I find students commonly expect that we will spend quite a lot of time in philosophy classes working to articulate definitions of philosophically loaded terms. They mostly seem to acquire this expectation from over on the wrong side of the tracks, in the social sciences, where get-acquainted dances apparently feature definitions, but philosophers sometimes share this expectation. Indeed, one argument endorses that a common-sense view of how we understand is developed forcefully by Socrates and Plato. But there are good grounds for abjuring definitions, some of which are also found in Plato. Further, going over the relevant arguments is a good introduction to philosophical methods because students can see live issues are involved and their own practices are at stake. A healthy skepticism about the value of definitions results from reviewing these arguments, and discussions and papers from my students. This was written first in response to, and as a summary of, discussions about definitions in Philosophy courses in upper division general education courses. Wittgenstein seminar discussions of conceptual analysis led to substantial revisions broadening its scope. I now use these ideas in Introduction courses, typically around the middle of the semester after working on one or two problems. Some of the contentious claims about philosophical method may remain open and are to the speech of Diodota in Plato's Symposium, where she gives an archetypal Platonic definitional account of love, and to the speech of Alcibiades, who presents what I suggest we read as a pure example. Definitions, especially philosophical analytical definitional accounts in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, are often undermined by Wittgenstein's investigations. Wittgenstein also works toward getting us to regard with suspicion the quick philosophical impulse to suppose that something like a definition or an explanation is what we need to better understand some philosophical idea. Sometimes, on his view, what's needed instead is excavation of the thinking that went into articulating the problem; sometimes we need to be clearer about why we suppose that there is a problem, because in so doing we may find the question, before we get to any answers, rests on mistakes.

The issue is, To what extent are definitional accounts able to help us understand philosophically loaded terms? The last phrase marks some boundaries, and shows this is a philosophical question, and is not about definitions outside philosophy. So the issue here is not about technical or uncommon or scientific words—if someone does not know what a lungwist is, or a passerine, or an anapet, or an eigenstate, then a definition is probably what is needed and we can go on to other things. But philosophical issues tend to turn on words like knowledge, truth, appearances, reality, meaning, art, justice, power. Although these words are crucial in thinking through philosophical problems, they are words remarkable in part because people are not at all stymied by them in their conversations outside philosophy. When we are doing philosophy, though, we tend to think we need an insightful definitional account which will illuminate the thing at issue—knowledge, virtue, the good, justice.

In several of Plato's dialogues Socrates presents an argument for definitions as the proper answers to those philosophical questions of the form, "What is X, really?" It is, I think, the main and crucial argument for definitions. It is also a good one; it has a lot of bite. Versions of it show up in philosophical conversations. It is often presented out of context, as a self-contained argument. In the dialogues, though, it shows up as part of a recurrent pattern in the dialogues which serves to undermine that same argument, or at least to prompt us to be wary. Therefore, I'll give the argument in its place in that pattern.

The argument is in four or five steps generally on how we count. The first is that a question, usually unmotivated, crops up—often voiced by Socrates, "What is X, really?" where X is the subject of many of philosophy's Immortal Questions. X could be, that is, love, knowledge, justice, piety, truth, meaning, statesmanship, perception, and so on in a series easily extrapolated up through contemporary manifestations—power, art (mentioned but never developed by Plato), reference, consciousness, language, culture. The second step is that some poor sap of an interlocutor offers to answer the question, and does so by offering examples of X. So in the Theaetetus, where the question is "what is knowledge?" there is a song-and-dance between Apollodorus the math prof and Socrates which results in Apollodorus offering up his student Theaetetus as a sacrificial lamb to the dialogue. Theaetetus is willing; he will answer the question, what is knowledge? He offers that there is the knowledge of making and reproducing, and in addition knowledge of a compound of geometry and other mathematics which he is learning from Apollodorus (later, while formulating the first proposal of a definition, Socrates mentions as another example the knowledge by which we may quote Homer and the great poets).

The third step in the pattern of these dialogues is that Socrates squashes the examples answer like a noxious bug, and provides the argument in favor of definitions—I asked after one thing, you have offered me instead a group of potentially endless list. How shall we tell what makes these examples the right examples, or how shall we tell, given this list, what else belongs on the list and what does not? There must be a way we identify those given examples or a way we decide regarding the next examples not yet given, so let's articulate that and it will serve as a rule which illuminates the essence of the thing we are after. Definitions then are a path to insight in a way that examples are not.

