

# The Linguistic Architecture of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*

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In the early pages of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, Mrs Munt, Margaret's 'incurrible' aunt, drags the reader straight into a maze of misnomers and misunderstandings. "Let me go down to *this house whose name I forget* instead of you" (8; emphasis added), she says, leaving blank the one thing that should be quite clear to any approacher of the text—the very name of the house after which the novel is titled. Once in Hilton she again bungles the name: "Its name is Howards Lodge" (13). Though she is fortunately directed to an inhabitant of the right house, another misunderstood phrase soon has Mrs Munt and "the younger Mr Wilcox" in a sorry mess. From the beginning the text shakes any naïve trust in the firmness of denotation, one definite way of linguistic representation, or the reliability of communication. "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister" (3), the narrator tells us, demonstrating in one stroke not only the narrator's power to pick and choose but also "the contingency of narrative authority—he could just as well start somewhere else" (Armstrong 310). We are forewarned that this coy text will play with its own speech, revealing both the fallibility of language as it works between the characters in the novel and its precarious mediation between narrator and reader. This paper seeks to show that *Howards End* makes use of the varied shiftings of language, pitfalls included, to bring into question the facility and complacency with which the effects of this tricky medium are often accepted.

## **"Logical, yet senseless"—the arbitrariness of language**

First of all, Forster's novel is filled with floating signs, with words that can attach to more than one referent, and also with referents that can be named

in alarmingly disparate ways. An easy example is the aforementioned “younger Mr Wilcox”—the narrator kindly explains that “‘younger’ may mean son as opposed to father, or second brother as opposed to first” (Forster 16). As he admits, there is “much to be said for either view,” and the possibility that grievous hazards may result from the double meaning cannot be blamed on the words themselves. The problem arises when the employers of these words neglect to doubt the solidity of the connection between sign and referent. The basic trait of language, that its signs and symbols can always be arbitrary, is lost on many of the characters in *Howards End*, and the narrator works to alert the reader of the discrepancy that so often goes ignored. The novel presents other instances of (sur)name play: “a Miss Schlegel alone was different” (201), remarks Leonard Bast upon an intimate encounter with Helen, comparing her to his previous image of the two sisters as one four-armed creature endowed with Schlegelness. “Miss Schlegel” is an ambiguous name, needing to be clarified with a first name in parentheses (as in Ruth Wilcox’s handwritten will) in order to carry specific meaning. So is “Mrs Wilcox,” a title that is found to move from Ruth Wilcox, née Howard, to Margaret Wilcox, née Schlegel. Margaret herself loses sight of the fluidity of names, and in her attempt to hide from it in her moment of premarital crisis she creates a bitter irony. On her discovery of Henry’s past infidelity, the future Mrs Wilcox is able to walk away from the situation by reassuring herself that “it was not her tragedy: it was Mrs Wilcox’s” (199).

The reverse case, of radically different names being assigned to the same referent, is most succinctly demonstrated by the problematic half-English, half-German status of the Schlegels. Mrs Munt deems the sisters “English to the backbone” (7) instead of “Germans of the dreadful sort.” With their German relatives, the phrasing would be the other way around: the Schlegels, “while scarcely English of the dreadful sort,” are not quite “German to the backbone”. Margaret and Helen’s mother dons the name “Poor Emily” or “*Die Engländerin*,” whichever is more appropriate for the national spirit at work in the context. The facile references to “we Germans” or “the English” that pepper the text are thrown into perspective by the existence of these borderline figures. Neither ‘English’ nor ‘German’ are adequate and unquestionable

