

# Language Is a Cultural Institution

Jodi O'Brien

*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922)

Consider the following headlines that linguist Steven Pinker (1994, p. 79) collected from various newspapers:

“Child’s Stool Great for Use in Garden”

“Stud Tires Out”

“Stiff Opposition Expected to Casketless Funeral Plan”

“Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case”

“Iraqi Head Seeks Arms”

“Queen Mary Having Bottom Scraped”

“Columnist Gets Urologist in Trouble With His Peers”

What does it take to understand the double meanings and the underlying humor in these headlines? The computational ability required to recognize these double entendres is innate and universal, but the content of each—or rather, its double content—and, more significantly, the fact that people find the phrases funny, is a consequence of social learning. When we learn language, we also become *socialized* into a cultural lexicon of concepts, how they fit together, and what to think and feel about them. Through language we are able to participate meaningfully with one another by attaching shared meanings and expectations to persons, things, places, and events. Through language-based social interaction, we learn culturally specific attitudes and responses, including the nuances of humor and other social expressions.

In the title case from his well-known book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, neurologist Oliver Sacks (1987) describes a man who has retained his ability for abstraction but has lost the “commonsensical” meaning of concepts used in everyday conversation. While trying to figure out what is wrong with the man, Sacks holds up a glove and asks him what he sees. The man studies it for a bit and then declares that it appears to be “some sort of container with five out-pouchings” (p. 14). Technically, this is an accurate description of the item. But is it meaningful? Seeing is a matter of conceptualization, not just sensory perception.

We use our conceptual knowledge to make meaning of our sensory experiences. Meaningful concepts are not just abstractions—they resonate with experience. Experientially, a “glove” is not the same thing as “a continuous surface unfolded on itself with five out-pouchings.” We learn conceptual meaning within social contexts. Socially meaningful concepts reflect specific experiences—experiences that are visceral and imbued with feeling. Thus, when studying how children learn to assign meaning to concrete things in their environment, we have to take into account both the social content and the context of experience.

To demonstrate the idea of meaningful experiential language to my students, I tell a story about a road trip I once took that followed the famous route that begins in “302” and ends in “310” (if you’re traveling from east to west). I describe my experiences along the way, including a car accident in “806.” “No one wants to be stuck in area code 806!” I lament. By this point in the story, the students look bewildered, even uncomfortable. They murmur to one another, wondering what I’m talking about, until eventually someone exclaims, “It’s area codes—she’s talking about area codes.” Recognizing that my travel markers are area codes brings the students some relief—now they have a vague idea of what I’m talking about. But the details of my trip are still uncertain: Where did I begin the journey, what’s the famous route, and where was the accident? Factually, there’s nothing wrong with describing a road trip in terms of area codes. It is, in fact, one of the ways in which this chunk of land we call the United States is subdivided. The problem is that no one understands what I’m talking about: My area code classification doesn’t resonate. As soon as I mention “Route 66” and further explain that the car accident was in Amarillo, Texas, comprehension dawns. Now we’re on the same page.

This example illustrates that some concepts and systems of classification are more meaningful than others. When we think about travel, we tend to think in terms of highways and sociopolitical regions (and not area codes). When we learn a language, we learn concepts and classification systems that are relevant and meaningful within a specific culture. Through language acquisition, we take in an entire system of culture. We learn what things are, as well as what they are not, and we also learn to associate specific values, feelings, and expectations with people, things, places, events, and experiences. For instance, carving up geographical chunks of land into highways, cities, states, and countries is a social convention. There is nothing in the nature of the land that creates a line between Texas and Oklahoma, but when we learn the geographical lexicon of U.S. culture, we learn the significance of “states” as a way of classifying that land we occupy. Consider the Four Corners Monument, where the borders of Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico meet. This is an unremarkable spot geographically, and yet there is a certain excitement to be had in standing on the ground marker and straddling four states at once. That excitement is a socially learned sentiment that we come to understand through sharing a language and its cultural system of classification.

In this essay, we explore the ways in which language and associated classification systems shape how we perceive, organize, evaluate, feel about, and respond to our experiences and environments. Assigning linguistic meaning to something is called *naming*. We discuss several implications of this process:

- Names are social concepts that we learn from others through interaction.
- We connect the names or concepts with social categories and classifications (humans are categorical thinkers).
- These categories and classification systems reflect cultural histories and values.
- When we learn language, we are learning cultural value systems that organize our perceptions and experiences.
- We are mostly unaware of this process and tend to think of our concepts and classifications as normal or even natural.
- Stereotyping and prejudice can be usefully understood as a result of linguistic categorization.