The fourth step in this pattern makes up the bulk of these dialogues: that is, the dialogues mainly consist of proposals of definitions and then arguments testing them, looking for inconsistencies, reductio ad absurdum possibilities, problems of being too general or too narrow, and then in the light of those examinations we revise our proposals or start anew, and then more debate prompted by critical inquiry into possible problems with the revisions or new proposals. This fourth step is the model for a great deal of philosophy ever since, still one of the most widely used models for doing philosophy in most of the Western World. But there's a fifth step—these dialogues end with an admission of defeat and an expression of humility. We don't, Socrates says, really know what knowledge is (isn't this odd? he sometimes says), or piety, or justice. We have met defeat, and must return to this investigation at a later time.

Socrates' argument in favor of definitions from that third step above crops up in various forms. In classes, it seems most often that students put it in the form of a rhetorical question, but one easily unpacked in terms of Socrates' argument. One bright English major, after reading a draft of these remarks, put it thusly: "But how do we know what we are talking about unless we lay out the boundaries?" Faced by these examples or by more candidates for examples of love or knowledge or piety, we need a procedure for separating the proper candidates from those which should be disallowed. If we cannot do that, then we may not know what we are talking about, and so may not know which examples are the right examples. Students who have taken our Ancient Philosophy courses often use the wording of the one and the many. Examples are a potentially endless list, but we need an account of the category in which those examples belong in order to know the thing at issue. Without a definition, how do we know what we are talking about? If we don't have a definition, maybe we don't know. Some students note this argument is consistent with Socrates' basic argument for doing philosophy, that we often think we know when we do not, and self-examination may reduce our delusion, may help us become more humble and more wise.

The room behind students' eyes sometimes fills up fast, and in teaching this material I find I have to serve notice at this point or I will get students who claim at the end they learned the centrality of definitions from me. Save some room, I tell them. What you've got so far is a common view, maybe even the standard view, perhaps yours, and the point of this work is not that view but the critique of that view. It is a tempting view and the argument is a persuasive argument. Now we try to find out whether it is right.

So, now the other side. The first argument calling this line of thought into question could be based on a more ironic reading of Plato's dialogues. That begins by noting the pattern outlined above, and noting further that in all that formidable corpus, sixteen hundred pages in our current standard editions, not a single definition survives to the end of a dialogue. Maybe that's
on purpose. Now of course excuses come to mind—definitions are hard. Doing a good job takes a lot of work and a great deal of time. The dialogues themselves bear witness to this. Socrates and his interlocutors, and presumably Plato, never give up, never totally abjure definitions, never even appraise that argument above in favor of definitions. Or at least this is what people tell me. The idea that Plato’s dialogues are attempts at definitions is still a common view, though dissenting voices are coming forward in Plato studies. No less than the textual ones but it is made that this ironic posture makes the agenda we inherit, an agenda on which formulating definitions is a main item. It is only recently I have come to wonder whether this is true. Why do the philosophers in those dialogues never succeed? Perhaps it is on purpose. I have come to think of Plato as a much more pervasively ironic writer, and as someone who tries more to get his readers to think things through for themselves, than I was taught. Some of Socrates’ arguments, after all, are purely rhetorical. We must make this ironic reading more charitable than the literal reading I was taught. (Socrates’ arguments for the mortality of the soul before he drinks the hemlock start to look like There, there, [pat on the shoulder], bones tossed to his blubbering friends who can’t handle the “We just don’t know” answer.) I think now that Plato loves, as Socrates loves, problems more than answers, jokes and methods more than positions, arguments and issues more than stands—and that these facts are crucially different from the ones he is inveigling us to take. And regarding the claim that no one appraises that argument for definitions, the inevitable failure of the definitional agenda looks, after we remind ourselves about his irony, like it could be part of an evaluation, but one which tests our intelligence. Besides, there is another crucial argument against definitions given in the *Meno* and implied in the *Euthyphro*. It evaluates the argument for definition, and that argument comes out wanting.

