Is there a Language 'Behind' Speaking? How to Look at 20th Century Language Theory in an Alternative Way

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1. What is at stake?

There is a standard 'picture' of how to look at 20th century theory of language: Within this picture normally a pragmatic shift is identified from structure-oriented authors as Saussure and Chomsky to action-oriented concepts of language represented in Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, or Habermas. Normally we judge this development as a kind of *progress*, pointing in the direction of a better kind of theory: a fruitful turn from structure to action, from competence-analysis to performance-analysis.

But this picture is much too simple. The aim of my talk is to suggest another way of looking at the 'logical geography' of 20th century language theory.[1] The guiding idea is to take the distinction between a universal schema and the particular use (or between type and token, rule and instantiation) as a criterion for sorting out those authors who plead for this methodological difference and those, who reject it. From *this* perspective, a new kind of division emerges and we find out family resemblances between language theorists, who normally were classified to belong to controversial methodological schools. On the one hand we can identify proponents of a 'two worlds model' of language. This model differentiates not only terminologically but even (so to say) ontologically between schema and use in the sense of logical-genealogical primacy; it is founded in the conviction that to explain linguistic behavior means to make the rules explicit we are implicitly following when speaking. To this 'cluster' belong structural thinkers such as Saussure and Chomsky as well as the speech act theorists Searle and Habermas. We want to call this positions the '*logosoriented*' or

[1] See: Krämer 2001.

'*intellectualizing approach*'. On the other hand, there are those philosophers who reject the separation between schema and use as a methodological strategy. To this category authors as Wittgenstein, as well as Austin, Davidson, and Derrida can be seen to belong. We want to call this position the '*embodied group*' or the '*non-intellectualizing approach*'. This typology may seem surprising. My further reflections hope to make it plausible. And by going through our argument we will make a discovery: In the terms of the non-intellectualizing approach we can reinterpret – and even rehabilitate – the internal rationality of the separation between schema and us.

2. The logosoriented approach

Saussure and Chomsky on one hand, Searle and Habermas on the other—this quartet of thinkers marks a major twentieth-century controversy: the polarity of structure and action as representing two basic options for a theory of language. Either language appears as a definable system, in which case the interesting question is "what is language?"; or language is embedded in the context of human action, in which case the question would be "what do we use language for?" Notwithstanding the contrast in the objects of language-oriented and speech-act oriented positions, however, there is common ground between the two. This commonality can be found in their underlying understanding of language, and concerns the more or less tacit presuppositions guiding both Saussure and Chomsky's theories of language as well as those of Searle and Habermas.

The physiognomy of the intellectualist view of language can be summed up as following:

(1) *Universality*. There are grammatical or pragmatic universals in which everything that can be referred to as "language" or "speech" takes part. Only phenomena exemplifying and representing these universal characteristics can count as speech or communication. Whatever in speech goes beyond its role as manifestation of a universal type is the result of non-linguistic circumstances and, measured against the standard of pure language and communication, belongs to the extra-linguistic sphere.

(2) *Invisibility*. The relationship between speech and language can be described using hierarchical, spatial metaphors, whether in terms of the relation between surface and deep structure or between inside and outside. As deep structure, language or communication are invisible entities. Language does not appear on its own but has to first be made accessible. It is the task of the theorist to penetrate the surface of the spatio-temporal speech event, to make explicit the structures no longer accessible to the senses but only to reason, and to introduce them to the "mind's eye."

(3) *Ideality*. Ideality is the vehicle that allows us to deduce from the surface to what lies behind it, to get from the empirically visible to the cognitively invisible, and to make it accessible through description. This strategy of idealization allows for language, speech, and communication to become significant objects of study not as they are, but as they should be. Of interest is not actual but possible language and communication.

(4) *Reference to rules*. To explain language and communication means to describe the rules we obey when we speak. The rules specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for linguistic and communicative creativity. These rules do not describe—from the perspective of an observer—the regularities of the use of language, but are rather required for us to be able to speak in the first place.

(5) *Ability as knowledge*. Our command of these rules is understood as a kind of knowledge: we know the grammatical or pragmatic rules, whether explicitly or implicitly. Language is not a practical skill like riding a bike or swimming, but rather a knowledge-based ability. This does not mean that the speakers are (or have to be) conscious of this knowledge, but rather that a theorist of language can reconstruct it in the form of objective knowledge. The ability to speak can thus not only be represented but also explained by a system of knowledge.

