using the same word at all. One can insist that a word’s only real meaning emerges from the precise way in which it is used, and because these two sides mean different things by the term “liberty,” they actually employ the word in two fundamentally incompatible ways. Because a word can refer to a variety of mutually exclusive ideas, it follows that each of these various usages has its own meaning.

This is another way of fixing the relationship of meanings and words, though unlike the previous method it does not insist on an unambiguous definition. But it does share with the linguistic fundamentalists the idea that singular, universalizable meanings exist. Each definition maps directly onto a word; the complexity of this second approach lies in the recognition that more than one meaning can be affixed to the same word.

The logical positivist A. J. Ayer, for example, argues that using the word “is” in differing ways proves unproblematic once it is realized that there are actually many different words that are spelled and pronounced “is” but are in fact profoundly different.<sup>17</sup> The incommensurability of meaning becomes, in Ayer’s reading, merely a case of incommensurable words that people too often confuse merely because they are spelled the same and used in similar but fundamentally disparate ways. The point of philosophy becomes, for Ayer, distinguishing these various kinds of meaning and straightening out the various usages of the word.

Others of the Vienna Circle, following Ayer, argue that words and sentences that cannot be made sense of in this way—that is, that cannot be either proven analytically or corroborated by measurements from the nonlinguistic world—lack meaning.<sup>18</sup> This form of positivism, which defines meaning as verifiable truth, seems at first profoundly different from the idea that meanings are ultimately determined by the author, as do those theories which argue that words are similar to names or that there is a singular, coherent “original intent.” But like those theories, words and statements are measured by absolute standards. These positivists hold that words are ultimately universal, and that the scientific approach that they employ locates the ways in which language is congruent with logic, method, and the unarguable truth of the “real world.”

The normalization of the subjective and specific uses of words creates a major problem with universalist and positivist theories of meaning (of both the referential and contextual variety). Linguistically constituted objects of inquiry are treated as epistemologically unproblematic: violence in international relations or domestic violence in the United States are considered uniform, definable categories removed from specific social, historical, and political forces that define and circumscribe them as linguistic entities.

Michael Shapiro has demonstrated how unacknowledged linguistic presuppositions have shaped common public understandings of identities, behaviors, and ethics. By presuming language’s representational character—that “criminal behaviors,” for example, somehow exist outside of a language system—users of a language system naturalize and effectively disclaim responsibility for a system of social order. If language merely denotes a preexisting reality, those who use language are accountable only for describing reality, not for participating in it. Shapiro identifies the central problem of such speech: that “the idea that we can speak *correctly* about objects and situations is predicated on an indefensible theory of meaning” and is thus “a misleading way to represent the relationship between speech and phenomena.”<sup>19</sup>

## SOCIAL LANGUAGES

Of course many theorists have searched for ways to analyze and undermine these conceptions of meaning. This reaction, especially prevalent in the twentieth century, rejects conceptions of words as directly representational. Instead, these semiotic theories locate a word's use within larger systems of social and linguistic structures. Words, therefore, do not refer to objects, but to organizations and systems.

Ferdinand de Saussure famously theorized that the structures of a language give meaning to its mere words. For Saussure, and subsequent linguistic structuralists, the relation is not between a word and an object (in the language of semiotics, the "sign" and the "signifier"), but between the sign and the system of other signs which impart significance. In language, Saussure argues, "there are only differences, and *no positive terms*."<sup>20</sup> The "picture theory" idea of a direct, positive linkage between word and object should be replaced, for Saussure, with an understanding of the relationships between words, or, more exactly, of the relationships of the differences between words.

Saussurian language is a system of classification, one with a necessary underlying order. Structuralism replaces the investigation of the representation of words and objects with an examination of language's underlying kinds of order. Word usage is seen as dependent not on objects themselves but on systems of language and society. Various forms of structuralism emphasize different classificatory systems; a Marxist analysis, for example, would emphasize the materially productive while an anthropological analysis would focus on the cultural.

This approach develops from the recognition that language, always social, must emanate from a selection of already existing possibilities. That words and meanings are constricted is commonsensical: if a word could mean "whatever you want it to mean," it would no longer function as a word in a society and would become an entirely private language. This, Wittgenstein reminds us, is an impossibility. Language, in Shapiro's reading, is "usually a matter of giving voice to discursive practices that represent a selection from a fixed set of practices permissible in the language."<sup>21</sup>

The structuralist argument demands that one must look at the practices and selection processes that make a language possible.

