The meaning of the wor(l)d: Value, sense, and reference in *Not Saussure* by Raymond Tallis

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Summary

This article is a critical review of the major argument in favour of realism and the concomitant critique of poststructuralism in Raymond Tallis's recent book, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*. While it is generally sympathetic to Tallis's aim to "refute once and for all the belief that there are logico-linguistic grounds for denying the possibility of a valid realistic fiction", it argues both that Tallis overlooks the central weakness of Saussurean theory and that the realism that he offers as an adjunct to his reading of Saussure is seriously flawed. It offers instead a Wittgensteinean view of the relationship between language and the world which, instead of setting out from the assumption that there is a gap between word and world which needs to be bridged, sees the "objects" of language as samples, or aspects of the world that are appropriated in historically and culturally variable ways as rules for the use of words. For Wittgenstein there is no gap between word and object because samples, as rules of "grammar", are in fact part of the structure of language.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is 'n kritiese hertaksering van die hoofargument ten gunste van realisme en die daarmee gepaardgaande kritiek van poststrukturalisme in Raymond Tallis se resente publikasie, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*. Alhoewel daar oor die algemeen empatie is teenoor Tallis se doel "to refute once and for all the belief that there are logico-linguistic grounds for denying the possibility of a valid realistic fiction", word terselfdertyd geredeneer dat Tallis die sentrale swakheid van Saussureaanse teorie oor die hoof sien en verder dat die realisme wat hy voorstel as 'n toevoegsel tot sy lesing van Saussure ernstige gebreke vertoon. Hierdie artikel stel dus plaasvervangend 'n Wittgensteiniaanse siening van die verhouding tussen taal en die wêreld teenoor Tallis se voorstel. Dit is 'n siening wat, in plaas daarvan om uit te gaan van die veronderstelling dat daar 'n gaping tussen woord en wêreld bestaan wat oorbrug moet word, die "objekte" van taal sien as voorbeelde of monsters, of as aspekte van die wêreld wat op historiese en kultureel wisselende maniere toegeëien word as reëls vir die gebruik van woorde. Vir Wittgenstein is daar geen gaping tussen woord en objek nie omdat voorbeelde of monsters, in hulle hoedanigheid as reëls van die "grammatika", in feite deel van die struktuur van taal is.

The concept of the referent is currently not a very popular one among literary theorists. Finding a way of putting that indicates the complexity of the question. For to claim that referents are out of fashion would be nonsense. Referents in a general sense (rather than this or that referent, this or that object) can hardly be popular or unpopular: even sceptics are stuck with them whether they like it or not. Referents are, to adopt a phrase from Fredric Jameson, "what hurts". However, to claim that the referent, or reality, is what hurts is always to move within language. It is an analytical truth or a matter of definition that we have no unmediated propositional access to the world. Consequently the degree of autonomy we allow the world will depend upon our conception of language. To take two extremes, we could follow the empiricist belief that our language is ultimately derived from the world, or

inclined towards the formalist notion that language is an autonomous system entirely independent of "reality" for its significance and constitution. It is important to note that despite the propositional form of the claims that language is or is not independent of the world, neither of them is an empirical proposition. The relation between language and the world cannot be shown or proved empirically because there is no languageless point from which to view or inspect such a link. As Wittgenstein clearly perceived as early as the *Tractactus* (1922), any set of claims which attempted to show that relationship would be senseless. His own early realism is one which is posited from within language in an effort to display the logical conditions of sense – to show, in contrast to poststructuralism for instance, that for language to be significant the sense of a proposition cannot depend on whether another is true (1922: 2.0211). In other words, the arrangements of simple objects that are supposed to be pictured by language in the Tractarian view are not the objects of our everyday or even scientific encounters but a logical requirement of the "determinacy of sense". It is no oversight that the *Tractatus* gives not a single example of a "simple object": these objects are posits or requirements invoked specifically to forestall what Derrida has subsequently celebrated as "writing".

Raymond Tallis's book *Not Saussure* attempts to tackle the problem of the relation between language and reality via an unflinching attack on what is generally known as the post-Saussurean conception of language and refer-ence. The book's punning title neatly conveys the double thrust of his criticism: first, a radical questioning of what appears to have become an axiomatic separation of language and world within structuralism and post-structuralism, and secondly, a claim that such a separation is not authorized by Saussure but rather stems from a systematic misreading and misrepresen-tation of his work. Tallis thus wishes both to show that post-Saussurean formalism is inconsistent and self-refuting, and to offer a theory of language and reference that will "refute once and for all the belief that there are logico-linguistic grounds for denying the possibility of a valid realistic fiction" (p. 17). For Tallis then, different forms of realism or antirealism are inseparable: radical nominalism with regard to language in general leads to a denial of realistic fiction, while a valid realist theory of language would establish the viability of realism as a literary form. This article aims to examine, from a Wittgensteinian position, the validity of Tallis's criticism of structuralist and poststructuralist forms of "radical nominalism", the accuracy of his own reading of Saussure, and finally, the realist theory of language and truth which he presents as a counterpart of his attack on antirealism.

Despite the rather understated scepticism suggested by the title, *Not Saussure* for the most part constitutes a contemptuous and dismissive, not to say vicious, attack on the post-Saussurean tradition. It is a tradition, Tallis informs us, based on intellectual idleness, incompetence and dishonesty; the intellectual seriousness of its adherents is denied by Tallis's reference to them as "thinkers" in scare-quotes, and in a sweeping exclusionary gesture Tallis informs us that "those who have been most impressed by its theories are...unaccustomed to or uninterested in evaluating philosophical ideas"

(p. 3). It is soon clear that *Not Saussure* uses as a preparatory rhetorical device the exclusion of the opposition from the very beginning by limiting what counts as "philosophy" or "serious thought" to its own intellectual position – a rather narrowly conceived, and by implication, conservative stance. "While a wish to defend realism is an important motive for writing *Not Saussure*", Tallis informs us, "another, possibly stronger, motive is my anger at the way post-Saussurean "thinkers" have collectively muddied the waters of philosophical discussion to a degree paralleled in the secular history of the West only by Marxist ideologues" (p. 2). Tallis's scorn does not end there. Even opponents of the "New Irrationalism" are claimed to be intellectually idle and incompetent. To mutter inanities about the "protection of humane values", he suggests, will hardly provide the necessary scourge – we owe our deliverance from the flabby complacency or lunatic raving of literary criticism to Tallis himself who, as both a practising and academic physician, will heal the chronic intellectual diseases which beset criticism "once and for all".

For all its self-righteous rhetoric it is not difficult to sympathize to some extent with Tallis. His iconoclastic approach to what has by now, for all its claims to revolutionary status, become a new orthodoxy ought to be welcomed as an occasion for seriously renegotiating the axiomatic status of much that is simply dogmatically received and passed on within literary theory. Rather than retorting with the countercharge that Tallis practises the same rhetoric that he finds so intellectually wanting in his opponents, we should take his diagnosis seriously. Let us allow him his anger. A life tending patients in the geriatric wards of the Royal Liverpool Hospital is likely to produce an impatience with the more indulgent forms of speculation that are part of life in literature departments. Whether Tallis's more intimate acquaintance with the harsh realities of life produces a better theory of language, or a final justification of realism, is another matter altogether.