(6) *Focus on competence*. Although linguistic competence can only be ascertainable from performance, they nevertheless exist independently of performance as a separate factor. Competence is the "place" where the regulating system of language and communication can be located.

It is for this reason that competence is the genuine object of linguistic theory. The theory of language does not investigate speech, but the disposition to speak.

(7) *Focus on speakers and on dialogue*. The decisive figure in the study of language and communication is the speaker. The production of linguistic symbols, not their interpretation, is the crucial linguistic activity. Speakers are actors in the sense of accountable originators of their utterances. A dialogue between two people is the primal scene of language usage.

(8) *Indifference to media*. The universal grammatical and pragmatic features of language and communication are indifferent to media. Language is actualized under material conditions but is not itself material, and is for this very reason indifferent to media. Media belong exclusively to the side of execution and actualization, and come into play when the linguistic system of knowledge, itself indifferent to media, is used under specific spatio-temporal conditions. Media are phenomena of actualization. Even more significant is the fact that language itself is not a medium—at least not in a sense that would be important or revealing in any way for a theory of language.

(9) *Disembodiment*. Not only is language disembodied, but so are the speakers themselves. Just as the vocal, written, gestural, and technical embodiment of language in its individual usage is marginal for language itself, the bodies of the speakers are not taken into account as physical prerequisites for speech, as desiring entities, or gendered difference.

(10) *Discursivity*. Language and speech belong to the sphere of the symbolic. What matters is the *differentia specifica* of this symbolism. Language is what it is in distinction to the image; it is a discursive and not an iconic symbolic system. Unlike the image there are always "final" elements in the analysis of language and communication, whether they be phonemes, morphemes, words, sentences, or speech acts, and all have precisely defined boundaries.

(11) *Reality index*: Are pure language and communication discovered or invented? The answer for our quartet of authors is clear: while it is

true that the logos-oriented concept of language is a theoretical reconstruction, they claim that this reconstruction only represents what actually exists as a system of rules and knowledge and speakers' competence, which is subsequently applied in individual speech. This is why theorists of language do not construct but rather re-construct, bringing to light what is hidden behind the heterogeneous phenomena of language. Pure language and communication are not noumenal—i.e. ideal—constructs; they are not merely fictitious but actually exist.

We are now prepared to define this intellectualist concept of language somewhat more precisely. The covert effect of the two-world model is to produce an understanding of language and communication that no longer distinguishes between the media and tools of description and what is described; tends to identify model and reality. We will call this the "intellectualist fallacy." Let us shortly explain this fallacy.

Austin uses the term "scholastic view"[2] to characterize an approach that does not understand a particular utterance according to its meaning in the actual speech situation, but rather mobilizes and discusses all of its *possible* meanings. Generalizing Austin's observation, Pierre Bourdieu refers to the "scholastic fallacy": when scholars examine social, cultural, and linguistic phenomena, they do so in a situation of leisure, *scholé*, which is defined by its exemption from those very conditions, purposes, and constraints that characterize the objects of study in their life-world embeddedness and facticity. Bourdieu sees an incompatibility here between object and method. Applied to linguistics this means that the *scholé* brings about a transition from the primary command of language as a means of communication to a secondary command of it as object of observation and analysis. Not to know languages but the know language *itself* is the goal of systematic linguistics. This means, however, that attributes deriving precisely from the fact that language is not used in practice but rather examined as an object are projected as real characteristics onto natural languages and speech. Following Bourdieu, Charles Taylor has also identified an intellectualist confusion in the philosophy of language between ideal and actuality and between model and reality.[3] But the situation is a little bit more com-

[2] Austin 1970.
[3] Taylor 1995.

plicate because the intellectualist strategy is more subtle than the mere confusion between ideal and real.

The division between actual, spatio-temporal, observable, particular, heterogeneous, everyday "speech events" and idealized, unobservable, scientifically reconstructable universal "language" is acknowledged and consolidated by ascribing ontologically different levels to each. The presupposition of the two-world model can in this sense be thought of as a strategy for *not* getting caught in the trap of the intellectualist fallacy. However, attributing a logico-geneological priority to language "itself" over actual speech metamorphizes speech, turning it into a—distorting—representation of the form of language or communication.

