



MUTUAL MISUNDERSTANDING

SCEPTICISM AND THE THEORIZING OF
LANGUAGE AND INTERPRETATION

BY TALBOT J. TAYLOR

Mutual Misunderstanding

Post-Contemporary

Interventions

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Mutual Misunderstanding

Scepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation

Talbot J. Taylor

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For
Read and Roy,
father and teacher,
in whose conversation
I imagine myself
to be

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*Nichts ist so schwer,
als sich nicht betrügen.*

—Wittgenstein

Preface

.....

This book concerns inheritance and creativity in the theory of language. It attempts to bring to light the means by which, in theorizing about language, we inherit particular kinds of discourse constraints, and it suggests a possible method by which we might free ourselves from this inheritance. The kinds of constraints discussed are those which are usually called “rhetorical.” Discourse is only possible, one might say, because in discourse we cannot say just anything. It matters, in other words, whether we *make sense*. This book therefore concerns the inheritance and creation of ways of making sense in theoretical discourse about communication, interpretation, understanding, and language.

I *too* would like to say “This book is written to the glory of God.” However, in my case the fact that such a remark would surely be misunderstood means that it would surely also miss its intended target. So, instead I will say that I have written this book for the interlocutors whose own voices echo in its very pages. For it is the threads of my conversations—a few quite real, but most entirely imaginary—with these interlocutors that I have borrowed and rewoven in putting together the rhetorical tissue of my own discourse. In addition to my father and Roy Harris, to whom I have dedicated the final product, there are many other interlocutors in whose image the following pages were created and to whom my own contribution herein is written. The following alphabetically arranged list of the names of these imaginary collaborators should make clear the derivative, as well as the speculative, character of this discursive exercise: George Wolf, David Wiggins, Tony Warren, Michael Toolan, Dugald Stewart, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Deborah Schiffrin, Ferdinand de Saussure, Frederick Newmeyer, Peter Mühlhäusler, Nigel Love, John Locke, Saul Kripke, Colleen Kennedy, John Joseph,

Chris Hutton, Paul Hopper, John Heritage, Rom Harré, Peter Hacker, Harold Garfinkel, Gottlob Frege, Michel Foucault, Stanley Fish, Esther Figueroa, Michael Dummett, Jacques Derrida, Hayley Davis, Jonathan Culler, Tony Crowley, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, Noam Chomsky, Debbie Cameron, Sylvain Auroux, Julie Andresen, and Suzanne and Jean-Marie Allaire.

Added to these are a few whose support and inspiration have made the writing of this book possible. To them I want explicitly to acknowledge my very deep gratitude. My first and most heartfelt thanks must be to my wife, Rosie. It is she who, in the past years, contributed the greater share of the hard work and personal sacrifices required to see this book through its long and painful emergence. So it is she who unquestionably deserves the primary credit for the eventual product.

The idea for this book first emerged in an after-seminar conversation with Katherine Morris in a now-defunct restaurant on Little Clarendon Street. I am grateful to her for taking the trouble to convince me that there might in fact be something worth articulating more clearly in my otherwise incoherent ruminations. I am similarly grateful to Gordon Baker; it was in the context of our conversations about the interpretation of Wittgenstein's writings that I came to see what I myself wanted to write. I hope my friend Lily Knezevich already knows how much I am indebted to her for her constant encouragement, as well as for the long hours she spent reading and commenting on my early attempts to transform my discursive intentions into continuous prose. It is by means of our critical dialogue that I was eventually able to discern how I could merge into one discursive whole that which I knew needed to be said and that which I thought I might myself actually be able to say. Finally, I must reserve a special share of gratitude for the very great moral support provided, in the final stages of my writing, by Stuart Shanker. His well-directed advice and unrestrained encouragement gave me the self-confidence and intellectual energy without which I might never have been able to bring the work to completion.

For financial and institutional support I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities for two generous fellowships, to the American Council of Learned Societies for a travel grant, and to the College of William and Mary for financial and academic support.

