

Language: a taste of reality

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Photo: Victoria Brown, February 2012

“I had rice and flesh, a Chinese yellow saffron risotto with that characteristic flavour of dust and closed jewellery boxes” (Gill, 2011: 55).

This is one of my favourite quotes about food. I feel it is truly evocative. I’ve tasted the dish myself and am reminded of the exquisite depth and intensity of its saffron flavour. But what does Gill’s metaphor really say about the taste of the dish? Reading it again, I am reminded of the pleasure of eating it, but I cannot relive it. Taste is ephemeral, and although tasting something again has the power to evoke distant memories, words are unable to elicit a taste.

In this essay I will be considering the suggestion that “language creates reality”. My interest in food writing led me straight to the conclusion that it does not. However, having read more on the subject I recognise that the issue is not clear-cut. Firstly, our feelings on this subject depend on how we define reality, a complex issue that I deal with throughout the discussion. Secondly, there is the problem of degrees; I maintain that language does not create reality *per se*, but it is possible that language creates reality *to a certain extent*. However, my core argument is that we would have a much better case for the affirmative were we to replace the word ‘creates’ with ‘constructs’ and/or ‘reproduces’.

I deal with this first by looking at notions of linguistic and cultural relativity in the works of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Dorothy Lee, respectively. I then look at the problem from another angle, considering approaches that highlight the importance of subjective perspectives. Here I draw on the phenomenological literature in my core analysis, and on food anthropology and food literature for my examples. I conclude with a consideration of the implications of this debate for anthropological theory.

Linguistic and cultural relativism

One of the most well known proponents of linguistic relativism was Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose ideas were popularised as the ‘Whorf-Sapir hypothesis’. Whorf was a student of Edward Sapir and his work further developed Sapir’s ideas about the relationship between language, culture and cognitive thought. Their main thesis is summed up in a quote from Sapir, cited by Whorf (1970a: 134) in the opening of one of his essays: “the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.” The language we use shapes our interpretation of the world and, thus, our experiences of it.

Implicit in this is the acceptance of an absolute, objective reality, which people experience differently depending on how it is categorised and codified by their mother tongue. Dorothy Lee (1987: 105-6) supports this idea, but extends it beyond language, suggesting that this codification can be found in the patterns underlying any aspect of culture. This could be taken as evidence that language

alone does not create reality, but there are issues with both Whorf's and Lee's analyses that require elucidation before we can explore this idea in full.

Whorf has been criticised for the lack of evidence to support his claims (Deutcher, 2010; Black, 1959: 231-232), but the core problem with his thesis lies in its internal contradiction. In exploring alternative ways of thinking embedded in other languages he suggests that it is possible to overcome one's own cultural conditioning via linguistic analysis. This runs against his central argument that the native speaker's thoughts are "controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious" (Whorf, 1970b: 252). Lee (1987: 105) runs into the same difficulties, arguing that one can only grasp reality as it is presented in one's own cultural code. She then proceeds to point out the differences between her own conceptual framework and that of the Trobriand Islanders.

Nonetheless, we can still find evidence in both arguments to support the notion that language creates reality *to a certain extent*. Both demonstrate that language provides a means for systematising and categorising the world, for making sense of reality. However, in exploring other languages and cultures, in translating the 'untranslatable', they also suggest, albeit unwittingly, that we are not forever bound within the confines of our own linguistic or culturally patterned behaviours. If this were the case, would not the vast proportion of anthropological study be rendered futile? This suggests to me that language is a tool, rather than a constraint, which we use, both consciously and unconsciously, to construct reality and reproduce it, a point that I will elaborate in the next section.

Subjective perspectives

Looking at this from another angle, I turn now to some alternative approaches that emphasise the importance of subjective perspectives.

Philosopher and phenomenologist, Alfred Schutz (1945: 533) argues that: "The origin of all reality is subjective, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real". Building on the work of William James, he develops the notion that there

are various orders of reality. 'The world of daily life', that is, the intersubjective world in which we act and interact, is seen as the paramount reality. Others include, but are not limited to, the worlds of mythology, religion and scientific theory. Language, he argues, pertains as communication to the intersubjective world "and therefore, obstinately resists serving as a vehicle for meanings which transcend its own presuppositions" (1945: 555). Whether or not we accept the notion of multiple realities, Schutz raises two important points for the current discussion. Firstly, in the emphasis he places on subjective experience and, secondly, in suggesting that language does not always provide us with the tools to describe our experiences.

That old adage, 'I am lost for words', aptly sums up the core of my argument here. From the axiomatic nature of this statement, we can infer that many people share the experience of being rendered speechless. As an aspiring food writer, I often struggle to find words to express the taste of foods. I am not alone; as suggested in my introduction, taste can be notoriously difficult to describe, a point supported in the food anthropology literature (Ferguson, 2011: 371-373; Korsmeyer, 2005: 7; Peynaud, 2005: 272). Michael O'Mahony and Rie Ishii's (1986) study of English and Japanese taste languages suggests that these limitations are inherent in language itself. Japanese adds a fifth taste label, umami, to our four primary tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter). Many English speakers they tested recognised a difference in the umami flavour, but did not have a label to describe it. They conclude that our quadripartite classification system is restricting and arbitrary.