The second argument, then (and one not dependent on reassessing Plato’s irony), against taking definitions as ways to help our understanding is Meno’s Paradox. It is Socrates’ argument in favor of definitions turned on its head, and it begins with (and is implied by) a simple question: *How shall we know when we have succeeded at defining?* Socrates asks us to consider how this question might be answered by two people, one who is knowledgeable or wise regarding the thing at issue, and one who is ignorant or foolish regarding that thing. To the extent one is wise about the thing we are after (think love, think justice, think virtue), then one might be able to recognize success, tell a better definition from a lesser one. But in that case the definition is useless as far as helping the person’s understanding, because the understanding has to come first. To the extent one is not wise about the thing, one will not be able to recognize success, one will not be able to tell a better from a lesser definition—but it is even worse than that, because to the extent one is not wise then one will be susceptible to being misled by lesser definitions, so definitions in that case are positively dangerous to one’s understanding. To the extent we are knowledgeable, definitions are useless, and to the extent we are not knowledgeable, definitions are dangerous. In no case will they be a help to our understanding.

This brings us to a more modern and somewhat milder argument, a kind of criterion argument. This one overlaps with and is like Meno’s Paradox, except that the punch line helps send us in search of something other than definitions. This then is the third argument against taking definitions as important aids to our understanding, and it trades on an insight of Wittgenstein about rules, that a rule is not the same as the use or the application of a rule. Here it is: It is possible to give a bad definition. A definition cannot itself tell us whether the definition is good or bad. Therefore the criterion for whether a definition is good or bad must lie outside the definition.

Note: The literature about criterion arguments, citing Sextus Empiricus on the problem of the criterion, tends to emphasize his point that the problem is bottomless because each offered criterion rests on a further justification. A Wittgensteinian insight is that in particular contexts this claim is not true. An experiment takes its apparatus for granted, though in another context, not one using the apparatus in experiment, the apparatus may be at issue. The boundary of intelligibility of issues within examples marks where our spade is turned.)

How shall we decide whether a definition is good or bad? Meno’s Paradox suggests, and the criterion argument reinforces the suggestion, that we examine the wisdom we have or do not have about the thing at issue. I’ll mention a couple of ways that examination can go.

Wittgenstein and others sometimes remind us to do a genetic analysis, to remind ourselves about the processes by which we came to be competent or wise in using the term and by which we became able to recognize and think through issues about the thing. That we are talking about philosophical terms here rather than technical ones but it is the case that philosophical terms are just those which are abstract and educated but which we routinely use outside of philosophy without the conversations grinding to a halt or crashing against a philosophical boulder in the current.

For example, thinking about how we came to be competent to speak of justice, we recognize a long process, proceeding by phases, involving many examples of different kinds in which we make mistakes and learn, and it is the process and growing understanding. It is a process rather like an education. Our understanding of justice, and so our later ability to recognize, e.g., whether Rawls has succeeded, begins as children with the related term *fair*. Notoriously, small children wail, “That’s not fair!” to mean something like “I don’t like it!” up until they begin to be able to be silent and wait their turn or share with others. Their understanding of what is fair may be nearly complete before they have even heard a single word, just. Questions of justice include questions about laws, including whether the laws are fair, and questions about balancing opposing interests and deciding moral dilemmas. Consider, as a noncontroversial example, whether trial by jury is an aid to justice. It turns out, as any tenth grade civics student could remind us, that trial by jury was justified in spite of acknowledgments that it would lead in all likelihood to injustices in some individual cases. Juries, with lack of training in laws and in critical thinking, are swayed by bad arguments and so send some innocent people to hang and set some guilty free. But trial by jury was founded in another conviction, the cynical conviction that power corrupts, and that some means is needed to curb the power of police and judges to keep them from going bad. Good judges are better than juries but judges with no limits on their power will not remain good judges, and so the right to trial by jury must be built in on a strong and fixed foundation, needs to be carved into stone or into the Bill of Rights. Individual injustices must be tolerated in order to protect against injustice metastasizing because of police or presidents or judges with unlimited powers. Now, this is no very sophisticated set of arguments, but clearly the understanding of justice behind it is not a child’s understanding. It is also not an understanding founded on definition. The same kind of story can be told about art, knowledge, virtue, meaning, real, love, piety, consciousness. Our ability and our wisdom with respect to each rests on a long process, an education.