classifiers. Speaking of the sisters' father, the narrator carefully adds that the description would only work "if one classed him at all" (24), suggesting that it would perhaps be more desirable to abandon the constant impulse to classify and nail down identities. The thirteen-year-old Margaret, witnessing the clash of Teutons and Englishmen, grasps that the dilemma can never be satisfactorily solved—"either God does not know his own mind about England and Germany, or else these do not know the mind of God"—but in an intellectual leap of conclusion she dramatically narrows her focus down to the individual, forfeiting a contemplation of the said organizations and a chance to question the validity of such emphatic divisions (26). Dealing with an individual person instead of an entire group is a choice with less epistemological complications, but one that still has its blind spots in that it skips the process of peeling away generalized attributes from a particular individual and recognizing the existence and workings of classifications and typologies for what they are. At this point Helen is more aware of the complexities hidden behind the seeming uniformity of the individual, as shown in her remark concerning the visitors of Wickham Place: "We get the right sort of man, but the wrong side of him" (37). When it is acknowledged beforehand that the names and labels that we see (or give) do not comprise the whole of a person, it is possible to discuss the classifications that weigh down the individual without getting caught up in the logic of those divisions.

Margaret knows that this can be done. She puts the question "for poverty or for riches?" above Aunt Juley's formulation of "for the rich or for the poor?" (52-53), recognizing that wealthiness and poverty are states, not innate traits. However, when it comes to action, she takes the current status quo for granted—"Others had attacked the fabric of society . . . she only fixed her eyes on a few human beings, to see how, *under present conditions*, they could be made happier" (108; emphasis added)—and when she speaks at all of categories it is still tied up in the terms of "the poor" and "we rich" (52). This fallibility is what makes her susceptible to Mr Wilcox's argument that "if wealth was divided up equally, in a few years there would be rich and poor again just the same" (133). Margaret counters his comment with the witty but compromising defense that 'her' socialists do admit as much, and that the opinions he

derides are fictitiously attributed to “ninepins.” In its own manner, this argument sharply points out the power of simple, taken-for-granted labels to create the illusion of a group identity that has no referent in reality. However, a more fundamental critique of Mr Wilcox’s view would be to point out that the very reason there will be a perpetuation of rich and poor is because a simple one-time handing out of wealth does not amount up to a change in the entire system, the “fabric of society” as it were. It takes time for Margaret to move out of the individual/given type dichotomy into a critique of the social system, and the awareness comes not for the sake of the poor—to whom she always stays the superior benefactor—but for the sake of her sister Helen, and by extension possibly that of women, an oppressed minority of which she herself is a member.

Margaret’s perception of Leonard Bast illustrates the difficulties she has in maneuvering between the individual and the type. Prior to any considerable amount of personal interaction, her reaction to Leonard is not much different from the comments of Mr Wilcox that she denies so forcefully later on: “She knew this type very well—the vague aspirations, the mental dishonesty, the familiarity with the outsides of books” (98). “He isn’t a type,” she tells Mr Wilcox at a later rendezvous, but to pull Leonard out of the typology she must “retreat . . . to the special facts of the case” (125). The idea is that *although* Leonard Bast is a possible member of the degenerate type, he is in possession of some saving qualities that make it worth their while for people like Margaret to help him as an individual. Leonard’s first encounter with the Schlegels ends with him leaving behind “no address . . . and no name,” and the narrator in the next breath deems “the very poor” “unthinkable”. Although Leonard manages to stay within the text as one who is “obliged to pretend that they are gentlefolk” (38), he is constantly tottering on the brink of the unthinkable. From being nameless and less than thinkable, Leonard is slowly being moved into a position where he both has a name (as an individual) and is thinkable (as part of a class). The one may not happen at the same time as the other, a constant readjustment of focus is needed to see Leonard “whole,” without falling into the traps of names, of a “linguistic deferral of the real” (Thomson 123)—either that of the ‘special case’ individual or the general and unquestioned homogeneous group.