**To Remedy
the Abuse of Words**
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One

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On addressing understanding

People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does. (Foucault, quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:187)

It's only by thinking even more crazily than philosophers do that you can solve their problems. (Wittgenstein 1980:75)

Do others understand what we say or write? Do we understand them? These are questions not often addressed in language theory. Those professionals who work in language theory—literary theorists, linguists, philosophers of language, communication theorists, semioticians, theorists of rhetoric, discourse analysts, etc.—are more interested in the problem of specifying *what* it is to understand and *how* we understand than in asking *whether* we understand. Apparently, the fact that communicators ordinarily understand each other is a pre-theoretical given, the *sine qua non* of academic discourse on language, meaning, and interpretation. Consequently, asking whether we understand our fellow communicators is typically treated as the sort of non-serious question that only a radical sceptic would even consider raising.

After all, if we cannot in fact understand what others say or write and if they cannot understand us, it seems natural to conclude that each of us is little more than a psychological island: that is, we are isolated solip-sists who hear only the echo of our own voices, all the while believing and acting under the tragicomic illusion that we are hearing and being heard by others. With such a conclusion as the only apparent alternative, it is not surprising that language theory has consigned the discussion of sceptical doubts about communicational understanding to the realm of non-serious discourse.

It is not my intention to argue for or against the seriousness of communicational scepticism. Rather, I intend to challenge the implication of the view just discussed: that is, that communicational scepticism has little or no influence in the intellectual discourse that constitutes modern Western thought on language. I will attempt to bring to light the importance of communicational scepticism to the rhetorical structure of that discourse, an importance that is concealed by familiar assertions of the status of communicational understanding as a pre-theoretical given (or by the equally common practice of dismissing this status as not even worthy of mention).

This aim fits into a larger task to be undertaken here: investigating the rhetorical source of Western ideas on language, meaning, and interpretation. Why are particular sorts of concepts, problems, arguments, assumptions, methods, puzzles, and solutions characteristic of this *episteme*? Why do language theorists of various intellectual persuasions and disciplinary schools all play one of a quite closely related family of (meta)language-games?

Again, questions such as these do not attract the attention of language theorists. Moreover, if language theorists ever were to address such questions, they would probably offer the unhesitating response that language theory simply attempts to produce an accurate account of the facts of language, as that task is understood within the general framework of the Western scientific tradition. The roots of *that* tradition, they might say, form a topic for the philosophy or history of science, not for language theory itself. Still, such a response—although direct—begs the question. For, one might ask, why is the task of “producing an accurate account of the facts of language” understood *as it is* within the Western tradition? And, in particular, what role in intellectual discourse on language (that is, in what I will call “intellectual metadiscourse”) is played by the purportedly unquestionable assumption that it is non-serious to doubt the effectiveness of language as a vehicle of communicational understanding?

Destitute of faith, but terrified at scepticism

A popular introduction to the philosophy of language articulates what I take to be the defining issue of language theory in the modern era. The author places the following task at the very center of inquiry into language:

We need a philosophy of mutual understanding, protecting shared understanding in the face of divergent ways and experiences. (Blackburn 1984: 8)

In writing this book it is not my intention to respond to such calls for a philosophy of mutual understanding; instead, I will investigate the motivation for asserting that a philosophy or theory of mutual understanding is something “we need.” This will lead me to consider how intellectual discourse on language represents that which needs to be “protected,” what it needs to be protected from, why we need to protect it, and how it is vulnerable, as well as the protective strategies that may be deployed and the methods of comparing the relative strengths of those strategies.

Moreover, by means of this investigation, I hope to afford some insight into the more general proposition that the discourse of modern humanist thought characteristically takes the form of a dialogue between the sceptic and his anti-sceptical adversaries. It is of particular interest that, within this discourse, the sceptic’s adversaries are typically portrayed as split personalities. They combine the “commonsense” faith of the layman (who is attacked by the sceptic for believing in propositions of foundationless dogma) with the intellectual discipline of the theorist (who responds to the sceptic’s attack by attempting to construct a sceptic-proof “protection” for those “commonsense” propositions). For, the theorist argues, to abandon those propositions would mean to lose our self-understanding and our understanding of the world in which we live.