The fallacy of persuasive definition also accumulates heft and relevance in the light of Meno’s paradox and genetic analysis. Though the fallacy is only framed as an argument against bad definitions, these considerations suggest we cultivate paranoia, that bad definitions are under every bed. The fallacy is a variety of begging the question, the fallacy of using definition as a way to smuggle in premises which improperly restrict the alternatives or which make the desired conclusion for which we allegedly go on to argue. A current example might come up in connection with current educational reform movements to require outcomes assessment as part of school appraisals and departmental reviews. This movement takes on urgency in times of contracting budgets and looming questions about which departments are central to the accomplishment of an institution’s mission and goals. The fallacy could equally well show up as part of arguments on opposing sides of the particular issue, “What is education really?” It is the preparation of young people for taking up productive adult roles in the society in order that they can add to the wealth of the society. This definition, which articulates the concept of education of many boards of regents and trustees for public institutions and by many legislators looking over their shoulders, will predispose one to assess the parts of the university or college by how well the graduates of each part pull down a hefty paycheck. It will also not only predispose assessors toward those departments whose graduates do well economically, it will
marginalize programs in the arts and liberal arts. — Scratch that future tense—this is going on now. Let’s try another definition. What is education, really? It is instilling young people with the best ideas the human race has had. Now, while I like this one better, it too is lamentably incomplete, and will marginalize those programs whose graduates are merely economic powerhouses, Mencken’s boobsoise, and will hand more power, money, and status to cultural studies programs in the liberal arts. This definition builds on the status quo by shifting the construct of education’s role in the market of liberation which involves independence and a paycheck.

Meno’s paradox concurs that persuasive definitions are those definitions which are dangerous to our understanding, which we might have known independently. But Meno’s paradox also reminds us that the understanding by which we can recognize that danger is not an easy thing, and definitely is not an understanding which rests on another, better definition. The criterion argument above provokes us to other definitions toward which that understanding rests. It rests instead on wisdom. That wisdom accumulates (or not) through a long and complex process of examination and worry.

A fourth argument against trusting definitions to help our understanding is also Wittgensteinian. It comes from asking the question again, “Now why did we want a definition?” That is, it pushes us to articulate the line of thought giving rise to the issue, to question the question rather than answer it. And some possible answers, even if they are overly hostile, help argue that the question-the-question move is worth making. One possible answer to why we wanted a definition, after all, is that we wanted the definition to do our thinking for us. A good definition will sort the good examples from the bad, will sharpen the boundaries and eliminate the marginal cases and the borderline cases and the troubling cases—will legislate which cases are in and which are out. When does a human life begin? Well, let’s define human life. Is Pollock’s work, or Duchamp’s, or Karen Finley’s, or Jeff Hefner’s, or Jeff Koons’ really art? Well, let’s define art. But this may be a mistake.

An exercise I sometimes use in class, and one which has in every case led to students arguing what we need is a definition, begins our work with dichotomies, and trades on the following story. Suppose my wife and I want another child but have been unsuccessful at getting her pregnant. This goes on for over a year, I get tested, she gets tested, no obvious problem is found. You are a friend, though not a very close friend, and know of our plight. Most of another year goes by. Then, happy day, we confirm that she’s pregnant. The first trimester, with its morning sickness and elation and fears and plans and baby name books, goes by, and things settle down. Then one day in the middle of teaching classes the department secretary catches me returning to my office and tells me to call Naomi at home. She’s ready to leave, tells me something feels wrong and she’s on her way to the doctor’s office, please call after my next class. I volunteer to just come home, but she says, no, just call the doctor’s office after class. I do. She tells me that the doctor has confirmed the baby has died in the womb and she is going to the hospital to be prepared for the procedure. I think aloud of asking to borrow a car but she tells me it’ll just be waiting and I’m not going to be that big a help, just take the bus and she’ll meet me there. I go out to the bus stop by my office and sit, very agitated. You come by. “Hey Prof. Powell, I just heard that your wife lost their first pregnancy! Congratulations!” — and then you notice something in my face and slow down. “Did I hear wrong?” you ask. “Is she pregnant or not?”