### “The gutter press”—acts of naming and framing

Let us look back to the novel's opening. Helen's letter, which one may as well begin with, tells us that “it [Howards End or *Howards End*?] isn't going to be what we expected” (3). Indeed, what is it that formulates what we expect? Preconceptions, prejudices, divisions, generalizations and habits that are passed down to us from history, society, and the limited personal experience we are permitted within these bounds. We expect to find the world neatly organized in the terms that we know, and tend to believe, like Mr Wilcox, that what we do not know “could not be worth knowing” (112). Margaret once imagines that Mrs Wilcox sees her as “foreshortened into a *Backfisch*” and follows up with a long self-description of how she supposes others will see her: “Very charming—wonderfully well read for my age, but incapable—” (71). Mrs Wilcox soon cuts her off—being the character least susceptible to such habits of speech—but the outburst is a good example of the novel's grasp of how people are constructed and typologized by what is said about them. The effect is that of putting people within little solid frames, and as the framing concepts are reiterated the belief that one *truly* is such a person grows stronger. As noted earlier, the problem is not merely the truth or falsity of the frame, but that the frame is taken without question to be at one with the thing itself.

This act of framing is dealt with by Forster on both a literal and metaphorical manner. We are first given a picture of Jacky in a “photograph frame,” the contents of which “represented a young lady called Jacky . . . taken at the time when young ladies called Jacky were often photographed with their mouths open” (41). The generalization “young ladies called Jacky” immediately calls up the image of the ‘wrong sort’ of woman, women who smile with their mouths but not with their eyes. Leonard jars the picture, breaks the frame, cuts his finger on the glass, and bleeds all over the “exposed photograph.” The narrator defers giving us a clear picture of Jacky, of “systems” of hair that are “too complicated to describe” and a face that “does not signify”. Though the reader does not get to see much of the unframed living Jacky, “of whom it is simplest to say that she was not respectable” (43)—begging the question,

what would a *less* simple version of her identity sound like?—the text works just hard enough to show that she is indeed framed, named and objectified separately of her will, and in doing so allows the possibility of unsettling the frame. In a parallel situation, Margaret breaks another photograph frame, this time holding Dolly's picture, in Mrs Wilcox's flat. The picture is described thus: "Dolly looked silly, and had one of those triangular faces that so often prove attractive to a robust man" (60). Dolly's face, like Jacky's non-signifying one, is defined not in terms of its own particular features (unlike Charles', whose "features prevailed opposite") but in terms of how they will appeal to a male observer-consumer. Dolly, who is continuously marginalized in the Wilcox clan, who is never 'told' anything, but who still cannot "think of any other name" besides that of Wilcox (291), is a prime example of an individual starved of imagination who cannot escape her rigidly defined frame.

That the frame functions as a metaphor for the representation and interpretation of persons is clearly put forward by another use of the word in the novel. To Leonard Bast, the text tells us, the Schlegel sisters "were denizens of Romance, who must keep to the corner he had assigned them, pictures that must not walk out of their frames" (105). After Leonard's problematic night with Helen in Oniton, his remorse brings him to imagine Helen as a work of art, "some picture in the National Gallery slashed out of its frame" (270). Though in his mind this violent removal from a familiar frame constitutes the greatest sin that he has ever committed, Helen's refusal to stay in the corner she has been assigned, and also to keep a 'decent' distance from the people that her class and acquaintances have relegated to a social corner, suggests that this frame that surrounds Helen is another that should be questioned and shattered.

However, the characteristic of any 'frame' is that it reasserts and reinforces itself each time its name is repeated; biases, quick definitions and conceptual binaries gain strength in this way. In one of her inner speeches regarding the Wilcoxes' move to London and her aunt and cousin's tendency to give weight to such matters, Margaret labels this capability of language "journalism":

The remark would be untrue, but of the kind which, if stated often enough, may become true; just as the remark 'England and Germany are bound to fight' renders war a little more likely each time that it is made, and is therefore made the more readily by the gutter press of either nation. Have the private emotions also their gutter press? . . . They [Aunt Juley and Frieda] might, by continual chatter, lead Helen into a repetition of the desires of June. (53)

Again, the truth value of a certain statement is of less import than the effects that its reiteration may create. Such words do not have the creative power of change ("Into a repetition—they could not do more; they could not lead her into lasting love") but are adept in framing and nailing to the wall things that may stay nebulous otherwise. The imperative, stated in so many words, that certain people must be (and always are) such-and-such—found above in the thought processes of Leonard Bast but also a big part of the lifestyle of the Wilcoxes, who easily always assume that "people like [Miss Avery] always assume things" (173)—hinders the revelations of "connection" that Margaret finds to be so important in life, and so lacking in Henry.

