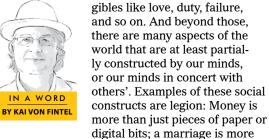# Words help construct the reality we live in

One of the patron saints of linguistics, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), famously ridiculed the notion put forward by Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) that the world consists solely of ideas in the mind. Johnson biographer James Boswell recounts, "I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it – 'I refute it *thus*.'" Rather than being a mere figment of thought, the rock was tangibly real to Johnson.

Among my kind, semanticists (professional scholars in the science of meaning), it is commonly assumed that the meaning of many ordinary words involves reference to objects in the external world. *Tree* refers to trees. *Swimming* refers to the activity of swimming. And so on. Most of us are Johnsonians through and through.

Granted, we also talk about intan-

IN A WORD
BY KAI VON FINTEL

gibles like love, duty, failure, and so on. And beyond those, there are many aspects of the world that are at least partially constructed by our minds, or our minds in concert with others'. Examples of these social constructs are legion: Money is more than just pieces of paper or digital bits; a marriage is more than a contract to which two parties agree.

Less obviously, though, there are powerful reasons to doubt the Johnsonian view, even for seemingly straightforward referential words like *house* or *thing*. My colleague Noam Chomsky has pressed the point on many occasions. He notes that Aristotle had already realized that houses aren't just material structures of stones, bricks, and timber. They are also "receptacles to shelter chattels and living beings." So, what makes a house a house is not just its material nature but also its purpose.

What about *thing*? Well, here's Professor Chomsky's thought experiment: "Suppose we see some branches strewn on the ground. If they fell from a tree after a storm, they are not a thing. But if they were carefully placed there by an artist as a work of conceptual art, even given a name, then they are a thing (and might win an award)."

So, I concur with Professor Chomsky that our world is made up of more than just external objects that exist outside our minds. There are more things between heaven and earth than a simplistic philosophy dreams of. When we study the meanings of words and phrases, what we are doing can be seen as natural language metaphysics: We learn about the nature of the reality we live in by analyzing the way we talk about it.

■ *Guest columnist Kai von Fintel is a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Melissa Mohr is on sabbatical.*