chapter one

Words and Things

*Words; which are also Bodies of much Weight and Gravity, as is manifest from those deep Impressions they make and leave upon us.*

"Words are only Names for *Things*," says Gulliver. Swift would agree. But it is in *A Tale of a Tub* rather than *Gulliver’s Travels* that he worked out his view of this relationship. In fact, the *Tale* is a key document in the seventeenth-century controversy over words and things. Writers and thinkers of this period, reacting against the florid style of the Renaissance, sought a language more appropriate to their own scientific and philosophical reasonings and turned to the relation between words and things as a matter of great importance. Swift's wordy book about words reflects a major concern of Bacon, Hobbes, Wilkins, and Locke; it is a parody of their preoccupation with language and at the same time a young writer's fresh exploration of an inherited stylistic and philosophical question.

Although it seems to me that every author (and every speaker) has his own implicit ideas on how language relates to the real world, in the *Tale* Swift—like Sterne, Carroll, and Beckett after him—brings his thoughts about language up front, makes language one of his main themes, and proceeds quite self-consciously to work out his ideas about words and things. Even though *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* treats of the sociological causes and moral effects of the misuse of language, Swift, years before he wrote that politically motivated argument, had approached imaginatively the much deeper issue raised by such linguistic corruption—its distortion of the world. Written in the context of discussions of words and things such as John Wilkins's influential *Essay Towards a Real Character* (1668) and, more immediately, book 3 (entitled "Of Words") of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, Swift's first prose satire may be read as his.
personal philosophy of language. Like Wilkins and Locke, Swift urges a return to things as the proper source of knowledge; the trouble with the Modern Author is that he deals with words apart from things.

In his book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argues that in Europe the general sense of language had become by Swift's day quite different from what it had been during the Renaissance: "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the peculiar existence and ancient solidity of language as a thing inscribed in the fabric of the world were dissolved in the functioning of representation; all language had value only as discourse. The art of language was a way of 'making a sign'—of simultaneously signifying something and arranging signs around that thing." In an attempt to eliminate verbal ambiguity and the superficial use of language, writers and philosophers of the seventeenth century turned toward a descriptive language of signs. The accumulation of real evidence in the new philosophy and science was typically set against scholastic book knowledge. And the emphasis on signs was a part of this desire to forge a new, more direct relationship between words and objects.

A peculiar but highly relevant chapter in the new emphasis on signification was the keen interest in building a universal language scheme. Believing that before Babel man had been united by a common language, linguists such as Johann Amos Komenský (Comenius), Samuel Hartlib, Francis Lodowick, Seth Ward, William Petty, George Dalgarno, and John Wilkins dreamed of a reunification of peoples and a reorganization of the world itself through the development of a universal language that might be shared once again by all men. "The transition that took place in England in the middle years of the century," explains James Knowlson in his recent book on language schemes, "was thus from a character which merely represented things and notions by agreement, to one which mirrored the whole of human knowledge by means of the combination of its elements." Ideally, of course, such a language not only would be an arrangement of words as signs of things but would itself be knowledge, since each word would provide a direct and accurate description of the thing signified.

Bishop Wilkins was a key figure in this movement. Complaining of "the Curse of Babel," he says in the *Real Character* that "besides the best way of helping Memory by natural Method, the Under-
standing likewise would be highly improved; and we should, by learning the Character and the Names of Things, be instructed likewise in their Natures, the knowledge of both which ought to be conjoyned.” The theory itself, he goes on, “upon which such a design were to be founded, should be exactly suited to the nature of things.” In his “Epistle Dedicatory” Wilkins claims a great deal for his real character, saying that it would lead to “the improving of all Natural knowledge,” “the clearing of some of our Modern differences in Religion,” and even “the Universal good of Mankind.” Although I do not wish to argue that Swift in the Tale was parodying Wilkins, he had certainly read the Essay Towards a Real Character, he would have found such hyperbolic promises laughable, and the Modern’s similar claims (on the title page and elsewhere) that his book is “Written for the Universal Improvement of Mankind” are strikingly close to Wilkins’s proud projections. Swift would agree with Wilkins and others that we ought to move our words closer to the things they stand for, but he would have found Wilkins’s compendium of knowledge (with its unwieldy thesaurus of elements, animals, manners, and so forth) an absurdity because paradoxically it was, in the end, so far from real things. Swift might have agreed with Wilkins’s general goal, but he could have accepted neither his universal claims for his project nor his encyclopedic methods.