1 Saussure, or Not Saussure?

It has become a truism of modern theory that after Saussure our conception of the relationship between language and the world can never be the same again. Before Saussure, the story goes, language could be conceived only in terms of its secondary relation to a primary phenomenon, either the world itself or ideas as representations of the world. Prior to his own work, Saussure suggests, language was commonly regarded as a "nomenclature" – "a list of names corresponding to a list of things" (1977: 65) – but the *Course in General Linguistics* announces the emancipation of language from such a secondary function. The conception of language as a system of differences in terms of which words (to retain the old-fashioned terminology for the moment) owe their formation only to their differential relation to other forms within the system and not to any entity within the world outside language, means, we are told, that language does not reflect the real world: if anything, because our access to that world is always mediated by language, and language as it is now conceived has no necessary relation to the world but instead consists of arbitrary combinations of signifiers and signifieds within and only within the

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system, the world as we know it is a *product* rather than the source of language, signifiers do not refer to entities within the world but only to other signifiers, in a chain that can never come to rest on any self-evident or given entity within the world. Reference, at least as it is traditionally conceived, is an illusion. Or so the story goes. This section will deal only with Tallis's argument that such a rejection of reference cannot appeal to Saussure for authority since it is based on a misreading of the *Cours de Linguistique Générale*.

A statement often quoted in *Not Saussure* is a typical example of the post-Saussurean rejection of reference is Terence Hawkes's claim that language "does not construct its formations of words by reference to the patterns of reality, but on the basis of its own internal and self-sufficient rules" (Hawkes 1977: 16). Now apart from the problem of attributing a self-constituting agency to language in terms of which it constructs its own formations of words (how would *language* perform such an act?), the notion of such a construction is often treated ambiguously within the commentaries. Does such a formation refer purely to the formal elements of the system, signifiers as a purely differential chain, or does it include the conceptual realm of the signified as well? If the former, then this is hardly a claim on which to hang a revolution: it is merely a way of putting the fact that the form of the sign (the *representamen*) is not determined by the nature of what it represents. The fact that signs are arbitrary or unmotivated has been denied by very few philosophers in the history of metaphysics. Saussure did not discover it despite the impression given by many primers; it is in fact the point of departure of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1975), and constitutes one of the major differences between himself and Leibnitz. As Saussure himself said: "No one disputes the fact that linguistic signs are arbitrary. But it is often easier to discover a truth than to assign it to its correct place" (Saussure 1983: 68). Hawkes goes on to suggest, however, that he means something more than a mere arbitrariness of form. "The word 'dog' exists", he continues, "and functions within the structure of the English language, without reference to any four-legged barking creature's real existence. The word's behaviour derives from its inherent structural status as a noun rather than its referent's actual status as an animal. Structures are characteristically 'closed' in this way" (Hawkes 1977: 16). As Tallis points out, there are a number of problematic points here, not least of which is the agency imputed to words via their "behaviour". The one on which he focuses is the crucial suggestion that if the world plays no role in the formation of the *form* of the sign (the signifier) it is similarly absent from the formation of *meaning*. The existence of dogs is irrelevant not only to the form d-o-g but also the concept "dog". Since the signified depends entirely upon the differential existence of the signifier and cannot exist on its own, it is not like a label that stands for some "thing" outside the system.

It is necessary at this point to see precisely how this is related to Saussure's other crucial antinomy, between *langue* and *parole*. For Tallis's point is that the well-known claim by Saussure that "in a language there are only differences, *and no positive terms*" is not an absolute one that applies to

language as a whole (as is commonly suggested) but only to the constituents of the system – *langue*. And Saussure does indeed qualify the claim in this way almost at once:

> But to say that in a language everything is negative holds only for signification and signal considered separately. The moment we consider the sign as a whole, we encounter something *which is positive in its own domain.*...Although signification and signal are each, in isolation, purely differential and negative, their combination is a positive fact. It is, indeed, the only order of facts linguistic structure comprises.
>
> (1983: 118 – emphasis mine)

Tallis takes this to imply that it is illegitimate for post-Saussureans to treat "signifier", "signified", "sign", "word" and "referent" as if they were the same. The sign, according to Tallis's reading of this passage, is a positive fact which stems from *parole* or the use of the system on particular occasions, while signifier and signified as pure negativities belong exclusively to the system. Meaning is thus not negative but a positive fact, a content arising from the combination of signifier and signified in *parole*, and according to Tallis most post-Saussureans are systematically blind to Saussure's own distinction between "that by virtue of which verbal meaning is specified and verbal meaning itself, or, indeed, meaning *per se*" (1988: 79). It is this assumption that value is the same as meaning and meaning is the same as reference that leads to their "radically nominalist" rejection of reference.

Tallis's point that the disappearance of the referent occurs through its collapse via meaning into value is an important one which requires some investigation. For the moment, however, one should point out that the commentators should be excused for their interpretation of an extremely ambiguous text. Tallis presumably takes the "own domain" in which the sign as a whole is "positive" to be that of *parole*, where the differential, negative potentialities of the system are realized in "meaning *per se*". But the *Course* does not obviously sustain this view. For Saussure states specifically that it is the *linguistic structure*, the system of *langue*, which comprises such positive facts (indeed they are the *only* positive facts in the system). Given his absolute distinction between *langue* and *parole* – and the valorization of the former as that which is "essential and social" rather than "accidental and individual" – meaning *per se* cannot be a product of use as Tallis suggests in his interpretation. The domain in which signifier and signified attain positivity in the form of the sign is for Saussure the realm of the *mental*. And this marks a crippling philosophical flaw at the heart of the Saussurean conception of language: an uncritical assumption of a Cartesian philosophy or mind that passes Tallis by entirely in his interpretation of the *Course*.

In his initial account of linguistic structure, Saussure informs us that we should begin with the "speech circuit" of at least two individuals. The starting point of the circuit is "the brain of one individual...where the facts of consciousness which we shall call concepts are associated with representations of linguistic signs or sound patterns by means of which they may be expressed" (1983: 12–3). He is at pains to emphasize that both concepts and

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sound patterns are *psychological*, and that the language as structured system "can be localised in that particular section of the speech section where sound patterns are associated with concepts" (p. 14), and that "linguistic signs, although essentially psychological...are realities localised in the brain" (p. 15). The systematic emphasis on the linguistic sign as a product of *association* effected mentally, of the linguistic system as a "stock of imprints" or "patterns" stored within the brain, suggests that it is Tallis who is misreading Saussure. This offers no consolation to Saussureans, however, for the mentalism of the *Course* undermines almost all of its revolutionary promise. One could ask how language can be both a social institution and an essentially psychological entity localized within the brain, how the process of association takes place, how it happens that all individuals "will establish among themselves a kind of means;. . . [reproducing] the same signs linked to the same concepts" (p. 13)? Relying on a similar form of mentalism, Locke attempted to provide answers to precisely these questions in the seventeenth century. Does Saussure do any better?