## It's the Name, Not the Thing

Herbert Blumer is credited with first use of the term *symbolic interactionism* to define the approach to the study of human behavior and society that we have been discussing (Fine, 1990). Blumer (1969), who was a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, suggested three basic premises:

1. Humans act toward a thing on the basis of the meaning they assign to the thing.
2. Meanings are socially derived, which is to say that meaning is not inherent in a state of nature. There is no absolute meaning. Meaning is negotiated through interaction with others.
3. The perception and interpretation of social symbols are modified by the individual's own thought processes. (p. 2)

When we make sense of a person, space, or occasion, we attach meaning to it. This process is known as *naming*. Naming has three elements: a label, a cognitive-emotive evaluation, and an associated course of action. The conceptual names we have for persons, spaces, and things include each of these three components. Consider a round, hollow tube made of glass with a single closed end. We can label or name it a "glass." *Glass* is a fairly abstract term, and we might each be imagining a different type of glass. Let's say that we narrow the meaning of the label by imposing additional classifications—for example, the glass has a stem attached. This description suggests a wineglass, which we may evaluate subjectively as, perhaps, an elegant sort of glass or a decadent sort of glass. Regardless of the specific glass that each of us has in mind, we are in agreement as to its general purpose. That is, we know the associated course of action toward the object that we have labeled a glass: It is a container from which we can drink.

Philosophers, linguists, and social psychologists agree that to name something is to know it. In the example above, of the man who could no longer identify a

“glove” (due to damage to the language centers of the brain), he could give vague abstract descriptions but could not “recognize” or conceptualize common objects and people. Although nothing was wrong with his ability for sight, he could no longer “see” things in a way that enabled him to comprehend their meaning and to share his observations meaningfully with others. As Oliver Sacks describes it, his expressions were gibberish.

This process of object identification is central to human perception and appraisal. Humans name things and then respond according to the implications carried by the name. They do not respond to the essential nature of the thing itself. Thus, we say that human behavior involves not just a response to a stimulus but a process—naming—that mediates between stimulus and response.

Try the following exercise: Work up some saliva in your mouth. How does it feel? Now spit it into a glass. How does it look? Now drink it up. You will probably respond to this last request with some hesitation; you might even be thinking, *Ugh, gross!* Yet I have simply asked you to reabsorb a substance that, in fact, you naturally generate and swallow continually all through the day. Why did you hesitate? Probably because you have an aversion to spit. This aversion is not a direct response to the natural essence of the substance. It is an aversion to the *name*, not the thing. Your reaction is based on your idea of spit—a symbolic process whereby you have conceptualized bodily fluids that have left the body as repulsive. The name *spit* implies an evaluative response (“Yuck!”) and a course of action (avoidance). You are not responding directly to the nature of the fluid (water and enzymes). Instead, you assign meaning to the fluid and respond to that meaning.

For the most part, this process is automatic. We don’t think about our responses unless we have reason to pause and reconsider (right now, you may still be thinking about “spit” because I disrupted your taken-for-granted associations). Consider how much learning children encounter in the course of their first few years of life. Through language acquisition, they take in not only the meaning of things, but also an entire culture of values and expectations. This process is mostly unconscious: They “receive” conceptual knowledge and integrate it into a system of understanding, without questioning the origins or validity of the concepts. A glib but fun example is the concept of “fart.” Children as young as 2 years easily learn the term and use it with giggles. There’s nothing inherently humorous about passing gas, but in learning the word “fart” children readily pick up not only the intended meaning, but also the tonal response that it evokes: Older siblings encourage it with a tone of mischief, and adults may look askance—especially when the child shouts in public, “Papa farted!”—but they’re often also stifling laughter. Children are extremely alert to these nuances. As they grow older and expand their environment, children become adept at adjusting their language usage to the situation. They learn to associate specific concepts and expressions with particular people and circumstances and pivot accordingly (e.g., *I will get in trouble if I call someone an “asshole” at school, even though my parents say it all the time when driving*). This code switching is especially pronounced in children who are raised in multilingual environments. Initially, children who are exposed to different languages don’t think of them as different languages; rather, they associate certain phrases and forms of expression

with different people and situations (e.g., they associate Spanish with Abuela and her friends, and they associate English with being at the store with Mama).

As a side note, a few decades ago, school administrators in the United States believed that children learning multiple languages would be cognitively slower or deficient, and so they encouraged immigrant families to speak only English at home. Now, there is robust research that shows that children who learn multiple languages are *more* nimble in their language use and more cognitively flexible. Typically, children growing up in multilingual environments tend to begin talking a little later than those growing up in the presence of only one language—because they have many more concepts to sort—but once the grammatical logic clicks into place, they demonstrate tremendous linguistic versatility.

## Associative Clusters, Classification, and Metaphors Reflect Social Values

Meaning consists of not only isolated words or names, but also the ideas and experiences associated with particular words. As children learn language, they first learn to group or classify the objects and people in their environment. Recall the work of the linguist Lev Vygotsky from the previous essay: Children progress from comprehending only their immediate perceptual reality to grasping abstract concepts. For instance, when a caregiver says, “Let’s play with your blocks,” children can call up the idea of blocks in their head, independent of being directly in the presence of the toy. The next step is sorting or classifying into abstract sets: colors, shapes, and eventually numbers. The child not only recognizes that certain features, such as right angles, are similar (e.g., a square), but also learns the general classification system. When learning colors, a toddler might initially say, “Red ball,” in imitation of the caregiver. Once they are able to respond to the general question “What color is this ball?” they understand that “color” is a form of classification associated with particular characteristics of objects (red, blue, pink, etc.).

