Plant Talk: Some Notes on the Botanical Bent of American Language

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Language is perhaps the most important nonmaterial element in a culture, both in terms of its functionality for a society and what it can reveal about a society to outsiders. Language is said to provide sociolinguists with a “window on society,” and that “...subtle and not-so-subtle linguistic differences are closely correlated with social differences” (Aceves and King, 1979). An examination of a specific language usually will give insight into the concerns, emphases, and major themes of a society. As Aceves and King stated:

The vocabulary of a language may also reflect everyday distinctions in the society. Those aspects of culture that are especially important to a people tend to receive greater attention in the language. It has been suggested, for example, that the heavy emphasis on verbs in the Navajo language is connected to their nomadic Lifestyle over centuries.

Language and cultural emphasis

Eskimos, according to anthropologists, demonstrate considerable cultural attention to snow because of their existence and survival in a cold environment with frequent, heavy snowfalls. As a result, Eskimos have an elaborate vocabulary for snow, with special

words indicating subtle distinctions in the types and characteristics of snow, snowfall, and other frozen precipitation (Hiller, 1933). Solomon Islanders have terms for different types of coconuts and their different growth stages because of the importance of the coconut in their lives and culture (Lewis, 1936). Various Arabic societies have thousands of words for camels because of the cultural centrality and reliance on this animal (Klineberg, 1954).

These examples and other such emphasis are usually general in context and are reflected in the speech patterns of many members of a society, not just a few persons with specialized interests. However, these assertions (i.e., members of certain societies have extensive, specialized vocabularies that permit them to perceive minute differences in some situational elements, such as snow) recently have been labeled a hoax (Pullum, 1991). Pullum (citing another author) contends that Eskimos simply string words together rather than develop a specialized vocabulary. However, for example, many collectors have highly specialized vocabularies that permit them to differentiate easily between subtle, but different, categories of objects in a collection, and there is reason to believe that societies do the same.

Cultural emphases of American language

In American society, many subjects receive special emphasis in the language due to cultural preoccupations, priorities, and inclinations. For example, Americans have an elaborate vocabulary pertaining to automobiles and sports. Traditionally, the American language has had a preoccupation with firearms (e.g., “I’ll be a son-of-a-gun,” “You’re a straight shooter” or “You’re right on target,” “Don’t go offhalf-cocked,” “Don’t get in the line of fire,” “He shot off his mouth,” or “Keep your powder dry”). Another less obvious, but still pervasive, cultural theme evident in the American language is the quantitative orientation of descriptive speech, with

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its emphasis on volume, size, numerical indicators, and magnitude.

The language of the United States also has a zoological connection, suggesting the considerable influence of and preoccupation with animals in our society (Bryant, 1979). Finally, American culture and, therefore, its language also manifest some degree of preoccupation with plants (Bryant, 1991). American language contains innumerable allegorical and figurative references, words, labels, phrases, analogies, metaphors, and similes suggestive of plants and plant-related behavior. The botanical influence in American language is pronounced and pervasive.

The botanical connection

The American language employs many plant-related phrases and words to describe the vicissitudes of life. When things go well, life is a "bed of roses" or "a bowl of cherries." When misfortune and turmoil occur, life becomes a "bed of thorns." An untenable situation puts us "out on a limb" or "up a tree." A dilemma is a "thorny" problem, and a really difficult task is a "tough nut to crack." Plans that did not work out as expected have gone "haywire." When a work process breaks down and tasks pile up, a "log jam" occurs. Misfortune, retribution, or punishment for a spiteful act or nonconforming, hedonistic behavior is "reaping what one sows." Taking advantage of a fortuitous situation is "making hay while the sun shines." The ferocity of competition in everyday life makes it "a jungle out there!" When an individual is successful, he/she may speak of standing in, or being in, "high cotton," "tall cotton," or "clover." If things go awry, however, just remember that nobody "promised you a rose garden." If there are still problems to be resolved, you are "not out of the woods," and since time may be short, you should "gather ye rosebuds while ye may."

Americans are attracted to plants and find beauty in their various forms. This attraction is reflected in the many people/plant comparisons. A child may be "cute as a cucumber" or "pretty as a posy." A person may have "lily-white skin," an "apple-pie face," "almond eyes," "lips like cherries," or "rosy cheeks." A tall, slender person may be referred to as "willow." Blond hair with a slight reddish tinge is called "strawberry blond." Exceptionally fine hair may be described as "corn silk." Some plant comparisons are descriptive rather than complimentary, such as referring to a red-headed youngster as a "carrot top" or a child with very light-blond, almost-white hair as a "cotton top." A person who has gained weight may be described as "pear-shaped."

