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Sweet, Salt, and the Language of Love¹



Sidney W. Mintz

The two chemically purest substances eaten by the human species are salt (NaCl) and sucrose (sugar) (C₁₂H₂₂O₁₁). Both are commonly consumed in refined crystalline form. In that form, they are, as we all know, similar in appearance. Dioscorides, describing sugar in his first-century (A.D.) herbal, compares (what we think to be) sugar to salt:

There is a kind of concremented honey, called *saccharon*, found in reeds in India and Arabia Felix, like in consistence to salt, and brittle to be broken between the teeth, as salt is (Forbes 1966: 103).

In spite of their similar appearances, however, the histories of salt and sucrose are radically different. Salt has figured in human diet for the whole of our species' history, at least as a naturally-occurring ingredient in other food (see, for instance, Nenquin 1961). Carnivores ingest salt with meat; that has probably been true as well for many groups within the human species, though we are omnivores unlike, say, feline predators. In those human societies in which meat is less important in daily diet, it has been contended that the consumption of mineral salt may be higher. But there is in fact no good evidence to sustain that view. It does appear that salt

¹ The author thanks Prof. Ashraf Ghani for advice, and Ms. Luciene Pisa for heroic assistance in the library. Errors are the author's responsibility alone.

is consumed by many, possibly even most, human groups in quantities exceeding what may be physiologically necessary (Kaunitz 1956); moreover, those groups that do eat salt usually reveal by their behavior that they regard it as a necessity (Gilmore 1955).

Sucrose, or what we call sugar, an organic substance and not a mineral one, is historically quite different from salt. It is extracted in liquid form from plants, the earliest of which cultigens used for this purpose being the sugarcane, probably first domesticated in New Guinea about 12,000 years ago, and only slowly diffused across the tropical and subtropical zones of the earth's surface. In contrast to sugar as we know it, honey—surely humankind's most ancient sweetener—is documented as human food in cave paintings an estimated 20,000 years old. But the sugars in honey are mainly glucose and fructose; to honey and its relevance to this subject I shall return briefly at a later juncture. Whether in the company of salt or of honey, sucrose in granular form—what we call sugar—is a latecomer as human food. Liquid sucrose, of course, had been consumed in fruit by the primate ancestors of *Homo sapiens*, stretching back no doubt for hundreds (and probably thousands) of millennia.

Salt, even when only a naturally-occurring ingredient in other foods, is a common (if not essential) component of human nutrition. Sucrose, on the other hand, is not only not essential; it is absolutely unnecessary. All carbohydrates, simple and complex, are transformed into glucose by digestion. Whether we are nourished on potatoes or apples, caviar or kidneys, the human gut draws no distinction. Thus, from the vantage-point of nutrition, sucrose has no special role. Its calories are calories like any calories; it is, as it were, grist for the same digestive mill.

When we turn from appearance, history, and body chemistry, to taste, however, the most obvious of all differences between salt and sugar comes into view: one is salty, and the other is sweet. What a difference that is! Strangely enough, whether there are different taste receptors for salt and sweet is not entirely certain. But that the tastes are differently experienced, whether on the tongue or in the brain, is beyond dispute. Moreover, the receptors themselves seem to be differently distributed on the surface of the tongue: sweet mostly at the tip, for instance, bitter mostly at the back. (This is why, one writer tells us, we sip tea and gulp beer. It is also why children who eat ice cream—as well as some of their parents—lick upwards on either the spoon or the cone.)

There is, further, an emotion I can only label “covetous”—since “lecherous” is no longer associated with food—that is linked with the tasting of sugar, as opposed to other tastes. Here is an illustration based on my own observations. If you have ever been interrupted by a verbal request while eating chocolate—a verbal request that required you to give an immediate verbal response—you may be able to recall a faint sensation of irritation that accompanied your struggle to speak while swallowing. The cause of the irritation, once detected, is simple to remember. Because sweet tastes are experienced with the tip of the tongue, and since most sounds require articulation in the front of the mouth, tasting sweet things while speaking are acts in conflict, both palpable and palatable, with each other. In effect, proper speech means swallowing the bolus of semi-melted chocolate already in the mouth while losing forever the sweet sensation it promised—a terrible sacrifice, in the view of some. I think that you will agree that while salt is profoundly appealing to many palates, its “weight,” the intensity of experience of its taste, is quite different from that of sugar.

Both substances, salt and sucrose, are powerful markers of human experience, as well as building-blocks of nature. All green plants produce sucrose by photosynthesis, converting water and carbon dioxide into sucrose and oxygen. Oxygen-breathing organisms such as ourselves busily consume the oxygen (as well as the sucrose), and produce carbon dioxide. The sucrose we consume is certainly not essential to our existence (though of course food of some kind is). In contrast, it may be that we need *some* salt, though there are cultures that actively eschew it. The sea is salty; amniotic fluid is salty; our blood is salty. The tendency to romanticize our involvement with salt—the amniotic sac as everyman’s ocean, our bloodstream as the memory of our marine origins, and so on—is irresistible to some authors (e.g., Tisdale 1988). But admittedly it is difficult to conceive of this earth and its life without salt.

For reasons having to do with the evolution of green plants, but also with the evolution of other forms of life, the same might be said of sugar. For human beings, descended from arboreal fructivores, there seems to be some built-in predisposition toward the sweet taste, privileging it above all others. It may indeed be the case that the sweet taste was a flag of edibility for primates who, though omnivorous, consumed much fruit, and for whom sweet meant “safe.” Carnivores, apparently lack a taste for sweetness (Beauchamp, Maller and Rogers 1977); and unlike herbivores, who

may consume mineral salt apart from their other food, predators can get salt from blood.

Newborn human infants respond clearly to sweetness; indeed, De Snoo found evidence of fetal responsiveness when sugars were introduced into the amniotic fluid (De Snoo 1937: 88). Only sweetness—among the four “cardinal” tastes (salt, sour, bitter, and sweet)—evokes this positive response. And so, though they are strikingly different in so many ways, salt and sucrose both figure in the architecture of life on earth, both are immensely important to contemporary humanity—and both, most of the time, are treated as humdrum and everyday, hardly worthy of attention.

Salt has probably been human food for as long as there have been humans. The anthropological evidence on salt use, salt collecting and salting is rich and varied (e.g., Hunter 1940). While it cannot be claimed that all peoples want salt (it is tabooed in some societies), and while the consumption of salt varies enormously worldwide, it seems clear that the craving for salt is ancient and widespread.

Both salt and sucrose are also interesting because governments have for so long been interested in them. State societies warm energetically to the fiscal joys afforded by the management of popular resources. Though we are perhaps inclined to think of such management in the West in relationship to tobacco, alcohol, and narcotics in particular, it should not surprise that commodities we regard as everyday—salt and sucrose among them—have long been a subject of lively interest to those who live by revenues gleaned from the work of others. Since sucrose in the form of granular, semi-refined sugar first began to become available to masses of European consumers, beginning in the late seventeenth century, sugar has been a favorite taxable item, a basis for immense corruption, and a plaything of modern economies. Since the Second World War, the rise of carbonated beverages has shifted the field of play somewhat, particularly since various sweeteners can be used in their manufacture. But that is another story. Perhaps one reason why sugars and sweeteners should continue to be the darlings of transnational corporations while salt has lost that special role, is that one’s capacity for salt-eating is clearly finite, while sugar consumption seems to be almost pathetically expandible—at least in some cultures.

But my purposes today are not to pursue the intentions of government or private enterprise, so much as the wanderings of the

heart. I pose the contrast between salt and sweet because the difference between them is experienced with such startling immediacy by all of us. The very words evoke sensations, and the sensations are acute. Who can fail to take note of the different images and sensory memories produced by speaking, on the one hand, of salty things and, on the other, of sweet things—a corned beef sandwich or a *salade niçoise*, versus a chocolate soda or a *mousse au chocolat*?

Salt has been associated with human diet for as far back as we can record its presence. It had, to our knowledge, no predecessor. But before there was sugar, there was honey. Honey is the only important food we eat that has been digested by someone, or something, else. (A less important predigested food is the concremented bird saliva that figures in the making of birds' nest soup.) Honey, the genuine ancient sweetener, is not universal, but it is known to humans wherever the honey-collecting bees *Melipona beechei* (New World) and *Apis mellifica* (Old World) are found. Man—and woman—have been honey-thieves for millennia, as are their primate relatives. The Indians whom Claude Lévi-Strauss studied in South America were honey-thieves, and greatly esteemed honey. Those stingless South American Meliponidae produce honeys which, Lévi-Strauss tells us:

have a richness and subtlety difficult to describe to those who have never tasted them, and indeed can seem almost unbearably exquisite in flavor. A delight more piercing than any normally afforded by taste or smell breaks down the boundaries of sensibility, and blurs its registers, so much so that the eater of honey wonders whether he is savoring a delicacy or burning with the fire of love (Lévi-Strauss 1952: 52).

Unlike sugar, honey is of course to be found in the Bible (as well as in the Talmud, the Koran, and the *Iliad*). Samson's riddle involved honey; Israel was the land of milk and honey; the resurrected Christ was fed honey at Emmaus; and so on. Because of its familiarity in the ancient world, honey and its associations—bees, beehives, beeswax—are all weighted with symbolic significance in a manner strikingly different from that characteristic of sugar.² It is almost possible to claim that sugar is the honey of modernity (Mintz

² A comparison of Chaucerian and Shakespearean texts suggests that sugar had become far more important in English society over time. Sugar ("sugre") is hardly mentioned in Chaucer; honey is repeatedly invoked allusively. In Shakespeare, sugar is referred to with startling frequency, while honey is mentioned less.

1989), honey the sugar of the ancients. In any event, I cannot begin to delve into honey symbolism here, though it properly belongs in the story to follow.³

The history of sugar changed quite abruptly, once it became well known in Europe. Carried to the New World by Columbus on his second voyage, the sugarcane had flourished there. Between the middle of the seventeenth century and nearly the middle of the nineteenth, Europe became a big consumer of sugar. During that period, most of it came from sugarcane, and from the New World. These were also the centuries of coffee, chocolate, and tea; sugar's transformation from rarity and medicine into necessity and food was achieved in the company of these exotic and—at that time—still-unfamiliar, bitter, stimulant beverages. I have tried to describe that democratization of consumption elsewhere, and will not impose it upon you now.

To be sure, more could be said of the history of sugar and salt. But I would like instead to devote a few moments to their roles in verbal imagery. I stress that this is research but barely begun. I am trying to explore in particular the use of sweetness as a vehicle for affective terminology. My reflections up to this point are neither methodical nor conclusive; let me enumerate some of them, merely as a basis for further discussion.

First of all, while sweetness connotes affection in some languages, it does not appear to do so in all. American English is rife with associations of this kind. I do not think that the same may be said of French, Spanish or Italian. I intend to collect word lists, as a first step in documenting what I expect to be culture-specific differences.

Second—in English, at least—the other large category for affective terms appears to consist of small, usually furry—or so-called “cuddly”—animals. In English, both categories are rife with diminutives, from “honey-baby” and “sweetie-pie” to “bunny” and “kitten.” I shall not deal in what follows with this second category of terms, but wanted to take note of it in passing. (It may also be fair to observe that the confections of Easter combine these cate-

³ Bees are commonly associated with work and purity. Beeswax was at one time the only permissible material for candles to be used in Catholic ritual. When Prince Henry, the sickly son of Edward I (1272-1307), lay dying, the candles “made to his measure” (and possibly in his likeness) to help him live were fashioned of beeswax. But they helped no more than the sugary medicines the court physicians prescribed for him, or the prayers of the thirteen widows who prayed all night for his recovery.

gories, meanwhile calling attention to the famed reproductive powers of chickens and rabbits, and the special significance of eggs—highly fitting for the earth's springtime rebirth.)

Thirdly, in American English, sweetness permeates other semantic areas besides human relations; I can suggest a few of these usages by way of illustration. Not only revenge⁴ but also music and sausage can be sweet; flowers smell sweetly, people sing sweetly, motors run sweetly, and persons can be sweet. Walter Payton is Sweetness personified, because of the way he runs; Sugar Ray Robinson—the original “Sugar”—was sweet because of the way he boxed. Our usages for salt, sour and bitter, as well as for “hot” (*piquant*), are more limited and usually, less complimentary. In collecting terminology in other languages, I hope to be able to show that the cognate terms meaning “sweet” are not polysemic for the same domains, but may mean “soft” here, “slow” there, “agreeable” somewhere else.

By the time the West was habituated to its use, sugar was firmly installed in European taste systems, and the figurative use of sugar in English terminology for positive affect was secure. “Honey,” “honeybunch,” “honeymoon,” and erotic terms such as “honey pot” are apparently quite old; to them was added “sugar,” “sugar pie,” “sweetie,” “sweetie pie,” “sweetheart,” “muffin,” “sugar daddy,” and erotic terms such as “jelly roll”—including the now-famous line “it mus’ be jelly ‘cause jam don’ shake like dat.”

The use of honey and sugar as vehicles for the description of feelings of love *may* seem self-explanatory. Yet it does not appear to be general to language, so much as culturally specific, which raises interesting questions. I think that the association between sweetness and love, and between sweetness and sexuality, is by no means natural, but culturally specific. Yet I suspect that no one, at least in the West, is surprised by this association; people do not seem to

⁴ From Aristotle, who defines anger as

a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight—far sweeter than dripping honey down the throat it spreads in men's hearts.

And from Homer's *Iliad* (Book 18: lines 78-133; the Robert Fitzgerald translation):

All let strife and rancor perish from the lives of gods and men, with anger that envenoms even the wise and is far sweeter than slow-dripping honey, clouding the hearts of men like smoke . . .

With thanks to Neil Hertz.

need to learn to like sweet tastes in the fashion that they learn to like the tastes of sour, salt, bitter and hot. Whether they need to learn to employ sweetness as an affective vehicle is another matter—is not “*mon p’tit chou en sucre*” an odd supplement to the original?

But the association between sweetness and positive affect is interesting for another reason. If there were one taste one might expect to be linked with physical love, I suspect that it would not be the taste of sweet but the taste of salt. The tastes of blood, sweat and tears are all saline. Indeed, only one liquid product of the human body tastes unmistakably sweet, and that is mothers’ milk. (I except the urine of those suffering from *Diabetes mellitus*.) It seems to me unlikely that we can explain this propensity to sweet imagery by reference to mothers’ milk. But then, what—if anything—are we to make of the sweetness imagery?

First of all, as I have just observed, it does not surprise us. That itself, it seems to me, is of some interest. At the same time, the distribution of sweet imagery for affective relations appears to be culturally specific—as is the per capita consumption of sugar. Secondly, I see no reason not to suppose that the frequency of such imagery is related in some important manner to the commonness of sweet things in the culture, and to the way people feel about them. It is perhaps worthy of note, for instance, that two societies famous the world over for their food, France and China, are also among those which tend to eat less, rather than more, sugar. Though I do not have any solid data yet, sweetness does not seem at first glance to bulk largely in the imagery of their languages. But it would be of little use to hypothesize further from such meager and impressionistic data. We need to know both how much such imagery has changed over time, and—to the extent possible—how variable the imagery is, in terms of such distinctions as class, region, and ethnic origin. The answers to these queries are not available, and will have to be collected. That task awaits the scholar.

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