Children are inexhaustible sleuths once they understand classification. Their sorting reflects not only an understanding of meaning, but also the cultural values they are exposed to. Toddlers will move through their environment saying “No eat” or “No mouth” or “We can eat this” as one early form of classification (edible/non-edible). Caregivers to toddlers are very familiar with the child’s initial lack of understanding this classification—infants and young toddlers are inclined to put everything into their mouths, because it’s one of their most developed senses and that’s how they explore things. They have no natural sense of what is or isn’t edible; they learn this in the process of learning language, and, in so doing, they learn to associate values to certain “foods” or non-foods. Try explaining to a toddler why the piece of cheese they are enjoying is now “icky” and no longer edible because they dropped it in the dirt. In some cultures, people eat bugs (“Yum, that’s good to eat”). In other cultures, the child who picks up a bug learns “Ack! Put that down—it’s yucky.” In addition to edibles, children learn clean/dirty; nice/mean; good/bad; fun/scary; indoor/outdoors, and hundreds more forms of classification. In other

words, they are learning not only what something is, but also how to value and feel about it.

These *associative clusters* are the building blocks of linguistic competence and cultural awareness, and they are essential for human survival. Most of what we know we know vicariously, which means we don't have to experience it directly to understand the consequences. We associate the expected consequence with the concept itself. "Fire" is associated with "very hot" and carries the expectation of being burned if we get too close. Saying, "Careful—fire!" is shorthand for understanding this cluster of associations. These associative clusters enable us to communicate with one another beyond the here and now, to talk in generalities, and to infer consequences in a shorthand manner that makes our existence more safe, meaningful, and efficient. Early learning is largely a process of acquiring and learning to manage associative clusters. Upon hearing a story about a scary lion, a child associates lions with danger. Most human emotion is in response to these learned associations, rather than in response to direct experience. Children learn to be afraid of lions without actually encountering one.

Children are fascinated with classification and are quickly able to recognize the signs or characteristics for within-category classification (e.g., the difference between a fire truck and a mail truck) as well as associative clusters for making these distinctions (fire trucks are red and loud). Along the way, they are learning cultural values and recipes for behavior: "Fire trucks help us," "Quiet voice indoors," "Strangers are scary—stay away." Children are sponges in absorbing these associations, which is the key to cultural competency and vicarious learning. This process is central to human development. It also results in early imprinting of attitudes and prejudices that are considered "natural" or commonsense and may go unexamined as we move through our lives. It's worth keeping in mind that much of what we consider commonsense is rooted in the early linguistic associations we were exposed to and not necessarily rooted in direct experience.

Through language, we learn to classify people, places, experiences, and events in culturally specific ways. We learn that humans can be old, young, big, small, short, tall, fat, thin, brown, white, and so forth. Each of these "names" includes emotive-evaluative components and behavioral cues that reflect cultural categories and hierarchies (e.g., calling someone "fat" in this culture has a very different set of associations than "thin.") By studying the values and emotions embedded in associative clusters and systems of classification, we can learn a great deal about the way in which culture—through language—shapes individuals' attitudes, feelings, and behavior. The power of language is not simply in words but in the manner in which words can be combined to create clusters of meaning. These associations, which we often take as commonsense, reflect social divisions, not natural ones.

### **Cultural Values and Hierarchies Are Reflected in Language**

Consider the words "bachelor" and "spinster." Each term refers to an unmarried person, classified according to gender. In other words, the existence of the two

distinct terms indicates that English is a *gendered* language. The content indicates that gender is a significant social classification: We organize social relations in terms of a gender division, the division is binary, and different values are assigned to the different gender lines. Consider further, are the terms “bachelor” and “spinster” balanced? Do they convey the same meaning for the different genders? What do you associate with each term? Typically, “bachelor” is associated with “free,” “fun,” “eligible,” and other positive connotations. Most especially, “bachelor” connotes “desirable.” In contrast, “spinster” conjures up images of a dour old maid languishing with her cats. She certainly is not desirable. This is an example of a linguistic asymmetry: supposedly parallel terms that reflect underlying cultural hierarchies or value differences. The two terms are shorthand for cultural ideals that afford much greater sexual agency and much less pressure for marriage to men than they do to women. A related asymmetry is “stud” and “slut.” Here’s another: We refer to married women as “Mrs.” and unmarried women as “Miss.” How do we refer to married and unmarried men? Contemporary English doesn’t make that distinction. What does the absence of a parallel term for men tell us about gender differences with regard to the cultural significance of marriage? The language structure implies that marriage is a central identity for women, less so for men. Asymmetries such as the examples here indicate not only that our culture is deeply gendered, but also that we have different rules for sexuality and marriage depending on gender. Social linguistics is the study of the cultural values and hierarchies reflected in language.

Linguistic analyses reveal the English language to be a sexist language: Gender is one of the most central linguistic classification structures, and the associations for parallel experiences and expectations differ markedly for men and women. One implication is that, regardless of your personal intentions not to be sexist, you acquired a language that differentiates significantly on the basis of gender. And not just different genders (men/women) but different values associated with gendered behavior and an implied hierarchy—one gender is better, is freer, and has more agency than the other.

