

Qualia

NICHOLAS HARKNESS

Harvard University, USA

Qualia (singular, quale) are cultural emergents that manifest phenomenally as sensuous features or qualities. The anthropological challenge presented by qualia is to theorize elements of experience that are semiotically generated but apperceived as non-signs. Qualia are not reducible to a psychology of individual perceptions of sensory data, to a cultural ontology of “materiality,” or to philosophical intuitions about the subjective properties of consciousness. The analytical solution to the challenge of qualia is to consider *tone* in relation to the familiar linguistic anthropological categories of *token* and *type*. This solution has been made methodologically practical by conceptualizing qualia, in Peircean terms, as “facts of firstness” or firstness “under its form of secondness.”

In the philosophy of mind, the term “qualia” has been used to describe the ineffable, intrinsic, private, and directly or immediately apprehensible experiences of “the way things seem,” which have been taken to constitute the atomic subjective properties of consciousness. This concept was challenged in an influential paper by Daniel Dennett, who argued that qualia “is a philosophers’ term which fosters nothing but confusion, and refers in the end to no properties or features at all” (Dennett 1988, 387). Dennett concluded, correctly, that these diverse elements of feeling, made sensuously present at various levels of attention, were actually idiosyncratic responses to apperceptions of “public, relational” qualities. Qualia were, in effect, an outcome of the socialization to culture and the affordances and limits of language. The problem was not solved but rather dissolved, requiring not philosophical introspection but rather empirical research.

The contemporary anthropology of qualia builds upon a long ethnographic tradition of empirical research on conventionalized apperception, which investigates not “the way things seem” for individuals but rather “the way things are” for social groups (see Boas, Franz; Sapir, Edward; Whorf, Benjamin Lee). Qualia are treated not as subjective properties but rather as intersubjective products, thereby inverting the directionality of their study. The recent anthropological interest in qualia is part of a broader, incremental expansion of linguistically informed semiotic analysis from speech behavior into non-linguistic materializations of sociocultural life (Chumley 2017; Keane 2003). The problem of qualia was made programmatic in the published proceedings of a 2010 conference, with topics as diverse as speech and morality, gender and comestibles, diamond mining and smuggling, art education and evaluation, kinship and embodiment, violence and torture, stigma and discrimination, place and memory, and social contact and the Cold War (see Chumley and Harkness 2013 and accompanying papers).

The initial guide for this anthropological reformulation of qualia was Charles Peirce’s disparate, limited writing on the topic (see Peirce, Charles Sanders; Semiotics). Viewing the problem through his trichotomy of categories – firstness, secondness, and

thirdness – Peirce conceptualized qualia as “facts of firstness” or firstness “under its form of secondness” (see Harkness 2017 and references there). This definition becomes clearer when it is understood through the composition of the sign as a functional triad brought into a dynamic structure by a dialectic of determination and representation (for a full explanation of sign classes, see *Classes of Signs*). The semiotic definition of qualia hinges upon the functional position where the dialectic is revealed most explicitly, the interpretant, which is both determined by and represents the other functional positions within a sign (representamen and object). To account for the perspective of the interpretant, especially for the way it can construe the conditions of its existence differently from its actual determination, Peirce used the terms “rheme,” “dicent,” and “argument.” Borrowing technical concepts from mathematics, Peirce also used the terms “genuine” and “degenerate” – as relative characteristics along a gradient, not absolute (or moral) categories – to understand the relation between determination and representation, the relative reducibility or irreducibility of semiotic composition, and the overall hierarchy of sign classes (Parmentier 1994). At the uppermost compositional boundary, the interpretant is most restricted and the sign configuration is most genuine because it is the most self-reflexively triadic. There is only one logical configuration of determination in which the sign, from the point of view of representation, can be an argument: the symbolic legisign. At the lowermost compositional boundary, the interpretant is least restricted. There are six logical configurations of determination in which the sign, from the point of view of representation, can be a rheme (the symbolic legisign is also included among these). In Peirce’s typology, the rhematic iconic qualisign – a sign of qualitative possibility where firstness appears under its form of thirdness – is the lowest or simplest possible class of minimally genuine signs.

Qualia, as facts of firstness, or firstness appearing under its form of secondness, are posited logically between qualities (pure firstness) and qualisigns. That is, qualia take semiotic degeneracy a step further than qualisigns, because they are not treated by the interpretant as signs at all. Although Peirce did not apply the genuine–degenerate distinction to the different kinds of firstness, an expanded concept of degeneracy helps to explain qualia as semiotic elements of experience for which an interpretant represents the features of determination not as qualitative possibility but rather as immediate sensuous presence (hence their philosophical characterization as intrinsic properties of consciousness that seem directly or immediately apprehensible). It is an experiential synthesis that focuses on the felt unity of the features of the experience. Qualia simplify, to the point of erasure, the complex indexical field and conceptual categories that generate the experience. The terminological irony is that extreme semiotic degeneracy is often felt to be experientially “genuine,” i.e. authentic, raw, or unfiltered. These “facts of firstness,” which exhibit both dicent and rhematic characteristics, can be accessible for reflection and manipulation only through higher-order sign classes (especially qualisigns, lexemic coding, and explicitly aesthetic genres). However, qualia always seem to lose something in this process (hence their philosophical characterization as ineffable and private). Rather than being higher-order signs reducible to combinations of lower ones, they are seemingly irreducible experiences that yield to analysis only by situating them within whole pragmatic fields of action and retrospectively tracing their

semiotic genesis via higher-order sign processes. This semiotic reformulation helps to explain the philosophical intuition about qualia as atomic, non-signifying “properties of consciousness.”

Anthropologists do not study “firstness” as such. Treated ethnographically, Peirce’s conceptualization of qualities as “mere abstract potentialities” is helpful only when they are regarded as cultural concepts that undergo different degrees of lexicalization and entextualization and exert different degrees of intensionalization and metapragmatic regimentation (Silverstein 2004). Just as qualia are accessible only through higher-order semiotic classes, the broader problem of sensuous social life (see *Body, Embodiment*) is investigable only through the higher-order complexes of cultural semiosis that produce the conceptual quality spaces around which social groups form. For cultural anthropologists, Nancy Munn’s *The Fame of Gawa* (Munn 1986) presents an exemplary approach to dealing with this complexity. Munn’s analysis of the salience of “qualisigns of value” for Gawan communal viability illuminates a cultural systematicity of sensuous qualities, analogically organized and pragmatically experienced across domains, genres, and objects of activity (e.g. sailing, gardening, eating, canoe building, shell trading, etc.).

For linguistic anthropologists, a productive area of focus has been the degree and structure of lexicalization in relation to the enregisterment of co-occurring speech forms (and, increasingly, non-speech forms). An obvious example is the anthropology of color terminology, especially the complements and responses to Berlin and Kay’s theory of “basic color terms” (see *Color and Color Nomenclature*). Ethnographic accounts have demonstrated that color terms and their longitudinal complexification – and thus the experience of their referents – are always involved in higher- and often parallel-order semiotic processes of classification, attribution, and conceptualization. These may be the systematic regularities of morphological distribution (as John Lucy demonstrated for English); multiple, multichannel, interlaminated planes of sensuous distinction (as Harold Conklin demonstrated for Hanunóo); direct analogical and terminological projection from the visual classification of system of cattle (as David Turton demonstrated for Mursi); or a whole pragmatic-semantic complex of denotationally iconic predicates (aka “sound symbolism” or “mimetics”; see *Ideophone; Onomatopoeia; Sound Symbolism*) organized by systematic phonological alternations (as is the case in Korean). These kinds of lexical fields are also often applied to speech itself, attributing sensuous qualities to communicative practice by projecting analogically from other domains of experience. Registers, genres, and entire codes become “hard,” “soft,” “fine,” “coarse,” “sweet,” “oily,” “fierce,” “plain,” “flat,” “straight,” or “curvy.” And in some illuminating cases, lexical registers of sensuous attribution come to self-reflexively generate the qualia that they purport to identify and discern in other domains, producing whole sensuous registers of transitive, multichannel semiotic co-occurrence and congruence (e.g. “wine talk” or “oinoglossia,” Silverstein 2004). The relative force of these practices can be judged by the extent to which they expand from “the way things seem” for individuals to “the way things are” for groups. Anthropologists have been able to explain with increasing precision not merely the processes but also the consequences of the production of qualia as they contribute to ideologies of intrinsic or natural forms value (Chumley 2013; Gal 2017).

The challenge for anthropologists working with the semiotically reformulated concept of qualia is the problem that facts of firstness manifest phenomenally as sensuous features or qualities that are not, in the first instance, treated as signs. Although they are semiotically generated and have the indexical capacity to focus attention toward activities, objects, social relations, concepts, or bodily states (Harkness 2015), they emerge initially as a semiotic limit, naturalized as intrinsic properties rather than participating in standing-for relations. In this sense, qualia can be treated as elements *of feeling* that are taken up via semiotic processes into higher-order reflections on the *feeling of* something else (note the syntactic inversion). The methodological and theoretical challenge may also be an opportunity. Treating qualia as the semiotic production of a certain kind of sensuous non-sign might be a way for linguistic and semiotic anthropologists to push their methods further into the ideologically non-semiotic. Take the anthropological interest in affect, for example. If qualia can be conceptualized in terms of extreme semiotic degeneracy, a self-truncating semiotic configuration where an interpretant represents the synthesized features of representamina not as qualitative possibility but as raw experience, then it may be possible to conceptualize affect in terms of an even more extreme form of semiotic degeneracy, where an interpretant represents only itself as being determined, i.e. only the effect of being affected. The interpretant within the internal composition of a sign should be distinguished from Peirce's classification of interpretants by whether and how they yield further semiotic effects by taking on different functional positions in new signs (e.g. relatively "immediate" or "emotional," "dynamic" or "energetic," "final" or "logical"). Qualia and affect both are semiotically generated and have the capacity to generate all sorts of further semiotic activity, but from the point of view of their internal semiotic composition, they are experienced as non-signs.

Recent anthropology has made methodologically explicit the semiotic processes by which qualia are both produced and incorporated into higher-order cultural regimes of differentiation, valuation, and personhood. But the rapid rise in interest in qualia has not come without its own confusion. As an anthropological concept in development, it is expected to yield different definitions and applications as it undergoes refinement. Important at this juncture is not to confuse or conflate it with other, existent concepts; qualia will not be methodologically useful if the term merely relexifies something else. Using Peirce, it is important to distinguish qualia from other semiotic concepts related to firstness, especially *qualities* (mere abstract potentialities), *qualisigns* (firstness, quality, or feeling functioning as minimally genuine signs), *rhemes* (sign configurations treated by the interpretant as involving qualitative possibility, e.g. the free-standing predicate, "... is red"), and *hypostatic abstractions* (the conversion of a predicate into a subject by extracting a property, e.g. "... is red" becomes "redness"). Given the possibility for confusion, it seems helpful to continue to conceptualize qualia as facts of firstness.

The ethnographic study of qualia is the study of cultural processes through which facts of firstness emerge socially, not merely idiosyncratically. To situate analytical attention to qualia within a broader anthropological program, it is helpful to recall the alternative Peircean terms for the semiotic categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness: tone, token, and type. Most linguistic anthropology has focused on the token-type relation, asking how sinsigns and legisigns relate one to another. An anthropological study of qualia requires also thinking carefully about tone and qualisigns.

Many attempts to do this have focused on the more classic categorial problem of indexical (and iconic) manifestations of culturally conceptualized qualities, i.e. *tokens of tone types*. Increasingly, research on qualia is addressing the dynamic and complex sociohistorical modes of human conduct through which these cultural emergents are generated and incorporated into higher-order semiotic processes. This developing approach to qualia as facts of firstness can be stated with a theoretical formulation that indicates its own method: it is an ethnographic attempt to understand the *typification of tone entokened*.

SEE ALSO: Boas, Franz; Body, Embodiment; Classes of Signs; Color and Color Nomenclature; Ideophone; Onomatopoeia; Peirce, Charles Sanders; Sapir, Edward; Semiotics; Sound Symbolism; Silverstein, Michael; Whorf, Benjamin Lee

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Chumley, Lily Hope. 2013. "Evaluation Regimes and the Qualia of Quality." *Anthropological Theory* 13 (1/2): 169–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1463499613483408>.
- Chumley, Lily Hope. 2017. "Qualia and Ontology: Language, Semiotics, and Materiality: An Introduction." *Signs and Society* 5 (S1): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690190>.
- Chumley, Lily Hope, and Nicholas Harkness. 2013. "Introduction: QUALIA." *Anthropological Theory* 13 (1/2): 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499613483389>.
- Dennett, Daniel. 1988. "Quining Qualia." In *Consciousness in Contemporary Science*, edited by A.J. Marcel and E. Bisiach. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198522379.003.0003>.
- Gal, Susan. 2017. "Qualia as Value and Knowledge: Histories of European Porcelain." *Signs and Society* 5 (S1): 128–153. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690108>.
- Harkness, Nicholas. 2015. "The Pragmatics of Qualia in Practice." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44: 573–589. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030032>.
- Harkness, Nicholas. 2017. "The Open Throat: Deceptive Sounds, Facts of Firstness, and the Interactional Emergence of Voice." *Signs and Society* 5 (S1): 21–52. <https://doi.org/10.1086/690041>.
- Keane, Webb. 2003. "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things." *Language & Communication* 23 (3–4): 409–425. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309\(03\)00010-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0271-5309(03)00010-7).
- Munn, Nancy. 1986. *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim Society (Papua New Guinea)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Parmentier, Richard. 1994. *Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Silverstein, Michael. 2004. "'Cultural' Concepts and the Language–culture Nexus." *Current Anthropology* 45 (5): 621–652. <https://doi.org/10.1086/423971>.