One conception of the rhetorical importance of scepticism to modern thought is expressed in the writings of John Stuart Mill. In *On Liberty*, Mill recommends a free and open dialogue with the sceptic as a rhetorical buttress to the foundational distinction between truth and opinion:

In the present age—which has been described as “destitute of faith, but terrified at scepticism”—in which people feel sure, not so much that their opinions are true, as that they should not know what to do without them—the claims of an opinion to be protected from public attack are rested not so much on its truth, as on its importance to society. (Mill 1859: 965)

Mill suggests that the confrontation between received opinion and scepticism is necessary to ensure that the propositions we continue to hold are those, and only those, that have been shown to be true. But accord-

ing to the story to be told in this book, what emerges from such a free and open dialogue with the sceptic is both the same as and the opposite of what Mill had hoped. That is, by being made the subject of a dialogue between the sceptic and his theoretical adversaries, received opinion does indeed end up being “shown to be true”; on the other hand, given the rhetorical form of that dialogue, the eventual attainment of that conclusion can never really be in doubt.

Nevertheless, as Mill remarks, scepticism is typically represented as undermining “the claims of an opinion to be protected from public attack.” Within the theory of literature, for instance, there is a perceived need to defend traditional practices of literary interpretation against communicational scepticism. In this there is a constant refrain: if it is not possible (let alone practicable) to devise a theory by which we may determine whether a given interpretation of a literary text is true or false, then the routine practices of editors, critics, and professors of literature must ultimately be without foundation. And if this is the case, then there can be no grounds for rejecting any interpretation of any text, whether the interpretation is that of a rival critic or (heaven forbid) that of a completely untrained student. In other words, if a student understands Hamlet’s graveside soliloquy to be an advertisement for soap powder, then apparently nothing can be said to legitimize the rejection of that interpretation!

The specter of communicational scepticism is also found within ethics, anthropological theory, jurisprudence, political theory, and the philosophy of science. If it cannot be shown that *good*, *just*, and *a human right* have universally accepted meanings, then we would seem to be led inexorably to the edge of the yawning chasm of moral and legal relativism. In which case, our “commonsense” opinion of racism, for example, as heinous might appear no more justifiable than the racist’s own opinion that racism is a worthy form of self-expression. Within anthropological theory the cultural relativist claims that there is no justification to the “received opinion” that we cannot understand the culture, behavior, language, politics, reasoning, and beliefs of societies other than our own. And such a sceptical perspective naturally leads to further questions about the definition of “our own society.” Are women and men members of the same culture? Children and adults? The believer and the atheist? The poor and the rich? The governed and the governing? If not, then who is? Whose actions can we justifiably claim to understand? And what sense is there, therefore, in speaking of “government by consent”? In the philosophy of science, sceptics again refute “re-

ceived opinion,” arguing that two scientific theories cannot ultimately be shown to contradict each other, for each theory’s component propositions can properly be understood only *within* the framework of the theory itself. Consequently, the “commonsense” picture of the progress of scientific understanding must be replaced by one of random or socially motivated shifts between fundamentally incommensurable theoretical paradigms, advocated by theorists who do not even understand each other’s arguments.

Let me repeat and emphasize: it is not my aim to argue for or against the seriousness of sceptical perspectives. Rather, my aim is to draw attention to the powerful influence of communicational scepticism in charting the rhetorical possibilities of modern intellectual discourse. In so doing, I will focus on the role scepticism plays in the dialogic rhetoric of intellectual metadiscourse; that is, in the construction of and conflict between theories of language, interpretation, and understanding. For it is in intellectual metadiscourse that we find most clearly displayed the sceptic’s mesmerizing hold over the theorist.

Thinking even more crazily than philosophers

I must confess straightaway that the means I have chosen by which to address my topic are anything but direct. It may be that, in virtue of the discussion’s excessively reflexive character—this is, after all, a discourse about discourse about discourse—a direct approach is simply impossible. Perhaps *no* methodology could escape being implicated in the discussion itself. I know that mine does not.

It is for this very reason that I will begin in this introductory chapter by presenting, but not arguing for, one possible *picture* of the rhetorical foundations of intellectual discourse about language. This “picture” is presented in the form of a possible interpretive framework for—or way of “viewing” or “making sense” of—language theory: namely, as a dispute between a communicational sceptic and his theoretical adversaries. The dialogic strategies employed in this dispute, as well as the topics on which the dispute focuses, are presented as stemming from a common rhetorical source. In subsequent chapters, this framework will be applied in constructing interpretations of various ways of theorizing about language.