This ties back into the language literature. In his critique of Whorf's linguistic relativism, Max Black (1959: 232) argues that "human beings have far more concepts [...] than words for expressing them". Like Lee (1987), he emphasises that codification goes beyond language and must take account of nonverbal symbols. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1972: 49-61) support this idea, arguing that language is the most important of human sign systems, but not the only one; gesture, bodily movements and material artifacts are among the other examples given. The core argument of their book is that reality is socially

constructed, and they cite language as key to that process. Here I find further support for my suggestion that language constructs reality, rather than creating it.

Reading Ernst Cassirer's (1953), *Language and Myth*, one gets the overwhelming sense that he would agree with the idea that "language creates reality". He argues that it is through language that we come to form an intelligible and meaningful understanding of the world (1953: 28-29). But he later acknowledges that something is lost in the process:

"If language is to grow into a vehicle of thought, an expression of concepts and judgements, this evolution can be achieved only at the price of forgoing the wealth and fullness of immediate experience" (1953:98)

Thus I find further support for the idea that language is a tool that can be used as a way to construct and reproduce our subjective experiences, but that it will never convey the full weight of lived experience.

A further complication in using language to communicate our taste perceptions is that "pleasant taste can never yield a universally valid judgement" (Kant, 2005: 212), that is, it's subjective. Indeed, Korsmeyer (2005: 3) argues that taste is the most subjective of sensory perceptions. Opinions on what tastes good vary not only across cultures (Ferguson, 2011: 372; Korsmeyer 2005: 3; Mennell, 2005: 245), but also between individuals (Elliott, 2006: 234; Ferguson, 2011: 371-372; Kant, 2005: 214; Korsmeyer 2005: 7; Peynaud, 2005: 272-273).

All this makes it difficult for me to accept the idea that "language creates reality". There are so many other aspects that shape taste experiences which appear to be more important than language, for example, social context (Ferguson, 2011: 376), one's cultural background (Ferguson, 2011: 372; Mennell, 2005: 245) and memories of past experiences (Korsmeyer, 2005: 7; Proust, 2005; Seremetakis, 2005: 297-299; Sutton, 2001), to name a few. Nonetheless, we can and do use language to construct and reproduce these experiences. Ferguson (2011: 371) supports this idea, recognising the difficulty of describing tastes, but suggesting

that language is a tool that can help us to counter (but not overcome) “the physiological singularity of food”.

I have chosen taste as my example because it is of particular interest to me as a food writer, but there are plenty of examples in the phenomenological literature that highlight the limitations of language as a means for sharing subjective experiences. For example, Byron J. Good (1994: 116-134) deals with sufferers of chronic pain, presenting vivid examples of individuals struggling to express the sensations they experience through language. On the surface this might appear more significant than the examples I’ve used, but I contend that taste is equally relevant and important. As something that all humans share, it provides a useful lens through which to consider a range of anthropological issues. Taste is an important cultural marker and, thus, integral to identity (Ferguson, 2011: 373, 375). Its commensal properties provide an opportunity to bridge cultural divides and share in a common human experience (Ferguson, 2011: 375). Most importantly, food can be symbolic and taste, like language, can convey meaning (Korsmeyer, 2005: 5; Stoller and Olkes, 1989).

Conclusion

The statement “language creates reality” is highly contestable, not least because the term ‘reality’ is too. We may differ in opinion on the absolute status of reality, but I think most of us would agree that different people perceive reality differently. Berger and Luckmann (1972: 14) emphasise the importance of this for sociologists; whereas the philosopher asks ‘what is real?’ and aims “to differentiate between valid and invalid assertions about the world”, the sociologist recognises all modes of reality as valid.

Phenomenological approaches, in particular, highlight the importance of subjective experiences to a comprehensive understanding of the world. Anthropologists who have embraced these approaches do so in an attempt to ‘bracket’ their own cultural biases in order to better understand the perspectives of those they study (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011: 88-89). Such approaches do not draw strict distinctions between subjective and objective aspects of reality,

recognising that people's attitudes toward the world are shaped by their experience of it, "as well as by the historical and cultural conditions that inform the values, assumptions, ideals, and norms embedded within it" (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011: 89).

This notion of cultural relativity is implicit in the idea that "language creates reality". However, as I have emphasised throughout, I believe this statement is too prescriptive and requires modification. Theories of relativity that suggest, on the surface, that we can never 'bracket' our own cultural conditioning in a bid to understand other cultures imply that much work in the discipline of anthropology has been futile. Nonetheless, there is still value in such theories. By drawing attention to these issues, by making the unconscious conscious, they help the anthropologist to recognise their limitations. Such awareness is clearly central to a phenomenological approach to anthropology.

I have argued that the idea that "language creates reality" can be more readily accepted if we add the caveat: to a certain extent. Or better yet, if we swap the word 'creates' for 'constructs' and/or 'reproduces'. Language is clearly an important tool, perhaps the most important, in the construction and reproduction of our subjective realities and the key means through which we communicate our experiences with other people. "An understanding of language is thus essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life" (Berger and Luckmann, 1972: 51-52).

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