The "intellectualist fallacy" does not then consist in ascribing a reality index to this "noumenal construct", and, finally, regarding individual utterances as the reality of pure language itself. Model and reality are not simply confused; reality is rather transformed into a representation of the model—and always at the expense of reality. *The fallacy is that the reality of speech is regarded as a representation, or, to be precise, an instantiation of language.* This introduces the boundary between language/non-language into speech, which, in contrast to language "itself," has the peculiarity of mixing linguistic with extra-linguistic elements. By virtue of this mixture, speech in relation to pure language is, as a matter of principle, incomplete, lacking, deficient, and distorted—less form than deformation. It is the task of theory to employ the concept of language as an instrument of purification. This is the kernel of the 'intellectualist fallacy'.

3. The embodied approach

If we look for authors to whom the relationship between language and speech does not follow the distinction between pattern and actualization, we get a very mixed group, containing philosophers as Austin, Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Derrida.

The different concepts of language outlined by these thinkers will come together around a negative maxim. This can be formulated this way: It is not meaningful, for whatever reason, to categorically distinguish between pattern and usage in terms of differently ranked modalities of languages understood as levels of being.

Because of the variety of these different positions we want to characterize their positions not by mere description of some common essential thoughts – because in fact there will not be a lot of such 'common thoughts' but by asking our theorists two questions. Their answers will be brief and, rather than in the form of quotes, imaginary. Our questions are as follows:

(1) Why is the distinction between pattern (rule) and actualization (application) not a good model to explain the relationship between language and speech?

(2) Is there such a thing as "pure" language or communication?

Wittgenstein's answer

(1) We can distinguish between rules and their application in the same way we distinguish between language games: There is the linguistic language game that characterizes certain sentences as grammatically correct model sentences and there is the language game of everyday communication, in which hardly any correct sentences are spoken. Language games do not lie behind or on top of each other, but side by side. There are no universal patterns and forms upon which individual cases are based. However, spatio-temporal phenomena that have been characterized as exemplary or paradigmatic for our practice do exist; these can accordingly serve as standards or "forms." Which particular phenomena can be considered exemplary or as setting standards for others is determined by the given form of life, whose "such-and-suchness" brings to a standstill all questions asking "why" of a "how."

(2) There is no such thing as a pure language, for two reasons: (a) The categorical separation of language and image cannot be sustained in relation to language itself. Language always also functions as image; it has a non-discursive dimension. (b) Language is only ever given as a part of a form of life. This is why linguistic rules, like any other rules, are not self-explanatory but have to be embedded in practices with which we are already familiar, in which we have already been trained, in order that we may "follow" them.

Austin's answer

(1) In matters of action what is important is not the side of intentions, plans, and patterns, but the side of execution. Unlike ideal intentions, real executions can fail. An action is something that can fail. What is essential to language usage takes place on the side of actual speech and not on that of possible speech. This insight into the potential of failure can also be applied to theoretical speech about language: all conceptual systems that set up definite boundaries can—and usually do—fail in the face of the complexity of reality as soon as they performatively claim that the world corresponds to their concepts.

(2) The performative power of an utterance to not only describe the world but also to change it, is not a phenomenon internal to language. Whether speech acts actually put into effect what they denote is not revealed by looking at language but by looking at culture. Performative power has its roots in the conventions and structures of social practice. In the archetypal performatives, ritual and speech go hand in hand and can supplement or replace each other. The special case of archetypal performatives makes evident something that carries weight for all speech: the power of language is rooted in something that precisely is not (or no longer is) "pure" language. Language is not autonomous.

Davidson's answer

(1) The question of the relationship between pattern and realization is a version of the question about the relationship between conceptual scheme and its (empirical) content. There is however no such thing as *one* conceptual scheme shared by everyone speaking the same language, for the simple reason that it is also not plausible for there to be *different* conceptual schemes. There can thus be no meaningful distinction between a linguistic scheme and its individual application.

(2) The question as to whether there is a language beyond speech is of no importance for a theory of language. The arguments against a common language are implicit in the answer to (1). Regarding speech we can also say that it is not speaking but understanding and interpreting

that are the crucial activities and forms of linguistic creativity. Here the understanding of utterances is a case of the understanding of persons. When we understand, we produce theories of truth that can buttress our interpretations, but they are only valid for a single utterance, or, to be precise, for a single speaker. The competence of the listener to produce a theory with whose help he can not only understand an utterance but also the person speaking, is based not on a kind of rule-based knowledge but rather resembles the wit, spontaneity, and inventiveness of artistic production. Linguistic competence is not based on knowledge. It is rather an art—the art of life.