Language is thus deterministic. The existence of syntagmas, the structuralist argues, is testimony to those systems outside the phrase itself that serve as the medium within which such a phrase or sentence has potential meaning. Stanley Fish's assertion that the mere dominance of certain political and economic forces determines the "truth qualities" of statements exemplifies this assumption.<sup>22</sup>

Feminist critiques of linguistic theory provide a specifically political example of this structural understanding of language. Robin Lakoff's groundbreaking work on the dynamics of gendered power underlying word usage, for example, shows how socially reinforcing relationships can cause the same words (or the lack of words) to be utilized in different ways depending on the hierarchical status of the speaker, a status contiguous with sexual difference.<sup>23</sup> For Lakoff, the same word, phrase, or sentence has different uses depending on a society's social and sexual structures (namely, in her case, American society). The acceptability of speech strategies based on gender results in certain articulations having radically differing connotations depending on the speaker's sex: forms of speech that are allowed for one gender and not for another, or that are weighted differently depending on the sex of the speaker.

Many feminist and queer linguists have followed Lakoff in studying how gendered societal forces form language, showing the intrinsically political nature of the battles over the meanings of words. The terms "feminism" or "rape," for example, serve as sites of contestation for cultural and political battles over the proper roles of (and relationships between) men, women, and society.<sup>24</sup> The variety of meanings attributed to these words bespeak political and social differences; the words themselves are practically buried beneath the divergent meanings. Other feminists have reemphasized Lakoff's focus on the identification of language and language patterns according to the social status of those who hear and use the words. Deborah Tannen, the best-known popularizer of Lakoff's linguistic theories, interrogates how words are used, heard, and understood divergently by men and women.<sup>25</sup>

Catharine MacKinnon provides one of the most ardent of these structural linguistic interpretations. MacKinnon's antipornography activism has led her to construct a legal theory that breaks down the ostensible division between language and actions. Against a purely formalist reading of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, which protects language from legal restrictions, MacKinnon describes the ways in which language acts—how it supports systems of power inequality.

MacKinnon argues that courts readily recognize multiple exceptions to the First Amendment. Words that are libelous or overtly incite dangerous actions or fix prices are clearly not sheltered by freedom of speech principles. MacKinnon strives to add pornography to this category. Pornography is, in her words, "masturbation material. It is used as sex. It is therefore sex."<sup>26</sup> In identifying certain kinds of words (and images, of course) as a form of sex, one that she posits is intrinsically based on the domination and enslavement of women, MacKinnon insists that they should be legally recognized and legislated as actions.

Most important to her reading is how these particular words participate in the maintenance of patriarchy and gender violence. For MacKinnon, pornography reflects and reinscribes these social relations. "Social inequality," she argues, "is substantially created and enforced—that is, *done*—through words and images."<sup>27</sup> Pro-egalitarian laws and social policies, therefore, must target such words and images, since they create the infrastructure upon which societal inequality is perpetuated.

MacKinnon's theory allows no room for ambiguity and multiple connotations. Like both the representationalists and the positivists, hers is a reading of language which sees words as ineluctably reducible to a specific meaning. But for MacKinnon this meaning rests not in what these words "say" (i.e., represent) but in what they "do" (i.e., enact). And they do what they have to do; as words in an oppressive, sexist, and racist society, they reflect and reinscribe that oppression, sexism, and racism. Their intelligibility to us proves this: MacKinnon explains that words of assault would make no sense in an equitable society.<sup>28</sup>

By shifting the location of meaning for words in spaces outside the relationship between words and objects, structuralists and structural femi-

nists such as Lakoff and MacKinnon help explain how social arrangements distinguish and differentiate words.<sup>29</sup> This, in turn, can explain why Lincoln's Northerner and Southerner seem to be using the same word to different ends; they use languages based in differing and incompatible structures. That one lives and works in one culture, and the other in another, implies that they cannot use the term "liberty" in the same way." The early Wittgenstein suggests the same idea, stating that "the limits of language . . . mean the limits of my world."<sup>30</sup> But none of these universalist approaches explain a vital (perhaps *the* vital) question in Lincoln's suggestion: how do these people recognize one another as using the same word?