Despite the Modern Author’s attempts to organize all knowledge for us, he lets slip in the final paragraph of A Tale of a Tub that he has “thought fit to make Invention the Master, and to give Method and Reason, the Office of Lacquays” (p. 209). But Swift has been undermining his attempts all along. Multiple introductions, digressions, and the “scenic” or anecdotal style of the Tale blur its potentially neat profile. Swift breaks things down even further, however. His emphasis on the individual word—an arrangement of the typesetter’s twenty-six pieces—is part of his unrelenting fragmentation of his persona’s ideas. One thing that makes A Tale of a Tub unique is that in it words tend to jump out of the text and out of their context, to take on meanings or values in their own right, apart from their larger meanings or values within the sentences in which they appear. “It often happens that men,” says Locke, “even when they would apply themselves to an attentive consideration, do set their thoughts more on words than things.” He could be describing Swift’s Modern.
Hugh Kenner cites the *Tale* as the first book that admits openly (and over and over) to being Herr Gutenberg's progeny. Capital letters, asterisks, chapter divisions, parentheses, italics, footnotes, marginalia, even blank spaces in the text—everywhere Swift draws attention to the technological parts of the book in our hands. Like the carcass of human nature, *A Tale of a Tub* is anatomized before our very eyes: “They tell us, that the Fashion of jumbling fifty Things together in a Dish, was at first introduced in Compliance to a depraved and debauched Appetite, as well as to a crazy Constitution; And to see a Man hunting thro' an Ollio, after the Head and Brains of a Goose, a Wigeon, or a Woodcock, is a Sign, he wants a Stomach and Digestion for more substantial Victuals” (p. 144). The ingredients of the *Tale* flash in every spoonful. And the ignorant eater mentioned here is the ignorant reader, who picks through this olio in search of the head or brains of the Modern's panegyric without understanding that the man really responsible is Jonathan Swift.

For example, italics in the *Tale* draw our attention repeatedly to the typographical existence of words. “Whatever word or Sentence is Printed in a different Character,” says the Modern, “shall be judged to contain something extraordinary either of Wit or Sublime” (pp. 46-47). Yet italicizing the words “Wit” and “Sublime” makes them in no way extraordinary; as a matter of fact, the italics in this case emphasize the lack of any special meaning in those words. Swift knows—although the Modern does not—that it is not the printer's type but the way an author uses language that lends a statement its significance or force.

Thus Swift's italics often work ironically, drawing our attention to the Modern's fine-sounding but quite empty words. At the same time, the italicization of words—usually of nouns, by the way—repeatedly compels us to focus our eyes on an odd word or a word used in an odd way, sometimes sets up a parallelism between two key words in a sentence, and, beyond this, makes us dig for the real meaning that Swift has concealed within the Modern's pedantic vocabulary. The italics in this passage work one way for the Modern and another for Swift:

I have one Word to say upon the Subject of Profound Writers, who are grown very numerous of late; And, I know very well, the judicious World is resolved to list me in that Number. I conceive therefore, as to the Business of being Profound, that it is with Writers, as with Wells; A
Person with good Eyes may see to the Bottom of the deepest, provided any water be there; and, that often, when there is nothing in the World at the Bottom, besides dryness and dirt, tho' it be but a yard and half under ground, it shall pass, however, for wondrous deep, upon no wiser reason than because it is wondrous dark. (Pp. 207–8)

Of course, the Modern has a good deal more than “one word” to say on this or any other subject! In this paragraph there are ten italicized words, six nouns and four adjectives. Although Swift might have italicized any of the twelve other nouns and five other adjectives, he has drawn our attention to the words that are, from his point of view, most important. If this were really the proud Modern speaking, the one word that he would certainly italicize would be the “me” in “I know very well, the judicious World is resolved to list me in that Number.” But Swift chooses rather to stress the paradox of a literal and a figurative profundity, of darkness that passes for depth. He italicizes “Profound Writers,” then splits the two words in order to use “Profound” to modify “Writers” and “Wells,” thus setting up analogies between literary works and wells, readers and those who stare into wells. By the time we get to the end of the paragraph, Swift has us thinking both at once as we read “Dryness” and “Dirt” (which expresses his contempt for bad writing) and “Deep” and “Dark” (which is essentially the paradox he is playing with). Swift is, of course, ridiculing the shallowness of the Modern’s Tale of a Tub at the same time that he is encouraging us to plumb the very real depths of his own Tale of a Tub. The effect of all this is that we pay a disproportionate amount of attention to the meaning of individual words.