Margaret's own actions do not serve to unsettle the frames of thought in which Henry moves. Though she is aware of the tendency of Henry's community to be a "forcing-house for the idea of sex" and the questionability of the statement "Male and female created he them" (179), she still deals with the Wilcox men in a manner that "fit[s] in too well with their view of feminine nature" (183), employing what she herself calls "the methods of the harem" (196). "Ladies sheltering behind men, men sheltering behind servants—the whole system's wrong, and she must challenge it" (182), she cries out in her mind as she jumps out of a moving car in the cat incident, but she is soon led demurely and symbolically back into the vehicle. The terms she chooses in describing her newfound society, those of "forcing-house" and "idea of sex," suggest both the imposed nature and the contingency and/or changeability of such divisions, but her principle of focus, with her affection for a few individuals forming its base, prevents her from taking action upon this realization of the workings of the existing system. Instead she becomes, for a time, a dubious accomplice in the "gutter press" of ever-repeated conventions. She still

can say rather naïvely: “It certainly is a funny world, but so long as men like my husband and his sons govern it I think it’ll never be a bad one—never real-ly bad” (233). She is “passing from words to things,” which, along with other more elaborate interpretations, means that Mr Wilcox now finds it all right to call her ‘it’: “What a practical little woman it is! What’s it been reading?” (223). It takes an attack on the rights of Helen—triggered by the “slashing out of the frame” that Helen’s unexpected behavior has achieved—for her to begin to react against settling into comfortable thingness, and move back into an analysis of language and society.

### **“An orderly conspiracy”—language and society in tandem**

Margaret’s trust in Henry Wilcox is based on the premise that he is “definite” (239). His assuring definiteness grants him in her eyes the status of a “last hope” in finding out what is keeping Helen away from England and her family. In the crisis that ensues, however, Margaret comes to face the fact that Henry’s solidness does not spring from worldly-wise knowledge and insight, but rather from a dramatically simplified view of the world. His world—the “outer life of telegrams and anger”—is built for “neatness, decision and obedience” (88) not thanks to a stricter kind of virtue, as Margaret has tried to imagine, but because the world is compartmentalized into neat categories and labeled as such, allowing him to turn a blind eye to all that may lie outside. This is the world in which “love means marriage settlements; death, death duties” (23), where social conventions take the place of the organic connection that is Margaret’s ideal.

The narrator analyzes these conventions: “A funeral is not death, any more than baptism is birth or marriage union. All three are clumsy devices, coming now too late, now too early, by which society would register the quick motions of man” (88). Daily life is chaotic in nature, not at all “the orderly sequence that has been fabricated by historians” (91). This important differentiation is absent in Henry’s world, where nothing is two-sided or multilayered, and all decisions and plans of action are therefore knot-free and “perfectly easy” (241). There, “the sick had no rights; they were outside the pale; one could lie



