(a)   (b)   (c)

acb   bac

All linguistic signs consist of two poles: a physical form, such as a word's pronunciation, and a meaning, the discrimination it makes in the domain of language which sustains the coordination of behavior. Any sign, then, simple or complex, in any human language exhibits this dual structure; in the Yimas language the simple form *nam* corresponds to the meaning that can be glossed "constructed dwelling in which a family resides; house," while the complex form *mu-ka-tkam-tuk-mpun* corresponds to "I showed it (a plant of some sort) to them (more than a few) a while (more than 5 days) ago." All human languages exhibit this dual patterning, even sign languages like American Sign (ASL), in which a given configuration of the hand(s) is the form conveying a particular meaning. As described by Peirce, signs can be classified into three types: icon, index, and symbol. An icon is a sign in which there is a perceptible likeness in its form and what its meaning describes. An example might be the verb *buzz off*, in which the verb's form [bʌˑz] bears a perceptible sound resemblance to the sound of a bee as it flies away. Iconicity plays an important role in language, especially in its poetic functions, but I will have no more to say about it here.

An index is a sign whose meaning is interpreted from the context in which it is uttered. A non-linguistic example would be taking black clouds as a sign, an index, of coming rain. Linguistic signs which are indexes abound, but are often not recognized as such because of their context boundedness. When I speak Tok Pisin to an English-speaking Papua New Guinea friend, the language choice is an index of his ethnicity and an assertion of social solidarity between us. When I use *vous* to a stranger in a Parisian cafe, the pronoun is an index of our social distance. When Nootka Indians traditionally used special phonologically altered word forms to address certain classes of people, say,

for example, hunchbacks or circumcised males, these abnormal speech forms are indexes of the addressee's condition. Finally, when Guugu-Yimidhirr speakers from Queensland used distinct lexical forms when speaking to their brother-in-law, the presence of these lexical forms is an index of this affinal kin relationship between interlocutors. All of these are indexes, signs whose meaning comes from the context in which they are used. Note that there is a cline of creativity versus fixedness in the meaning bearing function of the indexes in these examples. The last example, the Guugu-Yimidhirr brother-in-law lexicon, is highly fixed and presupposed; it would be socially highly taboo to use anything else in this context. On the other hand, the first example, my use of Tok Pisin with Papua New Guineans, is not fixed, but a creative choice; I could use English, but I choose to use Tok Pisin to lay claim to a particularly solidary relationship between us. The choice of the language in itself stakes this claim. The more highly fixed and presupposed a choice is in a particular context, the less likely speakers are to be aware of the actual independent meaning signalling function of the index. The context boundedness of indexes, magnified in the cases of highly presupposed variants, makes them notoriously difficult to study and analyze.

A symbol is a sign in which the relationship between its form and meaning is strictly conventional, neither due to physical similarity or contextual constraints. This is the type of sign described by Saussure, who emphasized the arbitrary relationship between the sign's form and its meaning, pointing out that the meaning "tree" is expressed by the form *tree* in English, but *arbre* in French. It is perhaps slightly misleading to overemphasize, as with Saussure, the arbitrariness of symbols; their conventionality, as in Peirce, may be a better perspective to highlight, treating symbolic linguistic practices on a par with wider symbolic cultural practices. The crucial effect of the conventionality of the relationship between form and meaning in symbols is that, unlike context bound indexes, it frees the domain of the symbol's meaning from the constraints of the immediate context. This is what it means to say that a word which is a symbol has a sense, a meaning which can be stated via paraphrase and holds across contexts of usage. Thus, a *woman* is an "adult female human being," and this holds across innumerable contexts, whether we are talking about giving birth, teaching a class, fixing a Ferarri or piloting a jet airliner. Paraphrase or metasemantics holds of all symbols via their conventionality; this is not, however, by and large true of indexes. There is a mixed class of signs, "shifters" which partake of features of both indexes and symbols. Examples are first- and second-person pronouns, demonstratives like *this* and *that* and temporal adverbs like *now* and *tomorrow*. These have paraphrasable meanings like "the person who is now speaking this" or "the day after the day in which I am

speaking," but this does not exhaustively describe them, for the actual context is necessary to do this: *I* "the person who is now speaking" is a different person in different contexts of speakers. Hence, shifters mix the paraphrasable property, drawn from the conventionality of being symbols, with the flexible context boundedness of indexes.

<div align="right">(William Foley)</div>