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On logophagy and truth: Interpretation through incorporation among Peruvian Urarina

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops an Amazonian critique of Western theories of interpretation as grounded in correspondence between a proposition and a state of affairs, and of truth as correspondence between mind and reality. For the Peruvian Urarina, language has materiality and force and implies a non-arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, and is moreover based in a very different mode of adequation of person to world: a process grounded in absorption rather than representation. The view that words are effectively consumed by others is exemplified by the *baau* genre of ritual discourse, in which a healer's speech is literally digested by the patient as a core part of the healing process.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I wish to trace the outlines of what we might think of as an Amazonian Urarina philosophy of language, paying particular attention to questions of truth and representation. I position this indigenous Amazonian view in contradistinction to a dominant view of truth in the Western philosophical tradition, one that also enjoys widespread popularity as a folk or common-sense view of what language is and how it works. This view we may refer to, for simplicity, as the representational theory of truth as it hinges on an alignment or correspondence between the mind and the world, or between statement and fact. This is a central component of what Alan Rumsey has referred to as the “Standard Average European linguistic ideology”, predicated on “the dualism of words and things; talk versus action; real world events versus ways of talking about them. Words in this view are not things, but only stand for things. They are mere symbols or signs, the purpose of which is to talk about a reality that lies beyond them and apart from them.” (Rumsey, 2009: 121). This apparently common-sense view of language thus naturally corresponds to a particular view of truth, namely one where truth is a matter of the alignment or correspondence between statement and fact, or between mind and world. Duranti (1993) refers to this as the “classic view” and traces it back to Aristotle, and his well-known definition of truth (*Metaphysics* 1011b25): “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true”. The basic idea - that the truth or falsity of a statement is determined by its goodness of fit with the state of affairs it describes - thus has a long and venerable pedigree, having been renewed and elaborated by key enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes, Bacon, and Boyle, then further refined by analytic language philosophers such as Russell and Austin.

As Rumsey and Duranti, among others, have pointed out, this is not however a view of language or truth that necessarily informs people's common-sense understandings in other parts of the world. This emerges clearly in the Amerindian context: consider for instance Gary Witherspoon's (1977) classic account of how Navajo see the world as created through language:

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literally sung into existence by primordial supernatural beings who are still routinely invoked in Navajo curing rites, which accordingly use language to re-enact the world's creation. Here – as Witherspoon observes – language is not a mirror of reality, so much as reality a mirror of language. Mental and physical phenomena are not readily distinguished, which is one reason why thought and speech are attributed considerable creative power, or why “word is the means by which substance is organized and transformed.” (Witherspoon, 1977:46).

Similar points have been developed by Magnus Course in his studies of the Mapuche of Southern Chile. Course argues that whereas language “continues to be understood by many scholars as primarily ‘symbolic’ and therefore necessarily concerned with representation and thus exemplifying a fundamental relation of discontinuity between signifier and signified... for Mapuche people language is better understood as primarily indexical and non-arbitrary, as... a heterogenous means through which new relations are forged and new entities brought into being.” (Course, 2012:20; see also Course this volume). In other words, Mapuche people see speaking as first and foremost a mode of relating and influencing, rather than representing the world, because of the intrinsic (i.e. non-arbitrary) connection between words and things, or signifiers and signifieds. Moreover, language is attributed a kind of agency that prevents it from ever being fully under any particular speaker's control: utterances “are but tenuously connected to the intentionality of their speakers, and are understood to be equally saturated with an autonomous force of their own” (Course, 2012:1).

Even Western philosophical viewpoints increasingly see as problematic some of the distinctions and assumptions embedded in the Standard Average European linguistic ideology. Hence Austin's seminal arguments that all utterances may be considered as forms of action, rather than representation, such that questions of truth and falsity give way to judgements of appropriateness or “felicity”. Yet as Duranti (1993:217) has made clear, if speech act theory manages to avoid positing a dichotomy between saying and doing, it nevertheless still ultimately rests on the same underlying dualism between mind and reality; it still shares with the classic view the same overarching reliance on the all-important distinction between the intentions of a speaker and the external world. To understand the meaning of a speech act still means reconstructing the speaker's intentions, as expressed through conventional linguistic signs, which “work by virtue of the speaker's intention to communicate and by virtue of their being understood by the hearer to reflect such an intention.” (Keane, 1997:680; cf. Duranti, 2015: 110).

As with the classic view, then, the intentions of a speaker are still themselves seen as central, and as pre-formed, or given in advance prior to the communicative event, rather than emerging from and shaped by the interaction itself. Speech act theory thus still posits a distinctly modern, Western subject, characterised by interiority and a norm of sincerity and sharply distinguished from the domain of objects (cf. e.g. Keane, 2002). The operative concept of interpretation – like the folk psychology on which it rests – remains bound up in the assumptions of the western rationalist tradition as “a process which focuses on an individual's mind as the meaning-making organism and on an individual's acts as the reflections or consequences of his states of mind” (Duranti, 2015:110). This is partly a consequence, Duranti suggests, of a universalising ethics in which individuals are seen as essentially similar to each other; it is thus reasonable to assume that one can imagine oneself, at least in principle, in the situation of anyone else. Such an assumption seems rather more questionable when it comes to non-universalistic social systems, such as India's caste system, which asserts an unbridgeable divide between social positions; it is even more potentially problematic as a characterisation of interpretation in societies where people explicitly disavow the possibility of knowledge of the mental states of another – the so-called ‘doctrine of the opacity of other minds’ (Robbins and Rumsey, 2008).

To summarise, then, the “classic” view of language in the West rests on a sharp distinction between words and things, or statements and facts, which ultimately corresponds to mind-body dualism: that is, to an unbridgeable divide between mental and physical phenomena. This gives rise to, or is associated with, a particular and similarly dualistic model of interpretation, as a process by which a listener seeks to reconstruct in her own mind the intentions of the speaker. It is not my intention to dwell on this model much further, beyond pointing out that it helps us to contextualise and comprehend the alternative, culturally-grounded conception of language that holds sway among the Urarina people of Amazonian Peru, and potentially – though more tentatively – throughout much of Amazonia. Before proceeding any further, however, let me make clear that that there is probably no such thing as “the” Urarina theory of language, in the singular. What I offer in this paper is less a straight description than a particular interpretation, one that makes connections and assertions that Urarina people themselves probably would not. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I want to resist the homogenising ascription of a single language ideology to a single culture or group of people, acknowledging that “language ideologies” is a default plural concept (Kroskrity, 2010) while exploring how different speech genres and interactional contexts might potentially reveal subtly diverging understandings of the nature of language.

My argument, in brief, is that Urarina tend to see speech as largely material, that is, as a kind of material substance itself rather than an immaterial representation of substance; but also as having a greater or lesser degree of materiality, as well as force or instrumentality, depending on the context. In those situations where speech is seen as especially material, and especially autonomous (that is, as having a force of its own), a particular theory of truth comes into view, which I shall refer to as a theory of truth by absorption. This absorptive truth contrasts with representational truth by being concerned less with an alignment of statement and fact, or mind and world, and more with an alignment of content and container, or indeed eater and eaten. My hypothesis, in short, is that in at least some contexts, words are considered to be subject to direct absorption by the body, rather than interpretation by the mind, generating a particular kind of alignment between speaker and hearer that is akin to that established by the consumption of food. We might say that consumption provides the core trope for the semiotic process.

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