Derrida's answer

(1) The traditional (metaphysical) relationship between form and actualization can also be found in the relationship between language and writing. However, as is always the case when there is a conceptual hierarchy, the relationship between the primary system of language and the secondary system of writing shows that the secondary term contains something that is both fundamental to the primary term as well as exceeding it, thus decentering the distinction between primary and secondary. Writing embodies the principle of iterability and the structure of delay (*Nachträglichkeit*), which are both necessary conditions for every signifying practice. The notion of iterability allows, for instance, a linguistic form to be interpreted as a universal that does not precede its particular execution in speech, but is rather constituted in the first place by repeated executions of the form. Given the structure of delay—the time interval upon which all repetition depends—iteration always also appears as a becoming-other and thus as a transformation of what was repeated.

(2) There is no "pure" signifying system because every actual signifying event is a *trace* of a past signifying event, which it both repeats as well as transforms. This is why the trace is the condition of the possibility of signs and at the same time the impossibility of pure signs. This is also true for language: writing is the condition of the possibility and the impossibility of "pure" language. There can be no "pure"

language because the form of language is only generated as the trace of repeating writing structures.

Is it possible now for us to sketch the outline of a non-intellectualist concept of language? Let us summarize some assumptions.

Language does not exist *as* form, but only *in* form of practices of linguistic usage. By "practice" we understand an action that is, in the broadest sense, tied to the body. It does not require a knowing-that, but only a knowing-how, i.e., an ability acquired through practice. Linguistic practices also include those that aim at *examining* language itself, that describe language as a form and develop linguistic theories. This practice is possible because language can be written down or fixed in other ways, thereby becoming an object of examination. All statements about *language* then always refer to the (written) *representation* of language, not to a language "per se." We do not have access to something like "pure" language. Language only exists as language-in-a-medium, as spoken, written, gestural, and technically mediated language. Neither do we have access to linguistic or communicative competence—except for in linguistic performance, where, however, language appears as embodied language. It is "embodied language" in a twofold sense: language itself has a material exteriority in form of the voice, writing, gesture, etc. This materiality of language is not marginal, but rather a basic fact. Furthermore, linguistic usage is—in varying degrees—tied to the corporeality of the language users, who express themselves not only as persons positioned in a symmetrical, formal-rational way, but also always as needy, asymmetrically positioned bodily beings. Here we have the outline of our sketch: we will call it, in reference to the "two-world model," the "performance model." But this is not the whole story.

Because the authors from the second group have more to tell us than these rather prosaic basics of a non-intellectualist concept of language. There is another insight that can be considered the "punch line" of our (less full-blown than slight) sketch: the new light in which the presupposition of the two-world ontology now appears.

In our diagnosis of the logos-oriented theorists, we interpreted the two-world ontology not simply as an intellectualist fallacy, but rather as the attempt to avoid the pitfall of this very fallacy. Let us recapitulate the

conclusions we arrived at in chapter six: initially it seemed reasonable to join Bourdieu and Taylor in seeing the cognitivist view of language as relying on an intellectualist fallacy that confuses ideal and reality, model and actuality. It became clear, however, that the two-world ontology in fact means the *avoidance* of this kind of confusion. Indeed, the two-world model guarantees that everyday speech and communication need *not* be identified with an idealized structure of speech or speech situation. This dual concept of language instead allows for a moderate version of intellectualism, in which individual speech is made into the representative, the instantiation, or the actualization of intelligible speech and communication. Thus it becomes possible to distinguish between what belongs to the order of speech and what does not, and therefore adheres to extra-linguistic conditions. Herein consist the rationality and strategic meaning of the two-world ontology.

The "punch line" of our sketch of language and communication beyond intellectualism is that this "internal rationality" of the two-world ontology can be taken up and reinterpreted at the same time as it is maintained. We have now arrived at the crux of our talk, and hence also at its conclusion. The importance of the logos-critical thinkers lies less in their different explanations for this or that characteristic of language but in their revision of the connection between pattern and actualization. Let us assume that the intellectualist view of language itself yields a pattern. We are not interested in replacing this pattern with a better one. Yet we want to take up the distinction between language and speech as significant, but give it another interpretation. How so?