Botanical references often are used to describe or label human behavior, tasks, and interactions. Engaging in routine, vocational work may be termed "laboring in the vineyards." After years of such effort, one should be able to indulge in a few luxuries, i.e., enjoy the "fruits of their labor." Obtaining information through informal channels is referred to as "hearing it through the grapevine." Introducing conflicting information or contradictory evidence into an argument "plants a seed of doubt." Belittling another person's successes or acquisitions may be a case of "sour grapes." To be especially laudatory or complimentary is to "gild the lily." Resolving a problem before it has serious consequences means "nipping it in the bud." When people hesitate to come to the point, they "beat around the bush." Reaching an effective and definitive solution requires "getting to the root of the problem." We "weed out" unwanted or superfluous objects or persons. To "plant one" on someone is to kiss or even strike them. Creditors may constantly seek payment of our due bills, but everyone knows "you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip." Just "raise cane" to have an error in a bill corrected. Engaging in riotous or hedonistic behavior (particularly of a forbidden variety) is "sowing wild oats" or "tasting forbidden fruit." A successful gardener has a "green thumb." To avoid sickness, one is advised that "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." Investigating your genealogical background is tracing your "family tree" or looking for family "roots." Some individuals may also "tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree" to signal that they are faithfully waiting for a missing loved one.

Botanical terms and phrases are used to compare types or categories of individuals and aspects of their lives. The best of the younger generation is referred to as the "flower of youth." The inexperienced, naive, or unsophisticated are "green as grass," and during the Vietnam war, newly arrived and inexperienced soldiers were "cherries." Individuals from rural areas are pejoratively termed "hay seeds." A passive spectator of television is a "couch potato." A parent's favorite child is the "apple of his/her eye." Peace-oriented hippies were "flower children," and their impact on the political scene was called "flower power." A person who acts or speaks in an irrational fashion (even with sarcastic intent) may be labeled "nuts," "out of his/her gourd," "out of his/her tree," or "gone bananas." An eccentric individual may be called a "real fruit" or "fruitcake," and a slow-witted person may be termed a "beanhead." A disreputable person is a "seedy character." A child with physical, temperamental, or behavioral characteristics similar to a parent is

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a “chip off the old block” (presumably a wooden block).

Botanical comparisons creep into every aspect of life. A politician with a constituency at the local level has “grass roots” support. In listening to political arguments, we should “separate the wheat from the chaff.” If we cannot discern the obvious, perhaps “we can’t see the forest for the trees.”

An overly possessive girl/boyfriend is called a “clinging vine,” and an unresponsive person is a “bump on a log.” Two persons who display similar physical or behavioral characteristics are sometimes called “two peas in a pod.” A person who has no dates may be termed a “wall flower.” Unsophisticated persons are “rough as a cob,” and an annoying or irritating individual is a “thorn in our side” or a “burr under our saddle.” An unfatigued person is “fresh as a daisy.” When we are embarrassed, we often turn “red as a beet.” Large or unflattering ears may be called “cauliflower ears.” A youngster tends to grow “like a beanstalk,” but ultimately becomes “sturdy as an oak.” Even in an exaggerated fish story, there may be a “kernel of truth.”

In making an observation or emphasizing a point, a botanical analogy may be used to communicate the message more effectively. Skeptical information is sometimes labeled a “hill of beans.” An unoriginal or unimaginative statement is “corny.” For persons who are never content with their lot, “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.”

There is great symbolic import in some botanical phrases. To make peace with someone, one may “extend the olive branch.” The phrase “hearts and flowers” is often used when referring to romance. Easy, undemanding work is a “shade-tree job,” suggesting that the job is sufficiently undemanding to permit occasional naps under a tree.

These examples of “plant language” are not an exhaustive inventory. However, they illustrate the pervasiveness of botanical terminology in American language.

