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EATING YOUR WORDS:
'ORAL' METAPHORS OF AUDITORY PERCEPTION IN ROMAN CULTURE

However men may analyze their experiences within any domain, they inevitably know and understand them best by referring them to other domains for elucidation. It is in that metaphoric cross-referencing of domains, perhaps, that culture is integrated, providing us with the sensation of wholeness.

J. Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances*, 1986.

I. 'DEVOURING IS HEARING EAGERLY'

In Plautus's *Asinaria*, the clever slaves Libanus and Leonida decide to play a cruel trick on their master's son, Argyrippus, and the beautiful prostitute, Philaenium, whose freedom he wishes to purchase. In a humiliating game of role-reversal, they demand that the young man beg on hands and knees for the money they have already procured from the play's eponymous ass-trader for her emancipation. While other scholars have discussed, for example, how this scene portrays an inversion of the normal social order in Roman society¹, in this paper I focus instead on a particular turn of phrase in the text: *auscultate atque operam date et mea dicta devorate* «Listen here and pay attention, and devour my words»².

These words are remarkable less for what is said than for how it is said. Leonida, the speaker, tells Argyrippus and Philaenium not only to 'listen to' (*auscultare*) and 'pay attention to' (*operam dare*) the words he is about to utter, but also to 'devour' (*devorare*) them. Why does he (or better, Plautus) use this curious expression, and what does it mean? We can certainly understand *dicta devorate* as a vivid restatement of the imperatives *auscultate* and *operam date*, and so the metaphor may simply be an instance of what Adrian Gratwick referred to as the «exuberance of imagery» typical of Plautus's language³. However, as I demonstrate here, other evidence suggests that the metaphor of 'eating' words (and that in particular of 'devouring' words) was a more widespread and culturally significant phenomenon than this implies. In fact, in Roman culture, metaphors

¹ See esp. HENDERSON 2006, MCCARTHY 2000 and KONSTAN 1983.

² Plaut. *As.* 649.

³ GRATWICK 1982, p. 112.

drawn from *oral* experience – eating – appear to have constituted a coherent system not only for speaking but also for thinking about *aural* experiences – hearing.

Literary and linguistic evidence suggests that the metaphor of ‘devouring’ words was a conventional way for Latin speakers to talk about auditory experience. In Plautus’s *Poenulus*, for example, when Hanno, recently arrived to Calydon from Carthage, overhears Agorastocles and Milphio speaking of two courtesans «both... freeborn, *and* stolen away from Carthage» (*ingenuas ambas surrupcias Carthaginiensis*) – thus confirming their identity as his two long-lost daughters –, he exclaims: «Oh immortal gods, I do beseech your aid! What sweet speech my ears devour (*quam orationem hanc aures dulcem devorant*)!»⁴. Likewise, in *Aulularia* we hear Euclio, who has been listening in approvingly on Megadorus’s tirade against marriage and his wife’s extravagant spending habits, declare to this compatriot: «I have too eagerly devoured your speech (*nimum lubenter edi sermonem tuum*)!»⁵.

Far from being uniquely Plautine, the metaphor is also used by Cicero, who expresses himself in its terms in his speech in defense of Publius Sestius, when he characterizes his client’s dabbling in philosophy as follows: «Being a very learned man, he used to praise philosophers... above all those said to surpass all others as admirers and panegyrists of pleasure: of what sort of pleasure, at what times, and in what manner this pleasure was enjoyed, he never inquired – but the word “pleasure” itself he devoured (*verbum ipsum... devorarat*)»⁶. And in *Brutus*, Cicero speaks similarly of Gaius Licinius Calvus’s qualities as an orator: «His language (*oratio*), weakened by too great meticulousness, was famous to the learned and those listening carefully, but by those in the crowds and the Forum, for whom eloquence was created, it was devoured (*devorabatur*)»⁷.

As may be seen, the metaphor conveys a specific kind of auditory experience – namely, cases of hearing specially characterized by attentiveness or eagerness on the part of the listener. In other words, in Latin, ‘devouring’ words meant hearing or listening to them eagerly – using the same image, we might say in English, «with relish...» or, in Italian, «con gusto»⁸. This meaning seems to be made explicit in another example from Plautus, this time in *Aulularia*, where the image of ‘devouring’ is expressed not by the verb, but by a descriptive adverbial phrase: «EVCL. *nimum lubenter edi sermonem tuom*. MEG. *an audivisti?* EVCL. *usque a principio omnia*, «EVCL. Much too pleasurable have I eaten up your speech. MEG. Oh, were you listening? EVCL. Heard every word!»⁹.

⁴ Plaut. *Poen.* 967-968.

⁵ Plaut. *Aul.* 537.

⁶ Cic. *Sest.* 23.

⁷ Cic. *Brut.* 283.

⁸ An extension of this metaphor may be seen in Plaut. *Mil.* 883, *postquam adbibere auris meae tuae oram orationis*.

⁹ Plaut. *Aul.* 537-538.

Edi means simply ‘I ate’, while *nimum lubenter* ‘much too pleasurably’ contributes the sense of eagerness.

But how is it that ‘devouring’, an experience of oral consumption, made sense to Latin speakers as way of talking about ‘hearing’, an experience of auditory perception, at all? According to the theory of metaphor developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, ‘eating’ words is meaningful as an expression of hearing them in Latin because Latin speakers in fact conceptualize auditory perception in terms of oral consumption. Briefly, this theory states that the metaphorical expressions we find in a language reflect the inherently metaphorical understandings that speakers of that language have of different experiences. In this view, metaphors – or more precisely, «conceptual metaphors» – are projections of conceptual structure that occur in cognition as a way of comprehending certain abstract experiences in terms of other more concrete experiences. For example, in many cultures the concept of love – hardly an experience that any of us understand very well – is conceptualized metaphorically as a journey. In English, this conceptualization is captured in expressions such as «Our relationship took a wrong turn» or «We’ve decided to go our separate ways». Or love may be understood in terms of cold and heat – as in «he’s giving me the cold shoulder», or perhaps most famously: «I’m just a hunk-a, hunk-a burnin’ love». It is the systematic nature of each of these metaphorical projections, moreover – the fact that they involve the transfer of an organized system of concepts from one domain to another –, that allows people to think, reason and therefore speak coherently about experiences that may be difficult to comprehend in and of themselves.

We know that in Roman society orality was an experience both highly salient culturally speaking and highly structured conceptually speaking. For example, Maurizio Bettini has described how the mouth (*os*), as the locus of speech, played such a central role in Roman thinking about personal identity that it came to represent the face itself¹⁰. Furthermore, the Latin language contained a wealth of terms defining different acts of speaking: the verbs *aio*, *dicere*, *loqui*, *fari*, *orare*, *narrare* and so on, reflected an elaborate system of conceptions of the nature of language and its social function, which enabled Latin speakers to express subtle nuances in meaning vis-à-vis manner, authority and so forth when speaking about speech itself¹¹.

More importantly from our perspective, Latin presented a well-defined system of oral concepts relating specifically to EATING. The lexicon of oral consumption in fact comprised semantically unmarked terms such as *esse* and *comedere*, more physically descriptive terms like *manducare* and *mandere* ‘to chew, eat by chewing’, as well as terms elaborating the basic concept

¹⁰ BETTINI 2000, pp. 317-353.

¹¹ See esp. BENVENISTE 1969, POCETTI 1999, HABINEK 2005, and BETTINI 2008.

of ‘eating’ to include various dimensions of meaning. EATING concepts were articulated according to the *manner* of oral consumption, for example: *devorare*, as we have seen, conveyed the concept of ‘eating eagerly and quickly’, while the verb *lurcare*, defined by the lexicographer Nonius Marcellus as *cum aviditate cibum sumere*, conveyed that of ‘eating gluttonously’¹²; *tuburcinari*, defined again by Nonius as *raptim manducare*, that of ‘eating rapidly’¹³; and *epulari* that of ‘eating with pleasure’¹⁴.

But they were also articulated relative to the *temporal* axis – *ientare*, *prandere* and *cenare* codify acts of eating differentiated by time of day (morning, afternoon, and evening, respectively); and they were articulated even according to the opposition ‘human’/‘animal’. The verb *vesci* appears to have denoted a uniquely human manner of oral consumption, and apparent exceptions only seem to prove the rule: Pliny the Elder, for example, speaks of a dolphin «eating (*vescens*) out of the hand of men»¹⁵ – but in a passage emphasizing how human these animals appear to be¹⁶. Conversely, the verb *pasci* defined a kind of eating peculiar to animals: when this term is used of humans, it always seems to convey negative connotations by representing human beings as animalesque: for example, Cicero speaks of those who «feed upon the divisions of the citizenry as well as sedition (*discordiis civium et seditione pascantur*)»¹⁷.

II. THE SCOPE OF THE ‘DEVOURING’ METAPHOR

Shortly, I will return to the idea that the ‘devouring’ metaphor of auditory perception is meaningful to Latin speakers because it depends upon the transference of connotational structures from the domain of EATING to that of HEARING in order to address the question of why Roman culture might represent certain auditory experiences metaphorically in such terms. It is important, however, to point out that other evidence demonstrates the broad applicability – that is, the widely distributed meaningfulness – of this metaphor in Roman culture. For example, the metaphor is also used in the domain of verbal utterance, where, when referring to certain acts of locution, devouring one’s words means, instead, mumbling, misspeaking or otherwise garbling a spoken utterance (as it still is in Italian: *mangiare le parole*). Quintilian defines «clear pronunciation» (*dilucida pronuntiatio*) as when «words, which are normally partially mumbled, come out whole (*verba tota exierint, quorum pars devorari... solet*)»¹⁸. Similarly, Apuleius speaks of himself as «murdering speech» (*sermonem*

¹² Non. Marc. *De comp. doct.* 10.31.

¹³ Non. Marc. *De comp. doct.* 179.21.

¹⁴ Cfr. Cic. *De fin.* 2.5.16, *in voluptate sit, qui epuletur*.

¹⁵ Plin. *Nat. hist.* 9.96.

¹⁶ Cfr. Plin. *Nat. hist.* 9.24, *delphinus... homini amicum animal*.

¹⁷ Cic. *Sest.* 46.99.

¹⁸ Quint. *Inst. orat.* 11.3.33.

interficiens) and «devouring words» (*verba devorans*) as he uttered a prayer to Isis: his words, that is, were uttered only with difficulty and garbled amid «frequent groans» (*singultu crebro*)¹⁹. And in Plautus's *Trinummus*, when one character stumbles over the utterance of another's name – *illi edepol... illi... illi... vae misero mihi!* – his interlocutor asks what the trouble is: «Stupidly, I've just devoured his name (*devoravi nomen*)», the first speaker responds²⁰.

At the same time, the 'devouring' metaphor can be used to speak metaphorically of any act of consumption that is undertaken eagerly and rapidly. For instance, in his letters to Atticus, at one point Cicero asks his friend: «What shall I do for you, who devoured those books?»²¹. Elsewhere he describes a period of particularly intense literary study: «Here we are devouring literature (*voramus litteras*)», the orator says²². In these examples, DEVOURING is used metaphorically to express the notion of enthusiastic, rapid and thorough reading. Another frequent expression is that of 'devouring' money. For example, in *Trinummus*, Plautus regularly employs this alimentary metaphor to characterize particular acts of monetary consumption: First, Philto, speaking to his son Lysiteles about the profligate spending habits of their neighbor Lesbonicus, mocks him as having «eaten up (*comedit*) anything and everything he had» (Plaut. *Trin.* 360). Philto again disparages Lesbonicus as someone who «balances his account sheet – after he has devoured (*comedit*) the entire amount»²³. And later, Callicles – to whom the spendthrift Lesbonicus has been entrusted in his father's absence – even suggests that the young man, if he knew where his father had hidden the family's only savings, «would devour (*comederit*) the entire spot where it was buried»²⁴. Similarly, Cicero accuses Verres of «not hesitating to devour the entire public treasury (*devorare omnem pecuniam publicam*)»²⁵, and so on. Here, the concept metaphorically expresses the notion of spending money recklessly, quickly and to exhaustion²⁶.

That the alimentary concept of 'devouring' is used by Latin speakers to define a range of other concepts belonging to such distinct domains of experience – 'hearing words with enthusiasm' in the domain of auditory experience, 'garbling speech' in that of linguistic experience, 'spending money profligately' in that of economic experience –, suggests how flexible and productive EATING could be as a metaphorical source domain. Indeed, James Adams has pointed out how «the metaphor of

¹⁹ Apul. *Met.* 11.24.

²⁰ Plaut. *Trin.* 907-909. FONTAINE 2007 has suggested that the expression *devorare nomen* here simply refers to speaker's having forgotten the other's name. The metaphor is never otherwise used of memory; for metaphors targeting this domain, see BETTINI 2009 and DRAAISMA 2000.

²¹ Cic. *Ep. ad Att.* 7.3.2.

²² Cic. *Ep. ad Att.* 4.11.2.

²³ Plaut. *Trin.* 417.

²⁴ Plaut. *Trin.* 753.

²⁵ Cic. *Verr.* 2.3.177.

²⁶ Cfr. CORBEILL 1997, pp. 101-103.

“eating” has surprising ramifications in the sexual sphere in Latin²⁷: the *culus* itself is sometimes described as metaphorically ‘devouring’ the *mentula*²⁸, but more frequently the metaphor is used of oral acts²⁹. In all these cases, it is likely because alimentary experience offered such a well defined system of concepts and such a highly articulated structure of connotations that terms of EATING were used in a metaphorical sense to express such different concepts across such different domains of experience. It seems to suggest how salient the alimentary domain was to Latin speakers both experientially: embedded in the linguistic and conceptual structures not only of the oral, but also aural and even linguistic, literary, and economic domains of experience, this metaphor appears to have been a remarkably flexible and broadly applicable theme of Roman socio-cultural representation.

III. ‘EATING IS HEARING’

While Latin speakers did not make use of every EATING word to characterize some experience of HEARING, they did recruit a certain organized set of oral concepts as metaphors for auditory perception, enabling them to talk about such experiences in a meaningful fashion. We have already seen that ‘eating’ words means hearing them, and that ‘devouring’ words means hearing them eagerly. But it is also common to find concepts of ‘taste’ – the perception of qualitative differences between foods – used as a way of conceptualizing the qualitative aspects of hearing. In Plautus’s *Mostellaria*, for example, the slave Tranio, having concocted an elaborate deception to conceal the reckless merry-making of Philolaches from his father Theopropides, wishes to know if his master has finally detected the ruse: «Ah, there is my master» he says; «I want to get a taste of his language (*gustare ego eius sermonem volo*)»³⁰. And Zeno, the late-fourth c. CE Bishop of Verona, expressed himself in the same metaphorical terms in a Latin sermon on the so-called Song of the Vineyard (*Isaiah 5:1-7*), urging his congregation, «Briefly get a taste of its language (*paucis eius degustate sermonem*)»³¹. In these expressions, ‘getting a taste’ (*gustare*) – an act of eating that implies not wholesale ingestion, but tentative, selective or rapid sampling – is used to express the concept of determining someone’s disposition by means of their speech, or of appraising the style of some speech.

Similarly, the metaphor of speech having a particular ‘flavor’, as captured by the verb *sapere* ‘to have flavor’, the noun *sapor* ‘flavor’, and adjectives such as *dulcis* ‘sweet’ and (*in*)*conditus*

²⁷ ADAMS 1982, pp. 139-140.

²⁸ Catull. 33.4; Mart. Ep. 2.51.6, 12.75.3.

²⁹ CIL IV.1854, 1884, 2360; Catull. 80.6, 88.8; Mart. Ep. 7.67.15.

³⁰ Plaut. *Most.* 1063.

³¹ Zen. *Tract.* 1.10b.1.

‘[un]seasoned’, was a way of understanding the particular tone of someone’s speech (in English, this might be called the ‘feel’ of someone’s words, using another metaphor). In an epigram addressed to Mamurra, for example, Martial questions the utility of reading works of mythology, deriding them as «the vain jests of a miserable page»; instead, the poet recommends his own writing, because it deals with topics of relevance to human beings: «You will... not find Centaurs, Gorgons, or Harpies here. My page tastes of man (*hominem pagina nostra sapit*)»³².

In fact, evidence suggests that in Latin the rhetorical embellishments that an orator added to a speech – its style – could be imagined metaphorically as a kind of ‘seasoning’ (*condimentum*). According to Quintilian, «if one uses [rhetorical figures] sparingly and as the matter demands, like a kind of sprinkled-on seasoning (*uelut adperso quodam condimento*), he will be more enjoyable»³³. Defining the concept of *urbanitas* in oratory, Quintilian also writes that: «In my opinion, urbanity is that in which nothing dissonant, rough, unseasoned (*inconditum*) or foreign can be perceived either in the sense, words, pronunciation or gesture, with the result that this quality is not so much in the individual words as in the entire tone of speaking, just as among the Greeks Atticism gives just that right flavor (*saporem*) of Athens»³⁴.

Another instance of such concepts serving metaphorically to characterize speech may be Cicero’s quotation of Lucilius in his description of Caesar’s unexpected visit to his Puteolan villa: «*bene cocto et condito, sermone bono*»³⁵. While most readers of this passage take *cocto* and *condito* to refer not to *sermone*, but to an implied *cibo*³⁶, in light of the ‘eating’ metaphor discussed here it is tempting to read the phrase as a gloss on Caesar’s talk. With the context of Caesar’s feast providing an obvious motivation for Cicero’s choice of metaphorical source domain, the image of Caesar’s talk being ‘well cooked’ and ‘well seasoned’ characterizes it metaphorically as ‘pleasant’, ‘enjoyable’, ‘satisfying’³⁷.

What is crucial to recognize here is how oral metaphors as a system offered a coherent way of talking about experiences of auditory perception. Just as ‘eating’ words meant hearing them, ‘devouring’ (meaning to eat eagerly) connoted hearing enthusiastically, ‘tasting’ (meaning to evaluate the flavor of some food) conveyed the idea of evaluating the style of an utterance or text,

³² Mart. *Ep.* 10.4.9-10.

³³ Quint. *Inst. orat.* 9.3.3-4.

³⁴ Quint. *Inst. orat.* 6.3.108.

³⁵ *Ep. ad Att.* 13.52.1 = Lucilius fr. 1122-3 Marx.

³⁶ Cf. *De fin.* 2.25.

³⁷ This characterization is obviously sardonic; yet Cicero’s point to Atticus in the letter seems to be, in fact, that Caesar, beyond simply raiding his host’s larder, what was most troubling about Caesar’s visit was his malapropos literary discussion (cf. 13.52.2, *spoudaion ouden in sermone, philologa multa*), ill suited to the circumstances of war and the relationship between the two men. It was the false friendliness of Caesar’s ‘well cooked’ and ‘well seasoned’ banter – enjoyable more to the guest than the host – that the orator found most unpalatable.

and ‘flavor’ defined the characteristics of that style – all in keeping with the inherent logic of oral consumption. Eating, devouring, tasting and flavor, that is, are interrelated experiences of the oral domain, and used metaphorically they define correspondingly logically interrelated concepts of auditory experience. Used as a conceptual system in this way, the metaphor allows Latin speakers to express certain meanings. By permitting them to draw on their rich, highly structured knowledge about EATING, the metaphor enables them to make reasoned inferences – and hence meaningful choices of words – about a range of aural experiences that, without the existence of the metaphor, might otherwise be impossible to convey or, indeed, imagine.

IV. THE MOTIVATION OF ORAL METAPHORS OF AUDITORY PERCEPTION

Up to this point, this paper has considered what the ‘eating’ metaphor does in Roman culture – it enables Latin speakers to talk coherently about particular experiences of auditory perception –, and how it does this – namely, by permitting them to draw upon the organized knowledge they have about oral consumption. But why do they speak of hearing metaphorically in terms of eating in the first place? What, culturally speaking, motivates this metaphor? An answer to this question may go back, in part, to the human bodily experience of speech itself. From the perspective of our physical embodiment, the mouth and the ears emerge almost naturally as the parts of the human body most directly associated with verbal communication. In our everyday understanding of bodily experience, that is, it is the mouth that produces speech and the ears that are responsible for its reception. In many cultures, speech is conceived as ‘exiting’ the body through the mouth and ‘entering’ the body through the ears in a continuous, unified cycle of vocal emission and auditory reception. In Roman culture, this understanding of vocal communication was represented at the linguistic level by the use of the prefixes *ē-/ex-* ‘out’ and *pro-* ‘forth’ with verbs of speech, as well as by expressions such as *auribus percipere*, in which hearing is imagined as the an act of ‘seizing’ (*cap-*) something with the ears.

At the cultural level, Bettini has observed that the close linkage between the mouth and ears as the organs primarily responsible for linguistic communication was reflected in ancient beliefs about the weasel³⁸. The weasel was an animal believed in antiquity to conceive through the ears and give birth through the mouth, and for this reason could be considered a symbol of linguistic communication. Explaining why the Egyptians worshipped the asp, the weasel and the scarab, Plutarch, for example, notes that «many believe that the weasel conceives through the ears (*kata to*

³⁸ BETTINI 2000, pp. 10-12.

ous) and gives birth through its mouth (*tōi de stómati*) and that this is an image of the origin of language»³⁹.

Viewed in this context, the ‘EATING’ metaphor of auditory perception may be seen to emerge from a kind of metonymy between the ears and the mouth⁴⁰. Because these two parts of the body were thought to be inextricably linked through the process of linguistic communication (and thus conceptually ‘close’ to one another), the former may have come to stand for the latter. In other words, because of their close conceptual linkage with the mouth, the ears came to be understood metaphorically as another mouth – a mouth that ‘eats’ or ‘devours’ or ‘tastes’ words⁴¹. But this explanation gets us only so far. Most importantly, it does not account for the directionality of the metaphor: why concepts of oral consumption should serve as metaphors for auditory perception, and not vice versa. A fuller answer therefore probably follows – as the contemporary theory of metaphor suggests – from differences in how Latin speakers conceptualized these experiences.

I suggest that what accounts for the metaphor is, in effect, that Latin speakers viewed auditory perception as somehow more abstract than oral consumption. As has been shown, Latin terms referring to oral experience constituted a highly developed system of concepts. These concepts are, moreover, highly concrete in the sense that are well defined by and grounded in physical, bodily experience. On the other hand, auditory experience does not seem to have suggested to the Roman imagination any particularly elaborate conceptual structure. This is implied, at any rate, by Latin’s relatively circumscribed literal vocabulary of hearing: in fact, this consists only of *audire* ‘to hear’ and *auscultare* ‘to listen to’ (cf. the opposition between Gr. *akoúw* and *akroáomai*, Ger. *hören* and *hорchen*, and so forth). While these terms differentiate involuntary and voluntary acts of auditory perception, no other non-metaphorical ways of talking about such experiences appear to have been available to Latin speakers.

From this point of view, the experience of HEARING seems to have remained relatively vague in Roman thought, and that of EATING to have offered a ready-made model for getting a handle on what was a comparatively poorly conceptualized aspect of sensory experience. This is not to imply that the relatively poor conceptualization of auditory experience encoded in the vocabulary of Latin reflects a deficiency in either expert or folk understandings of auditory perception in Roman

³⁹ Plut. *Is. Os.* 74.381a. As BETTINI 2000, p. 11 notes, «non c’è dubbio che il linguaggio abbia le sue origini proprio in bocca e orecchie: in questo senso la donnola, animale il cui ciclo riproduttivo si svolge proprio “dalla bocca all’orecchio”, costituisce un equivalente perfetto di questo fenomeno umano».

⁴⁰ Here, ‘metonymy’ is understood as a conceptual association in which one domain comes to refer to or stand for another based on their contiguity in experience: cf. DURHAM AND FERNANDEZ 1991, pp. 192-197.

⁴¹ The metaphor may be explained in part also by the conceptual contiguity of food and speech both as things connected with the mouth itself. This metonymic closeness of food and speech is suggested by Isidore of Seville’s etymological association of *os* and *ostium*: as Isidore hypothesizes, «[The mouth] is called *os*, because through it, as if through a door (*os-tium*), we both send food inside and we project spit out; or because food goes in and speech comes out there» (*Is. Etym.* 11.49).

culture. The writings of Rufus of Ephesus, Celsus and Galen demonstrate that at least by the first centuries CE ancient Roman anatomical knowledge of the ears' function in auditory perception was quite sophisticated, and folk beliefs and superstitions involving the ears flourished in Roman society⁴². Nevertheless, the auditory domain seems to have remained conceptually nebulous (and its vocabulary relatively unarticulated connotationally), thus motivating the recruitment of oral metaphors.

V. THE 'EATING' METAPHOR IN ACTION

Perhaps the particular terms and directionality of this metaphor do not surprise us, however. After all, anthropological studies of sensory perception have shown that, across cultures, the senses fall into a kind of hierarchy according to the degree of their conceptual elaboration. Taste and touch are the senses typically best developed in conception, while the senses of smell and hearing are typically the least developed, with vision (the sense of dimension and color) falling somewhere in the middle⁴³. Unlike tastes, things perceived by sight and sensations of touch, our perceptions of sounds and smells are difficult to individuate, characterize and conceptualize, and many languages lack detailed vocabularies related to these senses. Aristotle famously remarked that in Greek the sense of smell lacked its own system of classification, designations of smells being given metaphorically by words for tastes⁴⁴. In this context, Latin's oral metaphors of auditory perception hardly seem unique, and perhaps even predictable.

What might this metaphor tell us about Roman culture specifically, then? If nothing else, it may help contribute to our understanding of Roman social practice (linguistic as well as behavioral) as symbolically integrated, by allowing us to see potential interconnections underlying Roman society's «signifying order»⁴⁵. In other words, by permitting us to identify how Roman society's ways of speaking and ways of acting were symbolically interrelated, this metaphor directs us toward the representations or meanings that underpin a uniquely Roman behavioral code. The Roman *convivium* in particular represents a circumstance in which the linguistic – and I suggest conceptual – metaphor appears to be realized behaviorally. Though we lack detailed knowledge of this apparently widespread practice in Roman antiquity, at least during the late Republican and early imperial periods the *convivium* seems to have been an important context for the production, enjoyment and criticism of literature, as guests regularly would be entertained, as they ate, by

⁴² See., e.g., Plin. *Nat. hist.* 11.103; 28.5.

⁴³ See CACCIARI 1998, pp. 128-130, with the psycholinguistic bibliography.

⁴⁴ Ar. *De anim.* 421a.

⁴⁵ DANESI AND PERRON 1999.

readings of prose (and less frequently, poetry)⁴⁶. Numerous Latin authors mention this practice, as well as the special class of slaves who were employed as ‘readers’ (*lectores*) for dinner entertainment⁴⁷. In one famous account of this practice, Pliny the Younger describes the literary debut of Calpurnius Piso, who read his didactic work on catasterisms to rave reviews from the dinner guests⁴⁸, and Latin literature is full of references to the appropriateness of this or that literary genre for the *convivium*⁴⁹. The inextricable association of attending such a ‘dinner party’ with hearing some work of literature being read is perhaps best captured, however, in Petronius’s parody of this practice, the *cena Trimalchionis*, in which the sumptuousness of the host’s culinary offerings was matched only by the outrageousness of his literary performances.

Given this apparent convergence of alimentary with literary ‘consumption’ within the context of the *convivium*, it seems reasonable to suggest that in this particular instance Roman social life maintains at the level of *behavior* the same conceptual association that can be seen in the *language*. At a *convivium*, that is, to eat was to hear and to hear was also to eat, just as in Latin ‘eating’ words meant hearing them. This is not to suggest any kind of direct correlation between Roman practices of dinner entertainment and Latin’s oral metaphors of auditory perception. Nevertheless, it is telling that the Romans expressed to one another their experiences of HEARING in terms that echo, symbolically speaking, a shared context in which ‘hearing’ was especially salient: namely, the convivial context of EATING. The ‘eating’ metaphor of HEARING in Latin, in other words, can be seen as sharing the symbolic underpinnings of another, non-linguistic behavior that both is marked vis-à-vis HEARING and typifies Roman society.

For the Roman, then, talking about HEARING in terms of EATING was not some flight of metaphorical fancy; rather, it fit together with other things that s/he did as part of normal social and cultural experience (at least for a certain segment of society). This symbolic interconnectedness of a Latin speaker’s ways of speaking and ways of behaving vis-à-vis HEARING no doubt provided a member of Roman society who participated in such practices with what anthropologist James Fernandez calls a «sensation of wholeness», or the feeling that the things s/he did and the things s/he said in even seemingly disparate aspects of life were symbolically integrated and unified—and thus, in a very broad sense, meaningful. It also demonstrates the extent to which Roman ‘texts’ (in a Geertzian understanding of that term) must be viewed not only as the creations of individual

⁴⁶ Cfr. FANTHAM 1999, pp. 7-14; JOHNSON AND PARKER 2009, pp. 203-215.

⁴⁷ Var. *Men. Sat.* 340 Astbury = Aul. Gell. *Noct. Att.* 13.11.5; Nep. *Att.* 14; Sen. *Ep.* 64.2, *lectus est liber*; Ov. *Trist.* 4.10.43; Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.109-10; Mart. *Epig.* 5.78.25 and Plin. *Ep.* 1.15.2; 3.5.12, *super hanc [mensam] liber legebatur*; 9.36.4, *cenanti mihi... liber legitur*.

⁴⁸ Plin. *Ep.* 5.17.

⁴⁹ Cf. Cic. *De off.* 1.114; Pers. *Sat.* 1.30-40; Juv. *Sat.* 11.179-82; Aul. Gell. *Noct. Att.* 2.22.1-2, etc.

authors' imaginations, but also – or indeed above all – as embedded within a distinctively Roman worldview, with its unique ways of representing, understanding and existing in the world.

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