We have treated the non-intellectuallistic theorists as having dropped the assumption that there is such a thing as purified language and communication. Specifically, they "dropped" the notion that language has the capacity to operate as an order preceding speech. In this sense, "pure" language and communication is indeed a pure fiction. But only in *this* sense. If, however, we exchange the two-world ontology with a "flat ontology," the idea of a purified form of language takes on another, quite acceptable meaning. "Pure language" becomes separated from the universal plane of a "world behind the scenes," and placed where every other spatio-temporal language usage occurs. Examining and representing the "form of language" then becomes *a* particular linguistic practice. Everything that

refers to this "form" is no longer a universal condition of speech, but a modality of speech next to other modalities: a practice of engaging with mostly written signifiers that differs "significantly" from other practices. This way, the idea of a language preceding speech can be understood as the result of a historically circumscribable linguistic practice: Habermas' suppositions of rationality are not fictional; we rather encounter them in the argumentative standards of successful communication in philosophy seminars or in the conventions of academic writing. Chomsky's grammatically correct sentence is a fact resulting from the calculated transformation of sentence patterns into complete sentences within grammar books.

These reflections are admittedly all too hurried and simplistic. But perhaps the program has come into sharper outline: the gist of the two-world model, which consists in understanding the relationship between language and speech as that between a pattern and its actualization, can be reframed, in the guise of a "flat ontology," as the distinction between historical and systematic uses of language. The explanation as to what is specific about these different kinds of linguistic usages does not, as Wittgenstein thought, come to a standstill with the "that's just the way it is" of a form of life, but must rather—and here we must agree with Luhmann—take into account language's constitution in media. For language only ever exists embodied in vocal, gestural, written, or technical media.

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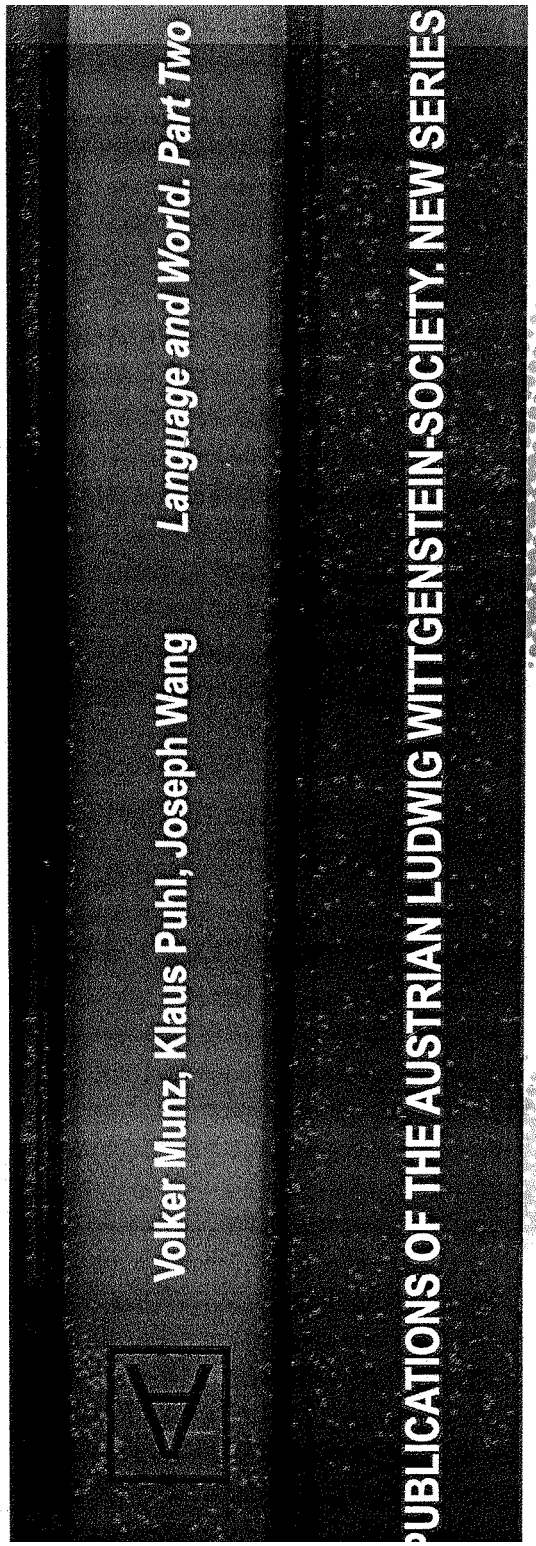

