

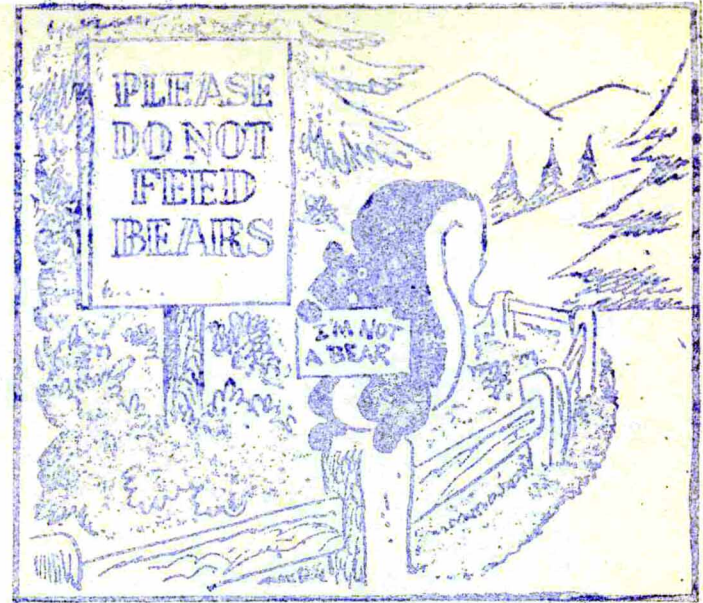
OF ALL the symbols we have created for ourselves, words are the most valuable and the most powerful:
*He ate and drank the precious words,
 His spirit grew robust;
 He knew no more that he was poor,
 Nor that his frame was dust.
 He danced along the dingy days,
 And this bequest of wings
 Was but a book. What liberty
 A loosened spirit brings!*

—Emily Dickinson

But words can also work a darker magic, a magic that misleads and distorts.

As symbols, words stand for things and ideas. They are not things and ideas. The word and what it represents are not the same thing, just as the flag is not the country. Words are only labels.

"Of course," you say. "Everyone knows that. It's obvious enough." In our mind we agree that the word is not the thing. Yet doesn't our behavior show that



we do identify the word with what it stands for?

- Many people feel that certain words, like *maggot* or *vomit*, are disgusting. As if saying or seeing the word were having the thing itself present.
- The use of certain words—the so-called "dirty words"—is frowned upon by most people. Yet other words with the same meaning—"proper words"—can be used without fear.
- Similar words, like *toilet*, have a red-faced glow about them, while other words that refer to the same thing do not.
- Some people suffer ridicule because of their "odd-sounding" or "sissy" names. As if the name could actually tell something about the person or were necessarily connected with the person.

These instances of word magic show how words can affect us. Words and what they do to us will be the main subject of the next two books of the Understanding Language series: *How Words Use You* and *The Impact of Words*.

