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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 reaches its apogee in 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.

## 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: 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 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.

## Words and commensality

The Urarina, with whom I have carried out a total of around two years of fieldwork since 2005, live in small villages dotted along the banks of the Chambira river and its various tributaries in low-lying, swampy terrain, deep in the Peruvian Amazon. Most villages are several days' travel by boat from the nearest towns, and people subsist mostly by hunting, fishing and small-scale, slash-and-burn horticulture (mostly plantains and manioc), supplemented by periodic short-term bursts of extractive labour for itinerant traders and entrepreneurs, undertaken in return for small quantities of manufactured goods. For a few years now, many are also recipients of the Peruvian government's program of conditional cash transfers. Though not as mobile as they were just a couple of decades ago, before land titling and the establishment of officially recognised, relatively long-lasting (though not entirely permanent) "native communities", Urarina still travel frequently to visit relatives; to harvest wild resources in lesser-frequented areas (ranging from palm hearts to timber to wild honey); and, often enough, change their place of residence, often in response to the squabbles and tensions that so often disrupt the apparent serenity of village life. Although few Urarina today could be described as active or practicing Christians – at the time of my fieldwork there were virtually no functioning churches, or indigenous pastors – there is something like a deep history of Christianization and missionization that generally remains well-hidden beneath the surface, but occasionally comes into view, as it seems to have left its mark on local mythology and cosmology<sup>1</sup>. This is most likely the result of a few decades of exposure to the activities of Jesuit missionaries towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup>. It is at least conceivable that this experience of contact has also influenced in some way Urarina theories of language and truth. On

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Jesuit historian Maroni, one Father Tomás Majano, using the neighbouring Cocama as intermediaries, managed to baptise some 200 Urarina in 1679, before they fled to the interior of the forest. In 1738, a mission was established on the upper Chambira river itself (Dean 2009: 91), and by 1745 the *reducción* of San Xavier de Urarinas had a population of 536 persons.

the whole, however, their views seem in many ways distinctly Amazonian, and indeed shared with a number of other peoples inhabiting the region.

The Urarina language itself does not make a lexical distinction between “language”, “word” and “speech”. All are referred to with the same term: *ere*. Speech is an important identifier in the sense that it makes people known or reveals who they are; each class of being, each species and ethnic group, has its own distinctive language, or way of speaking, which goes a long way in identifying it. Urarina refer to themselves as *cacha*, meaning “people” or “humans”, and to the Urarina language as *cacha ere*, simply “the language of humans”. In fact, we could say that to be human is precisely to speak human language. Each class of being has its own language, with which it is associated; thus Spanish, for instance, is referred to as *aansaiuru ere*, “the language of the wicked ones”. Within the Urarina ethnic group there are a number of recognisable dialects, loosely corresponding to geographical location, and to something like an endogamous nexus: that is, people seem more likely than not to marry within the dialect group. At smaller scales, language still has a similar kind of structuring and differentiating effect, even within the same dialect group: thus micro speech communities are continually being forged through common idioms and expressions, including widely-repeated joking terms or expressions that create a sense of community by excluding those not “in on the joke”<sup>2</sup>.

In short, then, speech constitutes communities at a number of scales, and is loosely akin to a practice of commensality, the action of eating together. Indeed, Overing and Passes (2000:xii) identified “speaking” as one of the so-called Amazonian “culinary arts”, along with the arts of feeding, working, and nurturing. This is no doubt also why speaking is such an important part of hospitality, and why speaking to a stranger is not taken lightly: two Urarina who don’t personally know each other would be unlikely to exchange words, unless they had to, and even family members

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<sup>2</sup> For the first couple of weeks of my fieldwork, for example, all the men in the village were in the habit of amusing themselves by shouting “pig trail” (*cojousi bero!*) anytime something went wrong, referring to an obscure but clearly amusing incident involving a pig that occurred just before I arrived.