The underlying attempt of structural accounts of language remains the same as that of the positivists: to affix and explain meaning through a directly correlative account of words, whether the correlation be to a system or to a thing.<sup>31</sup> In other words, language models something else, a mapping of social or physical reality. This approach explains the incompatibility of the two terms both spelled "liberty." But, crucially, it does not explain their sameness, their familiar likenesses.

#### WORDS MATTER

To claim meanings as universal is to demand agreement. If I can *prove* a word's direct and unarguable conjunction to an object or a system, you no longer need to interpret, and you owe nothing to a larger interpretive community. Those who are attempting to build a ubiquitous system of meaning (of both the referential and contextual varieties) make a central, underlying claim: through a system of determination, whether semiotic or scientific or historical, words' meanings can be worked out in such a way that they demand agreement. If the real sense of "liberty" can be determined, even if (as the positivists and structuralists argue) real meanings make up different definitions of a word, then their signification can be fixed *and shared*. Claims to universality, in other words, are commands.

But words do not reflect an ostensibly nonlinguistic reality in these ways. They are neither (as in referential theories) indicative and purely representational nor (as in contextual theories) exhibitions and indica-

tors of superstructural political relationships. Words, in other words, are pluralized: there are always “other words.” While words can engage, cajole, seduce, inspire, dismiss, teach, injure, and captivate, they do not necessarily *demand*. They could demand only if they held a directionally simplistic relationship to exteriority. If they did, if words could only represent things or systems, then they would indeed be impotent and not particularly worthwhile objects of study. Studying the objects or the systems themselves would make more sense.

Instead, words have complex registers, varieties, and meanings. Charles Taylor provides a useful example of how words are not directionally simplistic. Saying to a fellow traveler “Whew, it’s hot” neither imparts information (he or she is already aware of the heat) nor encourages the formulation of a linguistically inaccessible idea (it is not a particularly difficult concept to conjure).<sup>32</sup> Rather, it attempts to bridge the fundamental distance between people, to create a realm in which conversation and connection, however limited, become normal and acceptable.

Language, then, does something more complex and multidirectional than the previous conceptions would have it do. The reflective or structural models do not hint at its potential to establish spaces for human experiences such as community and creativity. The formative capacity of language has occupied a central place in twentieth-century linguistics—namely, how can a word hold more than its “meaning”? When does a word go beyond in its purely locutionary sense?

J. L. Austin described the effectuation of language in *How to Do Things with Words*, explaining the impossibility of separating speech from action. In his description of illocutionary “speech acts,” those utterances which by their very articulation cause events such as “I now pronounce you man and wife” or “I christen thee” or “I promise,” Austin identifies the ways in which language acts upon the world. Discussing the perlocutionary aspects of language, he identifies language’s effect on people. This is a complex outcome, for when one person says “This film is boring,” the locutionary force (describing being bored) is obvious; the perlocutionary force (the reaction on the part of another to the implied request to leave) is not.<sup>33</sup>

In describing these ways in which language operates, Austin is doing more than depicting unusual alternatives to the universalist models of meaning. He instead provides an entirely different understanding of what language does. To focus solely on the relationship between words and objects, for example, is to miss the everyday use of those words. The “ordinary” aspects of language interweave with these creative, constitutive uses.

Wittgenstein, in his lecture series known as *The Brown Book*, conceives of a language (or, more properly, a “language-game”) made up purely of nouns used as commands: a builder calling to his assistant “brick” or “slab” depending on which physical object the assistant will next bring him.<sup>34</sup> Such a language has immense simplicity, and seems to be directly representational. But Wittgenstein highlights the ways in which communication and action are decisive aspects of language: “slab” ends up meaning not only the thing, but also the bringing of the thing, the ordering of the work, even the relationship between the builder and the assistant.<sup>35</sup> Even one word contains multitudes.

The political difficulty with this pluralization in more political contexts is that these separate meanings are incommensurable: liberty cannot mean both the perpetuation of slavery in certain states and its end in the United States. More precisely, these two meanings can *no longer* remain in the peaceful proximity they enjoyed before the Civil War. The complexities historically concealed in the term “liberty” have been revealed; the word has become politicized. Its ability to work as a simple uncontested term has disappeared and the different functions it can and does serve have been made apparent.