Many cultures make a linguistic division between formal and informal relationships. Depending on how familiar you are with someone, you use different pronouns. In English, we simply say “you” when referring to the other (whether they are our boss or our roommate). In German, by comparison, the pronoun is either “du” or “Sie” depending on degree of familiarity. English speakers learning languages with both formal and informal pronouns struggle to make the distinction—how do you know which form of address to use when? Within these linguistic cultures, people adept in the language are attuned to these differences—it’s part of how they think, based on their linguistic development—and are therefore able to make the distinction with relative ease. Kinship is another line of social division found in many of the world’s languages. Indian grandparents, for instance, have different names depending on whether they are the maternal or paternal grandparents. If they are paternal grandparents, they are Dada (father’s father) and Dadima (father’s mother); if they are maternal grandparents, they are Nana (mother’s father) and Nanima (mother’s mother).

This means that cousins end up using different terms for the same set of grand-parents. The division reflects the cultural significance of matrilineal versus patrilineal lines. Still another division is age. Vietnamese speakers, for example, use different forms of address depending on whether they are older or younger than the person with whom they're speaking.

Another significant linguistic classification embedded within English is race. In an essay written in 1976, Richard B. Moore describes several aspects of racism reflected in English. Although it may seem like innocent coincidence, Moore observes that color symbolism is embedded throughout the language:

The symbolism of white as positive and black as negative is pervasive in our culture. . . . "Good guys" wear white hats and ride white horses, "bad guys" wear black hats and ride black horses. Angels are white, devils are black. The definition of *black* includes "evil, wicked, sinful . . .," the definition of *white* includes "morally pure, spotless, innocent."

For those who are dubious, Moore offers the following play on words as an illustration of the prevalence of the negative associations of "black":

Some may blackly (angrily) accuse me of trying to blacken (defame) the English language, to give it a black eye (mark of shame) by writing such black words (hostile). [They] may accuse me of being blackhearted (malevolent), of having a black outlook (pessimistic) on life, of being a blackguard (scoundrel) . . . who will be blackballed (ostracized) by being placed on a blacklist (list of undesirables).

In addition to the negative color symbolism, Moore notes the heavily weighted cultural judgment in the differential use (more common when he was writing) accorded to "colored" people who are "good" and "know their place" in contrast with "Black" people who are perceived as "uppity" and "threatening." English is heavy with what Moore calls "loaded words" that reflect a racist Eurocentric, white perspective. We are taught that Columbus "discovered" America and that Native "tribes" (rather than "people" or "nations") "attacked" and "massacred" (innocent) colonial settlers. African "pagans" live in "huts" in the "darkest Africa." Moore asks us to consider the psychological impact of the phrase "The master raped his slave" versus that of "The white captor raped an African woman held in captivity." "Slave," he argues, suggests something less than human and turns the captive person into a thing:

Next time you write about slavery or read about it, try transposing all "slaves" into "African people held in captivity," or "Black people forced to work for no pay," or "African people stolen from their homes and families." While it is more cumbersome, it conveys a different meaning.

In concluding his essay, Moore observes:

Negative language infects the subconscious of most Western people from the time they first learn to speak. Prejudice is not merely imparted or superimposed. It is metabolized into the bloodstream of society.

Moore wrote this essay 45 years ago, and it may be tempting to argue that we are now much more culturally aware of the racism reflected in our language. Terms such as “savage” and “uncivilized” may indeed be less common and more open to cultural critique, but consider the ways in which ideals such as the “rightness of whiteness” and its corresponding middle-class cultural values are still present, especially in political terms such as “homeless,” “underclass,” “underdeveloped,” and “culturally deprived.” Similar terminology abounds for people living with disabilities and people who are aging. Linguistically, our language reveals a cultural bias for people who are able-bodied, employed, middle-class, youthful, Christian, and law-abiding. Challenge yourself to think of more asymmetries and common-sense phrases that reflect these value-laden and hierarchical social divisions.

## Metaphors We Live By

In an essay by this same title, social linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson discuss yet another way in which language reflects cultural values (Reading 5). They claim that our linguistic conceptual systems, especially metaphors, play a central role in defining our everyday realities. Metaphors are an important aspect of language that shape how we perceive, attend to, organize, and evaluate our experiences. In other words, metaphors provide a frame for the situation. The well-known metaphor “Time is money” conveys a deeply held American value for productivity and efficiency and reflects our long history of capitalism. Related metaphorical phrases such as “Spend your time wisely” and “That’s a waste of time” implore us to think of time as a commodity that we need to manage carefully. When we are with a friend, we think of it as “spending time” with them. Try substituting “sharing time” instead. Does it feel different to say “I enjoyed *sharing* time with you?”

Lakoff and Johnson are inviting us to think about the broad cultural values reflected in language through metaphor. As with associative clusters, we learn these metaphors without really thinking much about them or the ways in which they shape our experiences. Among the examples Lakoff and Johnson discuss are common metaphors for argument and for love. They observe that our metaphors for argument reveal a warlike orientation: “He attacked my perspective,” “My points were right on target,” “Your ideas are indefensible—anyone could shoot you down.” There’s nothing inherently right or wrong with this metaphor, but, as Lakoff and Johnson point out, the war orientation sets us up to think in terms of competition and win/lose, rather than an opportunity for sharing, cooperating with, and learning from one another. In Part V and Part VI of this book, we look at how social structures are reinforced based on our beliefs and “scripts” for the situation. Putting together

some of the themes from this essay, you can see how the associative cluster of “corporate workplace” as “competitive” and “argumentative” may result in a win/lose workplace culture that may not actually be the best business model.