I ask for a show of hands, who thinks she’s pregnant, who not. I’ve always gotten plenty of hands, and then vehement arguments, for both sides, even though I always think I’ve taught them by this point to be paranoid about such questions. And then come the arguments by which we might want a definition (or other, but still restricted, alternatives) we need to watch for the possibility of just telling the story which allegedly gives rise to the question. The thing to do with marginal or borderline or problematic cases is not necessarily to remove their problematic status out of the question, but to point out why they are problematic, marginal, borderline, and why. A definition which makes all the conceptual boundaries clean and sharp may mislead us and may invite us to commit the fallacy of persuasive definition. In other words, in these cases, definitions may be dangerous to our understanding. Austin remarks that oversimplification is the occupational disease of philosophers—unless it is the occupation. Wittgenstein’s remarks about how often we are in our thinking by overly simple pictures of the things at issue are I think informed by Austin’s insight.

A fifth and last argument against trusting definitions to aid our understanding stresses the crucial role of examples. It can be set up by considering the relationship between Socrates’ argument in favor of definitions and the inversion of that argument in Meno’s Paradox. Examples won’t do, because we are asking about how often we are in our thinking by overly simple pictures of the things at issue. — Scratch that answer (or other, but still restricted, alternatives) we need to watch for the possibility of just telling the story which allegedly gives rise to the question. The thing to do with marginal or borderline or problematic cases is not necessarily to remove their problematic status out of the question, but to point out why they are problematic, marginal, borderline, and why. A definition which makes all the conceptual boundaries clean and sharp may mislead us and may invite us to commit the fallacy of persuasive definition. In other words, in these cases, definitions may be dangerous to our understanding. Austin remarks that oversimplification is the occupational disease of philosophers—unless it is the occupation. Wittgenstein’s remarks about how often we are in our thinking by overly simple pictures of the things at issue are I think informed by Austin’s insight.

In the face of the devastating arguments against the centrality of definitions, we might wonder, “What were we thinking?” That is, we might wish to do diagnostic work on an eye toward inoculating ourselves against similar mistakes in the future. Here, I’m on less solid ground, since I can only locate the temptations which misled me, and I don’t find that Plato helps me here. Wittgenstein alludes, by which we may tell whether we understand the thing we investigate, is whether we can give correct examples. The question, “How do we know what we are talking about?” can sometimes be answered by giving examples. Toward the end of an introductory course, students show whether they know what philosophy is if they can generate a series of philosophical questions beyond those we have addressed. Such an answer has it all over any definition and tests any definition. Theaetetus offers examples at the beginning of that dialogue generated by the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so naked and true (and drunken) an example that the definition, and the last word is delivered by Alcibiades, whose love for Socrates is so
noxious consequences in the forms of problems in philosophy of language. That noises—clicks, drumbeats—or colored tokens or puff of smoke can convey meanings by way of an agreed-on code looks like the idea that words can convey meanings by way of agreed-on definitions. And the divorce we have worked then sets us up as well for supposing that definitions are the bridges, the linguistic turn, between our inquiries into the words and our inquiries into the things themselves. This requires we forget Wordsworth, telling us that “words are not the garb of thought but their very incarnation.” This requires that we forget the thing Falstaff forgets, when he asks, “what is honour? A word. And what is in that word?”—and repeats the word to himself in the cool London evening. Honnooonooour?? Air. A puff of wind?? I’m to give my life for a puff of wind?? But Falstaff, and Shakespeare, have issues, not with the word but with the thing, but the thing is not a separate thing from the word—it’s honour we are investigating. In distancing ourselves by separating the word from its meaning or use or concept, we are, as Austin says, halfway down the garden path already, set up to encompass our own destruction.