Two major strains of post-Austinian language theory presume that words exceed representation. The first accepts the structuralist conception of the ineluctable bonds between language and power, but rejects this as a unidirectional causal relationship. The second develops a pragmatics of language, accepting Austin’s and Wittgenstein’s notions of language as active and differentiated, and expanding these insights to the ways in which words activate identities and pluralities. The first of these strains is most closely identified with Michel Foucault, the second with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Academics have debated Foucault's genealogical projects for decades now, yet they rarely address language's central role in his philosophy.<sup>36</sup> But language proves central: overtly at times, such as in his extensive discussion of discursive practices in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, but also in his later examinations of the history of self-constitution in "Technologies of the Self."<sup>37</sup> The capacity of language changes over the course of his intellectual development, to be sure, but the ways in which words serve as a political and social focus of regimes of knowledge do not. Foucault specifically views the philosophical emergence of a focus on language as fundamentally and centrally transformative of all of French political thought.<sup>38</sup>

Forget semiotic theories of reading; Foucault does not argue that there are underlying meanings to systems of language which work subterraneously and require extensive methods of translation to discover. Like Austin and Wittgenstein, he envisions meaning within language itself rather than hidden beneath it.<sup>39</sup> Foucault considers it therefore obvious or articulated; he showed that an investigation of language that ignores or de-emphasizes language in favor of other, "more real" systems is, in fact, not about language at all. The object of linguistic study, for Foucault, should be how language and power are linked in the use of words.

Why should such imbrication not be obvious to those who use language every day? Foucault's systematic focus on linguistic prescriptions and constraints shows how various functionings of power mask themselves through the normalizing forces of the mundane uses of language. Early in Foucault's career, he primarily examines such disguises. The uses and meanings of words are not accidental but surrounded by institutional and societal mechanisms of reinforcement.<sup>40</sup> This may not sound very different from structuralist theories, where social forces determine language. But Foucault further argues that these prohibitions help constitute social practices that themselves depend on power formed by particular linguistic usages. These regimes of power—what Foucault called, at various times, *épistémé* or disciplines—do not and cannot exist outside of the linguistic practices of those who live within them.

Later in Foucault's career his focus changed from the proscriptive concealments of language to its prescriptive characteristics. In his histories of

sexuality, for example, he notes that after the (alleged) Victorian prohibitions on overt sexuality, the twentieth century saw a radical outpouring of words on sexuality. Yet this deluge justifies itself as a reaction against restraints on discussions of sexuality, which depend on a theory of repression that is disproved by its own existence.<sup>41</sup> What, Foucault asks, does such a language of liberation entail?

Part of the answer is that it justifies, almost necessitates, speech. Confession and interpretation become necessary parts of social life because they assert truths that would be less supportable were there not a “history” of subjugation against which they ostensibly strive. This results, Foucault argues, in a system of justification that conceals and rationalizes power, where those who bravely fight against the alleged silence achieve what he called “the speaker’s benefit: the interrelated discourses in which sex, the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of a certain felicity are linked together.”<sup>42</sup> In their pretense to authenticity, marshaled against tyranny, words “produce truth”: this effect, Foucault contends, arises from the distinction Plato makes between philosophy as truth telling and politics as the field where truth is tested.<sup>43</sup>

Across his work, Foucault presents a linguistic theory of language and power as coterminous, where power and words circulate in social, institutional, and political structures. Such an analysis of language entirely rejects universalist notions of meaning. Words do not mean “things” or represent “structures”; instead, they constitute relations of power themselves. Not exclusively, of course; Foucault clearly does not underestimate the power behind prisons, armies, or police. But he emphasizes that such institutions are profoundly dependent on the discursive practices that constitute the institution itself. A prison cannot function outside of a legal and discursive system that determines why some words (and actions) that are tolerated or encouraged outside the system are forbidden within it.

Contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler and David Campbell have applied Foucault’s linguistic theories to specific political questions. For Butler, language is both the site of the making of gendered subjects and a location where such subjects can exceed (some of) the constraints

of power.<sup>44</sup> This, she argues, makes language always partial and always contestable, though it is also the reason that words have such power to constrain, limit, and produce our selves. David Campbell identifies similar ways that the uses and effects of language work by examining its role in the relations between national and state identities. For example, Campbell identifies linguistic formulations of difference which form the groundwork of the foreign policy of the United States, where danger and threat are displaced onto those who are rhetorically defined as most un-American,<sup>45</sup> or how political identities can be lexically transformed from discordant coexistence to radical violence.<sup>46</sup>