Similarly, consider some of our metaphors for love. Love is crazy, madness, something that befalls and overcomes us. A linguistic analysis of our language around love shows that we consider romantic love to be deeply significant and necessary but also something that just happens to us. “True” love awaits and is “out there.” These metaphors incline us to be endlessly hopeful but without agency, which is a surefire recipe for depression. We are always looking for “the one,” and, when we find that person, everything will fall into place. Alternatively, consider the notion of love as a collaborative work of art (now there’s a different metaphor). It’s something that must be sought actively, and worked on, together. It’s not a magic that befalls us; it’s something we co-create. Different metaphors, different experiences.

## Language Is A Cultural Institution

The examples we have discussed illustrate ways in which cultural values are imparted to us through the meanings, tones, and expectations associated with particular concepts and systems of classification. For social linguists, language can be considered a cultural institution. The structure and content of languages make up our entire cultural landscape. We learn who to be, how to behave, and what to think and feel through the parameters of language. When people crossing geographical and linguistic borders say that something is “lost in translation,” they mean that there is no cultural equivalent. It’s not just that the word doesn’t exist, but all the cultural associations the word or phrase evokes may not be possible to convey in another language. An experience, idea, practice, or class of people may be highly significant in one culture and completely absent in another and, accordingly, not translatable across cultures. Some expressions reflect culturally specific practices. For instance, Swiss-Germans use the phrase *dreikäsehoch* (“three cheese high”) as a way of describing the height of a growing child. The idea of stacking three cheese blocks as a form of measurement comes more readily to mind in a culture known for its cheese-making. Other phrases reflect cultural emphases that are not easy to capture in translation, such as the Russian term *razbliuto*, which is the feeling one has for a past love. It’s a sad word associated with loss, nostalgia, and an unrecoverable past that reflects Russian romanticism. There is no real English equivalent: certainly “my ex” doesn’t do justice to the cultural ideal. *Sobremesa* is a Spanish phrase for the feeling of well-being when dinner is over but the wine and conversation are still flowing. Americans may have a general idea of this, but it’s not linguistically marked in English in a way that is comparative with the Spanish appreciation for lingering in companionship and conviviality. The Danish *hygge* is somewhat equivalent, but it includes an association with long winter darkness and the coziness that can be found in warm candles, fuzzy slippers, and easy company. More than just a word

for “cozy,” *hygge* reflects the cultural geography of northern nights and a general cultural emphasis on radiance in home and community.

In the 1970s, Japanese psychiatrist Takeo Doi wrote a book called *The Anatomy of Dependence*. In it, he described the Japanese concept of *amae*. *Amae* is central to Japanese culture (it both is a noun and takes several verb forms), but there is no equivalent idea in English. The closest translation is “indulgence” or to “indulgence of an inappropriate request for help or support.” While doing a psychiatric residency in the United States, Doi was unsettled by what he observed as indifferent or exasperated responses among his fellow (American) doctors when patients behaved in ways suggestive of the need for attention; the Americans were dismissing these behaviors as “acting out” or “trying to get attention.” On reflection, Doi realized that in Japan, the same behaviors would be understood within the framework of *amae*—people just want to be loved. In this desire, people may make seemingly odd requests; for example, a grown child might ask another adult for help with tying her shoes. When the adult grants the request, it’s *amae*. The cultural and emotional association is not one of “indulgence” (which has a negative association of being “put out”) but one of harmonious cooperation in supporting someone’s need.

Doi further explains that in Japan, *amae* is understood not so much as a declaration of dependence (“I need you to help me”) as an attempt to regain control when one feels overwhelmed (“When you grant me my request, my agency and sense of connection are restored”). Doi was saddened but what he observed to be a callous response to suffering psychiatric patients, and he explained this sentiment of “not indulging people unnecessarily” as part of the American psyche and reflected in our language (in this case, the absence of a concept that is so prevalent in Japan). Japanese people have an entire lexicon around *amae*, including specific people in their lives from whom they can confidently expect *amae*. Imagine knowing that you can “fall apart” on occasion and that there is a cultural structure, reflected in language, for helping you find your footing again without feeling ashamed. This is etched into the Japanese psyche and reflected linguistically.

Anthropologists Manuela Picq and Josi Tikuna offer another example of language as a cultural institution (Reading 6). Their focus is on the demise of a richly diverse set of ideas and practices around sexuality among Indigenous peoples. They chronicle a broad spectrum of Indigenous gender roles and sexual practices that were rendered invisible by colonizers because the Indigenous sexual terminologies were lost in translation.

The meanings of gender roles and sexual practices are cultural constructions that inevitably get lost when they are decontextualised in cultural (and linguistic) translation. The spectrum of Indigenous sexualities does not fit the confined Western registries of gender binaries, heterosexuality, or LGBT codification. It is not these idioms that are untranslatable, but rather the cultural and political fabric they represent. Indigenous sexualities defy contemporary LGBT and queer frameworks.

