

Part II

The Nature of Language

The most striking, pervasive and elaborate manifestation of a distinctively human consciousness is language. Human language is unlike animal signalling systems, for example, inasmuch as the signs of a human language are explicitly signs. They are not, for example, symptoms, embedded in a causal chain passing through transmitters and recipients, nor are they remotely analogous to natural signs such as the signs that connect clouds with rain. Tallis insists that linguistic signs are arbitrary, in the Saussurean sense of that word. (There is no natural connection between signifier and signified within the sign, and signs are the signs they are in the system by virtue of their differences from all the other signs in the language system.) For Tallis, the true significance of the arbitrariness of the sign lies here: linguistic signs are signs that display their status as signs explicitly. This is another way of saying that the auditory and written signs of language are used in the full understanding that they are signs and that, in order to discharge their signifying function, they have to be understood as signs by a recipient who is aware that the producer of them is relying upon their being understood in this way. Human language, and its numerous derivative codes, is uniquely an instrument by which meaning is *meant* in order to occur. It is riddled from top to bottom with metalanguage and exhibits throughout much of its usage elaborate patterns of self-consciousness and self-referral, both in serious communicative activity and in play.

Tallis sees the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign as lying at the heart of the distinctively human linguistic activity of reference. Reference utilising arbitrary signs has several features that distinguish it from the communicative function of signals emitted by non-human animals. For example, reference is distanced in several rather special ways from the object referred to – the latter is merely an instance of a general possibility; or, to put this another way, reference is achieved through general

meanings. Indeed, Tallis believes that human discourse – in contrast with animal responses to present actualities – is predominantly about *possibility*: possible states of affairs which may or may not be realised. It is this, he argues, that makes language the supreme means by which explicitness may be elaborated and new meanings created.