Given that Saussure recognizes the "utter chaos" to which the untrammelled principle of arbitrariness would lead (so much so that he claims, in a much-ignored passage, that "Everything having to do with language as systems needs to be approached...with a view to *limiting* arbitrariness" (p. 131; emphasis mine), he faces the problem of determining which differences *count*. It is a basic tenet of Saussurean linguistics that, out of the infinite range of phonetic and/or graphic differences possible in the domain of the linguistic, only a limited range of specific differences will count as *phonemic*, or productive of meaning. The difference between "zot" and "bot" (say) has no value in the system of English, whereas that between "cat" and "cut" has, even in cases where speakers *pronounce* them identically. How does the system determine which differences make a difference and which do not? Let us see what Saussure has to say.

In the second part of the *Course*, by which stage Saussure had stabilized both his terminology and his crucial antinomies, he establishes the by now well-known principle that concepts or ideas (Saussure treats them as if they are the same thing) cannot exist prior to the system: "No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure" (p. 110). Sound and idea are like the recto and verso sides of a sheet of paper, inseparable; consequently, "[e]very linguistic sign is a part or member, an *articulus*, where an idea is fixed in sound, and a sound becomes the sign of an idea" (p. 111). This differential conception of both signifier and signified thus involves a particular structure of differences which will give rise to meaning, but when it comes to articulating that structure something strange happens. "In a given language", Saussure informs us, "all the words which express neighbouring ideas help define one another's meaning" (p. 114). One might ask: what exactly are *neighbouring* ideas? And even if we were to answer that question would we not have conceded that it is *ideas* which determine meaning since we would need independent access to the ideas themselves to determine which ones were neighbours and which ones were not. This is, of course, precisely what Locke's brand of empiricism has been

rejected for holding. In case this seems to be an isolated slip, one can point to many instances in which Saussure is forced to appeal to the priority of the idea in his account of the workings of the system. The problem lies both with the spatial metaphors that Saussure is forced to use and the unanalyzed concept of "similarity" to which he appeals. So "no word has a value that can be identified independently of what else there is in its vicinity" (p. 114), "a particular concept is simply a value which emerges from relations with other values of a similar kind" (p. 115). The problem is that if one works with the notion of a system of completely arbitrary differences, one cannot appeal to similarity or spatial contiguity without leaving the system. As Saussure himself concedes, "[a]ny word can evoke in the mind whatever is capable of being associated with it in some way or another" (p. 124). So where are the spatial limits, the strictures of similarity to be found? All Saussure offers is the vague notion of "words having something in common" (p. 170), and, more damningly, the *idea* as to that which gives one access to the system itself. So we are told: "In each series, it is known which factor to vary in order to obtain the differentiation appropriate to the unit sought." How? "If the idea to be expressed is a different one, other oppositions will be brought into play to produce a different value, thus yielding some other form, such as *marchez!* or *montons!*" (p. 128). So too, Saussure tells us, "any difference in ideas distinguished by the mind *will seek expression* in different linguistic signals; whereas two ideas the mind no longer differentiates will tend to find expression in the same signal" (p. 119). These statements merely confirm the suspicion that when Saussure claims that "concepts like 'house', 'white', 'see', etc. *considered in themselves* belong to psychology" (p. 144) this is not an unfortunate lapse but reveals the inconsistencies stemming from his Cartesian philosophy of mind. Whenever Saussure attempts to explicate the notions of vicinity and similarity that will limit the absolute arbitrariness (and hence chaotic nature) of the system, he appeals to the notion of an idea perceived independently by the mind. It is finally the distinct ideas present to the mind that bring into play, and delimit, the arbitrary oppositions of the system.

The problems have only just begun, however. For one may ask what, apart from these always-already perceived relations present to consciousness, constitutes the grammar of a sign within the system, and thus crucially determines "similarity" and/or demarcates "vicinity"? As Vincent Descombes has shown in a superb study of these issues (Descombes 1986), it may be convincing enough to be told that "mare" signifies because of its difference from "hare" and "bear", but what distinguishes between the two "bears" in "I can't bear bears"? It is hard to see how the system can produce the difference because in terms of *differential value* there *is* no difference. Yet no one would doubt that there is all the difference in the world in the signification of "bear" respectively as a verb and as a noun. (Note that the plausibility of Hawkes's suggestion that "dog" functions in terms of its role as a noun within the system rather than its reference to any animal dissolves if there is no way for grammatical categories to be established by and within the system. See Mitchell 1986.) An example favoured by post-Saussurean commentators for its role as proof of the purely differential nature of signification is that of

colour concepts. "Brown" does not signify because of its reference to a particular shade in the world, we are told, but because of its difference from "red", "black", "green", "yellow", and so on. But what makes the difference between "brown" and "red" (say) count here, and not that between it and "drown"? What makes "red", "brown", "green", etc. into a grammatical system, distinguishable from other systems like "tall", "short", "fat", "thin", or "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. . . ."? If we reject Saussure's implicit reply, that these are relations mysteriously perceived by the mind, both for being inconsistent with what he says elsewhere and for being inadequate in itself, we will have to turn to two other possibilities that, if they are not rejected entirely by the *Course*, are at least severely bracketed: the *use* of these concepts as a scheme (*parole*), and the existence of coloured objects to which they are applied (reference).

We have returned, via a route that he did not himself choose to take, to the issues that preoccupy Tallis. I have attempted to show that Tallis's defense of the *Course in General Linguistics* against the post-Saussureans does not hold. They cannot be accused of misinterpreting a work so redolent of ambiguity and contradiction – not, at any rate on the issue in question. The first claim suggested by *Not Saussure*, namely that Saussure provides no support for post-Saussureanism, cannot be sustained. Let us see how its second, more radical one which challenges the loss of the referent, fares.

2 Saving reference

The mentalist conception of meaning, which was accepted as a full-blown philosophical doctrine almost universally from at least the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, was comprehensively demolished for the first time by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*. This work showed that concepts cannot be equated with mental objects of any sort. It is especially concerned to break the hold of the "communication model" – used by Saussure to introduce the distinction between *langue* and *parole* in the Introduction of the *Course* – in terms of which language as a series of sound-patterns serves to evoke "the psychological association of this pattern with the corresponding concept" (1983: 12) in the mind or brain. Furthermore, Wittgenstein's "private language" argument demolishes the empiricist notion that meaning (language) can be built up out of a combination of intention and sensation. I have the sensation S, and decide to refer to it by the name or concept "S". As Locke points out in Book Three of the *Essay* (1975: 476), as long as I use the same word consistently to refer to the same thing I will have a perfect language (for Locke, language begins to go wrong when it gives rise to misunderstandings during the communication of ideas from one person to another). But how is this achieved? The person inventing a private language must be able to specify the similarity of (say) S^1 to S^2 to S^3 across a variety of sensations (be they internal or sensations of things outside the mind). But specifying the respect in which S^1 is the same as S^2 already presupposes the ability to refer to, to pick out, the sensation for which one is inventing a name, and so one sets out on an infinite regress, always assuming

the very thing one is trying to explain. No amount of undertaking or intending on our part, nor any appeal to the immediacy of private sensation, can found a private language without an implicit appeal to an already available public one. Empiricism is always committed to a double doctrine of the "givenness" of things in the world, or sensation, or sense data, and the power of a mental process (a private undertaking or intention) to effect a connection between word and object. Wittgenstein severely questions these assumptions. At the same time as it puts paid to the metaphysical realism upon which empiricism bases itself, however, the private language argument is also directed against forms of nonrealism (like methodological solipsism) which hold that there can finally be no distinction between thinking that one is right and being right, for the ostensible private language user is bound to be unable to distinguish between these two positions: whatever *seemed* right to her would be *right* (Wittgenstein 1968: 258). Since (as Saussure has shown us) it is the very condition of language that there should be a difference between making noises and using signs, the relativism of the private linguist precludes her not only from conceiving of others but also *herself* as a speaker or thinker.