As Picq and Tikuna state, even queer and LGBTQ frameworks are insufficient for conveying the cultural meaning and the complexity of Indigenous gender and sexuality practices. The fluidity of Indigenous culture is lost in translation, and its gender and sexual practices are shoehorned into Western linguistic gender binary structures, which renders them invisible and misunderstood. It can be difficult to fully comprehend the implications of a colonized, appropriated culture being stripped of its significant structures of meaning and rendered instead through the imprecise, uncomprehending language of the conquerors. When a language is lost or appropriated, entire civilizations and histories become unknown.

## Categorization, Mindlessness, and Prejudice

Up to this point, we have described the ways in which, through language acquisition, we learn names and associated clusters of meaning and value for people, events, places, and experiences. We have looked closely at some examples of how cultural values are embedded in language. The implication is that language is culture and, as such, it shapes our thoughts and experiences. To finish this section, we look at some of the implications of associative, categorical thinking and its relationship to prejudice.

The sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel (1991) writes about the ways in which we carve out distinctions between people, places, experiences, and behaviors. What, for instance, makes something “criminal” in one society and commonplace in another? What gives someone high status in a particular situation? Why are some events mundane and others ceremonial? These “islands of meaning,” as Zerubavel refers to them, are culturally specific and reflect the human nature of classifying and categorizing. Zerubavel gives a personal example of once looking for mittens with his son when they prepared to go walking on a snowy day. He couldn’t find any mittens, but then his son appeared with some socks on his hands and announced he was ready to go. What makes socks socks and mittens mittens, Zerubavel wonders. Obviously, it’s the way we categorize or classify them—one set is supposedly for feet, and the other is for hands. Mittens do have some features (e.g., a pouch for the thumb) that socks do not, but on a cold day when hands simply need warming, socks will do just fine. Zerubavel also notes that a child came up with the idea, not an adult. Children are often quicker to use objects differently from the intended use. They are less caught up in the “appropriate” use for the object, and they are less likely to have fallen into the habit of categorical thinking.

Psychologist Ellen Langer refers to the inability to think of alternative uses for something as being “trapped by categories.” She has made a career of demonstrating the ways in which the human function of classification, which is necessary and useful, also renders us *mindless*. When we classify something, we file it in our memories under a master category and then remember the general category, rather than the details. If someone invites you to a Halloween party, your mind focuses on “Halloween” and calls up the meanings you associate with the event. Costumes are closely related and form part of the cluster of associations you have

with the category. As a result, you may overlook the fine print in the invitation that says “formal wear only” and then feel embarrassed when you show up dressed as pumpkin.

Langer (1990) tells the story of a man on a scavenger hunt who is looking for an item on his list described as a piece of wood measuring 80 by 36 inches. He asks neighbors to search their sheds and garages, any place they might have some spare wood lying around, but no one is able to help him. Later in the day, he walks by a lumberyard and notices some doors stacked in a pile. In a flash of insight, he measures them and realizes that a standard door is an 80-by-36-inch piece of wood. As Langer explains, we don't tend to think of things in terms of the qualities they consist of—we make quick categorical assignments and then think only in terms of the category (in this case, a door is a door, not an 80-by-36-inch piece of wood). Socks are socks, mittens are mittens, and so forth.

Cognitively, categorical thinking is necessary for us to make it through the day and to communicate with others. When we name something, we categorize it and then know what to expect. We conceptualize the category and associated expectations, and we behave accordingly. Preparing for “class” has a different categorical recipe than preparing for a “funeral.” Knowing which is which is how we organize our lives. The problem, as Langer suggests, is that we become mindless and lose our ability to “think outside the box” of our associations for the category. Another implication of mindless categorization is jumping to conclusions based on general features of the category. Langer calls this *premature cognitive commitment*. In my classes, I tell students I'm doing a memory test and then read them a list of 13 words: “drowsy,” “tired,” “slumber,” “snore,” “quiet,” “rest,” “snooze,” “bed,” “drift,” “eat,” “dream,” “float,” “sheep.” I then ask them to write down as many of the words as they can remember. I read the list back and ask how many they wrote down correctly. Some recall 10; the average recall is 7 or 8. Someone always asks, “Was ‘sleep’ on the list?” Without reading back, were you thinking “sleep” was in the list too? Every time I do this exercise, most people write down “sleep” as one of the first words they recall. Why is this, when it's not on the list? It's because memory is both categorical and *generative*. When trying to make sense of our environment, we look for general categorical clues and then generate or create the associated category for naming (and recalling) the item, person, or event. After hearing a few words, your mind leaps to the association “sleep” as the central concept under which to group the words. You open a mental file called “sleep” and store the words in it. You likely recall “sheep” and “eat” because they are outliers to the category you just created—they don't fit, so they float around. You're less likely to recall all the other sleep words, because you lumped them together under “sleep” and now they're just background.