Both the numerous footnotes (which were added to the fifth edition) and the marginal notes (which appeared in the first and all subsequent editions) refer often to single words within the text proper—defining a word, interpreting it, or questioning its use. The Tale keeps the reader looking simultaneously at the body of the text, at the bottom of the page, and at the margin. In a theoretical way we ought to observe that an author who uses such notes is on the one hand underlining the purely typographical nature of his book, since we do not use notes in speaking, but on the other hand refusing to let his book stand still, since notes offer alternate or fuller readings. When the Modern says that Peter sets his papal bulls roaring in order to frighten “Naughty Boys” (p. 112), and when Swift adds at the bottom of the page, “That is kings who incur his displeasure,”
then we are forced to accept "Naughty Boys" both as youths who pester Lord Peter the fop and as the royal enemies of the Pope in Rome. "Ventriloqual gadget," Kenner calls the footnote. Swift's footnotes are necessary to the multilevel effect of *A Tale of a Tub*. 

Like the italics and footnotes, the marginal notes focus our attention on individual words or phrases, if only in forcing us to slow down or interrupt our left-to-right reading. Beyond this, many of the notes explain or define words used in the text proper. "Three Pence" is said to be "A Lawyer's Coach-hire" (p. 176). "True illuminated" is "A Name of the Rosycrucians" (p. 186). "Husks and their Harlots" is "Virtuoso Experiments, and Modern Comedies" (p. 65). And sometimes it is difficult to know what validity one of these readings has over another. "Husks and their Harlots," for example, would seem to suggest simply "dried-up old fops and their women"; the equation with "Virtuoso Experiments, and Modern Comedies" would occur to no one but the Modern Author. As usual, the Modern is compromised: although he condemns hieroglyphic writing, Swift shows him consistently writing that way himself.

Less obvious, perhaps, is what we might call the "glossary style" of *A Tale of a Tub*. The Modern frequently uses synonymous pairs of words to get his meaning across, a device characteristic of Bacon, Browne, Milton, and other seventeenth-century writers. The Tale is full of such doublets: "Cant, or Jargon" (p. 28), "Transposal or Misapplication" (p. 43), "Briguing and Caballing" (p. 65), "Thought and Application of Mind" (p. 71), "Dispositions and Opinions" (p. 81), "Errors and Defects" (p. 92), "Tyros's or junior Scholars" (p. 101), and so on. What is obvious from this list is that whereas a few terms are usefully joined, the second term helping to define the first (e.g., "Briguing and Caballing"), most of these pairs are redundant, the second term merely echoing the first (e.g., "Errors and Defects"). And Swift on occasion toys ironically with this rhetorical construction, as in "the Dross and Grossness" (p. 62) and "the most Illustrious and Epidemick" (p. 142). The Modern believes mistakenly that a multiplicity of words guarantees meaning; on the other hand, Swift intends for us to read his *Tale of a Tub* on one level as a parody of such seventeenth-century redundancy, as is clear from the following absurdity: "Now this Physico-logical Scheme of Oratorical Receptacles or Machines, contains a great Mystery, being a Type, a Sign, an Emblem, a Shadow, a Symbol, bearing Analogy to the Spacious Commonwealth of Writers" (p. 61). It is significant
that in the *Tale* the italics, the footnotes and marginal notes, and the Modern’s glossary style all play up the synonymy of language. But the Modern’s use of words and more words betrays everywhere the authority of his categorical statements.

Another aspect of Swift’s fascination with individual words is his emphasis on proper names. In the “Apology” he denies the charge that he has borrowed the names of the three brothers (p. 13). In section 2 the brothers go without names, although the Modern promises to supply them later (p. 84). In section 4 “the learned brother” becomes “Peter,” Swift stressing Peter’s insistence on a proper title: “He told his Brothers, he would have them to know, that he was their Elder, and consequently his Father’s sole Heir; Nay, a while after, he would not allow them to call Him, *Brother*, but Mr. *PETER*; And then he must be styl’d, *Father PETER*; and sometimes, *My Lord PETER*” (p. 105). True to religious history, Swift delays naming the other brothers until section 6, when they are baptized “Martin” and “Jack” (p. 134). Names or titles are clearly important to Peter in a way that they are not to Swift. Peter’s assumption of progressively more formal titles shows Swift’s contempt of papal aloofness; by insisting on such artificial respect, Peter indeed *becomes* these titles, and nothing more.