REFERENCES
1 Plato’s dialogues contain several instances of Socrates arguing for definitions by responding to examples as offering a useless many when he asked regarding one: Theaetetus (Stephen, 1974). Euthyphro (6e); Meno (71d-72c); Laches (190e-192b); Minos (71d-72d). In the Parmenides (135a-135c) the character Parmenides invokes the idea that without a form unifying examples all conversation would be annihilated. In the Sophist and the Statesman, in which Aristotelian methods of definition by classifying and then differentiation are at issue, this argument for definitions seems to have been taken for granted and skipped, though the process of definition again goes down to defect.
2 Gerald A. Press, Plato’s Dialogues: New Studies and Interpretations (Rowman and Littlefield, 1993). The introduction spells out the “New,” based in taking Plato’s irony and dramaturgy to be more central to his philosophy than doctrine is. The results are markedly more sophisticated and less Platonist readings. (One is reminded of Jung saying, “Thank God I am Jung and not a Jungian.”)
3 Meno (80d). Socrates counters with a famous argument which leads to the absurd conclusion that no one learns anything, only remembers instead from past lives.
4 Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford U. P., 1986). The discussion of empty questions in a form most useful to students (see the example of a club which dies and then is resurrected, and of which the question is asked, “Is it the same club, really?”) is in discussions of identity, Chapters 12 and 13, “Why Our Identity Is Not What Matters” and “What Does Matter.”
5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, German with trans. Elizabeth Anscombe, (Routledge Kegan Paul, 1953) §§ 113-137, 250-269, 352-358, 419-433, 572-583, p. 184 offer examples of Wittgenstein comparing philosophical temptations with pictures which guide them and with the examples which give them the lie.
6 Frank B. Ebersole, Language and Perception, 2nd ed., and Meaning and Saying, 2nd ed. (Xlibris, 2004). The essays “The Complexity of Speech Acts,” Chapter 2 in MaS, and “Stalking the Rigid Designator,” Philosophical Investigations Oct 1982 (reprinted with revisions as “Proper Names and Other Names,” Chapter 8 in LaP), include discussions of pictures of language and pictures of words which dissociate words from the examples in which they are supposed to do work or stand for e.g. meanings. A postscript included in both books cites Wittgenstein and comments on the centrality for Ebersole of searching for and articulating such pictures, and then subjecting them to examination in the light of examples.
7 John R. Searle, Speech Acts An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969) p. 1. The first, nearly page-long paragraph is a classic expression of the picture of language as consisting of what Searle calls “acoustical blasts,” the functions of which then form the grounds for problems of philosophy of language. Some of this he surely gets from his former teacher, J. L. Austin, whose discussions of “Constative” and “Performative” in How To Do Things with Words (Oxford U. P., 1965) contain some of Austin’s few lapses into a view of language as consisting of “uttering certain noises” (p. 92) by which we do various things. Still, the discipline has not come to terms with the undermining of truth-conduciveness and intentional semantics found in Austin, nor the much richer landscape which lies beyond them. Ebersole’s “The Complexity of Speech Acts,” cited above, is a more successful investigation of these issues.
8 Rudolph Carnap, Introduction to Semantics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1948) p. 3-4. Carnap begins his discussion of the theory of signs and languages by spelling out the notion that telling someone and using signs may be interchangeable and equivalent.

“A language is a system of sounds . . . for the purpose of communicating with other persons . . . . Instead of speech sounds other movements or things are sometimes produced for the same purpose, e.g. gestures, written marks, signals by drums, flags, trumpets, rockets, etc . . . . speech language is the most important practically, and is moreover in most cases the basis of any other language, in the sense than this other language is learned with the help of the speech language. But this fact is accidental; any of the other kinds of language could be learned and used in a way independent of the speech language. . . .”

“A continuous utterance in a language, e.g. a speech, a book, or a flag message, may be analyzed into smaller and smaller parts. Thus a speech may be divided into sentences, each sentence into words, each word into phonemes . . . . When we speak in abstracto about analysis of language, we use the term ‘sign’ to designate the ultimate units of the expressions of the languages. Thereby it remains undecided whether words or letters or whatever else are taken as signs.”

In The Logical Syntax of Language (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1937) p. 6, Carnap says that in principle "any series of any things will equally well serve as terms or expressions in a . . . language." Part of the justification for saying that language is signs is this idea that in principle people could use drumbeats or smoke signals instead of telling in English. Telling in English is analyzed down into sentences, words, sounds; those are interchangeable with and equivalent to signs or signals such as the catcher uses or the flashes of an Aldus lamp.
9 Thomas Wheaton Bestor, “Plato’s One/Many Problem, and the Question, ‘What Is a Referential Theory of Meaning?’ Philosophical Investigations Spr 1981, pp.1-31. Bestor suggests Plato’s sophistication regarding words and their places in examples has been underestimated and that the model for theorizing reference we take from reading him should be turned on its head.
11 William Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part I, Act 5, Scene i. Thus, Falstaff famously and comically makes the same divorce of word from thing which is central to philosophy of language.