to them remorselessly,” and Helen can be baited and hunted like a wild animal chased by the pack. When a person is labeled as (even only potentially) ill in this reductive world, he or she is no longer classified as a person, and ethics fades. Helen as a living personage, Margaret feels, “faded as he talked . . . Her fair, flying hair and eager eyes counted for nothing” (243). Earlier, upon the destruction of Wickham Place, she had felt a similar anger, but had cut herself off in the middle of it: “What right had such men—but Margaret checked herself. That way lies madness” (93). This time Margaret seems less afraid to take the way of madness. She and Helen would “be mad together if the world chose to consider them so” (246), and here she does not check herself: “How dare these men label her sister,” she begins, and mounts to “Were they normal? What a question to ask!” (246). This indignation could simply mean that Margaret thinks that all Schlegels are normal, of course, and that to suggest otherwise is an affront, but it also could point to the problematic act of drawing the line between what is deemed normal and what is not. That this issue is left unclear is an indication that the text has room in it for the second interpretation. “Sanity, the normal, determines what will ‘fit in,’ and what sort of order best suits its perpetuation . . . [but] such imposition inhibits acts of self-determination” (White 47). Margaret, who had in former times so decisively focused on the individual and the individual alone, finds herself facing a system in which individuals, however special, cannot be free from the clutches of an imposed set of criteria. Can one really draw such clear divisions?

The Wilcox men seem to think one can. Definiteness rules their world, and their principles are those of imperial Britain, of moneyed London society, of the complacent upper middle classes. Their inability to separate themselves from the constructed “fabric of society” is reflected in their tendency to confound linguistic representation with the actual, their illusion that significance is found only in “what can be (re)presented or faithfully reproduced” (Gordon 320). If one cannot hear it, it is not there. The elder Mr Wilcox naively supposes that because “he heard no complaints in later years” from his wife, their married life must have been problem-free (Forster 77). He gives full faith to what is apparent. He constantly fails to see the conclusions of his own words and the paradoxes inherent in them, but when passed over in silence it is as if

they really are not there: “And these are the men to whom we give the vote,” observed Mr Wilcox, *omitting to add* that they were also the men to whom he gave work as clerks—work that scarcely encouraged them to grow into other men. ‘However, they have their own lives and interests. Let’s get on.’” (156; emphasis added). For Charles Wilcox, when one employs language, it is for a definite purpose: “When people wrote a letter Charles always asked what they wanted. Want was to him the only cause of action” (81). The criterion of definiteness hinders their appreciation of the misty presence of *Howards End*: “we feel that it is neither one thing nor the other. One must have one thing or the other” (116).

However, seemingly definite names remain always questionable. “Uneducated classes are so stupid,” says an again categorically speaking Henry, and Margaret asks, “Is Miss Avery uneducated classes?” (173). Thus phrased, she is not asking whether Miss Avery is indeed factually an uneducated person, but rather if the classification itself is valid. Another mock-categorical statement, “All men are equal—all men, that is to say, who possess umbrellas” (39), denounces the pretenses of Democracy when it exists only as a hollow general phrase with no systematic backbone. Democracy’s call is inaudible in the abyss—the message of supposed equality fails to communicate equally. Bast’s desperate attempts to pull himself away from the abyss, to escape negation, by decorating his own experiences with the words of established writers or under the names of their most excellent books—his repetitions of “have you read . . . have you read . . .” (100)—end in a pathetic flop, both as a conversational tactic and later as a symbol, as books pour over his dying body. Name-mongering cannot save. When words are removed from their role as “signposts” and are mistaken for the “destination” (103), when social roles and labels are mistaken for the whole entity, if that which cannot be isolated or segmented is mistaken as the mere total of its arbitrarily cut up parts, or worse, just one of them, the fullness of the world is reduced along the path of “false clues and signposts” (91) down to the kind of “orderly conspiracy” (184) that is the limit of Charles’ imagination, or to the “ordered insanity” of “values as arbitrary as those in a pack of playing-cards” that so horrifies Margaret (281).