Jack likewise travels under various labels. It is typical that Peter should *demand* his titles whereas Jack is *given* his nicknames: “And now the little Boys in the Streets began to salute him with several Names. Sometimes they would call Him, *Jack the Bald*; sometimes, *Jack with a Lanthorn*; sometimes, *Dutch Jack*; sometimes, *French Hugh*; sometimes, *Tom the Beggar*; and sometimes, *Knocking Jack of the North*. And it was under one, or some, or all of these *Appellations* (which I leave the Learned Reader to determine) that he hath given Rise to the most Illustrious and Epidemick Sect of *Aeolists*” (pp. 141–42). The italicization of each nickname and Swift’s footnote on each draw attention to the names proper. But to push further, if we assume that one’s name is his most personal possession, then the multiplicity of names here implies a multiplicity of identities. And I take Swift seriously when he leaves it up to the reader to decide which name or names (and thus which identity or identities) Jack deserves. Names in *A Tale of a Tub* tend to shift, to be loosely, not absolutely, applied to people.19

So what’s in a name? The most obvious explanation for the instability of proper names is that Swift intends to satirize both
Catholics and Protestants into stereotypes, suggesting that whatever you call them they are all the same. But Swift is seldom so easy. The several names for Calvin—"Jack the Bald," "Jack with a Lanthorn," "Dutch Jack," and so on—suggest that Calvinism is not one movement but different movements in different countries, as it was. Swift plays loose with Calvinism by playing loose with John Calvin's name; but he likewise knocks the Modern for making so much of mere nicknames. Like the alternate readings forced on us elsewhere, the multiplication of names in the Tale is part of Swift's simultaneous objection to and delight in alternate explanations of things. Throughout his writings, and in A Tale of a Tub in particular, Swift plays on the fluidity of language, forces his reader to juggle alternate expressions, and generally condemns yet exploits the multifarious meanings of words. He has it both ways: while making fun of Peter's insistence on a proper title and Jack's numerous nicknames, he raises the quite serious problem of naming and suggests that agreement is essentially a matter of propriety and convenience. Interestingly, the Modern Author does not have a name, and Jonathan Swift attached his own name to only one of his literary works.

Swift's emphasis on naming is only part of his keen interest in words. The Modern is explicit about the plight of words in the Restoration theater (pp. 60–61), the various definitions of the word "Critic" (pp. 92–93), and other matters of diction. And clauses like these are common: "a damn'd Kick on the Mouth, which hath ever since been call'd a Salute" (p. 115); "which we commonly suppose to be a Distemper, and call by the Name of Madness or Phrenzy" (p. 162); "the whole Operation of Preaching is to this very Day among their Professors, styled by the Phrase of Holding forth" (p. 202). In the Tale Swift uses words so self-consciously that we sometimes get entangled in his language at the expense of his meaning.

But for all his verbal pyrotechnics, Swift intends to bring up (without necessarily resolving) some crucial questions about the nature of language. He jokes poignantly about the whole words-and-things controversy. In one passage he seems to satirize the thinking behind the Royal Society's insistence on "so many things, almost in an equal number of words":20 "Air being a heavy Body, and therefore (according to the System of Epicurus) continually descending, must needs be more so, when loaden and press'd down by Words; which are also Bodies of much Weight and Gravity, as it
is manifest from those deep Impressions they make and leave upon us" (p. 60). The pseudoserious argument of course pivots on the ironic pun on "Impressions," which Swift forces us to take in its physical as well as its figurative sense. He reduces the Royal Society's honest desire to bring words and things closer together to an absurdity: words are themselves things. Correspondingly, "Words are but Wind" (p. 153) is a gross perversion of Bacon's "Wordes are but the Images of matter." Swift here takes Bacon's (and Locke's) warning that words do not stand for things but for the ideas of things and reduces it to another absurdity: words have no relation whatever to things. Thus Swift brings the whole seventeenth-century debate over words and things down to the ridiculous opposition between words as things and words as hot air.

This matter of the signification of words comes up time and time again. After a series of crack-brained equations ("Is not Religion a Cloak . . ."), the Modern argues that "those Beings which the World calls improperly Suits of Cloathes, are in Reality the most refined Species of Animals, or to proceed higher, that they are Rational Creatures, or Men" (p. 78). Then, narrowing his focus, he says that people "do according to certain Compositions receive different Appellations" and gives a couple of examples: "If certain Ermins and Furs be placed in a certain Position, we stile them a Judge, and so, an apt Conjunction of Lawn and black Sattin, we intitle a Bishop" (p. 79). These few pages are reminiscent of Locke's extended discussion "Of General Terms," in which he shows how quickly the human mind fits particulars into the pigeonholes of genus and species. This process has to do not with real essences but only with what Locke calls "nominal essences" and is just another kind of naming: "Men, making abstract ideas and settling them in their minds with names annexed to them, do thereby enable themselves to consider things and discourse of them, as it were in bundles, for the easier and readier improvement and communication of their knowledge, which would advance but slowly were words and thoughts confined only to particulars." Locke considers what several accidents are required to name a thing "gold," "horse," or "man." In light of Locke's commentary, what the Modern says does not sound foolish at all but seems rather like Swift's humorous account of the agreements we make among ourselves that the presence of a couple of accidents is sufficient for labeling a person "man" and a few more for labeling him "judge,"
"bishop," or something else. Our dictionaries are collections of such agreed-upon signs for things.26