Some social scientists have undertaken a more systematic investigation of plant-related language. Psychologist Robert Sommer (1988) conducted a study of botanical metaphors—“botanomorphs,” as he terms them—that reflect human characteristics. His study revealed widespread folk use of metaphors, including botanical metaphors, to describe personality and physical attributes (e.g., calling an inexperienced person a “cherry” or a “green pea”). Sommer states that folk descriptions of personality are not “. . . accidental but originate in important social transactions.” Accordingly, he contends that folk botanomorphs can provide special insight into mental processes, personalities, and social interactions.

The “roots” of plant talk

Some American slang with botanical nuances undoubtedly originated in European languages, including Anglo-Saxon. Just as the English language is an amalgam of different languages and dialects, the American language is a variation of English with a mixture of other languages and dialects. After all, such commonly used words as *toupee*, *coupe*, *milieu*, *rendezvous*, *liaison*, and *ambience* are derived from the French, and other common words, such as *barbecue*, *mesa*, *taco*, and *adobe*, are of Spanish origin. Many authorities speak of American English (Baugh, 1957; McCrum et al., 1986; Pei, 1967). In some countries, language schools, such as Berlitz, may even offer British English or American English (McCrumb et al., 1986). Mencken’s (1980) monumental *The American Language* details the development of this variation of English.

Languages are always growing and absorbing. They reflect the cultures and experiences of the people that make up a society. The English language, and specifically the American language, reflects rural and agrarian experiences. America was a thickly vegetated wilderness with bountiful flora and fauna when first settled. The early pioneers relied on the indigenous flora for their needs—trees for log cabins, herbs and roots for medicinal remedies, wild fruits and berries to supplement their diet of game and fish, pine straw for bedding, and vines for weaving baskets. Until the late 1800s America was an agricultural society, and its culture reflected this orientation. Food and materials that could not be obtained from the forest had to be raised—cotton for spinning cloth, tobacco for smoking, garden vegetables and grains for food, hay for livestock fodder, and gourds for drinking implements. Children made toys from plants—cornhusk dolls, may pops, sling shots, and vines for swinging. Given the abundance and utility of plants in everyday life, it is not surprising that botanical references occur frequently in language.

America is still a world leader in agricultural production (the leading nation in some agricultural crops and products), but it no longer has a culture and social life built on agriculture. Today, three-quarters of the U.S. population live in urban areas. In 1930, nearly 25% of the population actually lived on farms, while only 2.5% lived on farms by 1983. Even as recently as 1960, only ≈7% of the total employed labor force were farm workers, and by the early 1980s, this figure had declined to 2.9%. At the same time, farm operators (owners or renters) and farm managers comprised only 1.4% of the labor force (Palvalko, 1988). In the 20th century, the

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kiss under the mistletoe. Many people send flowers to sick friends and sometimes plant a tree on Arbor Day. We arrange flowers to beautify the interiors of our homes, and water the lawn and plant shrubs to make the outside of our homes attractive. Military and hunting clothing are made to look like plants for purposes of concealment.

Plants are a part of common-place, daily behavior. They are also often at the center of political dissension and controversy. Smoking tobacco is the topic of heated, social debate today, as is smoking marijuana. “Clear-cutting” and other forestry practices have their vocal critics and active opponents, and logging interests vs. the protection and preservation of the spotted owl has generated a political dilemma of some significance. Darley (1990) has asserted that, in the area of social priorities, animals invoke more public concern than plants. In the spotted owl vs. logging interests controversy, some sentiment leans toward saving the bird rather than saving the trees, but, in fact, the owl is being “used” to save the trees, since those trees are not protected as endangered species. After the discovery that an extract derived from the bark of the Pacific yew tree may be useful in treating breast cancer, there seems to be little public concern that the yew tree may be destroyed in the wild to satisfy the demand for the medicine it provides. Such writers have termed this concern with animals over trees “animal chauvinism.” The U.S. government, as a matter of international policy, now is assisting some foreign governments in the destruction of crops that can be processed into narcotics, to the great discomfort of the peasant populations that raise these crops. In short, the human/plant interface can be a matter of serious, social consequences.

Conclusions

Plants influence human behavior. They are a central part of the culture of most societies. We must remember that we are not atomized elements in a social system; we are organic components in that system. Therefore, our perceptions and interpretations of our experiences are essentially those of the social system itself. Since plants are a part of the social, as well as the physical, world, it is not

surprising that language incorporates the existential imprinting of the botanical reality. “Plant talk” is simply a manifestation of the collective historical consciousness expressed metaphorically.

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