Language thus gives society a tangible and “natural” form, in the types it

assigns and the statements made from them, but its apparent definiteness is not as reassuring as it seems. As previously examined, even single signs are not stable markers of meaning; in addition, *Howards End* gives endless examples of late telegrams, misunderstood messages, ignored pleas, letters with unexpected consequences, messengers that die before their confessions can be given. Even when the message is clear, as in Mrs Wilcox's handwritten will, the latent power of language is erased and thrown into the fire—it does not work. Speech that could have communicated deeper meaning, that could effect an impact of “the unseen . . . on the seen” (85), that could in a way rise above the faultiness of everyday language, is conspicuously aborted. Facts removed from their context are sometimes very quickly communicated, but through indirect means, such as in the case of Mrs Munt and the flat porters or Mr Wilcox and the cab driver who drove the pregnant Helen to Howards End. Information thus garnered from ‘underlings’ propels the receivers to draw definitive conclusions of their own, Mrs Munt fussing over the disruptive presence of Paul and Mr Wilcox worrying over who Helen's ‘seducer’ is. “Until his name is known nothing can be done” (259), pronounces Mr Wilcox in his characteristic manner, waiting for more facts to fuel him on the only path of action he can imagine. As Margaret well knows, however, Helen's situation is much more complicated, close to ineffable, and not to be untangled by the revelation of one name. The text shows “the limits of language as an instrument of social mediation” (Armstrong 320). Language is flawed, and the trust in its definiteness is finally challenged. For Helen and Margaret, awkwardly coming together at Howards End, “explanations and appeals had failed” (Forster 255). The “particular language” (242) that they had once securely shared has fallen short, and their connection is reinstated not by talk but rather through what is not spoken.

### **“Who's ‘we’?”—the narrator's use of language**

How does a text that stresses the futility of its own medium expect to be received? Having been prodded into an awareness of the pitfalls of language, what attitude must the reader take towards the text? “I am swathed in cant,”

thinks Helen, “and it is good for me to be stripped of it” (20). Although the replacement of her old cant with the questionable panic-and-emptiness values of the Wilcoxes, and the following vehement withdrawal from them, has caused much turmoil for Helen, her self-observation remains pertinent. If one wants “everything down in black and white,” that is what one is left with (282), and in order to see more one must step out of one’s well-defined and tightly swathed boundaries. “The whole of life is mixed” (272), the narrator tells us, and the text closes on a note of Margaret musing on our “differences—eternal differences” (288). To escape the “gutter press” of reinforcing and imposing language, one turns—as Mrs Wilcox is portrayed to have done—to the values of indeterminacy and indefinability. “I always sound uncertain . . . It is my way of speaking” (59), says Mrs Wilcox to the talkative, coherent, but easily typologizing Margaret. Her enigmatic presence and her blurred speech dims “the outlines of known things” (67) and opens the possibility for other words, other understandings. Listening to Margaret paraphrase something she herself has only vaguely suggested, Mrs Wilcox reminds her that “these are indeed ‘other words’” (58). Margaret’s speech becomes only one out of many potential linguistic formulations, one projection, instead of gaining authority as an essential and immutable statement. The architecture of *Howards End* itself is a good reflection of Mrs Wilcox’s principle:

Across the ceiling of each ran a great beam. The dining-room and hall revealed theirs openly, but the drawing-room’s was match-boarded—because the facts of life must be concealed from ladies? Drawing-room, dining-room and hall—how petty the names sounded! Here were simply three rooms where children could play and friends shelter from the rain . . . just rooms again, where friends might shelter. (171)

Though rooms suggest division, and the structure of some is less transparent than others, fundamentally the conventional names are “petty” devices and the actual space is open to renaming, re-appropriation, and a friendly mixing-up of identity. Servants’ quarters, where usually “unknown maids” would perform “obscure duties” (188), are integrated into the whole of the organic living space. As often pointed out in the text, the house and the wych-elm tree also

exist superficially as separate entities but blend and move apart at will, seemingly a part of each other. To the black-and-white spirit which urges, "Answer my question. Plain question, plain answer" (242), Mrs Wilcox would answer: "One doesn't ask plain questions. There aren't such things" (19).

