

Healing

Language is central to diagnosis and healing around the world. Healing functions ascribed to language transcend clinical or public ritual processes; they include not only curing disease but also healing illness (restoring persons to life contexts). Healing discourse is thus oriented to pragmatic and moral "stakes."

Just how language might heal is controversial. Are healers' words placebos, increasing hope and thus improving prognosis? Or do healers persuade patients to experience the world and their condition differently? What rhetorical features (e.g., imagistic words that seem to make Jesus present to heal, or the self-authenticating claims of a human healer) persuade so well? Or is healing effected by the mutual attunement of embodied interactants in healing events (or across a series of events that, together, achieves incremental healing)? Perhaps metaphor is the key insofar as it links bodily experience with myth, influencing sensation, imagination, and action as much as mental operations.

It may not be referential content that turns speech events into healing events but, for example, the way the narrative structure of a healing encounter builds and releases tension. Healer's voices may need to be "beautiful" to heal. The aesthetics of sound, poetry, rhythm, and imagery in shamanic chant and in group singing effects cures for Yolmo people (Nepal). For the Amazonian Suyá, curing songs work when they name the right animal to evoke some attribute needed to counterbalance its opposite in the sick person. Finally, "indexicals" (like a vocal quality that "makes present" a powerful spirit and not just a human medium) and "metaindexicals" ("We hereby make present that mythic time when healing was possible") may alter patients' bodily awareness.

Diagnosis is integral to curing and contributes to the drama of healing; especially when revealed by a spirit, diagnosis itself may empower or reassure. Language mediates diagnostic practices from biopsychiatry to Bangladeshi divination. But whereas herbalists and doctors treat speech as

an instrument for probing realities they take to be external to speech, exorcistic and divinatory speech draws attention to itself, working performatively or magically in both diagnosis and cure.

Healing systems are genres that change over time and relate to larger cultural processes as well as to each other. Thus physical healing, inner healing, and deliverance (exorcism)—three genres of Catholic Charismatic healing—have distinctive discursive and phenomenological structures but are also interconnected. As structures entailing typifications of experience, narrative genres that are “self-centering” and therapeutic for some may tell others that their experience is beyond both genre and help. Participant structures vary greatly across healing such genres as Spiritism, shamanism, and group therapy. Patients, curers, spirits, family members, and others are charged with more or less responsibility in different genres. Australian Aboriginals who help (but ignore the words of) close companions when “it is the sickness itself speaking” are exclusively authorized to recount the sickness and its cure. Middle-class Americans may expect self-expression of trauma to be therapeutic, whereas others put hope in a healer’s words and—because words “do things”—consider verbalization of suffering to be dangerous. Whereas some genres cure the self by centering it, a linguistic decentering of the self is crucial to others. Where possession cults are culturally salient, people may try to cure a person’s first incident of possession but later see possession as a sign of a cure, or at least a sign that—in order to be well—the affected must participate in the possession cult and speak (dance, act, etc.) under a spirit’s influence.

Typifications of language and healing relate to broader ideologies. What is language that it might heal? Suyé curing songs are viewed as substances blown and rubbed into patients’ bodies. To look at language and healing together is to allow ideologies that treat language as embodied to challenge our own tendency to make it the proper object of (disembodied) cognitive science. Particular ideologies and social formations influence which discourse features are considered curative. Examples include written narratives of traumatic events that help the writer reorganize the memory; metaphors that aptly capture illness experience but increasingly introduce agency; glosolalia as a sign but also a vehicle of the healing work of the Spirit; and playful use of dramatic and rhythmic speech features to alter unhealthful patterns of thought and embodied habit. These value-laden visions of healing incorporate notions of language, affect, personhood, and bodies. A complete account of language and healing would examine how discourses constitute illness, disease, and medicine in broader terms. It is within a whole linguacultural-ideological system that “the inability to put feelings into words” may, for instance, be pathologized—labeled “alexithymia,” and expected to lead to “somatization”—while expressing distress in psychological terms may be privileged. The language-and-healing relationship itself reflects power, and the case described exemplifies what Foucault calls an “incitement to discourse.”

Must language be clear in order to heal? Warao Amazonian curing traditions attribute efficacy to features such as vocables not meant to be understood by patient or audience. To claim that vocables and artfully

ambiguous narratives heal highlights the limits of persuasive referential clarity. But alternation between clear and obscure speech also creatively indexes Warao shamans' authority. Power relations are reproduced when Warao shamans' speech (mostly in an esoteric register) is strategically clear just when they declare their own authority, but also when doctors interrupt patients' narratives or fail to use laymen's terms to instruct patients so that they can manage their illnesses. Mexican Spiritists might not share an analytic pre-occupation with power that individuates and dramatizes the healing relationship. Corporate healing rituals defy personalistic analysis; their efficacy lies not in an intense, private, verbal relationship, but in empathic resonance in groups co-constructing testimonies of transcendence. Corporate rituals such as Sinhalese exorcisms, however, dramatize power relations, even when genres of humor central to exorcising demons serve secondarily (for middle-class Sinhalese) to index participants' (lower) class status. Language, thus, may heal one but "hail" or address others, from deities to bystanders and critics.

(See also *act, body, genre, indexicality, music, narrative, performativity, poetry, power, prayer, reflexivity, register*)

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