The view presented in this picture does not, I freely admit, reproduce a conventional understanding of the theories discussed. Indeed, at times it clashes violently with the picture given by a theory’s standardly ac-

cepted interpretation, which is precisely my intention. For the standard interpretations of language theories are products of the same discursive practice, or dialogic language-game, which produces the theories themselves. Moreover, as the *accepted* accounts of what language theories are, they establish the boundaries to and limit the possibilities for what can be *acceptable* theorizing about language. If we are ever to free ourselves from this recursive pattern of self-determined and -determining self-understanding, we need to find a way of accounting for (making sense of) language theories not from the perspective of an outsider—this I could hardly pretend to do—but from an insider’s perspective *other* than the one which, in the rhetorical construction of the theories, has held us enthralled. If such a method of analyzing theoretical discourse is to be at all successful, it will require a willful act of rupture, of anthropological estrangement, and of conscious decision to approach the topic from a perspective *other* than that of convention and familiarity.

I hope not to underestimate the difficulties the readers of this book may face in acceding to my request that they voluntarily put aside what I have just called the “conventional way of interpreting language theories” so that these theories may be viewed through the interpretive optics that I am to propose. A natural, and perfectly justifiable, response would be for a reader to object that, in order to gain some rhetorical leverage in my metatheoretical discourse, I am asking leave to beg some of the most fundamental questions it raises. Such a reader may well already have put my book back on the shelf. Those who are still hesitating may—or may not—be persuaded to stay the course if I say, in reply, that I have no objection to their conceiving of my interpretive framework as an extended metaphor or allegorical narrative (or perhaps as something belonging to the recently invented mode of discourse called “faction”). Such a conception at least would place proper emphasis on the fact that I have no intention to motivate or defend the argumentative strength or objectivity of the interpretations produced. The goal in producing this picture is not one of representational truth but of rhetorical consequences.

In the final analysis, all that I can do in addressing my topic is to appeal to my readers:

“Try looking at things from this angle. If from this perspective you can make a different sense of what is being looked at—that is, if there emerges a pattern different from that with which you are familiar—then something will have been gained: at the very least

the awareness that there *is* a possible alternative to the conventional means of making sense of the theorization of language and communication in modern Western thought.”

Furthermore, the realization that there is at least one alternative to the conventional picture may itself lead to the even more liberating realization that still other pictures are possible. And this may help us to appreciate the plasticity of the experience of making sense of any discourse, including the intellectual discourse of theorizing about language. I see this as the only means of responding to what is perhaps the most intractable methodological dilemma facing the study of human behavior:

What makes a subject hard to understand—if it’s something significant and important—is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect. (Wittgenstein 1980:17)

It is on these grounds that I request my readers, as part of the communicative pact regulating our continuation from this the opening of my narrative, temporarily to put aside their natural objections to all or part of its interpretive framework in order to see if this framework can help to effect a *perceptual shift* in how they make sense of the discourses that constitute modern language theory. If I am granted the opportunity to demonstrate the value of this exercise, then, once that demonstration is complete, the objections themselves may appear in a different light.

But some readers may still want me to say why I think such an interpretive exercise is even worth attempting. What is the good of coming to see that the practice of theorizing language and communication may itself be viewed from more than one interpretive perspective—made sense of according to more than one picture—especially when I do not even claim to provide access to *the* perspective or *the* picture from which the *true* interpretation will emerge? In other words, even if my bizarre methodology (“thinking even more crazily than philosophers do”) achieves its aims, so what? My answer to such a question can here only be brief, dogmatic, and without supporting argument; and it is here that I will have to stand.

Theories of language are theories of what we do; they are professional, institutionalized, “disciplined” practices by which we account to ourselves for what we do—where doing is essence. As the means by which we account for our understanding, they are the vehicles of our own self-understanding. Furthermore, the authority today given to intellectual discourse means that the accepted accounts (“pictures”) of what we do and what we are automatically acquire a second, much more powerful, rhetorical function: that of informing us about—that is, telling us—what we *can* do and what we *can* be. As we understand ourselves to be, so we become. I would hope therefore that by foregrounding the plasticity of the forms by which we account for our powers and practices of understanding, we might increase the possibilities for the exercise of those powers and the performance of those practices. Is this not a worthy aim for the reflexive discourse of the “human sciences”?