who haven't seen each other for a while usually meet and greet each other in near-silence, only gradually warming to a free exchange of words. Ultimately, then, exchanging words creates not only a sense of common identity, but a kind of commensality, a community of kin who are in some deep sense alike. Yet the process is not perfectly symmetrical, at least not always, for again like acts of feeding or care, there is often a certain directionality involved, with one party primarily listening with the other one speaking. This is certainly the case in more stylised forms of speech, such as political oratory, where the words of a leader may be explicitly framed as a gift to others, who are not expected to reciprocate, at least not with words. Here, too, speech can be used to establish or display authority, even while it is explicitly thought to go a long way in creating and stabilising political communities and their boundaries<sup>3</sup>.

### **Materiality and Instrumentality**

In the Urarina view, at least much of the time, speech is not quite immaterial: it is rather its own kind of substance, one based in breath, *raka*, which circulates within the body, much like blood, and is closely related to people's vital energies. More generally, in fact, it seems to me that words and things are not considered to be radically distinct kinds of things. This should perhaps not be particularly surprising: after all, as Keane (2007) has argued, the sharp separation between words and things (or signifiers and signified) is closely linked to the work of purification characteristic of modernity, in which subjects are separated out from objects, much like culture from nature. This separation closely corresponds to the modernist ideal of the sincere speaker, whose words emanate

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<sup>3</sup> There is also a deeper sense in which communities are forged through talk, through the exchange of words. This is why, for instance, so much importance is placed on the somewhat quirky speeches by community leaders at festivals and sporting events, a key aim of which is to create a sense of stable, organised communities (see Walker 2013). This is a point made effectively by Janet Chernela, who has shown how women of the Northwest Amazon construct a "community of talk". As she puts it, "the community...emerges as a cultural artefact whose production is largely the work of women's speech interactions." (Chernela 2003:795; see also Chernela this volume).

from within, and are symbolic in their essence: hence uncovering the meaning of an utterance becomes a matter of reconstructing that speaker's intentions.

By contrast, the lack of a firm distinction between words and things is present in a number of areas of Urarina life. It corresponds to a very widespread sense that material and immaterial attributes are deeply interwoven: for instance, bodily substances are often held to convey subjective qualities. Thus the proper care of a newborn might often require the careful incorporation or ingestion of both material and immaterial substances in order to build up its body, and it is often difficult to differentiate one from the other (e.g. Walker 2009). Knowledge is not only grounded in the body; it can be acquired from, and is closely linked to, various external material sources, especially trees and plants (McCallum 1996). Thoughts can themselves be described as a kind of fluid, closely linked to the circulation of blood, and capable of reciprocally influencing a range of physiological processes (Fabiano 2015: 49).

Nevertheless, certain forms of discourse seem more material, more substantive, and at the same time more agentive than others. I have argued elsewhere (e.g. Walker 2016) that the most powerful forms of speech, or those seen as most authoritative, tend to be those thought not to originate with their speaker and her innermost thoughts, but rather from some other (hidden or higher) source - whether that be gods or government officials - with the speaker acting as a kind of mouthpiece or medium. In these cases, words are seen as hard or solid, detachable, and are not strongly connected to the state of mind of the speaker. This is true also of political oratory, a highly public and stylised form of speaking that is also relatively de-personalised, drawing on stock phrases and having little to do with the innermost will or thoughts of the speaker. Such speeches studiously avoid potentially dangerous opinions or emotions, and if good, are said to be "hard" and "straight" (*rauhicha*)<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ewart (2008) similarly observes of the Panará people of central Brazil that a person who speaks well is capable of "hard speech" and of "hard hearing". Vision is also a relevant sense modality to draw upon in evaluating speech: hence Panará people may evaluate speech as "beautiful" (public, open, audible to all) or as "ugly" (gossip).