A second Austinian linguistic effectuation rejects the very notion of language as meaning, turning instead to what language does.<sup>47</sup> For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, linguistics is the investigation of acts. Language, they argue, “is neither informational nor communicational.”<sup>48</sup> It is, instead, “the transmission of order-words, either from one statement to another or within each statement, insofar as each statement accomplishes an act and the act is accomplished in the statement.”<sup>49</sup>

A Deleuzian conception of language primarily arises from the perlocutionary, to use Austin’s terminology. Deleuze and Guattari focus on what arrangements of language both *generate* and *transform*.<sup>50</sup> Words form a part of larger structures—here they too agreed with Saussure. But Deleuze and Guattari also point out that Saussure conflates difference and opposition when he moves from claiming that “in language there are only differences” to the unnecessary corollary that these differences “are without positive terms.” In doing so, he denies those times when language is positive, creative, and different all at once.

Words can be positioned differentially without being oppositional for Deleuze and Guattari.<sup>51</sup> This critical approach to the words of law, policy, or politics shows that words have an empirical, material reality, not in the sense that they exist as corporeal objects, floating about through the air, but in the ways in which they effect changes, affect people, and reconstitute the world. At first this may seem the same as MacKinnon’s project; after all, she too is interested in what words enact rather than what they “say.” But for MacKinnon what words do—at least the words which inter-

est her—is oppress; they are intelligibly direct appliances of subjugation. For Deleuze and Guattari, conversely, words can oppress, but they can also do many other things, both salutary and not, even simultaneously. The mistake, they believe, comes from thinking that “content determines expression by causal action, even if expression is accorded the power not only to ‘reflect’ content but to act upon it in an active way.”<sup>52</sup> Language can certainly be used by one person or institution to act upon another (for example, the kind of language known as “law”), but it can also reconstitute relationships between people and other people, things, and organizations.

Language, in this picture, is not *about* the world but is *of* the world. If language represents the world, that is, if it reflects things or structures, then using language empties the world of meaning, it replaces the identity of things and structures with depiction. But language in fact does no such thing; instead, it is elemental to and formative of the human world. It is not a tool to be employed by people so much as it is an ontological component of people. For Deleuze and Guattari, it constitutes a composite articulation: “Enunciation in itself,” they argue, “implies collective assemblages.”<sup>53</sup>

Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls this Deleuzian moment the move “from the body of the individual to the body politic.”<sup>54</sup> One can conceptualize these assemblages as collectivities and communities of people; this presents perhaps the simplest formulation. Language must be communal. Speaking, as Foucault asserts, subverts the assumption that humans are disparate, discrete, and fully individuated beings.<sup>55</sup> Only those whose identity has been constituted within at least one social nexus can talk.

But these assemblages are also accumulations of language, accretions of implications. For Deleuze and Guattari, words and sentences are in constant relation to the world and to other linguistic assemblages, a “regime of infinite debt, to which one is simultaneously debtor and creditor.”<sup>56</sup> Nor is this a singular regime; language is multiplicitous, with currents of slang, eddies of other languages, tides of usages. A Deleuzian reading of language emphasizes linguistic intensities, learnings, and flows.

These quotidian aspects underlie both the power and the pragmatics of language. Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the transformative nature

of language: words, they show, turn “prisoners” into “criminals,” “passengers” into “hostages,” and “workers” into “a proletariat.” This transformation is not corporeal; it is actual. A criminal fundamentally differs from a prisoner. The former kind of person embodies evil and guilt; the latter exists in a particular sort of situation. Language can change identity, create meaning where none was before, and reorder the material reality of the world.

What do these post-Austinian theories (of both the Foucaultian and the Deleuzian variety) say about Lincoln’s understanding of “liberty”? They show that the word differs when used by a Northerner or a Southerner, but it is not purely located situationally. Rather, it forms part of a chain of variation, where the different “effectuations” in which Northerner and Southerner participate continue through one another.<sup>57</sup> Employing the word in service of different ideals of freedom does not mean that they use it in antithetical ways. As in families, difference is not reducible to opposition in meaning.

It does mean an enactment of identity, an enactment upon common bases (the word itself) to differing states of being—violently so, lest the brutal Civil War be forgotten. “Liberty,” even though a central component of identity, shifts and flows, referring doubly and oppositionally.

