Cloud-Cuckoo Land

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The literary world might have had enough of T.S. Eliot, but one of his ideas, namely, that nothing is or can be a substitute for anything else (1933), does not seem to have attracted much attention. If true, we must indeed be living in a make-believe world, since so much of it is filtered across to us through the symbols we use all the time as substitutes for things.

The opening premise is that our symbols, be they for language as in words, or for commensuration as in numbers, can fall short of the things they are supposed to represent. The second premise is that they can straddle, vault across and go veering crazily beyond the things they are supposed to represent. Because of imbalances in both functions, and in the way we use them, they can misdirect us.

Let us first consider numerical symbols, the basic tools of one human field of measurement, quantification and cogitation called mathematics. Things happen in the real world that cannot happen in the world of numbers. For example, we can have a "minus one" in the world of numbers, but not a "minus apple" in the real world. And for moving objects, if Mr. X fires a well-aimed bullet at Mr. Y, it will penetrate some part of his body and cause severe damage. Yet mathematically this is impossible. In fact it is impossible for the bullet to leave the pistol. It is impossible for it even to even begin to move down the barrel. We remember that old demonstration that the hare can never overtake the tortoise, or that a fast object cannot overtake a slow one. That particular problem is generated in considering two moving entities. However, even between two fixed points we cannot get round the difficulty. To traverse any distance, a moving object would first have to cross the halfway point. Then it would have to cross the halfway point of the remaining distance. And so on—there is always some distance left to cross even after a thousand or ten thousand (or any number you can think of) halfway points have been crossed. Mathematical points have no dimension, so they do not accurately represent points in the real world. And of course, if mathematical points have no dimension, no matter how many of them we put together we cannot produce *distance* of any kind. The result is a piece of impeccable mathematical logic, namely, that motion is an illusion. But this is not confirmed by experience: distances do exist, things do move around in the real world.[1] Which should we accept, the logic of our minds when we play around with our own symbols, or the evidence supplied

through our senses from the world around us? And why are the two not congruous?

We should not need to be reminded that an arbitrary squiggle on a piece of paper or a puff of air through our speech organs is not the same as the thing it represents—nine things are of course, larger in quantity than six things. However, the number 9 is not larger than the number 6, it simply *represents* a larger amount; and if we use words rather than numbers, "ten" is not smaller than "seven," although it has one syllable less in speaking, and looks a good bit smaller in writing. Indeed, we should not need to be reminded of these basic facts, but some people tend to act as if symbols are fully representative of things. Some people, in fact, tend to act as if they are the same.

The disconnections are evident. Occasionally, though, on the *productive* side we have conjunctions. For example, that twentieth-century triumph of how a piece of mathematical logic could lead to real events, namely, Einstein's E=MC [squared], that the energy contained in matter is equal to its mass multiplied by the speed of light squared. Regardless of what we do on paper (or in our heads if we have that kind of brain), where we can multiply things, or square them, or raise them to any power we want, we might ask, if the speed of light is the ultimate, how can we possibly *multiply* it by anything, how can we possibly *square* it in the real world? Nevertheless, scientists assure us that continuing experimentation tends to confirm the general soundness of Einstein's insights, and that this equation is a reasonably true representation of the enormous amount of energy contained in matter. This is an example of a successful, though rather surprising movement from mathematical logic to fact.

And again, on the other side, we have the impeccable mathematical belief that if you divide a number by half, you will get double the number. Try it in the real world. Divide a dollar by half a dollar and see if you get two dollars. Better still, divide it by a millionth or a trillionth of a dollar: the smaller the fraction, the bigger it becomes. Nice--all people will soon be infinitely rich! But alas, this does not work in the real world. Here we have an example of an unsuccessful production from logic to fact. [Homeopaths claim that this is how they titrate their medicines--a lot of people are puzzled to learn that in homeopathy the more you weaken a drug the stronger it becomes].[2]

Let us look at our verbal symbol making. At the *receptive* level, by which one means where the brain creates symbols for things it encounters in the real world,[3] there are reasonably satisfactory conjunctions provided strong associations and, more importantly, limited associations are developed. In imagination let us reconstruct a small incident in human pre-

history that might well be representative of some language events. A small, wandering tribe encounters a strange, horse-like animal with long ears. The Mr. Know-all leader has to prove his leadership, so he states superciliously (as though he knew all along) that it is a "donkey," creating a verbal symbol in a brief explosion of noise through his speech organs concocted on the spur of the moment: his followers obediently nod their heads: and so it becomes the accepted substitute for that animal among those people and their descendants.[4] Had the leader been truthfully cautious he would have said, "O faithful followers—I hereby offer a sound-symbol which you may associate with that animal, but never, repeat never, say that that animal is a donkey." Language gives us that dangerous little word "is" and its variants. However, thus far, at the receptive level, the human impulse to name things seems valid, and remains valid if the primary association, and only that association, is maintained. To this extent we can say, though cautiously, that our symbols are fairly reliable.