Theorizing language

The interpretive framework which I will adopt in this book (but not here argue for) represents the technical practice of theorizing language, interpretation, communication, and understanding—the practice I am calling “intellectual metadiscourse”—as derived from non-technical (or “practical”) metadiscourse; that is, from our ordinary, everyday practices of talking about what we say and do with language. This distinction between practical and intellectual metadiscourse is drawn according to the difference in the rhetorical norms which the practitioners of those two forms of metadiscourse impose on their performance: in other words, according to the difference between how practical and intellectual metadiscourses are *themselves* talked about and evaluated as reflexive practices. Making a similar point in their book on Michel Foucault, Dreyfus and Rabinow discuss how technical political discourse derives from the theorizing of lay political problems:

Political technologies advance by taking what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science. Once this is accomplished the problems have become technical ones for specialists to debate. (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:196)

In the next few pages I will explore in more detail the notion of deriving intellectual metadiscourse by means of theorizing practical metadiscourse.

Characteristic of human discourse as a social activity is what we might call its “metalanguage” (or “metadiscourse”). The speakers of any language have a variety of resources for addressing what they consider to be relevant features of communicational practice. Among these are such institutionalized metalinguistic terms as the English *word, sentence, name, phrase, verb, understand, mean, discourse, pronounce, read, is called, stands for*, and so on. But of at least equal importance are the spontaneous, “colloquial,” and context-specific ways of talking about talk (and writing) which are not institutionalized. Consider the following examples:

“You express yourself unclearly (or incorrectly, persuasively, confusingly, unfairly, boringly, honestly, courteously, insistently, conspiratorily, etc.)”

“He didn’t quite get it”

“You shouldn’t have objected to that”

“What was she driving at?”

“They weren’t trying to insult you”

“I didn’t like his tone”

“She compared dancing with me to water torture”

“Don’t tease your brother!”

“You really mustn’t interrupt her all the time”

“What does he mean?”

“He agreed with my comments”

“He cursed his bad luck”

“He lied about his age”

“He was quite insistent about not wanting to go”

“Never disclose how you acquired your illness”

“We suggested he confer with his friends”

“She enumerated my shortcomings”

“That’s all I will say on the matter.”

The point of listing such examples—which I intend to be taken as commonplace expressions and locutions of everyday discourse—is illustrative: I hope they will act as reminders, helping the reader to bring into focus the metadiscursive character of much of what we say and hear said in our daily communicational encounters. Such familiar metadiscursive commonplaces are important features of the ordinary, reflexive practices by which English speakers address, conceptualize, and so facilitate their participation in the activity of speaking English. It is these reflexive practices which I am calling “practical metadiscourse.”

Moreover, it is because we talk about our linguistic activities that those activities acquire for us a recognizable character; that is, that we can make sense of those activities (both to ourselves and to others) and so take an active part in them. In other words, an important function of metadiscourse is to serve as a means by which we may attempt to influence how discursive acts and sequences (both our own and those of our interlocutors) are *to be* seen; that is, what aspect they are to be seen under. For example, imagine that I refer to what you just said as an insult (or as a joke, or as teasing, or as a slip of the tongue). By this remark, I may succeed in influencing the rhetorical status which we give to your utterance in the remainder of our conversation; that is, whether we subsequently treat it as having been an insult, joke, teasing, or something else. My remark may thus make as much—possibly more—of a contribution to the communicational relevance of your speech act as did the original utterance of the speech act itself. It may, for instance, affect how we subsequently refer to your utterance (as an “insult,” a “joke,” “teasing,” etc.); that is, of what we count it *as*. Without such a supporting infrastructure of metadiscursive practices, the activities we know of *as language*—instances of which are referred to in the examples above: suggesting, lying, cursing, disagreeing, speaking truly, insulting, speaking French, expressing ourselves, understanding others—not only could not be so known (so conceptualized); they could not exist. Instead, those activities would remain “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” (James 1890:488) within which we neither knew our way about nor could determine how to act ourselves.