#### PUBLIC POLICIES, PUBLIC LANGUAGES, PUBLIC FAMILIES

Linguistic incommensurability has tangible consequences, for example, in constructing public policy and understanding the nature of law. The central linguistic problem in jurisprudence and public policy, as many see it, emerges from the perceived need for words and sentences to have clear and overt references. Such approaches strive for clarity and agreement; once clarity has been achieved, political problems become solvable.

But wouldn’t we have figured out how to do this by now? In fact, attempting to universalize meaning and referentiality proves impossible. Even the problems that form the objects of policies are politically defined and contested. Thus the very conceptual foundation of this book—the idea of “family”—can never be clearly determined nor delineated. It can only be argued over and reconfigured, over and over. Do two gay men

and their children make up a family? A childless heterosexual couple? Three roommates in the big city? And who is in this family: children and grandparents certainly, but what about second cousins, or dogs and cats? A divorced, and thus no longer legally related, child's spouse? Friends who often stop by for dinner? The inhabited physical structure?

Political and policy processes, determined in part through these arguments, profoundly act upon those families. Clearly, questions of legitimacy and inclusion affect members of transnational families; health care involves children and partners in gay and lesbian relationships; anti-poverty programs constrain nutritional choices and medical decisions. Here the incommensurability of language and the determinacy of policy prescriptions collide most dramatically.

The terminology of "poverty" exemplifies these clashes, where language and policy draw together through the erroneous presumption of universality. As Sanford Schram has pointed out, the language of poverty—its presumptions, applications, and logical consequences—profoundly shapes its political support and efficacy, while perceptions of its efficacy and constituency simultaneously affect what counts as poverty.<sup>58</sup> Language effects poverty, Schram argues, and the social sciences' presumptions of linguistic neutrality serve to mask not only poverty's constructions but also to naturalize its effects.<sup>59</sup> For example, attempts to change the fundamental understanding of poverty are smuggled in public policy arguments. A study published in 2004 by the Heritage Foundation attempted to show that poverty in the United States is far less widespread than popularly presumed. Among its evidence: 78 percent of families living in poverty have VCRs or DVD players; 97 percent have a color television; more than half have a stereo; over 33 percent have an automatic dishwasher.<sup>60</sup> More recently, assumptions that cellular phone ownership could never be compatible with true poverty have made it difficult for social services agencies to equip homeless families with such phones.<sup>61</sup>

Most if not all people in the United States would acknowledge the possible coexistence of systematic and structural economic hardship in modern American life alongside the ownership of a thirty-nine-dollar Toshiba DVD player or a ninety-dollar Sony television. As Adam Smith recognized,

a linen shirt may not be a necessity of life (Greeks and Romans having lived without one), but it may become “a necessary of life” at particular historical periods, even for the poorest of the poor.<sup>62</sup> This kind of claim highlights the difficulty of arguing for the necessity of antipoverty programs to those for whom historically bounded versions of material wealth decide and delineate “poverty.” If poverty and televisions are mutually exclusive, then poverty has been largely eliminated in the United States; if poverty can coexist with television ownership, then the statistics on color televisions do not necessarily inform the poverty debate.

This does not mean that a final definition of poverty should be properly established. “Poverty” as a concept remains an essentially contested term; it cannot be reuniversalized. The very question of a “word-having-meaning” (as Austin puts it) ultimately cannot make abstract sense. No meaning of “liberty,” “pornography,” or “poverty” can transcend their usage.

Words are not, however, interchangeable within the same contextual and situational circumstances. “Liberty” represents an ideal worth fighting (and dying) for; “the continuance of slavery as a way of life” is far less compelling. It takes very little effort or thought to oppose “pornography” or “poverty,” at least insofar as those concepts are deployed in contemporary discourse. They remain easy opponents.

The idea of marriage has become political precisely because its meaning is shared, yet access to the institution remains contested. Liberty, for Lincoln, proves political for the opposite reason: it has incommensurable meanings, although all agree on its necessity, even so far as justifying war. In both these cases, the public uses of the terms remain vital and celebrated as their politicization causes difference and strife.

In both examples, the popular presumption remains: we should reach a uniform and common agreement regarding the meaning and uses of these languages as the foundation for the very basics of public, common life. In other words, the incommensurability of terminology must be overcome before community can return. But the ongoing engagement over the terms, the very debates that make each approach and usage coherent, proves that communities of meaning already exist, either in spite of

linguistic incommensurabilities or (possibly) as a result of them. The attempt to elide or eliminate these differences implies the antipolitical and the anticommunity.