At the other end of the spectrum are highly emotive discursive forms like ritual wailing that seem designed precisely to express or evoke an innermost state or feeling, allowing the speaker to embody a socially appropriate emotion on the occasion of a death. Here too, however, the “truth” of such speech has relatively little to do with what a person “really feels”, their “sincerity” as it were, and more to do with the extent to which such speech serves to reaffirm social alliances, absorbing people into each other. Yet such speech seems largely ephemeral, almost immaterial. In fact, it seems to me that speech is most thing-like, and most effective or instrumental, precisely when it’s most disconnected from a speaker’s thoughts. These are also the contexts in which the semiotic process is most explicitly conveyed through tropes of “eating” or “consumption”.

### **Liquefied song**

Let me illustrate with a relatively clear example, which pertains to a particular class of songs or chants used extensively for healing. Known as *baau*, these are especially commonly used for healing children suffering from mystical harm such as that caused by spirits or non-humans. In the prototypical scenario, a concerned mother will seek out someone with the necessary experience – perhaps the father, or an uncle or grandfather – who will whisper the right words into a small bowl of mother’s milk, or some other liquid, which is held carefully up to his mouth. With one hand supporting the bowl from below, the other hand covers over the opening to keep the freshly voiced words from escaping. In this way the words are said literally to enter into the milk, which is eventually fed to the infant. Once inside the body it “paints” or “dyes” the blood, thereby alleviating the worst of the symptoms. The words “spread out like gossip” within the body of the patient, entering the body “just like sugar dissolves in your coffee.”

In this example, then, words are quite explicitly consumed by the intended recipient, whose body adjusts accordingly, realigning itself to the world. No comprehension of the words by the patient is

assumed or necessary, and there is no question of reconstructing the original intentions of the speaker. While the incomprehensibility of ritual discourse has been highlighted by some as a strategic feature, the result of masking devices employed by the utterer (e.g. Severi 2002), here I am suggesting that the intelligibility of the words is entirely beside the point. In fact, the performative force of ritual chanting is often spoken about in terms of physical actions: words “rubbing down” a patient much as a shaman might massage an afflicted limb during a healing ceremony. The chant aims to “dye” the blood and the inner part of the patient’s body in much the same way, I was told, as palm fibres are dyed, before being woven. According to Fabiano (2015), *baau* are seen to have the ability to penetrate and transform the body because they are themselves akin to a bodily fluid, and because there is a transfer into the song of the speaker’s intentionality or subjectivity (*corii*, a term I have elsewhere translated as “shadow soul”). The song’s potency is thus directly correlated with the strength of the speaker’s *corii* and *acarera* (breath). Though I did not hear Urarina explicitly claim that therapeutic songs absorb or transfer a speaker’s *corii*, or shadow soul, it does appear that the song’s potency is somehow both linked to, yet disconnected from, the intentions of the speaker.

Similar kinds of practices appear to be widespread in the region. A virtually identical example can be found among the Desana: Buchillet (1992: 217-18) has described how the Desana shaman ‘recites an incantation of the opening of a gourd containing a liquid, or over a plant...he recites the incantation to himself while exhaling or blowing on the opening of the gourd or on the plant at certain precise moments of the incantation. The incantation is carried by his breath to this object. At the end of the cure, the kubu hands the gourd to his patient, who is expected to drink the contents.’. Yet if the words themselves are material, or substance-like, they also seem to carry within them not only the breath, but also something of the consciousness of the speaker herself. Hence Course’s (2009) claim that Mapuche people see song as allowing them to experience and incorporate the perspectives of others, or what he calls to “encapsulate subjectivities”. Because of the relatively fixity of a song, its text-like or object-like quality, the ‘voice’ of a song’s initial composer can be detached from the initial context of composition, but carried within it nonetheless as the song travels through time and

space, such that subsequent singers of that song come to absorb an imprint of the composer's subjectivity (2009: 306). Indeed, the power of songs lies precisely in the fact that they are at once "closed" or entextualised, and thereby able to convey something of the composer through time and space, and yet also "open" to being experienced anew by other singers and audiences.