As well as providing the means by which—interactively—we conceptualize and so “know our way about” our ordinary communicational activities, practical metadiscourse also serves as a way for speakers to enforce regularity and conformity in the communicational activities of their community (and, correspondingly, how to draw and police the boundaries of what they perceive as “our community”). That is, one important function of practical metadiscourse is to serve ordinary discourse as a *normative* instrument of self- (and other-) control. We do not expect those with whom we interact linguistically to speak “any which way.” Rather, we typically hold them responsible (and expect to be held responsible ourselves) for conforming to whatever we take to be “normal” patterns of communicational behavior in our community: for example, to call the color of this typeface “black,” to have subject and verb agree in number, or to spell the name of that metropolis in the North “W-e-a-t-h-e-r-f-i-e-l-d.” When the behavior of others does not

meet our expectations, we typically object, admonish, or correct; or we may look for “reasons” to explain the defeat of our expectations. (Possibly our addressee didn’t hear what we said, or has become deaf, angry, or drunk, or is “making a point,” etc.) And, again characteristically, when we hold what we take to be a position of authority in relation to our interlocutor (for example, a child, a student of our language, or someone who does not know the word for X), we often tell them how they *should* speak or write. We say, for instance, “Don’t say ‘he got’s’; say ‘he has’”; or “This is called a ‘——’”; or “No, not ‘newsmonger,’ ‘newsagent’.”

It is thus typical of human language that its speakers treat it as a normative activity, as is manifested in such remarks as “you *should* answer when you are spoken to,” “‘You is’ is *wrong*: ‘You are’ is *correct*,” “You *mustn’t* disagree with everything he says,” and “If you begin this paragraph with ‘on the one hand,’ you *have to* begin the next with ‘on the other hand’.” In other words, metalinguistic remarks such as these are not characteristically treated (talked about: evaluated, explained, corrected, etc.) as empirical hypotheses, describing how some person or group does in fact behave. Rather they are treated as having a normative function: that of telling our interlocutors how they *should* behave. One consequence of the pervasive normative use of such reflexive phenomena is that the language acts of those in our community can be brought into the kind of conformity that is required to make those acts useful in the accomplishment of social activity. From this perspective, therefore, language appears not as an autonomous system of formal regularities but as a normative practice, the regularity of which we ourselves create, police, and reward as a part of the very performance of that practice, and to which we attribute what amounts to a moral value (as in “saying X is *right*”). This is what I mean by asserting above that another important function of metadiscourse is to serve discourse as a normative instrument of self- and other-control.

The crucial step in the genesis of intellectual metadiscourse is the decontextualization of practical metadiscursive expressions from their ordinary rhetorical contexts and their recontextualization within the rhetorical context of intellectual inquiry. In everyday interactions, our reasons for speaking about a communicational event—that is, for speaking metadiscursively—and what we say about (and will accept being said about) that event both depend on the contingent properties of the interaction: its participants, its purposes, its contextual setting, and so on. It is quite atypical for participants in ordinary discourse to speak

idly about the features of their discourse; nor do they customarily do so for purely speculative reasons or for the purpose of exercising their metalinguistic skills. Rather, if ordinary interlocutors do refer to the communicative features of their interaction, they do so for “local” reasons which are fully explicable only by reference to the particularities of the interaction itself and of the context in which that interaction occurs.

For instance, one pervasive reason for engaging in practical metadiscourse, as I argued above, is to bring about normative conformity. But normative conformity is not a universal requirement for communication; nor are the criteria determining what counts as normative conformity independent of the contingent properties of particular communicators, communicational purposes, and interactional contexts. Communicational goals are sometimes achievable by the simple utterance of a grunt (Bet: “Would you like another beer?” Stan: “Uhhnnn . . .”). At other times something more articulate is required. But whether a particular set of interactional circumstances does or does not call for conformity and what will be counted as conformity are both contingent issues for particular speakers to decide, given their respective communicational goals, their personal and social relations, their personal preferences, their moods, and a host of other contextual and interactional variables.

Similarly, an utterance that in one rhetorical context, for some participants, could be said to be “insulting” might well in another context be spoken of as “friendly banter.” Thus Mike’s colleagues might take him to be justified in accusing Elsie of “insulting” him when, in a committee meeting, she says, “Mike doesn’t know his arse from a hole in the ground”; but if she had made this remark, not in a committee meeting, but during a friendly after-hours drink in the pub across the road, Mike’s accusation would understandably be laughed off by their companions (and Mike would be said to be “touchy”). In other words, what we may say when engaging in metadiscourse—and, thus, how we may attempt to influence the aspect under which a given communicational act is seen—is *itself* normatively regulated as a contingent matter within particular rhetorical contexts. How we talk about talk (metadiscourse) is just as much a rhetorical subject of reflexive determination and normative regulation as is talk (discourse) itself.