Disputing the value of the judge's "bench," the Modern advises us to look into the "Etymology of the Name, which in the Phoenician Tongue is a Word of great Signification, importing, if literally interpreted, The Place of Sleep; but in common Acceptation, A Seat well bolster'd and cushion'd, for the Repose of old and gouty Limbs: Senes ut in otia tuta recedant" (p. 57). Here again the tongue-in-cheek tone should not be allowed to obscure Swift's fascination with words and their histories; in this case he is making a rather clear separation between a word's etymology, its literal denotation, and its popular connotation. No matter that the reference to the Phoenician origin of the word is malarkey. No matter either that in the end the common implication of the word is undercut by a learned quotation from Horace. At least the subject was for Swift a most serious one. The words "Signification" (that which is signified by a word) and "Acceptation" (the sense in which a word is accepted or received) are both common in seventeenth-century discussions of language and are found elsewhere in the Tale, as well as in book 3 of An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.27

Behind the Modern's misguided explanation of the word "Zeal" is an ironic consideration of a topic treated quite seriously by others: "For this Meddly of Humor, he made a Shift to find a very plausible Name, honoring it with the Title of Zeal; which is, perhaps, the most significant Word that hath been ever yet produced in any Language; As, I think, I have fully proved in my excellent Analytical Discourse upon that Subject; wherein I have deduced a Histori-theo-physiological Account of Zeal, shewing how it first proceeded from a Notion into a Word, and from thence in a hot Summer, ripned into a tangible Substance" (p. 137).28 The hyperbolic diction and proud tone (one is responsible for the other), plus the absurdity of the closing metaphor, serve to repel us from the content of the Modern's linguistics. The terms "Analytical Discourse," "physiological Account," and "tangible Substance" lend an air of parody to the passage. Our immediate response is to guess that Swift would take exception to everything the Modern says here.

But look again. The subtlety of the linguistic pun on "significant Word" suggests that Swift may be saying something on that topic worth listening to. In fact, the three key terms in seventeenth-
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century linguistics are here—"Notion," "Word," and "tangible Substance." Swift would agree with the Modern that a sign for a complex idea stands for a "Meddly of Humor." And Swift would undoubtedly agree with the point that Locke hammers home ad nauseum: "We should have a great many fewer disputes in the world if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only and not for things themselves." Thus although Swift would say (with the Modern) that the notion or idea spawns its sign, he would certainly add (against the Modern) that the word could not possibly spawn the thing itself. That the Modern should put "Notion" and "Word" ahead of "tangible Substance" is an indication of his inverted priorities.

The story of the three brothers and their manipulation of their father's will is itself an example of the gradual abasement of the meaning of words. And in telling that story, Swift has borrowed a favorite trick of the Modern's—taking a metaphor in its literal sense—and has ingeniously spun a book out of it. "Words are the clothing of our thoughts" was a seventeenth-century cliché. Swift uses it in his Thoughts on Various Subjects: "Common Speakers have only one set of Ideas, and one set of Words to clothe them in." It appears also in his quite serious Tatler contribution on linguistic degeneracy: "In this last Point, the usual Pretence is, that they spell as they speak: A noble Standard for Language! To depend upon the Caprice of every Coxcomb; who, because Words are the Clothing of our Thoughts, cuts them out, and shapes them as he pleases, and changes them oftener than his Dress." That Swift had this cliché in mind as he was writing A Tale of a Tub is clear from his absurd equation of language with clothing in section 2, the first part of the allegory: "To this System of Religion were tagged several subaltern Doctrines, which were entertained with great Vogue: as particularly, the Faculties of the Mind were deduced by the Learned among them in this manner: Embroidery, was Sheer wit; Gold Fringe was agreeable Conversation, Gold Lace was Repartee, a huge long Periwig was Humor, and a Coat full of Powder was very good Raillery: All which required abundance of Finesse and Delicatesse to manage with Advantage, as well as a strict Observance after Times and Fashions" (p. 80). Thus Swift is using his story of the three brothers as an allegory of corruption not only in the Church but also in language and style. Like clothing and religion, language degenerates when one insists upon "a strict
Observance after Times and Fashions." And a moment later writing and clothing are confused in a pun, as the Modern Author says, "And so leaving these broken Ends, I carefully gather up the chief Thread of my Story, and proceed" (p. 81). Looked at this way, the Tale assumes a satisfying wholeness (if we insist on such a thing!), the story proper giving us an allegory of linguistic degeneracy, the digressions a series of bad examples of degenerated language. The Modern Author’s style is fashionable all right, but it bears little or no relation to what men with common sense regard as real, moral, or human.