In the case of the Urarina *baau*, my suggestion is that these songs effectively stage or dramatize an implicit theory of language – in which the speech and thus personhood of others may be literally consumed, absorbed into the body – that also operates in other contexts too. I would emphasise here that the verbs "to hear" and "to taste" are both expressed with the single Urarina term, *aonaa*, which I take to suggest precisely the closeness between these two sensory modalities. Whether heard or tasted, or perhaps both at once, words are absorbed into the body, causing a realignment of sorts, an attunement of perspectives, or a subjective shift. This is why speaking is truly one of the culinary arts, and why language is so powerful as an index of common being: much like sharing food, sharing words allows people to mutually inhabit one another, to belong to each other.

### **Oral Fundamentalism**

In making this claim, I am highly mindful of the importance of "eating" more generally in Amazonia, not only as a social process for making kin, people who share a common substance, but as what has been described as a "fundamental classificatory or logical operator" (Vilaça 2000:88, 103-4). As Vilaça puts it, "[i]nflexions in eating practice summon different modes of being an actor/having the capacity to act." Strathern (2012:1-2) further points out that eating is in fact applied by Amazonian peoples to many acts "that from an English-speaking perspective do not involve taking in food in any immediate sense". What gets captured by the activity of eating, suggests Strathern, ultimately becomes a question of belonging or mutual possession; which is why there are so many instances where incorporation or digestion is thought to lead to some form of identification.

This emerges fairly clearly in the case of cannibalism. In Viveiros de Castro's classic analysis of ancient Tupinamba warfare cannibalism, which functioned as "an elaborate system for the capture, execution, and ceremonial consumption of enemies", the killer would ostensibly steadily devour parts of his victim before entering into a period of mourning; from here he began to take on something of his victim's identity: to start to identify with him. What was ultimately eaten and then incorporated by the killer, suggests Viveiros de Castro, would thus seem to be not simply parts of the body of the victim, but something like his point of view:

What was eaten was not the body as a "thing", but the body as a sign with a purely positional value. What was eaten was the enemy's relation to those who consumed him; in other words, his condition as enemy. In other words, what was assimilated from the victim was the signs of his alterity, the aim being to reach his alterity as point of view on the Self. Cannibalism ... involves a paradoxical movement of reciprocal self-determination through the point of view of the enemy. (Viveiros de Castro 2009: 142-43).

Cannibalism thus becomes a kind of reproduction by semiotic capture, one in which "the other is internalised as a condition of the externalisation of the self." (*ibid.*: 176)

Yet if cannibalism was indeed primarily a question of acquiring or imposing a perspective, or point of view (Vilaça 2009:137), this was only one way of expressing the broader idea that "eating" in Amazonia "seems to be a general way of articulating the entailment of all kinds of entities in one another" (Strathern 2012:11). Such cases point to a widespread notion of semiotic capture where eating and meaning-making can be hard to separate; where eating itself is a form of interpretation, and vice versa. This claim casts new light on the close connection noted earlier between language and kinship or group identity: the possibility of consuming linguistic signs directly helps explain why exactly it is that sharing a language and sharing bodily substance are equally important as markers of group identity, for indeed the two are intrinsically related.