Not only are we mindless, and imperfect recorders of our environment, but also we make things up. Langer (1990) defines *mindlessness* as unthinkingly using a few symbolic cues to fill in the blanks. Specifically, once we've settled on a categorical association (i.e., naming), we are likely to “recall” features associated with the category and ignore details that don't fit the category. We do this because it's

efficient (Langer calls us “cognitive misers”) and so that we don’t have to pay close attention to everything in our environment. We navigate our way through life by making categorical assessments and responding according to socially learned corresponding associations. For the most part, this serves us well. We can be efficient in our thinking, and we don’t have to experience everything directly in order to know what the situation requires of us. When you enter a classroom, for example, the category *classroom* implies a particular set of behaviors, roles, and expectations. You fall into a behavioral response that is routine, or mindless. When walking down the street, we classify people according to their type of clothing, posture, age, and so on. Based on these cues, we make quick assessments based on categorical associations (e.g., white, well-dressed, older, gray hair = gentleman = safe). We do this in the blink of an eye and largely without thinking about it. This ability for categorical associative thinking enables us to move quickly and efficiently through our daily encounters. It also means that most of our behavior is guided by stereotypes.

## Stereotypes and Default Assumptions

Throughout her career, Langer has studied the implications of our reliance on cognitive categorization through learned social classifications—in other words, stereotyping. This is the way humans think and make sense of the stimuli around us. We use a general naming process (categorization) to assign meaning to people, things, and events and then form judgments and behave accordingly. And, for the most part, we do this mindlessly. Much of the time, our stereotypical assessments are relatively accurate and provide us with recognizable routines for navigating the environment. The problem is that once we lock into a category or stereotype, we are likely to enhance (or even make up) details that fit the stereotype and possibly overlook information that would prompt us to reconsider our initial assessment. For instance, when people are briefly shown pictures of a woman sitting in a restaurant and told she is a “librarian” and then asked what details they recall, they tend to respond with stereotypical details (e.g., wearing glasses, has a book). In one experiment, the woman is not wearing glasses, but respondents almost always remember her wearing glasses. Wearing glasses fits the associative cluster or the stereotype of “librarian.”

Memory and perception are unreliable, because we are so dependent on stereotypical thinking. In a book on how to be more *mindful*, Langer (1990) advises us to become familiar with the unexamined associations that make up much of our early learning and to practice being more discerning in our everyday interactions. Langer has applied her insights into later-in-life care for persons who are aging. She notes that a stereotypical approach to the “elderly” is to assume physical and mental decline. These assumptions result in care environments that may actually lead to decline, even if it wasn’t inevitable (See Part VI, on self-fulfilling prophecies). Langer has advocated for changes in these environments that reframe the “patients” as “residents” living in their “homes” and capable of caring for things (nurturing plants and pets, for instance).

Douglas Hofstadter (1986) is another scholar who writes about stereotypical thinking. He discusses what he calls *default assumptions*. Default assumptions are preconceived notions about the likely state of affairs—what we assume to be true in the absence of specific information. Given no other information, when I mention “secretary,” you are likely to assume the secretary is a woman, because “woman” and “secretary” are associated stereotypically. In the absence of specific details, people rely on the stereotype as a default assumption for filling in the blanks. Default assumptions have a tendency, in Hofstadter’s words, to “permeate our mental representations and channel our thoughts” (p. 137). For instance, given the words “cat,” “dog,” and “chases,” you are likely to think first of a dog chasing a cat. This line of thought reflects a default assumption that, all else being equal, the dog is more likely to chase the cat than the other way around.

Default assumptions are rooted in our socially learned associative clusters and linguistic categories. They are useful in that people cannot always afford the time it would take to consider every theoretical possibility that confronts them. Nonetheless, default assumptions are often wrong. Default assumptions are only one type of language-based categorization. Hofstadter is particularly interested in race-based and gender-based categorization and default assumptions. For instance, if you hear that your school basketball team is playing tonight, do you assume it’s the men’s team? Most people would assume so unless a *qualifier* is added to provide specific information. In this case, the qualifier would be “the women’s basketball team is playing tonight.”

Language is a powerful reflection of cultural associations and stereotypes. These associations are revealed in the way we use language. The phrase “my Black doctor” reflects the cultural assumption that, all else being equal, the speaker knows that the audience does not expect the physician to be Black. A qualifier is added, “Black,” to offset the expected default assumption. Similarly, consider the practice of hyphenation in racial and ethnic labeling. Anglo-Americans rarely refer to themselves as such. Rather, the default assumption, in the absence of a qualifier such as “Japanese American,” is that an American is Anglo and white. The qualifier is considered unnecessary, because Anglo and white is assumed to be the default. One of the problems with default assumptions is that, in addition to being taken for granted, the categorical associations tend to include notions such as “normal” and sometimes even “culturally desirable.” In other words, default assumptions reflect deeply embedded, often taken-for-granted cultural hierarchies.

## Prejudice

What does all this have to do with prejudice? In 1954, psychologist Gordon Allport published a book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, that became a landmark in understanding ethnic prejudice as rooted in everyday cognitive functioning. The gist of Allport’s logic is “I think, therefore I’m racist.” This is my phrase, not Allport’s, but it neatly summarizes his theory in line with the discussion here. Our thinking is shaped by the linguistic culture we grow up in. When we learn the

meaning of things (the naming process), we are learning not only the name, but also cultural associations (associative clusters). We internalize these meanings and the corresponding cultural ideals, and they become the basis of our understanding of ourselves and others. Language is a cultural institution that denotes specific social classifications and hierarchies. In other words, when we learn language, we learn social divisions for differentiating groups of people, and we attach values and judgements to these groupings. These social divisions become stereotypical categories. In our everyday cognitive processes of making sense of those around us, we respond to them through stereotypical frames: The less we know about them personally, the more likely we are to interpret them stereotypically. As we have seen, U.S. English linguistic culture is deeply racist (as well as sexist), which means that people's default assumptions—the stereotypical thinking—when they encounter people who are not white (white = normal) will be racist. Allport observed that this racial prejudice would be particularly high among those in dominant group positions (i.e., white people), because, given their prejudice, this group would be unmotivated to engage across group lines and therefore unlikely to encounter insights that might challenge their prejudices.