One of Tallis's major criticisms of post-Saussureans is their, inexcusable in his eyes, tendency to reduce Saussure's conception of the whole sign to a single aspect of it: the signifier. So we are told that texts are merely chains of signifiers without signifieds and this is celebrated as the emancipation of the signifier, freeing it from all accountability to something else outside the system of language – i.e. language minus speech. Tallis is right. If Saussure defines the system in terms of its task of holding in a perpetual state of parallel the signifier and its signified, if signifier and signified are like the recto and verso of a sheet of paper, then it is nonsense to suggest that signifiers can exist independently, even as a system. We can, however, see the impulse behind such a collapsing of one into another. If the signified is to be thought of as the *product* of the signifier, if there can be no signified outside the articulation of a chain of signifiers, the gesture whereby the signified is simply elided or collapsed onto the plane of purely formal signification is to be expected. Besides, if the associative link between the two can be located only in the mind of the receiver, then the best way of sidestepping the implications of that model is simply to avoid contemplating it, to *save* it until it becomes unavoidable in this or that reading. Barthes's (1977: 148) celebration of the death of the author effects just such a move. It duplicates precisely Saussure's bracketing of the active part of the speech circuit, to propose the "space" of the reader (in another duplication of Saussure's metaphors of statis) as that in which the text's dispersed meanings are to be collected or saved. But how? How does one recognize signifiers *as* signifiers, which differences, considered purely as differences, count? What Saussure inadvertently confirms is Tallis's claim that structure is in fact discernible only via meaning. The apparent criteria of identity in terms of which a signifier or signified is identical with itself only by being different from everything else is like the notion of similarity appealed to by the supposed private language user: it is empty without a veiled appeal to an already available meaning. That meaning, Tallis

suggests in complete antithesis to post-Saussurean doctrine, is – at least in part – provided by the world.

Not Saussure tries to restore reference by redrawing important logical distinctions between signifier, signified, and referent which, it claims, have been collapsed into the Saussurean notion of value. The referent has mistakenly been confused with the signified, resulting in the denial of, or at least the reduction of, the referent to a set of differential values within the system of *langue*. The world has consequently been turned into an effect of language in a radically nominalist reduction. "The fundamental post-Saussurean confusion", he claims, "is between the signified of a sign and the referent of an utterance or a piece of text" (1988: 94). To draw this distinction Tallis needs to reject the semiological project of remaining at all times within *langue*. Conceding the Saussurean point that reference cannot be a product of the system, he locates it in the domain of use, or *parole*. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that reference reduces the role of the system, and in the case of proper names, bypasses it altogether by mobilizing the "deictic co-ordinates that are implicit in the spatio-temporal context of the utterance" (p. 85).

We should compare this emphasis on use with Wittgenstein's advice that we rid ourselves of the habit of looking for the meaning of a word as some sort of object (in a mental or material world) to which it corresponds, and instead pay attention to explanations of meaning: "Studying the grammar of the 'explanation of meaning' will teach you something about the grammar of the word 'meaning' and will cure you of the temptation to look about you for some object which you might call 'the meaning'" (Wittgenstein 1969: 1). Looking at the use of words will provide one with a nonhypostatized conception of meaning, one in which meaning (as an object: *the* signified) does indeed "drop out of language" (Wittgenstein 1974: 41). It is neither the signified in Saussure's sense nor the object of empiricist philosophy, but a product of specific and differentiated human practices, what Wittgenstein calls "language-games". This involves, it is important to note, a complete reconception of Saussure's pivotal distinction between *langue* and *parole*.

Tallis's restoration of reference by invoking the deictic contexts of use (at one point via Wittgenstein, see p. 84) does not challenge this distinction. On the contrary, he takes delight in showing up post-Saussureans for themselves ignoring it. More about that later. For the moment let us examine Tallis's argument.

The first point that Tallis makes is that the post-Saussurean case against realism is in fact an attack on a straw man. Generally he is right about this. Very few realists claim that language mirrors the world in a relation of one-to-one correspondence. The kind of realism that Tallis favours would concede that language has a role to play in stabilizing and to some extent organizing the world we inhabit, but would claim that nevertheless language does not *create* the world. The world plays a crucial role in determining the truth or falsity of our propositions (there is a difference between saying that something is true and its being true). More controversially, the world also plays a role in constituting the meanings of language.

One should note that these two positions involve two different conceptions of realism. The first involves an epistemological realism, in which the issue is what justifies us in claiming knowledge of the world, and in which the current philosophical debate concerns whether truth or falsity can or cannot transcend our current procedures for discovering or determining truth. The second position might be called "metaphysical realism" since it attempts to show something about the nature of the world in order to tell us something about the nature of language. Tallis makes no distinction between the two, nor any between them and the position that he ultimately wishes to defend, namely, literary realism. It is by no means obvious that they are logically related.

In order to defend what I have called his "metaphysical realism" Tallis feels that he needs to restore reference as a proper and indeed unavoidable aspect of language. It seems that, if one is not to appeal to some kind of mental glue, reference is best defended as a part of specific uses of language, and to do this while staying true to the Saussurean antinomies of *langue* and *parole*, signifier and signified, it is necessary to distinguish sharply between signifier, signified, and referent. It was precisely the collapsing of the referent into the signified that shut the world out in the first place, since the system of signifiers cannot conceivably have negative bits of the real world as its differential counterparts. Tallis fully agrees with this, suggesting a tripartite theory of the sign in which (initially at least) signifier and signified belong to the system, while the referent belongs to specific, deictic uses of the system. One mobilizes the sign (signifier + signified) "dog" in order to refer to *this* dog in this situation at this point in time. Language can and does reach out beyond itself to refer to the world: it is not a totally closed system.

It is important to note that if one does not distinguish clearly between meaning and reference one gets into all kinds of difficulties, like having to say that because "the Golden Mountain" does not exist the signs I have just used do not mean anything, and so I could not claim (truly) that the Golden Mountain does *not* exist. It was once again Wittgenstein who drew our attention to the logical difference between the meaning of a name and its bearer by appealing to such grammatical features. Regarding reference as something that stems from the use of language in particular situations seems to offer few problems. The connection between word and object becomes a feature, not of mental images or intentions or metaphysical relations, but of a reiterated practice in which no appeal is needed to any kind of essential similarity or connection between sign and referent. Wittgenstein again: "What makes my image of him into an image of *him*? Not its looking like him" (1968: 177), and "How do I know that this picture is my image of the *sun*? – I *call* it an image of the sun. I *use* it as a picture of the *sun*" (1979: 88).