In a passage that is in effect a little essay on words, Swift implies that the source of such decadence is a cavalier use of language.

However, after some Pause the Brother so often mentioned for his Erudition, who was well Skill’d in Criticisms, had found in a certain Author, which he said should be nameless, that the same Word which in the Will is called Fringe, does also signifie a Broom-stick; and doubtless ought to have the same Interpretation in this Paragraph. This, another of the Brothers disliked, because of that Epithet, Silver, which could not, he humbly conceived, in Propriety of Speech be reasonably applied to a Broom-stick: but it was replied upon him, that this Epithet was understood in a Mythological, and Allegorical Sense. However, he objected again, why their Father should forbid them to wear Broom-stick on their Coats, a Caution that seemed unnatural and impertinent; upon which he was taken up short, as one that spoke irreverently of a Mystery, which doubtless was very useful and significant, but ought not to be over-curiously pryed into, or nicely reasoned upon. And in short, their Father’s Authority being now considerably sunk, this Expedient was allowed to serve as a lawful Dispensation, for wearing their full Proportion of Silver Fringe. (P. 88)

Just beyond the edge of the page, Swift listens intently while the three brothers bicker over the rules of signification. To the attentive reader, the verbal in-jokes “signifie” and “significant,” plus the irony of a “nameless” author, point to Swift’s presence. The question would seem to be not simply whether the father’s will can be wrenched this way, but also whether words in general can be torn loose from their accepted referents. May one person (or even three) decide that the word “Fringe” signifies what others customarily call a “Broom-stick”? Swift typically buries his point of view within a passage; here the one commonsensical brother thinks the “Mystery” of signification ought to be pried into, and at least he asks the right questions. The passage implies that to switch referents on the basis
of what is momentarily expedient is to destroy the “Authority” of linguistic convention.

What leaves words open to such private redefinition—Swift elsewhere equates linguistic change with linguistic corruption—is the imperfection of language itself. As Locke says, “Thus we may conceive how words, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by men as the signs of their ideas: not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain ideas, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea.” Swift would agree, regretfully. Because the connection between a word and an idea of a thing is based only on convention, the three brothers may, if they want, decide that “Fringe” means “Broom-stick.” But to abandon linguistic convention is to abandon the possibility of communication with others. If you say “toe-may-toe” and I say “toe-mah-toe,” we may get on one another’s nerves; but if you say “Fringe” and I say “Broom-stick,” how can we understand one another?

The consequences of linguistic distortion go further. Swift deals most memorably with the problem in his three-page dramatization of Peter’s mutton dinner.

*Come Brothers, said Peter, fall to, and spare not; here is excellent good Mutton; or hold, now my Hand is in, I’ll help you.* At which word, in much Ceremony, with Fork and Knife, he carves out two good Slices of the Loaf, and presents each on a Plate to his Brothers. The Elder of the two not suddenly entering into Lord Peter’s Conceit, began with very civil Language to examine the Mystery. *My Lord,* said he, *I doubt, with great Submission, there may be some Mistake.* What, says Peter, you are pleasant; *Come then, let us hear this Jest, your Head is so big with.* None in the World, my Lord; but unless I am very much deceived, your Lordship was pleased a while ago, to let fall a Word about Mutton, and I would be glad to see it with all my Heart. How, said Peter, appearing in great Surprise, I do not comprehend this at all—Upon which, the younger interposing, to set the Business right; *My Lord,* said he, *My Brother, I suppose is hungry, and longs for the Mutton, your Lordship hath promised us to Dinner.* (Pp. 116-17)

Swift is, of course, joking about transubstantiation. But also at issue here is the source of linguistic authority. What we have is a sort of emperor’s-new-clothes situation. Peter had earlier “let fall a Word about Mutton,” but the brothers say they “would be glad to see it.”
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And Peter speaks of "excellent good Mutton," but Swift (not the imperceptive Modern here) speaks of a "Loaf" of bread. In this context I find "Conceit" an interesting word: it signifies Peter's mad fancy and at the same time (referring to the rhetorical device) suggests his linguistic trickery.

The question is, Is this thing before us a "shoulder of Mutton" or a "Crust of Bread"? What name do we give it?