Allport's theory was very robust when he wrote it, and it helped explain the strong fear and resistance among white groups to the civil rights movement. For Allport, overcoming prejudice—negative emotional reactions based on *unexamined* stereotypical categories—requires gaining *more accurate* information about other groups and effectively debunking stereotypes. Allport was not naïve; he didn't think this could happen overnight, and he realized that stereotypes have a tendency to become self-fulfilling. We treat people based on our preconceptions, regardless of how inaccurate, and end up creating a corresponding reality. Think about this in regard to contemporary movements, such as #BlackLivesMatter, motivated by well-documented prejudicial treatment of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color by law-enforcement officers. What has changed in the nearly 70 years since Allport's book? Are the stereotypes the same or different? What cultural changes do you see reflected in contemporary language regarding racism, sexism, and other social lines of difference and hierarchy?

## Conclusions

The Greek philosopher Epictetus is reported to have said, “What disturbs [people] are not things, but their opinions and fancies about things.” Our opinions and fancies about things come to us as part of language acquisition. We inherit cultural ideals and value systems, which we internalize, largely unthinkingly, as a process of learning how to name and classify our experiences. Human civilization would not be possible without language, and we would not be able to get through our days without the ability to survey and assess our environments categorically. The problem isn't the linguistic cognitive process itself; it's our mindlessness. Much of what we fear, loathe, and are inclined to avoid is rooted in associative conceptual clusters that came to us indirectly—we don't have much direct knowledge of many

of the things we deem undesirable, unclean, impure, and undeserving. Further, we carry an entire structure of social differentiation and hierarchies in our heads through our language, and yet we're largely unaware of this. We are beasts with stories on our backs (or in our heads). These culturally learned stories direct our attention and perception, they guide our organization and evaluation of experience, and they shape our memories and later recall. Importantly, they enable us to share (communicate) with one another—we wouldn't, couldn't be human without them. These storylines also trap us into preconceived stereotypical categories of thought and judgment that can be personally limiting and also deeply prejudicial.

The material in this section provides you with tools for comprehending and dismantling deeply rooted and largely unconscious structures of oppression. The limits and inequities of our culture are in our collective linguistic bloodstream, coursing through our everyday thoughts and encounters. The promise of this material is that we are *generative* creatures. We have the capacity to consciously examine the structure and content of our received stories; to investigate and refute stereotypes that reflect inaccurate and prejudiced associative clusters; to think more carefully about the default assumptions we hold and the social divisions they reflect and reinforce. We are language-based creatures, and we can generate new lines of thought and engagement.

## References and Suggestions for Further Reading

- Allport, G. (1954/1979). *The nature of prejudice*. Basic Books.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Prentice Hall.
- Doi, T. (1973). *The anatomy of dependence* (J. Bester, Trans.). Kodansha International.
- Fine, G. A. (1990). Symbolic interaction in the post-Blumerian age. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *Frontiers of Social Theory* (pp. 117–157). Columbia University Press.
- Hofstadter, D. (1986). *Metamagical themas: Questing for the essence of mind and pattern*. Bantam Books.
- Langer, E. (1990). *Mindfulness*. Da Capo Press.
- Moore, R. B. (1976). *Racism in the English language: A lesson plan and study essay*. Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Educators.
- Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct: How the mind creates language*. HarperPerennial.
- Sacks, O. (1987). *The man who mistook his wife for a hat and other clinical tales*. Harper & Row.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1961). *Thought and language* (E. Hanfmann & G. Vahar, Eds. and Trans.). MIT Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. With an introduction by B. Russell. Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Zerubavel, E. (1991). *The fine line: Making distinctions in everyday life*. Free Press.

# The Production of Reality

## Essays and Readings on Social Interaction

Seventh Edition

Jodi O'Brien



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320  
E-mail: [order@sagepub.com](mailto:order@sagepub.com)

SAGE Publications Ltd.  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP  
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.  
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044  
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.  
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12  
China Square Central  
Singapore 048423

---

Acquisition Editor: Jeff Lasser  
Product Associate: Tiara Beatty  
Production Editor: Astha Jaiswal  
Copy Editor: Will DeRooy  
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.  
Cover Designer: Rose Storey  
Marketing Manager: Jennifer Jones

Copyright © 2022 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

All third-party trademarks referenced or depicted herein are included solely for the purpose of illustration and are the property of their respective owners. Reference to these trademarks in no way indicates any relationship with, or endorsement by, the trademark owner.

Printed in Canada

ISBN: 9781544309347

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



21 22 23 24 25 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1