The semiotician may however reply to Tallis that she concedes all this but, true to Saussure, she is not interested in *parole*, but only in the nature of the system, from which, by his own definition, reference has been excluded. So by his own account it is illogical, and unfair, to berate her for showing no interest in the referent or the operation of reference. This bracketing, after all, is what initiated semiology as a break with previous conceptions of signification in the first place.

It is for this reason, I suspect, that Tallis begins to renege on his own distinction between system and the referent and to pull what in Saussure is the product of the former into the domain of the latter. Meaning, something initially posited as entirely distinct from the referent (that was the condition of restoring reference to the Saussurean model), becomes coterminous with the referent (at least in some cases) in the metaphysical part of Tallis's argument. The shift, like the elisions in the arguments of Tallis's opponents, is not stated overtly but slowly becomes apparent as he presses the point that meaning is not the creation of language, but merely the articulation, in and through language, of something beyond it. Let us take one or two preliminary sentences in which Tallis sets out his project:

> A plausible account of language must take a middle course between the implausible idea that language passively "reflects" reality and the equally implausible idea that reality is produced by language....It must be able to accommodate the fact that meaning is articulated (in the sense of being divided up and joined together) by language without making this fact a springboard to the fact that meaning is *created* by language....A satisfactory language will, at the very least, acknowledge that language stabilizes, and to some extent organizes, our world in so far as the latter is intelligible, even though it does not itself generate the meanings into which we are plunged; that linguistic meaning refers us in the end to experience that go beyond or, more strictly, lie beneath, language.
>
> (1988: 102)

If Tallis accuses post-Saussureans of "almost unbelievable sloppiness" he must expect to be indicted for his own share of confusion here. The golden mean that he offers appears to be nothing but good sense: there is a commendable lack of dogma of both realist and nonrealist kinds until one attempts to make sense of these passages, passages in which Tallis is nailing his colours to the mast. The distinction between meaning and reference begins to fade as the claim that language does not create the world shades into the suggestion that it does not create *meaning* either. If meaning does not come from language, not even language in use, where does it come from? The following sentence suggests that meanings are in fact entirely distinct from the stabilizing and organizing capacity of language – they are something (external to language) into which we are "plunged" (the world?), but at the same time they are opposed to "refer" us to our experiences, presumably of a world that is the foundation of language. Now if we are plunged into a world pregnant with nonlinguistic meaning then we simply experience such meaning, meanings cannot at the same time be that which refers us to those experiences, unless the world itself is to be conceived as a self-referential entity – a bizarre twist indeed to the non-Saussurean tale. These claims are simply unintelligible. But they could be regarded as mere preliminary rhetoric. Tallis's detailed explication of his theory is, however, dogged by similar contradiction.

In order to avoid the strong empiricist position which holds that the world contains "natural kinds" which are reflected by language, Tallis proposes a

model in terms of which the relation between word and object must be one of mediation rather than reflection. This drives an even firmer wedge into the assumed gap between language and world with which empirical theories of language have always struggled: there is an irreducible chasm between word and object, some way must thus be found to bridge it. The bridge proposed by Tallis is what he calls the "sense of the object" (1988: 107). Objects, according to Tallis, are imbued with an indefinite number of senses, which it is the task of language to grasp and present. The referring expression (composed of one or more word tokens) thus, in Tallis's words, "stands proxy" for a sense of the object or reference. Since he does not wish to seem to be invoking the notion of "real essence" which even John Locke rejected in favour of "nominal essence", Tallis insists that such senses are not equivalent to the physical properties of objects, but are literally indefinite. This allows for repeated reclassification in terms of different contexts, interests, uses, and so on. The model thus differs from "causal" theories of reference, pioneered by Saul Kripke (1980) and Hilary Putnam (1975), in terms of which reference is secured by a causal relation between word and object, and the referent is stabilized or is said to be "rigidly designated" by the discovery (say) of its chemical properties. This is an important difference, since it allows Tallis to claim that the senses which he attributes like a cloud of ions to objects are not simply properties of such objects, to be reflected in language. It is, however, difficult to see precisely what sense to attribute to this use of "sense". We are told on the one hand that words "stand proxy" for the sense of the object as Tallis attempts to justify his claim that meaning is not created by language. The meaning of a word is no longer the object for which it stands, as Wittgenstein notoriously once claimed: now meaning is the *sense* of the object for which it stands. The meaning of a word coincides with the sense of the object in the referring expression, and here it certainly seems that sense belongs to, is intrinsic to, the *object* in some way or to some degree, otherwise there would be no substance to the claim that meaning is *not* a product of language. But on other occasions we are told that such senses are "tethered to a particular object" (Tallis 1988: 119). We are back with the curiously dual picture according to which meaning is an extra-linguistic realm into which we are plunged and at the same time something which refers us to that realm.

It is not difficult to see now why Tallis should adopt such a picture. In order to bridge the gap between language and reality with which he started out as a matter of definition he needs to attribute meaning to both realms. The problem is that "meaning", and more specifically "sense", is a linguistic term – it belongs to language. In Frege, whom Tallis credits for drawing the distinction between sense and reference which all post-Saussureans have subsequently ignored, sense is wholly a property of language, a route to or presentation, in and through language, of the referent. One can attribute properties to objects by describing them but it is difficult to see on what grounds one might attribute senses to them. What procedures do we have for looking for such "senses"? How do we know when we have found one, especially when the senses of an object are as good as nothing: an indefinite

cloud of ions tethered to the object? The causal theory of reference, although not without its own problems, has at least the virtue of working with a concept that has defined procedures of discovery and description. (The question is whether it employs such a concept legitimately or not.) To attribute senses to objects either makes no sense, or boils down to saying that sense is a function of language, not objects.

One could put the point slightly differently, focusing instead on Tallis's use of the word "object". Used as it is in *Not Saussure*, "an object" is not a predicamental term but a transcendental one. Predicamental terms are those which can be used to classify things in accordance with specific properties. Transcendental terms cannot be used for such classification because of their level of metaphysical generality: concepts such as "being", "thing", "same", and, in the way that Tallis uses it, "object". One cannot use "object" in this sense to classify things because what is not an object is nothing. This differs from its use as a term which might classify things into those which are material, discrete, and can for instance be moved fairly easily. To use an example from Descombes (1986), the lost property office deals with objects in the ordinary sense: the objects that it will accept are restricted to those which fall within a particular classification – hats, coats, umbrellas, watches. There are certain things it will not accept: lost children, lost ships, lost opportunities, and lost memories. "Objects in ordinary language", Descombes thus suggests, "are thus far too determinate for the purposes of transcendental philosophy which calls anything short of nothing an *object*" (1986: 106). It was for this reason that even the *Tractatus* dismissed the transcendental sense of "object" as a "pseudo-concept", and in his later work Wittgenstein modified this position slightly by suggesting that such a use of "object" has only the appearance of sense since philosophers believe that they are using an ordinary concept but they have in fact removed it from the language-game in which it has its life. If it is our ordinary concept then it must be used as an ordinary concept; if not then it is a completely different concept and cannot be used to elucidate our ordinary use of it. Appearances to the contrary, the grammar of "object" is not the same as the grammar of "chair".