To the extent that my arguments for the Urarina might potentially extend to other parts of Amazonia, an interesting question concerns the role and significance of multilingualism, especially in light of the manifest importance of language for collective forms of identification and belonging. In fact, in those cases where multilingualism is most prevalent and well-known (the upper Vaupés region in Northwest Amazonia and the upper Xingu in Brazil) there is an especially strong sense that the language one speaks reflects the group to which one belongs. The very fact that no lingua franca has emerged in the Xingu, given such dense and long-term interactions, is even thought to reflect a reluctance to coalesce, an emphasis on maintaining distinct ethnic identities. Even when people find themselves speaking the same or similar languages, subtle variations in speaking style become key markers of difference<sup>5</sup>. In the Vaupés one finds similar patterns, perhaps taken even further: social identity is here linked to patrilineal descent, but this is established above all through language, because one always speaks the language of one's father (see also Chernela in this issue). Each language group is exogamous, which is to say, people are compelled to marry someone who speaks a different language to one's own (speakers of the same language are considered "brothers"). Yet although people thereby learn to understand at least two different languages, these are kept strictly separate, for mixing is strongly discouraged, and people are reluctant to speak languages not their own. Indeed, though a woman will go to live with her husband's group after marriage, she will continue to use her own language with other in-marrying wives and with her own children. In general, speakers make a concerted effort to maintain languages as separate systems, reflecting a concern to maintain ethnic and kin boundaries (Sorensen 1967)<sup>6</sup>. In short, then, multilingualism and

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<sup>5</sup> Fausto et al. (2008:143) write that "Comparisons between the speech of Carib groups and that of Arawak groups are fairly frequent. Thus, the Kuikuro, Kalapalo, Nahukwá and Matipu are said to speak 'in the throat,' 'inwards,' in contrast to the Wauja and Mehinaku, who speak 'outwards,' 'on the tip of the teeth'. These comparisons highlight articulatory qualities: the preponderance of dorsal, velar and uvular consonants among the former and the coronal and palatal sounds among the latter. This diacritical logic not only operates between peoples from distinct linguistic families, but also within the same language among its dialectical variants, which are seen as the end product of specific historical process of social fissioning."

<sup>6</sup> As Aikhenvald (2013: 56) writes, in the Vaupés, "exogamy itself is rooted in the distinction between consanguinity (identified with speaking the same language) and affinity (relating to speaking a different language)." Mixing languages is strongly discouraged.

linguistic exogamy strongly support the claim that to share a language and to speak it with another eventually means to share a common, corporeally grounded identity.

For this same reason we can better understand why the speakers of a particular language are often associated with the consumption of specific kinds of food: that is, why one goes hand in hand with the other. Hence remarks by Amazonian peoples that in order to learn a language one must eat that peoples' foods. This was what Matis people told Philippe Erikson, for example, when asked about how they learned the Marubo language: namely that sharing food with them was essential (Erikson, personal communication). The association holds too in cases where people speak a different language in different places: for example, a Kichwa person told Michael Wroblewski that if you go to a Kichwa village, "You will see people speaking Kichwa, drinking chicha, eating yuca, plantains. But in the city they do not, they drink cola, eat canned products, and speak Spanish. They do not want to drink chicha and eat traditional food." (Wroblewski 2010: 46-7).

### **Eating Words and Absorptive Truth**

It has been suggested, to this point, that the cultural emphasis on both speaking and eating that one finds among Urarina might be more closely interconnected than previously supposed, reflecting a certain sense that words, like food, are there to be consumed, as it were. This is literally true in certain ritual contexts, where the potent words of healers are actually mixed in liquid and fed to patients, but as a kind of general logic appears to underwrite a range of other practices. Yet a scan of the ethnographic and historical record reveals that the idea of eating words is actually remarkably widespread across time and space. Exploring some of these connections helps to reveal something of the specificity of the Urarina view, while also highlighting the common ground it shares with non-representational conceptions of truth elsewhere - especially in the Christian tradition – effectively



complicating any straightforward contrast between regionally and historically constituted language ideologies.