Pray, said Peter, take me along with you, either you are both mad, or disposed to be merrier than I approve of; If You there, do not like your Piece, I will carve you another, tho' I should take that to be the choice Bit of the whole Shoulder. What then, my Lord, replied the first, it seems this is a shoulder of Mutton all this while. Pray Sir, says Peter, eat your Vittles, and leave off your Impertinence, if you please, for I am not disposed to relish it at present: But the other could not forbear, being over-provoked at the affected Seriousness of Peter's Countenance. By G—, My Lord, said he, I can only say, that to my Eyes, and Fingers, and Teeth, and Nose, it seems to be nothing but a Crust of Bread. Upon which, the second put in his Word: / never saw a Piece of Mutton in my Life, so nearly resembling a Slice from a Twelve-peny Loaf. Look ye, Gentlemen, cries Peter in a Rage, to convince you, what a couple of blind, positive, ignorant, wilful Puppies you are, I will use but this plain Argument; By G—, it is true, good, natural Mutton as any in Leaden-Hall Market; and G— confound you both eternally, if you offer to believe otherwise. Such a thundring Proof as this, left no farther Room for Objection. (Pp. 117-18)

The struggle is between dictation of meaning and empirical testing for meaning. Between "By G—, it is true, good, natural Mutton as any in Leaden-Hall Market" and "I can only say, that to my Eyes, and Fingers, and Teeth, and Nose, it seems to be nothing but a Crust of Bread," Peter reminds me of Humpty Dumpty in Through the Looking Glass: "'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'"99 Because Peter's proof "left no farther room for Objection," it precludes the world of the senses and is to Swift as unreal as Wilkins's arbitrary scheme. The error is linguistic as well as theological. Of course, as in the "Broom-stick" passage, the wrong opinion wins out; Martin and Jack eventually surrender to Peter's dogma. But not before Swift has made his point: to set aside the conventionality of language is to set aside communicable reality, or rather, what we conventionally call reality.

The point Swift makes here about words and things is precisely that made by Locke: 'For words, being sounds, can produce in us no
other simple ideas than those very sounds, nor excite in us but by that voluntary connexion which is known to be between them and those simple ideas which common use has made them signs of. He that thinks otherwise, let him try if any words can give him the taste of a pineapple and make him have the true idea of the relish of that celebrated delicious fruit. The word "pineapple" is no more the same as my relish in eating a real pineapple than the word "mutton" is the same as my relish in eating a real leg of mutton. To confuse one with the other is to mistake language for reality. A Tale of a Tub implies a culture in which language has become the art of sign-making. Yet the Modern's myriad signs often seem to be signs without referents. Swift admits that sign-making is critical; he also suggests that mere sign-making is not enough and that it can degenerate into sign-collecting.

Johnson notwithstanding, Swift never, even in The Conduct of the Allies, relies on "strong facts" alone for his effects. In the Tale he toys with language and draws attention to the linguistic process of naming things; but whereas the Modern treats language as the art of making signs, Swift insists that making signs is only one of its functions. Although he is never again the philosopher of language that he is in the Tale, Swift here explores the signification of words while simultaneously demonstrating their deep resonances. He uses language not just for signifying but also for implying, reminding, and insinuating. A great deal of the force of this and Swift's later satires depends upon his extraordinary sensitivity to the signification as well as the multiple connotations of individual words.

3. On the matter of Swift's relation to Locke, see W. B. Carnochan, "Gulliver and the Human Understanding," chap. 4 of Lemuel Gulliver's Mirror for Man (Berkeley, 1968), and Denis Donoghue, "Words," chap. 4 of Jonathan Swift: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge, 1969). Although the evidence is admittedly inconclusive, in my opinion Carnochan and Donoghue wrongly insist that Swift is anti-Lockean. A helpful analysis of Locke's relation to seventeenth-century discussion of language is to be found in John W. Yolton, "Signs and Signification," chap. 9 of Locke and the
Compass of Human Understanding (Cambridge, 1970). Ricardo Quintana's Two
Augustans: John Locke, Jonathan Swift (Madison, 1978) has been published only
recently.

4. Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences,

5. I echo James Knowlson, Universal Language Schemes in England and France,
1600-1800 (Toronto, 1975), p. 34; Knowlson's book is a welcome addition to the study
of language in this period. Murray Cohen's Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in
England, 1640-1785 (Baltimore, 1977) has appeared since I completed this study.

multiple causes are described succinctly in Vivian Salmon, "Language-Planning in
Seventeenth-Century England: Its Context and Aims," in In Memory of J. R. Firth,


8. John Wilkins, An Essay Towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical


10. Swift parallels Wilkins also in his reference to the antiquity of the Phoenician
tongue (p. 57; cf. A Real Character, p. 11) and his discussion of hieroglyphics (pp. 98-
99; cf. A Real Character, p. 12).


12. Hugh Kenner, Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians
(Boston, 1962), p. 59. On Swift's involvement in the printing of the fifth edition of 1710, see
Guthkelch and Smith, pp. xix-xxviii.