Language and World Part Two: Signs, Minds and Actions

Proceedings of the 32th International Ludwig Wittgenstein-Symposium in Kirchberg, 2009

Edited by Volker Munz, Klaus Puhl and Joseph Wang

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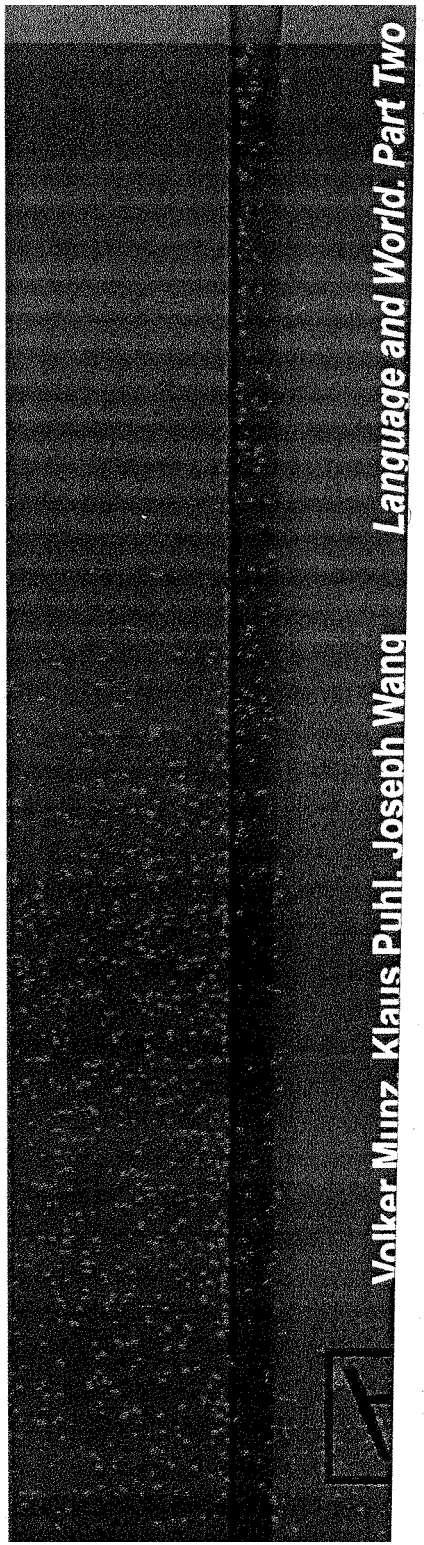
This second of two volumes brings together invited papers of the 32nd International Wittgenstein Symposium (Kirchberg/W. (Austria), 2009). The collection not only contains articles related to some of Wittgenstein's central arguments but also holds contributions that deal with the role and function of signs, as well as with the relations between language and action, consciousness and metaphysics. An interdisciplinary workshop was dedicated to "Wittgenstein and Literature", an area of study which has been prominent in the philosophical discourse of the last decade. Contributors to this volume are Anat Biletzki, Michael Dummett, Laurence Goldstein, Peter Janich, Brian McGuinness, Marjorie Perloff, David Schalkwyk, Joachim Schulte, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, David Stern, Eike von Savigny among others.



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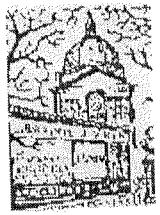

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Preface

This is the second of two volumes containing the proceedings of the 32nd International Wittgenstein Symposium in Kirchberg/Lower Austria, August 2009.

The first of these two volumes "Language and World" is solely dedicated to Wittgenstein's philosophy. Although several of the contributions collected in the present volume do refer to Wittgenstein, the articles published here also tackle central issues that are not directly related to his work. The five sections of this book deal with the following topics: „Theories of the Linguistic Sign", „Language and Action", „Language and Consciousness", „Language and Metaphysics", „Reality and Construction". An additional interdisciplinary workshop was dedicated to Wittgenstein and literature. Wittgenstein himself saw close similarities between poetry and philosophy and was not willing to draw a distinction between the two. Furthermore his influence on literature and the arts is still very strong.

The editors would like to express their gratitude to all the contributors and to those who took part in the many and lively discussions during the conference. Without them this volume would never have happened.

We would also like to thank the board of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society and our publisher Dr. Rafael Hüntelmann for supporting us all the way through.

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Volker A. Munz, Klaus Puhl, Joseph Wang

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Language and World. Part Two

Signs, Minds and Actions

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