An affirmation of indefiniteness is also a major trait of the narrator him/herself. There have been disputations on the gender of the narrator,<sup>1)</sup> the exact pinning down of which seems not only futile but also contrary to the text's own orientation. Subtle shifts in self-definition work to defy the unquestioned stamping of one settled function or identity, one assumed state of "always" for the characters *and* for the narrator. Though the novel is often considered a discussion of class, a close follower of the text will find that the Schlegels fluctuate in their own observations of the class in which they belong. At one point Margaret refers to herself and Henry Wilcox as "we middle classes" (Forster 140), while only a few pages later Helen refers to herself, Margaret and again Henry as "we—we, the upper classes" (163). It is the same "we," but with different appellations. The most notorious user of this shifting "we" is the narrator. The narration of *Howards End* has stimulated so much discussion on its sympathies and tendencies, its intent and success/failure, precisely because the narrator is an indefinite and multi-morphous formulation. Its performance is "a provocation to reflect about the functions they disrupt rather than a failure to execute them" (Armstrong 309). Sometimes overlapping with Margaret's psyche, sometimes proving itself to be radically removed from the action of the text,<sup>2)</sup> sometimes seemingly in collusion with the reader ("it is only you and I who will be fastidious"; 41), sometimes putting distance in between ("you may laugh at him, you who have slept nights out on the veldt"; 106), the narrator's fluctuating speech poses the questions, "Who is this narrator?" and "Who is he/she addressing by 'you' or 'we'?" Though he/she would indeed most easily be identified as part of "the class to which the Schlegels belong," the "effect of her [sic] repeated use of 'we'" is *not* "to suggest that she speaks for a group" (Roby 118), but rather to question the facile grouping

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1) E.g. Roby 116.

2) See the memorable incongruous episode regarding the narrator's grocer (Forster 155).

that is insinuated by such use of language. The question “who’s ‘we?’” is in fact sprung three times in the text itself, although through the mouths of Mr Wilcox and Margaret. As Francis Gillen has noted, the narrator of *Howards End* “deliberately adopts the position of one who, like the reader himself, makes certain tentative, but not always perfectly omniscient, deductions about the action taking place in the novel” (151), and that position itself is in constant movement. The narrator, as our guide to *Howards End*, endorses a heightened awareness of language and group/type identification, a questioning of complacent and settled usage, and an acceptance of indeterminacy and heterogeneity. To the end, the text preserves a respect for “things that I can’t phrase” (289), and meanwhile, like the altered Mr Wilcox, employs “the old phrases” but to an “unexpected and shadowy” effect (291).

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ABSTRACT

## The Linguistic Architecture of E. M. Forster's *Howards End*

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Forster's novel *Howards End* provides a playful look into the arbitrary and sometimes inconsistent nature of names and denotations, challenging a simple view of language that expects "plain answers" to "plain questions." Forster poses mix-ups of seemingly definite proper names that in fact have more than one referent, and likewise, referents that are assigned radically different names by different people. A worldview based on apparently solid and homogeneous "types" and "classes" leads to many cases of such confusion, which in Forster's novel brings not only short moments of embarrassment but also much personal sorrow and full-scale disaster. Refusing to draw a world that can be neatly organized in familiar terms, Forster breaks "frames" (both literally and metaphorically), commenting that frames can be dangerously strengthened by the "gutter press" of facile repetition even when they are not true. As the novel's main protagonist Margaret matures, her admiration shifts from the definiteness of the self-assured Henry Wilcox to Ruth Wilcox's "misty," indefinite, and open stance. Faced with situations where one cannot simply choose "one thing or the other," Margaret goes as far as to accept the way of madness rather than continue to be a determined follower of the given norm. The values that had been assured by definite language are discovered to be "as arbitrary as those in a pack of playing cards," and meaning continuously misfires. As symbolized by Margaret's interpretation of the architecture of the house *Howards End*, whose rooms are always interchangeable and open to renaming, the text of *Howards End* promotes the value of indeterminacy as a safeguard against unwitting violence and also as a guide to an understanding founded not upon what language dictates, but in what it leaves unphrased.

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