#### IN CONCLUSION

Families constantly explode the putative opposition between community and incommensurability, thus disproving the conceptual assumption that connected togetherness can never coexist with radical differences in outlook, affect, or ideology. The immediacy and intensity of familial relationships, the inconclusiveness and distances between people who love one another, the shifting emotional tenors, legal connections, and temporal responsibilities that make up the modern family: all show that even a small community is complex and irreducible to easy sloganeering about “connection” and “sameness.”

The particularities of these relationships should not be forgotten, especially if political communities are modeled upon or against families, as they were for the list of political philosophers listed in the second chapter. Families connect closely to politics, these theorists intuit, precisely because families constitute sites where conflicts and desires of independence, belonging, and responsibility hold strongest: they are the locales where people feel their relationship to power, obligation, rights, privilege, autonomy, and dedication most intensely.

What, ultimately, do these recognitions mean for political understandings of community? One solution, which makes little empirical sense, would be to call for a disappearance of felt community, to argue that in the face of profound differences the affective ties of nation or state or neighborhood have been falsely created and should be eliminated or ignored.<sup>63</sup> The opposite solution, wrong rather than merely unfeasible, would argue that differences within families prove minor and unimportant compared to large-scale, “real” political differences. But the persistence of domestic violence and murders, of monies spent on health care for parents, of emotional energies expended between couples or between parents and children disprove this commonly held assumption.

Instead, attention to families illuminates the real and quotidian incom-

mensurabilities between people tied together by accident of birth, lines of affiliative affection, or choice, while also revealing that such incommensurabilities need not be pathologized or rejected. Families contain differences, but this does not require working out the proper hierarchy, or demanding absolute and total equality at all times, or building a legal system which coordinates all families in the same ways, or dismissing the entire familial project altogether.<sup>64</sup> Families indicate the ways we already coordinate, contest, and overcome the most important divisions in our lives. They provide models of love and anger, respect and regret, connection and independence, life and death.<sup>65</sup> In its best moments, such recognition can create what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “a generosity of *ethos* more than an ethic of generosity.”<sup>66</sup> Our forms of life ought not disappear, nor need they merge: such a politics requires only magnanimity toward different, overlapping forms of life.

This is something we do every day. The practices of everyday life necessitate that we dwell in weakly incommensurate worlds. Business, family, academics, and entertainment all have varied contexts that we juggle, overlap, and negotiate daily. We already possess “at the same time the different skills required for dwelling in several weakly incommensurate worlds and hence [we] can occupy more than one identity at a time.”<sup>67</sup> These multiple roles and worlds and responsibilities and emotional tenors enfold and produce the kinds of people we are.

The human subject is always part of organizational, institutional, and collective identities, but this does not mean that we must subsume ourselves in these identities. They make up parts of us, important parts, but subjectivity also emerges from the contestations, the aporias, and the overlaps of these communities. The whole of who we are, our individual life worlds, involves the combinations of these judgments: combinations which always conflict with and depend upon others’ ways of making their own worlds. The lives we lead emerge from the negotiation of these common but incommensurate communities of judgment.

These communities crystallize at their most intense locations, where our quotidian lives form our identities. It is the family—the realm of the intimate, the personal, the interrelational—where people always already

negotiate dynamics of interplay and interaction. Where we love, argue, engage, think, care, and act. Where we likely spend more time and energy than in any other relationships. Where the vast and insurmountable distances between us coexist with our knowing other people as well as they know themselves. Where, in other words, our communities emerge from our incommensurabilities.

If the family serves as a model for political understanding, it should not be as a form or an archetype. No *polis* can be shaped as a family, since the intimacies and intensities of families cannot be transferred to organizations of unknowns. But our family lives can help us understand important aspects of political life: that difference does not foreclose community, that incommensurability does not threaten collectivity, that the techniques of familial living, when they work, can balance the competing pulls of dissimilarity and solidarity. These recognitions, while never faultless, prove both sufficient and necessary for life with others. Families, while themselves imperfect, provide reason for most of us to change ourselves on their behalf. To take that implication seriously—to commit to work on ourselves at the same time we work on those around us—proves the precondition to being both dedicated and engaged citizens and participatory and responsible family members.