When we turn to intellectual metadiscourse, however, we find that one of its most important normative requirements is context-invariance; the properties of intellectual metadiscourse are expected to be independent of the contingent features of particular contexts. Another way of

saying this is that intellectual metadiscourse is supposed to take as its topic not the features of particular, situated discursive events, but rather the features of discourse *in general*. At the same time, the goal of intellectual metadiscourse is supposed to be the affirmation, description, and explanation of the facts of discourse. That is, it is concerned with the construction and evaluation of *general, empirical hypotheses* about linguistic phenomena.

It is at this point that I can explain what I mean by the “theorizing” of metadiscourse. According to the picture I am presenting, the rhetorical source of intellectual metadiscourse lies in the treatment of locutions of practical metadiscourse (“metadiscursive commonplaces”) as general, empirical hypotheses and in the evaluation of these locutions according to the justificatory practices of intellectual inquiry. That is, they are evaluated to determine if their affirmation is justified: for example, by seeing if they correspond to—“are true of”—existing states of affairs. The rhetorical source of intellectual metadiscourse thus lies in the treatment and evaluation of practical metadiscourse as a *primitive theory of language*: a “folk linguistics.” The aim of intellectual metadiscourse is to remedy the inadequacies of practical metadiscourse, *thus interpreted*. It aims to correct, improve, and give a scientific foundation to our folk, proto-theories of language as these are manifest in practical metadiscourse.

Perhaps I should try to put this in less jargon-riddled terms: language theories are based on taking our commonplace remarks about language and asking such questions as “But is this (always) true?” “What makes it true?” “How can this remark and that remark *both* be true?” and “How can we be sure?” For instance, in speaking metadiscursively we typically say things like:

1. “*Magenta* means THIS” (while pointing at a colored bead);
2. “I object not to what Mailer wrote but to what he implied”;
3. “Gail promised she wouldn’t tell him.”

However, extracted from the practical interactional circumstances in which they were originally made, and inserted instead into the rhetorical context of intellectual metadiscourse, such ordinary remarks (which I will call “metadiscursive commonplaces”) raise (and have repeatedly raised) questions such as the following:

1. What is it for one property of the physical world—a sequence of sounds—and another property of the physical world—the color of

a bead—to stand in the relation here called “meaning”? How is this relation formed? How does it endure? Do we *know* that it really exists? Might it only be an illusion? How can we be sure? Moreover, does the sequence of sounds uttered in pronouncing *magenta* mean only the particular color in the object to which the speaker is pointing? Does it not mean similar colors in other objects? How is this possible? How similar do the colors have to be? Does that relation—between *magenta* and the color magenta—exist independently of speakers and hearers? How can we determine if we ourselves are right or wrong in what we mean by *magenta*? How can we prove someone wrong who says it really means ‘a nice knockdown argument’? Could everyone be wrong about what it really means? What authority determines “right” and “wrong” here? What if everyone means something different by *magenta*?

2. Is it true that what Mailer wrote is different from what he implied? If so, where does the difference lie: in the arrangement of the words? In beliefs held by our community? In Mailer’s subconscious? In the reader’s brain? In what the reader knows about Mailer? How would such differences arise? Do the same words have the same implications for every reader? Is it mistaken to draw some implications and correct to draw others? Is a reader free to draw what implications she likes? If not, why does she draw some implications rather than others? How should we determine which are and which are not legitimate? How does a reader learn to distinguish what someone writes from what they imply? Can we ever know if we make that distinction correctly?
3. What is it about what Gail did that constituted her promising not to tell him? If it was just saying “I promise . . .,” then has a promise been made every time someone says those two words at the beginning of a sentence, or are other conditions required as well? If the latter, then how can we tell if Gail really did promise? What is it to promise something? In what way, for instance, is it different from implying or from telling? If the difference between promising, implying, and telling is more than just speaking different words, then in what does this difference consist? Neurological events? Social compacts? Behavioral expectations? Psychological dispositions? How could such differences relate to the differences in the words used? And are they the same for everyone who speaks, hears, writes, or reads those words? What if they are not?