Tallis's use of "the sense of an object" transcends in precisely this way the predicamental differences of ordinary use. In order to found such differences extra-linguistically Tallis has to suggest that they lie within the "object" in precisely this transcendental sense. To show the connection between word and object he cannot avail himself of the already available senses of ordinary use but is forced instead to speak of the object (and its senses) in completely indeterminate terms: as an "indefinite" number of senses, surrounding objects which are indistinguishable from each other like a "cloud" of ions. By appealing in this transcendental way to the "senses of objects" *Not Saussure* offers us the theory that language is founded upon one-knows-not-what, one-knows-not-how.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Tallis often falls back on an empirical rather than strictly transcendental argument, namely that our ability to perceive clear and distinct objects – objects like dogs and cups which "come armed with their own spatio-temporal, rather than semantic, edges" (p. 113)

– means that meaning is not a product of language but of the world. Once again, within our ordinary commerce with language and the world there can be no doubt that we can pick out, pick up, draw, and describe objects with distinct edges and distinct identities. Perhaps this is all that Tallis wishes to say, and perhaps this is what post-Saussureans (all of them?) deny. But Tallis's claim has a metaphysical dimension, namely that our concepts stem from the clear and distinct objects of our worldly intercourse; that it is our experience of the world that provides the content of meaning even if language as a system articulates it in terms of its forms.

Let us take Jastrow's celebrated duck-rabbit drawing, or, even more simply a right-angled triangle. We ask someone who perceives these objects to draw as accurately as possible what she sees, and she produces a copy of the object. Now we ask her what she sees. She may say of the duck-rabbit "a duck" or "a rabbit" or "a duck-rabbit drawing"; of the triangle "a triangle" or "a mountain" or "a wedge" or "an arrow", and so on. The point is that to say what one sees in this case involves more than merely reproducing the object in the form of a copy, for the copy fails to convey the fact that one sees a duck, say, rather than a rabbit. It has been suggested (by Putnam 1983: 219) that this example, from the *Philosophical Investigations*, makes the Kantian point that unlike a physical image, which may be seen in more than one way, a mental image is always unambiguous, it is always-already a construction or interpretation. While the discussion of seeing-as may be used to support the general notion that experiences are to some extent a construction of the mind, Wittgenstein seems to be more concerned to show that, however much the objects of our experiences might come with their own edges, this is not enough to give us concepts. To see a duck-rabbit drawing is not to be provided with the concept of a duck, for one might see it as a rabbit. The empiricist is convinced that what I see must be produced in me by the influence of the object. "Then what is produced in me is a kind of copy" Wittgenstein suggests, "something that in its turn can be looked at, can be before one; almost something like a *materialization*" (1968: 199). In that case one should be able to describe it in purely spatial terms. But in the case of the duck-rabbit, or the triangle, or a face which is smiling, no simply spatial description or reproduction will convey (say) the smile. The concept of friendliness simply cannot be gleaned from this internal materialization of the object, no matter how sharply defined its nonsemantic edges may be. One has to be conversant with particular concepts in order to see aspects, and this means, in Wittgenstein's view, that "It is only if someone *can do*, has learnt, is master of, such-and-such, that it makes sense to say he has had *this* experience" (1968: 209). The important point is that concepts are neither mental images nor the objects of perceptual experience, but are acquired through the mastery of particular techniques. It is only when people can go on in specific ways, as part of an established practice, that we attribute conceptual skills to them, no matter what kind of mental images they may have or objects they happen to perceive. And to see an image as something involves a whole system of such conceptual abilities, it is "not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects" (Wittgen-

stein 1968: 212). As the "private-language" argument shows, no appeal to the "focussing of sensory attention" (Tallis 1988: 240) on an object can provide us with concepts.

3 Obliterating the gap

So far the remarks on *Not Saussure* have been almost entirely critical. The intention has not been to suggest that Tallis's aims are worthless, or that post-Saussureanism has indeed got it right, but rather how difficult it is to mount an argument on behalf of realism, chiefly because realism is almost invariably a metaphysical doctrine. Like idealism and solipsism it believes that it can describe the nature of the world itself – although its claims have the form of empirical statements, they do not convey any of the information that such descriptions convey. The metaphysical thrust of Tallis's argument lies in his initial position that there is a gap between language and the world that needs to be bridged by an adequate theory of language. The problem with putting the issue in this way is that it keeps the world on the other side of language, and when one then tries, from within language, to reach out and recuperate what has been excluded in the original gesture, this is impossible without resorting to transcendental claims.

Consider the following remarks: "There is every reason to believe that representation and reality are not merely added together here and there in language, for the simple reason that it is impossible in principle to rigorously distinguish them. And it does not help that this happens *in* language; language in general – and language alone – *is* this." It comes, not from some realist text, but from Jacques Derrida (1973: 49), whom Tallis derides as the apotheosis of radical nominalism, the "post-Saussurean" who, more than anyone else, has been responsible for the banishment of the real world from the realm of signification. Seen in this context it is at once rendered ambiguous. What does it mean? Well, it either suggests the view of the *Tractatus* that signification is unthinkable without the systematic imbrication of language and the world ("all that is the case"), or it conveys the opposite pole of this equation, namely that the world is unthinkable without language. Do these positions differ in kind or degree of emphasis? I suspect that the difference is not as great as is sometimes claimed, which suggests perhaps that the *Tractatus* is one of the most misrepresented works in twentieth-century philosophy.[1] Tallis, however, would reject such a monist claim that it is impossible in principle to rigorously distinguish reality and language, because, like Strawson's similar position regarding the equivalence of fact and statement, it suggests a "suspiciously snug fit between them" (Tallis 1988: 45). Why such a snug fit should arouse the suspicions of someone who claims to *restore* the realm of reference to language becomes apparent when one reflects on the fact that Tallis's realism requires a gap between language and reality in order to posit an extra-linguistic realm of meaning in which language partakes, for which it "stands proxy". *Not Saussure* thrives on the posited gap between world and language and recoils from any suggestion that language cannot be regarded as a tool for grasping the world (Derrida's insistence that the relation is not

achieved *in* language) but that it simply *is* the amalgam of representation and reality. To claim that this amalgamation is achieved *in* language is to adopt a transcendental viewpoint from which one could describe the fit, and that involves, as we have seen, the use of pseudo-concepts: "object", "thing", "entity" about which, since we have left the language-game of description – of "indication" – we can say nothing, not even that they exist.