The idea of eating words can often appear simply to reflect or imply an analogy between oral and aural experience, where the former is used to conceptualise the latter. Thus it is relatively common, in English, to speak of eating one's words, meaning to retract what one has said or confess that one was wrong. Similarly, we might refer to food for thought, or of devouring a book, or of finding someone else's speech hard to digest. It is noteworthy however that to speak of eating or devouring words appears to have been especially widespread in ancient Roman culture, where orality in general – much like in Amazonia - was both highly salient and highly conceptually structured. Thus certain concepts of 'taste' were used to conceptualise the qualitative aspects of hearing, or to evaluate the style of a particular utterance or text. Similarly, concepts of 'flavour' could be used to designate the particular tone of someone's speech, its characteristics – the 'feel' of their words, as it were. Short (2009) suggests that this emerged from "a kind of metonymy between the ears and the mouth", because the two parts of the body were seen as inextricably linked through the process of linguistic communication, and thus conceptually close to one another. In other words, the ears came to be seen as a metaphoric mouth, in part because alimentary experience was a relatively concrete domain, as well as being highly experientially salient.

Yet there are also many cases where the eating of words is quite literal, rather than merely figurative or analogical. There are countless examples, many of them fictionalised, of people eating physical texts or scriptures if one cares to look for them: in *A Tale of a Tub*, Jonathan Swift describes an attempt to distil great vats of literature to an essence, in pill form; in the Hmu area of China, a legend tells how the Miao people acquired good memory by eating the script they had invented (Enwall 2008). Many examples may be found in religious contexts. Alberto Manguel describes a medieval Jewish initiation rite in which a boy was wrapped in a prayer shawl and given a slate on which was written the Hebrew alphabet and a passage from the Scriptures. The teacher read the

words aloud, the child repeated them, then ‘the slate was covered with honey and the child licked it, thereby bodily assimilating the holy words.’ (Paul 2009). Examples abound in the Christian Bible: in the Book of Revelation (10:8-10), John is given a scroll by a mighty angel and told to eat it: “So I took the small scroll from the angel's hand and ate it; and it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned bitter.” (*Revelation 10:10*). Ezekiel too learned the Word of God by eating a scroll: “So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. He said to me, "Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you." Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth. Then He said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them....”. Eating words is here taken quite literally as a possible mode of receiving them; yet we also find what appear to be more metaphorical usages: thus Psalm 119 (119:103): “How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!”. Or Jeremiah 15:16: “Your words were found and I ate them, And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.” Or Ezekiel 2:8: “Now you, son of man, listen to what I am speaking to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I am giving you.”

A little further investigation of the present-day English idiom of eating one’s words reveals this too to have a religious origin. One of the earliest known usages comes from a 1571 translation of Calvin’s commentary on the 62<sup>nd</sup> Psalm; the verse “Once hath God spoken it, I have heard it twice, that power belongeth to unto God” is explained in the commentary as “God eateth not his word when he hath once spoken it”. The word *not* eaten by the speaker here is the divine word, and the choice of metaphor implies that *we* are the ones to eat God’s words, not God himself (Bauer 2010:54). The ultimate reference is of course the sacrament: eating the host is eating the Word that was made flesh (John 1:14)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> In his analysis of the phrase, Bauer points to even earlier usage, from 1551, in a treatise by Thomas Cranmer, who defends himself against his opponents attack by telling him, “Brynge you for the some place in my booke, where I saye, that the lordes supper is but a bare signification without anye effecte or operation of god in the

## Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I wish to draw out some possible implications of these diverse visions of eating words, especially as one might construe them as implicating an alternative theory of truth and interpretation. In describing the Urarina view of language, I have contrasted it with a long-dominant view of language in the West, but then also compared it to some surprisingly similar ideas from around the world. My suggestion is that the Urarina not only place great emphasis on both eating and speaking, but in some contexts at least seem to view speech as something to be literally consumed, as a way of directly absorbing and incorporating part of the speaker. Yet this contrast is probably too overarching, too dichotomous. For as noted earlier, there is ultimately no “single” theory or ideology of language in either the West or among Amazonian Urarina, even though one or another theory might dominate in a particular context or at a particular point in time. It is clear that the notion of eating words is far from alien to the Western tradition, even though it seems to have been more or less systematically excluded from serious modern philosophical thinking about truth and interpretation, instead relegated to the realm of poetry and metaphor.