13. Cf. Swift's joke about capital letters used to no purpose: "Upon the Covers of
these Papers, I casually observed written in large Letters, the two following Words,
DETUR DIGNISSIMO; which, for ought I knew, might contain some important
Meaning" (p. 28).

14. On page 69 the following words are italicized: "inneundo," "W-t-t-n,
words, sixteen are nouns, two are adjectives, and one is a proper name. The
percentages are typical and suggest the strongly nominal quality of Swift's prose. It is
interesting that the italicized words manage to catch perfectly the flavor of this
passage from "A Digression on Madness."

15. For a discussion of the notes, see Guthkelch and Smith, pp. xxii-xxv.


17. I have borrowed the term from W. K. Wimsatt, who uses it in Philosphic
Words: A Study of Style and Meaning in the "Rambler" and "Dictionary" of Samuel

18. Cf. Wilkins, p. 19 ("defects and imperfections") and p. 20 ("Defects or
Imperfections"). A Real Character is replete with such redundancy, even when
Wilkins is complaining about such a thing: "The chief Difficulty and Labour will be
so to contrive the Enumeration of things and notions, as that they may be full and
adequate, without any Redundancy or Deficiency as to the Number of them, and
regular as to their Place and Order" (p. 20).

19. Cf. the discussion of the multiplicity of "godfathers" for books (pp. 71-72) and
Swift's note on "Bumbastus": "This is one of the Names of Paracelsus: He was call'd Christophorus, Theophrastus, Paracelsus, and Bumbastus" (p. 152).


21. And he even puns on its double usage in a physical sense: the word means both the mark left by a heavy body or a blow and the characters made by printing from type.


24. Cf. the Modern's references to "Genus and Species" (p. 57), "Classis" (p. 63), and "Specie" (p. 100).

25. Locke, 3. 3. 20.

26. Wilkins claims in his "Epistle Dedicatory" to be doing far more than mere dictionary-making, his goal "being as much to be preferred before that, as things are better than words, as real knowledge is beyond elegance of speech, as the general good of mankind, is beyond that of any particular Countrey or Nation."

27. Cf. "Acceptation" (p. 96) and Swift's several puns on "Sign" (e.g., pp. 61, 144, 196).

28. The inspiration for this passage may have been Henry More's discussion of the etymology of "Zeal" in Enthusiasmus Triumphatus (1662), Augustan Reprint Society, no. 118 (Los Angeles, 1966), p. 12.

29. Locke, 3. 10. 15.

30. Cf. Locke's discussions of this matter, 3. 4. 11 and 3. 5. 15.


32. As examples see Ben Jonson, Timber, or Discoveries (1641; rpt. Oxford, 1947), 7:625: "For that which is high and lofty, declaring excellent matter, becomes vast and tumorous, speaking of petty and inferior things: so that which was even, and apt in a meane and plaine subject, will appeare most poore and humble in a high Argument. Would you not laugh, to meet a great Counsellor of state in a flat cap, with his trunk hose, and a hobby-horse Cloake, his Gloves under his girdle, and yon Haberdasher in a velvet Gowne, furr'd with sables?"; Thomas Sprat, History of the Royal Society (London, 1667), p. 111: "They were at first, no doubt, an admirable Instrument in the hands of Wise Men, when they were onely employ'd to describe Goodness, Honesty, Obedience, in larger, fairer, and more moving Images; to represent Truth, cloth'd with Bodies"; and John Dryden, "Preface to the Translation of Ovid's Epistles," in The Poems of John Dryden (Oxford, 1958), 1:185: "For thought, if it be Translated truly, cannot be lost in another Language, but the words that convey it to our apprehension (which are the Image and Ornament of that thought) may be so ill chosen as to make it appear in an unhandsome dress, and rob it of its native Lustre."


35. This seems to be a common formula, as in Sir William Temple, "Of Poetry," in *The Works of Sir William Temple*, ed. Jonathan Swift (1702; rpt. London, 1770), 4:427: "But to spin off this thread, which is already grown too long. . . ." Up to his usual tricks, Swift a few lines below uses "Thread" to refer specifically to clothing.

36. Throughout *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*.

37. Locke, 3. 2. 1.

38. It is perhaps significant that in 1662 Antoine Arnauld, in his *Port-Royal Logic*, discussed rather extensively the linguistic problems raised by Christ's words "This is my body." See the most recent translation by James Dickoff and Patricia James, *The Art of Thinking* (New York, 1964), pp. 95-98; the potential influence of the *Logic* on Swift is taken up in chap. 5.


40. Locke, 3. 4. 11.