It appears to be one of the mysterious paradoxes of names that they do not imply the existence of anything. To use a name is not to commit anyone to the belief that something is the case, to do that one has to state that something is the case, using a proposition. It is a crucial view of the *Tractatus* that objects can only be named and states of affairs can only be described. One cannot name a state of affairs because that would commit one to the absurd position that in denying a state of affairs one would be naming a nonexistent object.[2] The objects for which words stand in that work must therefore lie beyond existence: they are the "substance" of the world and of sense, and "substance is what exists independently of what is the case" (Wittgenstein 1922: 2.024). It is thus a form – "the possibility of structure". In his later reconsideration of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein rejected this metaphysical way of putting the unity of language and world, although he conceded that it was an "old problem":

> Here we have the old problem, which we would like to express in the following way: "The thought that *p* is the case doesn't presuppose that it is the case; yet on the other hand there must be something in the fact that it is a presupposition even of having the thought (I can't think something is red, if the colour red doesn't exist)". It is the problem of the harmony between world and thought.
>
> (Wittgenstein 1974: 142)

As I suggested earlier, the Saussurean answer to this puzzle, namely that one does not need the existence of anything red to have the sign "red" – all one needs is a systematic differential relationship with other colour concepts – cannot get off the ground since the system cannot of itself group those together as *colour* concepts (since "colour" is itself simply one more differential negativity in the system). Tallis's suggestion that colours are distinct entities available to perception and that the meaning of such concepts thus depends upon these empirical differences available to the eyes gets us no further. It is not because different cultures divide up the colour spectrum differently that Tallis is not convincing (he is very persuasive regarding that particular warhorse) but rather because, as we have seen in the discussion of aspect-seeing, perception alone cannot give us concepts. It is as incapable of conveying to us that what we are seeing – be they ever so distinct – are *colours*.

The traditional way around this is to suggest that it is through ostensive definition or baptism that the connection is made between language and the world. One sees a colour, red say; one points to it saying "This is red" and the connection is established. Once again, we owe to the later Wittgenstein the complete deconstruction of this picture of the connection between language and the world. The picture is wrong, not so much, as some commentators have suggested, because an ostensive gesture is always open to misinterpre-

tation. *Any* gesture or use of language can be misinterpreted. The problem stems rather from a confusion of two distinct moves which might be made using the sentential form "This is red" or an ostensive gesture accompanied by the utterance "red". On the one hand one may be saying something about the world, that is describing some surface as being red, in which case such a statement can be true or false, and, most importantly, *the meanings of the terms and their place in the language are already understood*; or one could be defining the meaning of the term "red". Although these uses share the same sentential form and deictic gestures – indeed the same orientation to the world – they are entirely different and logically incompatible. In the one case (description) one is using signs, the meanings of which are already understood, to say something about the world; in the other one is using the world to define, to give a meaning to, a sign. The traditional notion of ostensive baptism conflates these two logically distinct uses, assuming that one is both describing the world and giving the meaning of the sign through the deictic gesture and the appropriate utterance. This is what Tallis's invocation of the "sense of objects" does. It assumes that the ostensive definition of a word also says something about the object: it presents its "sense". It is important to note that both definition and description presuppose language. The definition is not the founding of language upon the bedrock of the world but is rather a rule of grammar. It tells us where in the system of language the sign is to be stationed, so it assumes familiarity with the system and its grammatical categories. This is why Wittgenstein says that "only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name" (Wittgenstein 1968: 30). One could compare the assertoric use of "red" in "This is red" to the moves made in a chess game while the use of the term in the definition is like the preliminary identification of the pieces and their relation to each other. These do not constitute moves in the game although they may be required for the game to be played. The definition is thus a rule for the use of a sign using a sample from the world as a paradigm. That sample, Wittgenstein emphasizes, is then *a part of language*, a component of its grammatical structure. If one wishes to use Saussurean terminology (although it is misleading to do so) one could say that the ostensive definition of "red" belongs to *langue*, while the description of a coloured surface is part of *parole*. Note that the definition is not a one-off event, but involves a systematic set of practices: indicating a variety of shades that will count as red, contrasting them with other shades that are collected under a different sign, offering a variety of examples to produce a system of related terms whose sense *is* established by our appropriation of the world into grammar. Perhaps this is what Tallis means when he speaks of the "sense of objects". He is trapped, however, by a transcendental terminology and approach to the problem that renders his solution as nonsense (*Unsinn* – see Wittgenstein 1922).

The distinction that has been drawn here between the two modes of ostension do, however, underline Tallis's Wittgensteinian point that reference is a product of use rather than the system: "An expression has reference only in the stream of life." This can be illustrated by a grammatical example. It is grammatically impossible to answer the question "What is the reference of

'tree'?" A tree? Which one? All trees? Where are they? This is what marks the notion of a "nomenclature" of which Saussure speaks (1983: 65) as an *impossible* one, not merely a naive or simplistic model as he supposes, and what makes his incorporation of a version of it into his theory so disastrous. It is entirely possible, however, to answer the question "What is the reference of 'This tree', or 'The oak at the entrance to the students' union', or 'The tree I was speaking about last night'?"

Wittgenstein's treatment of samples as grammatical paradigms, rules of language, has four important implications:

First, while retaining the crucial idea that one can work only within language, it offers a completely different conceptualization of the system, *langue*, or, as Wittgenstein terms it, "grammar" and its relation to the world. No longer can *langue* be considered simply as a network of relations completely cut off from the material world, but rather the world has been drawn in to the system, as an integral part of its network of rules. The old picture of language as in some way a reflection of the world is thus completely avoided, and reference cannot be denied on the spurious grounds that signs do not and cannot resemble things. Of course they do not – this point is well argued by Tallis.

Secondly, the gap between world and language which is part of both the Saussurean heritage and Tallis's realism is eliminated entirely. There can be no gap between the system and itself; even to speak of the relation between language and the world is to draw a false picture. Derrida is correct. Signs and things do not meet here and there, accidentally as it were – language simply *is* the identity of reality and representation.

Thirdly, no sign commits us to the existence of any state of affairs. Sense is divorced from the way things actually are, even if this view does retain in a nonmetaphysical, rather trivial sense, the Tractarian requirement that for a sign to have meaning something *has* to exist; that is, if the meaning of "red" (and all the other colour terms) is fixed via the manipulation of *samples* of such colours in definitions, then at some time such samples must have been and must be available for the rule-fixing to take place. It does not mean that "red" must always exist in some metaphysical way, or even that one must be in the presence of something red to be able to use the sign. Thus no object of any kind need be "present" for a name to have sense. When we say (following a reduction offered by Phenomenology) that a description has to be a description of *something*, this "something" is not some metaphysical object present to the proposition but merely, as Descombes (1986: 119) puts it, "a bad dream of language". It stems from the grammar of a description that it takes a (grammatical) direct object. This grammatical form has no ontological implications whatsoever, just as a wish or the expression of an expectation requires no ghostly object to give it sense (Wittgenstein 1968: 442ff). By the same token – in terms of exactly the same grammatical form – a proposition, a description, need have no real correspondent in the world for us to understand it, nor does it cheat us (as the critics of literary realism suppose) if it offers a grammatical object rather than a real one. There is as much (or as little) of a problem understanding the sense of a wish as there is

understanding a fictional statement. Neither require any kind of "presence" to imbue them with meaning: "'Here is a red patch' and 'Here there isn't a red patch'. The word "red" occurs in both; so this word cannot indicate the presence of something red" (Wittgenstein 1968: 443). The illusion of presence is a grammatical illusion, it is like a substantive that "makes us look for the thing that corresponds to it" (Wittgenstein 1969: 1). But this does not mean that words do not refer to objects or that propositions do not make true or false statements about the world. It is merely a variation on the view of the *Tractatus* (1922: 4.064) that assertion cannot give a proposition a sense: we cannot found language on a description of the world, but we can and do *use* language to describe the world (truly or falsely).