However, things also happen inside our brains: we juggle with our own symbols in different settings. Our symbols also create facts, some verifiable, as in Einstein's formula mentioned earlier, some partly verifiable, and some unverifiable. At the *productive* level we find several disjunctions. We can play around with symbols to our hearts' content. What we do with them might or might not reflect truths in the real world. Many things can happen to a word as it moves from generation to generation, even within one generation. We manipulate the symbol in ways that we cannot do with the real thing. We give it meanings, attributes and functions that go well beyond the original association. For instance, we can use the word "donkey," not for the long-eared animal, but for a foolish person, taking it into the field of metaphor. We can give it abstract qualities. We can move it into areas a real donkey can never go. We can make abstract claims about it that cannot be verified. We can toss it around with other symbols, fracturing and distorting their ordinary functions in our verbal structures, as poets often do. Our poor donkey is confined to its own living imperatives. However, detached from it, our symbol is flexible and wide-ranging. The upshot of this is that what we think is necessary and logical might or might not be so, Sherlock or no Sherlock.

We live in a self-created symbolic world that in part represents the world at large (the verifiable or partly verifiable part), and in part has nothing or very little to do with it (the unverifiable part). However, both parts have a great deal to do with *us*. And, because they emerge from the same source and are used in the same way, both parts are likely to be treated by us in the same way. Herein lurks one of language's dangers. Because the symbol-referent association can, through frequent use,

become very strong, the mere existence of a symbol tends to bequeath existential substance on something that might not exist at all, and the manipulations that we do with the symbol are likely to be attributed to that non-existent something. This is implied in some of our most down-to-earth utterances. As mentioned earlier, we think nothing of describing someone as a "donkey" rather than specifying his assumed intelligence in a literal manner. The metaphor employed here conveys a subtle collection of attitudes and associations that would not come across in a literal exposition. In a sense all language is metaphorical and associative in that arbitrary though widely accepted phonological or graphic symbols are used as substitutes for things in themselves. As Lakoff (1987, p. 79) states, ". . . social stereotypes are cases of metonymy—where a subcategory has a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole . . ."

This might seem more to do with social stereotypes of professions such as the label "banker," but in a sense all linguistic labels have elements of social stereotyping. When we use "tree" for a natural phenomenon, the word (a widely-known linguistic symbol) becomes a substitute, a stand in, for the given phenomenon. It represents what we conceive to be the essence of that phenomenon. It gives shape to a concept by using a structure of consonants and vowels. At the same time it may add dimensions (through the working of some kind of "affective" fallacy) of its own, or ignore aspects that are of little interest to us. What we consider to be a tree's "beauty" or "usefulness" is clearly subjective and affective rather than descriptive of inherent characteristics. *Human responses, agendas, wishes, ambitions, errors, fancies, interpretations and associations are grafted on to the concept*. These elements subsist in common discourse. It is not often that we are aware of this aspect of everyday speech. We see it in the fanciful mythologies of some ancient (and not only ancient) tribes and cultures—names, given in the same way as we do to things for which some confirmation is received through the senses, to things the existence of which no corroboration is received through the senses, followed by a reinforcement of the realness of those unreal things through detailed descriptions and anecdotes about them. A word supplies shape or substance to something that might not have such attributes. A word is an inherently misleading thing.

The foregoing can be illustrated through examples. I can say, "Eleanor was Ike's wife," and be fairly sure that, with confirmation received through hearsay and written material coupled with corroboration from historical and other sources, I am stating something true, even though these people no longer exist. This statement falls into the verifiable or partly verifiable part of our symbolism, and can, with some reservations, be affirmed.[5] However, using the same language construction I make a

similar assertion when I say "Hera was Zeus's wife," but this statement falls into the unverifiable part of our symbolism. The fact that a long time ago a few million people in ancient Greece *believed* it to be true, did not make it true. Most of the six (or whatever) billion people living on Earth today would deny that it was true. However, numbers and beliefs cannot be cited to support or demolish such a statement. It cannot be affirmed. It cannot be denied.

The word metonymy means the process of giving "another name" to something (meta= change, beyond or another; nym= name and y=process), a kind of substitution of one thing for another (Crystal, 2004, pp. 290-291). This might entail using a characteristic or a well-known relationship for something. "Palace" might be used for "king," (as in "the palace rejected the proposal") or "house" might be used for the combined opinions, decisions or recommendations of a group of decision-makers (as in "the house recommended a small increase in taxation . . .").

We see this happening everywhere, all the time, but especially in fields of human interaction that require a degree of persuasion. Language for "persuasion" can be found at every level, even the most mundane ones—the child trying to persuade his parents to buy some toy, the father trying to persuade his son to do better at school, the mother trying to persuade her daughter to help with household chores, the teacher with his/her students, the student with his/her teachers, everywhere and all the time. However, the most prominent domains of human activity concerned with persuasion are, broadly (1) the power structure in a given society, (2) commerce and the whole field of buying and selling, (3) religion and the dissemination of moral and spiritual principles for society, and (4) literary writings.

Using language for purposes of persuasion was once taught as a skill to people defending themselves in courts of law in ancient Greece, and later, in medieval times in many parts of Europe, for purposes of converting people and disseminating religion. Its most obvious usage is in the political power game—if rulers can persuade people to accept their rule; their job becomes easier, less fraught with danger. Leaders, even out-and-out dictators and absolute monarchs, have known this for a long time. The fist-waving demagogue, even if what he says is nonsense, is usually more effective than the cool-headed rationalist in persuading people to support him in the power structure.