We might therefore suggest that if dominant modes of thinking about truth in the West have tended to construe it as largely a matter of representation – of the relation between mind and reality, or statement and fact – there is nevertheless also an alternative but nevertheless recognisable tradition in Western thought, one “that construes truth as something that cannot be articulated through speech, but only more direct or immediate ways. Alongside the view of truth as an alignment of intellect and thing or statement and fact, there is a less-acknowledged, though important, sense of

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same, or else eat your woordes agayne.” Cranmer wants to stress that to him the lord’s supper is not a mere word without substance or *res*, a “bare signification”, as his Roman Catholic antagonist accuses him of maintaining: Eating the host is eating the Word that was made flesh (John 1:14). “Cranmer uses the metaphor (to eat one’s words) sarcastically to remind his reader of the literal truth of eating the divine word, which is a synonym, and not a metaphor, of being “fedde and nourished with Christes verye fleshe and bloode”. (Bauer 2010:55).

absorption-based truth.” (Sloterdijk 2006: 521). Sloterdijk is referring here to the Christian Mass or Eucharist which, he suggests, points to a concept of truth concerned less with the representation or the imagining of some matter in a different medium, and more with the absorption or integration of one matter into a different matter. If representational truth is concerned with the alignment of mind and world, or statement and fact, this absorption-based truth aims instead for an equivalence of sorts between container and contained – or devourer and devoured (*ibid.*: 521).

My suggestion is that if such a view now has a submerged or subaltern status in the Western mainstream, something resembling it may nevertheless predominate among the Urarina, where there is relatively little emphasis on the intentions of speakers and where language is conceived, not as an abstract code, but as something intrinsically connected to the body of the speaker. Hence Nuckolls’ (1996: 129) observation that neighbouring Quechua speakers ‘use the body to intensify their participation in the perceptual process they stimulate. The body becomes a resonance chamber for the sounds, rhythms, and processes of the natural world’. Or as Kohn puts it, ‘Runa tend to see talk primarily as experience and less as a way to represent it’ (Kohn 2002: 117). Rather than the hearer imagining or reconstructing, in her own mind, the intentions of a speaker, the two, through words, participate directly in each other.

Such a view of interpretation seems especially appropriate given the nature of social interaction in so-called “high-context cultures”, where people share a very strong common background of experience. Such contexts often allow many things to be left unsaid, as they are implied and immediately understood in the course of interaction (Sammut and Moghaddam 2014:992). This contrasts with so-called ‘low context cultures’ – such as our own - where more explicit articulation of individual orientations may be required, because people have different backgrounds and experiences. In other words, a theory of truth focusing on intentions correlates with a social context in which there is potentially relatively little by way of shared context, thereby demanding careful attention to a speaker’s intentions or intended meaning, because little can be taken for granted.

Where much of social practice is habitual and matter-of-fact, by contrast, and relies on similarly enculturated subjects “who are in a position to interrelate on the basis of immediate and nonconscious meanings of commonplace objects and events without having to deliberate upon them” (Sammut and Moghaddam 2014: 992), there is no need to take conscious, reflexive thought as the starting point of social interaction. Instead, there is scope for meaning to appear directly as a property of an object, just as any of its physical properties might (Daanen and Sammut 2012).

Such is the case, perhaps, for the view of speech that prevails in the Urarina imagination, a view geared towards building absorptive and participatory relationships rather than on staking a claim to representational truth. I have suggested that the semiotic process might in this case best be represented through the trope of consumption. What is at issue, in terms of truth, is perhaps less a matter of whether a statement accurately represents the external world, and more whether the participation that ensues is appropriate - and therefore life-enhancing – or inappropriate, and therefore dangerous. In this view, all eating is a semiophagy of sorts; or put differently, all signs are ripe for the eating.

Then again, I might be wrong – in which case I’ll just have to eat my words. Or should that be your words?

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