This picture also covers the fact that our concepts are formed into systems, a fact that the Saussurean notion of *langue* could not account for. The system is constituted by and within a language-game which is oriented to the world in specific – and changing – ways; the game is first and foremost a practice, a system of doing things in and with the world, and that determines the selection of samples as samples of colour rather than texture, for example, and thus groups colour terms together as a system of concepts. This model is also able to account for such synthetic *a priori* propositions as "White is lighter than black". It seems to express the *essence* of the two colours, but this is merely a grammatical "essence", derived from the fact that one uses the same paradigm or sample to define "white" and "light" and "black" and "dark" respectively.

Finally, because samples are incorporated into language as rules via our various practical relations to the world, and these practical relations exist in time, the grammar of language is not fixed once and for all but is an evolving, historical process stemming from human activities, needs and interests. These are furthermore thoroughly material, they take place in and are directed towards our historical condition of being situated in the world. That Eskimos have more terms for snow than we could dream of or the inhabitants of deserts a massive range of terms for browns and tans but few for shades of green should come as no surprise. It neither proves that colours are determined entirely by differential relations nor that the world forces our concepts upon us. The world offers resistance to what we can and cannot do in it, it shapes our needs and interests (we will only instantiate a wide variety of types of snow as rules for the use of a system of signs if we live in an environment where snow abounds and shapes the form of our lives), but it does not offer us a language. Tallis makes the former point well, but his discussion of the latter relies far too heavily on a half-regenerated form of empiricism. It is not because we see immediately the difference between blue and orange that we have the terms "blue" and "orange". There is a difference between dark and light blue. Any child can see this difference as clearly as that between blue and orange, and we have access to that vision through what they can do with colour samples, how they arrange them, pick them out, contrast them in a colour wheel and so on. What makes the one set of different shades impose a pair of colour terms on us and the other merely a single term covering a range of gradations? It has nothing to do with

perception elevated to a level of metaphysical necessity and everything to do with specific forms of social technology, of what we can or cannot do in and with the world, or what samples we are able to and interested in offering as rules for language. Needless to say, once our system of colour concepts is established and passed on through training, then the concepts direct those needs and interests, they will determine to a large extent what we will see, what differences and similarities will count: "It is only if someone can do, has learnt, is master of, such-and such, that it makes sense to say that he has had this experience." However, because language consists of the world appropriated and reappropriated in this way, its rules will change as our material relation to the world changes – conceptual schemes will be dropped or newly established under the pressures, political and natural, of our material being in the world.

Tallis's Wittgenstein-like emphasis on reference as a function of use rather than *langue* thus omits a crucial reconceptualization of that system. I have already shown why his reliance on the "senses" of objects and the im-mediacy of perception cannot be used to pin meaning onto the world itself. With that prop removed his suggestion, in part entirely true, that reference can take place only via the deictic co-ordinates of an utterance, fails to account for the "connection" between sign and object. Take the following summary of his position:

> Reference, which is the coincidence of one sense of the object with the signified of a linguistic sign brought down from generality of meaning by tokenisation and mobilisation of deictic co-ordinates, connects, as we always thought it did, the linguistic and the extra-linguistic realms.

(Tallis 1988: 112)

It is very difficult to make out what is supposed to be going on here. Reference is presumably what "connects" the linguistic and extra-linguistic realms (notice the obligatory gap). Does it do so only at the moment of use, in which case how is the "generality of meaning" of a signified made to coincide with the sense of the object? At the moment of use? Well then, where does this generality of meaning come from? By Tallis's own account, it cannot be a product of the system. But assume that it is. What allows me to use this signified (in its general, potential state) to coincide with this object? If they are being brought together by the mobilization of deictic coordinates then the gap is closed only now, at the moment of speech plus deixis; there can be no shadowy bridge which tells me to link *this* signified to *this* referent before I actually do so. Why not to *that* one? Perhaps this has been achieved through a prior use? But that leads to an infinite regress. Tallis's invocation of use boils down to the need for a fresh baptism every time we refer to the world, the sense has to be "tethered to the object" anew. In that case one is not talking about the world, but setting up the connection between language and world all the time. The game never gets started.

One needs no such impossible "connection" between language and reality, because as Wittgenstein points out, no such connection would serve the purpose; we simply talk about the world using a system of signs which in part

consists of our grammatical appropriations of the world as we see, move about, work on and live in it. Such appropriations are the precondition for being able to talk about the world: they show that language and reality are related in the same way as "light" and "white", "black" and "dark", which is what Derrida suggests in the quotation above, even though he does not follow Wittgenstein's picture of such a material and practical appropriation of the world into grammar.

Properly supplemented by Wittgenstein's crucial discussion of samples or paradigms and their status as rules of language, Tallis's emphasis on the relationship between use and reference makes a great deal of sense, and it shows us why, in its Saussurean concentration on system, it appeared to semiotics that the world had dissolved into pure difference. Tallis is quite correct when he suggests that *langue* is in fact a retrospective construction from *parole*, just as dictionaries – the medium in which *langue* as a semantic system is registered – are in fact the synchronic records of diachronic patterns of use. Thus a masked reliance on use rather than system is characteristic of the whole semiotic project. It is a point that Tallis only hints at, but Descombes (1986) makes it the crux of his critique. So, when Barthes suggests in a famous example from *Mythologies* that a black pebble is a mere signifier until "I weigh it with significance (a death sentence, for instance, in an anonymous vote)" upon which "it will become a sign" (1973: 113), the problem is not so much, as Tallis suggests, that Barthes overlooks the difference between a pebble as a material object that can be used to carry out the execution and a signifier as a purely differential entity in a system, but rather that the pebble becomes a sign only when it is used in a particular way – "if I weigh it with a definite significance". So too, hats, berets, skirts signify nothing. It is only when I make a statement by wearing them that they signify something, only when I present a bunch of roses to my lover is my passion declared through it.

If Tallis and Wittgenstein are right – and I am sure they are – that the system can be perceived only in and through use, then the analysis of *parole* under the mask of *langue* is an inevitable path that all semiotics must follow. And once this move is unmasked, once we know that the only thing available for reading is the use of signs, then the original theoretical exclusion of the world, of reference, from language in the name of the priority of *langue* has to be completely reconsidered.

Notes

1. For arguments that the *Tractatus* is *not* a realist work, see Ishiguro (1969), and McGuiness (1981). Its insistence on "determinacy of sense" is, however, an attempt to limit the play of signification since such play would, in his view, reduce such signification to nothing.
2. This is ignored by Benveniste, for instance, when he suggests that the referents of sentences are states of affairs considered as *objects of reference* (1971: 224–27). Tallis displays the same tendency when he suggests that the statement "The dog is sitting on the mat" corresponds to a "complex object" or a *res* (1988: 224–243). His

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statement that the *Tractatus* views a state of affairs as a "complex proper name" could hardly be more mistaken! (1988: Note 13, p. 265).

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