

posed to "stream" solely in terms of size, whereas a "fleuve" differs from a "rivière" not because it is necessarily larger but because it flows into the sea, while a "rivière" does not. In short, "fleuve" and "rivière" are not signifieds or concepts of English. They represent a different articulation of the conceptual plane.

The fact that these two languages operate perfectly well with different conceptual articulations or distinctions indicates that these divisions are not natural, inevitable, or necessary, but, in an important sense, arbitrary. Obviously it is important that a language have ways of talking about flowing bodies of water, but it can make its conceptual distinctions in this area in any of a wide variety of ways (size, swiftness of flow, straightness or sinuosity, direction of flow, depth, navigability, etc.). Not only can a language arbitrarily choose its signifiers; it can divide up a spectrum of conceptual possibilities in any way it likes.

Moreover, and here we come to an important point, the fact that these concepts, or signifieds, are arbitrary divisions of a continuum means that they are not autonomous entities, each of which is defined by some kind of essence. They are members of a system and are defined by their relations to the other members of that system. If I am to explain to someone the meaning of *stream* I must discuss the difference between a stream and a river, a stream and a rivulet, and so on. And, similarly, I cannot explain the French concept of a "rivière" without describing the distinction between "rivière" and "fleuve" on the one hand, and "rivière" and "ruisseau" on the other.

Color terms are a particularly good example of this characteristic of the sign. Suppose we wish to teach a foreigner about colors in English. Let us suppose also that this particular student is a rather slow learner and from a different culture, so that we must work out an efficient teaching strategy. It might occur to us that the best way to proceed would

be to take one color at a time: to begin, for example, with brown and not go on to another color until we were certain he had mastered brown. So we begin by showing him brown objects and telling him that they are brown. Since we want to be thorough, we have assembled a collection of a hundred brown objects of various kinds. Then, after having bored him and ourselves for several hours, we take him into another room and, to test his knowledge of "brown," ask him to pick out all the brown objects. He sets to work but seems to be having difficulty deciding what to select, so in despair we decide we haven't been thorough enough and propose to start again the next day with five hundred brown objects.

Fortunately, most of us would not adopt this desperate solution and would recognize what had gone wrong. However many brown objects we may show him, our pupil will not know the meaning of *brown*, and will not be able to pass our test, until we have taught him to distinguish between brown and red, brown and tan, brown and gray, brown and yellow, brown and black. It is only when he has grasped the relation between brown and other colors that he will begin to understand what brown is. And the reason for this is that "brown" is not an independent concept defined by some essential properties but one term in a system of color terms, defined by its relations with the other terms which delimit it.

Indeed, this painful teaching experience would bring us to understand that because the sign is arbitrary, because it is the result of dividing a continuum in ways peculiar to the language to which it belongs, we cannot treat the sign as an autonomous entity but must see it as part of a system. It is not just that in order to know the meaning of *brown* one must understand *red*, *tan*, *gray*, *black*, and so on. Rather, one could say that the signifieds of color terms are nothing but the product or result of a system of distinctions. Each language, in dividing the spectrum and distinguishing categories which it calls colors, produces a different system of signifieds: