

Matter and Meaning

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Everything matters. And matters are complex. In a way, matter is chaos that withdraws from being known. And yet, meaning tries exactly this: to tame to name and know matter. Most humans favor order over chaos and rely on language as a model of ordering matter into meaning. When transferring matter into meaning via wording, some elements of matter are prioritized at the cost of others being neglected, silenced, or overwritten. While doing so, meaning offers a wording that allows to know the world, knowing that the cost thereof is a simplification or even violation of matter and knowing that matter can yet never be known.

Let's look at a most harmless example for this. Apples. They do exist. At times, they explain matter. Like when falling in newton's head. And when they are eaten, they are matter, too. Yet when using the word "apple," we do not talk about matter in its purest form. Rather, we are already right in the midst of meaning. Figure an apple! Do you think about taste, odour, shape, color? Think of an apple's color! Is your apple red, yellow, or green? Even though we figure apples are red, green OR yellow, actually no apple would ever look alike—and this is also because none would ever be a single-colored one. Any red apple, for example, may have greenish or yellowish parts or spots. Nevertheless, when wishing to buy an apple at a grocery store, I would either call it by its name, like Boskoop or Elstar, or ask for a pound of the red apples. For sure, I would not bother the grocery seller by describing specific color complexities. As a result, I would be getting an apple from the box of apples that are largely red, without minding that they also feature other colors. Maybe because I know that it does not matter—neither in terms of price nor taste (cf. Arndt 2025).

To focus on matter's major traits is pillared on respective societal communication agreements. As for an apple, the consequences are rather harmless. But there are many instances where meaning-making is not harmless at all. After all, the so-called "common sense" does not exist in any vacuum. Rather,

it is embedded deeply in given power constellations and respective needs and notions of normality. Power and those privileged by it have an immense say in how to name a place, a person, a desire.

The language community can either conserve or transform both situated wordings (Haraway 1988), their mode of world-making and thus the respective situating contexts. Just as words do not simply exist, but are made, on purpose, with a focused agenda of meaning-making and with respective consequences, words do not simply change. They are changed, mostly in given power constellations and the transformation thereof. Obviously, this matters less with respect to whether or not we address an apple's being fully red or not. But as for words that name peoples and their territories, or people and their social positions, wording has served those who control institutions of power; and thus, consequentially, discriminating against those they have Othered. In deciding for or against them, for or against using racist terms or strategies of gender inclusive language, we strengthen or weaken racism's or sexism's modes of meaning making. We are what we say to generate meaning, and the meaning we choose to favor will determine who we become.

References

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