The language of persuasion is fundamental to the whole area of trade and commerce. Traders want our money. Persuasion is as important here as it is in the power structure. Examples can be found in almost any advertisement. Mostly, we find the use of the *imperative* ("drink" so-and-

so, “buy” such-and-such) without softeners such as “please . . .” or “you would do well to . . .” This helps to create a kind of compulsion among prospective buyers by preempting their right of choice. *Repetition* is also a figure, one that helps to condition the buying public through continuous or frequent exposure. *Association* is also employed by linking a certain product with a certain name, so that a person buying a vacuum cleaner (an appliance) might think of it as an “xxx” (the name of a widely successful manufacturer). *Metaphors* and *similes* abound.

Religious texts also tend to be very rich in substitution figures. The inherent difficulty of explaining absolutes and eternals to ordinary people limited by temporal constraints and perceptions would generate a need to use mundane, concrete parallels. Thus (Mark 4, pp. 30-32):

> 31 It [the Kingdom of God] is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds in the earth:
> 32 But when it is sown, it groweth up and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches . . .

Metaphorical substitution also shows up strongly in literary works. An endless number of examples can be found--Prince Hamlet (in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, by William Shakespeare, Act I, scene 2) gives us this strange construction: “Frailty, thy name is woman” in place of the straightforward, “women are frail.” This is an example of how we can play around with the elements of language. A characteristic is inverted with the subject. It is personified and accorded a concrete predicate (the subject).

Metonymic[6] substitution is in operation all the time. It is useful for explaining things to others, especially when the audience is not familiar with the speaker’s subject. Describing, amplifying, illustrating or explaining things in terms of other things is done all the time. The basic structure of a sentence is associative and substitutive in that the predicate says something about the subject, thus linking one idea with another. In saying something as basic as, “he is a carpenter” we move the subject away from the idea-in-itself (a certain man) to another idea (carpenter) asserted to be true of it, or assumed to be true of it, or commonly known to be true of it, or linked in some way with it in the predicate. As Fiske (1992, p.36) states: “All messages have to have an explicit or implicit metalinguistic function.”

Ours is a strange world extensively constructed out of substitution and of further substitution for substitution. This helps us to be flexible and creative. It also helps us to be stupid. If Eliot is right, we do indeed live in what Aristophanes (Birds) called *nephelococcygia*, cloud-cuckoo land.

Notes

[1]Attempts to bridge the real and the mathematical through infinitesimals for problems like this one suppose the existence of things of which no confirmation has been received to date, at least not in this writer's experience. A refutation of the assertion that the speed of light is the fastest in the universe might also be seen here--the rotation of the earth creates the effect of the universe revolving round the earth, and as you move outwards the speeds of objects must increase proportionately: very distant objects would have to be moving at speeds greater than the speed of light to complete one revolution of the earth. If the concept of *distance* is acknowledged, the speed of light logically cannot be the ultimate in the universe. We do not need the rotation of the earth for this--even if a snail twists slowly around itself, it generates relative speeds faster than the speed of light at distant points in the universe.

[2]Homeopaths will leap up clamouring that there is another important step involved in the preparation of their drugs. They call this *succusion*--between titrations the container is firmly struck several times against a padded board. Does this stimulate fractional division of the original solution and thus make it more potent? One has one's doubts, but homeopathy, which began in the eighteenth century, continues to have many followers round the world, including some prominent ones. Sceptics argue that homeopaths peddle small sugar pills treated with meaningless liquids, and that cures, if any, take place because of the body's self-curing abilities, and that the rest is just show-biz, atmospherics or the placebo effect.

[3] Hard-core philosophers would tell us that there might not be a real world out there, since all we have to go on is an inadequate array of physical senses interpreted by an unreliable neural system, that we might *think* there is a chair 'out there,' but that we could also be hallucinating even if our senses seem to support the notion. To a degree, however, we have to rely on those unreliable senses and brains. Even the most convinced of such philosophers would hesitate before jumping in front of a moving truck.

[4] This is true up to a point, of course. A word might become something far removed from the original within a few generations, both within the tribe and among descendants, especially those who travel away from the parent tribe. The original meanings associated with it might also undergo a lot of change.

[5]Once something has gone into the past it cannot really be affirmed. Some learned people have raised questions about the works of Shakespeare, for example, and even about the fact of his existence. This kind of doubt can be raised for all things past. How can we be sure that Confucius, or Newton, or Hannibal, or Alexander, or anyone (or anything) said to have existed in the past, really did so? All of what we call history, which begins as soon as the evanescent 'now' passes, might just be fiction.

[6]The writer is using metonymy in its broadest sense, which includes metaphor and synecdoche, although valid distinctions can be made. For those who are interested, Fiske (1992) and Bredin (1984) might serve to clarify these categories, which help in abbreviating, strengthening and providing new dimensions to the literal, the mundane and the ordinary. This might be seen as something good or as something bad. Either way, it is happening all the time.

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