

Eviatar Zerubavel on TAKEN for GRANTED: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable for Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast

Marshall Poe

Welcome to the New Books Network.

Hello, everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the New Books Network. You're hearing an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast brought to you, of course, by Princeton University Press and the New Books Network. And today, I'm very pleased to say we have Eviatar Zurubavel on the show. And we're talking about his terrific book, TAKEN FOR GRANTED: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable. It's out from Princeton University Press in 2018. Eviatar, thanks for being on the show.

Eviatar Zerubavel

My pleasure.

Marshall Poe

Absolutely. Could you begin the conversation by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yeah, I'm a sociologist. I teach at Rutgers University. I got my PhD at the University of Pennsylvania in 1976. I've taught in University of Pittsburgh, in Columbia and Stony Brook. And I've been at Rutgers since 1988 and I'm the author of 13 books that deal with various topics ranging from hospital schedules to the development of the seven-day week to 16th century maps of the Americas, to conspiracies of silence, to genealogy, and so on. So this is a book, TAKING for GRANTED is a book about what we take for granted, what we assume by default.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, you're a man after my own heart with the range of your interests. I'm similar in this way. I can't decide what I want to write about. So can you tell us why you wrote TAKEN for GRANTED and what you were hoping to accomplish with the book?

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes, the challenge that I had when I started thinking about this book was how to talk about that stuff which we don't talk about. As I mentioned, I wrote a book about conspiracies of silence called THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM. This is different. This is not about the stuff that we deliberately are not talking about, but the stuff just stays there in the background because it's assumed by default, so why talk about it?

So for example, I'm very struck by the fact that there are road signs that tell me to anticipate a curve in the road, but I don't have anything that tells me to anticipate a straight road. Most of

the roads I drive on are straight. So this is the kind of stuff that interests me: to challenge the taken for granted, to challenge that which we take as a given, which we assume by default. Why is there a term such as openly gay? But there isn't a term such as openly straight? For example, why is Obama perceived as a black man, whose mother was white rather than as a white man whose father was black? So, this is the kind of stuff that has always interested me. One of my earlier books, SOCIAL MINDSCAPE, so I start with the question of why is it that when we take a hamburger and we add a piece of cheese, it's called cheeseburger, but when we add some ketchup, it doesn't become a ketchup-burger? These are the kind of questions that I like to ask, to tease the reader to actually think about the stuff that he or she don't think about, but it's actually the stuff that the world is made of.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Absolutely that's fascinating. I really like the point about the hamburger and the cheeseburger, as somebody who likes hamburgers and cheeseburgers. So the distinction between marked and unmarked is fundamental to the book. Can you tell us a little bit about this distinction and give us some more examples?

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes, the distinction is actually, I'm borrowing the distinction that a couple of linguists, Roman Jakobson and Trubetskoï developed in 1930. So within linguistics it's been a very, very important distinction between voiced and unvoiced, for example, and so on. But it stayed within linguistics for more than 50 years and when I was working on a book on the week-- the history of the week and the phenomenology of the week—and I noticed that there were two very different seven-day weeks, historically. There was the Jewish seven-day week, which later became also, the questions and the secular and the astrological seven day week, where all the names of the days of the week in English, for example, are still are derived. And I noticed that the difference between those weeks is that in the Jewish week, you have six days that don't have any meaning and the Seventh Day, the Sabbath from Saturday, that is the marked day. In the astrological week, it's not like that. So in Hebrew for example to this day, the days of the week are called first day, second day, third day, fourth day, fifth day, sixth day, and then the Sabbath. So they are named after the Sabbath. On the other hand, in English for example, there is a day of the sun, a day of the moon and so on and so forth and all the days are marked.

So I started realizing that there's a great potential for sociological theorizing if we take this distinction from linguistics between marked and unmarked and so basically this is the difference between a cheeseburger and the non-ketchup-burger. Okay, this is the difference between having on the train a car that says quiet car and the other cars not marked as noisy cars because you know that it's noisy. Or when you drive in a city and there is a lane for bikes and it says bike lane or there is a drawing of a bike but you don't have any drawings or terms such as "car lanes," and so on and so forth.

If I'm invited for dinner and I'm a vegetarian, I'm expected to announce that I don't eat meat. If I'm invited to dinner and I do eat meat, I'm not expected to announce that I eat meat. So there's this asymmetry and I talked about it as semiotic asymmetry between marked phenomena and unmarked phenomena. And what's interesting, of course, sociologically is that it's collectively marked and collectively unmarked; it's not just about an individual's decision to mark the world, it's about the fact that the world is culturally marked or unmarked for us collectively.

Marshall Poe

Actually, you prompted a thought and that is, there are idiosyncratic markings in the sense that there are some things that individuals will notice constantly and repeatedly that the collective will not. That's kind of an aside; this just occurred to me.

Eviatar Zerubavel

That's true. That's true. So I can cite for example, that something happened a week before I fractured my elbow but you won't know what I'm talking about because you didn't know that I fractured my elbow.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, that's exactly right. Phobias. Things like this. I'm also thinking of, I guess what we might call kinks or something like this--the person that is really excited about female shoes is going to really notice female shoes all the time, whereas I don't know anything about them.

Eviatar Zerubavel

As you just said, it's about noting, it's about noticing. So before TAKEN for GRANTED I wrote another book called HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT, which talked about the distinction between figure and background, figure and ground, and it's much more about perception. This book is much more on the use of language.

Marshall Poe

Well, you have a rather striking sentence in the book that I liked it and it's wonderful English: "Markedness is inversely related to statistical prominence." There's a lot in that sentence. Can you talk about it?

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes. So when you have in statistics, a normal distribution or phenomenon, you have the famous bell shaped curve, and most of the phenomena in the world are going to be covered by that curve and then there's the stuff in the fringes that isn't. Well, that stuff in the middle which is most of reality is, is not marked. There's nothing, there's no reason to mark it, because we assumed it by default. So we mark the stuff. So, for example, if you are, if you are very promiscuous for example, and you are called a slut, if you are the reverse of that, you're called a virgin, but what about all the stuff in between? Most adults at least are neither virgins nor sluts. Why isn't there a name for that, precisely? Because it's semiotically it's superfluous, redundant. You don't need it because you assume that. So the same thing as I said before, about the semiotic absence of a term such as "openly straight" is that you assume that people are straight. If they are not straight, then they're going to announce it. That's the openly gay. And openly straight? There isn't such a concept. There's a concept such as polyamory, but there's no concept such as "monoamory."

Marshall Poe

That's a good point. So, then colloquially we might say that we don't really talk about the "usual," we talk about the "unusual" things, statistically unusual.

Eviatar Zerubavel

Exactly. It's the extraordinary, it's the special. It's really a distinction between specialness and ordinary-ness and when people... so I mentioned, you know, the whole thing about perception.

If you want to blend in in a lot of environments, you're going to wear blue jeans because blue jeans are kind of an unmarked part of your attire.

Marshall Poe

But on the other hand, if you wanted to stick out you would wear loud pink velvet pants, like my daughter does sometimes?

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes, exactly. So this is what I mean by the inverse relationships between the statistically popular, prevalent in the semiotically prevalent.

Marshall Poe

Mmhmm, it's a kind of perceptual/linguistic filtering.

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes, exactly, exactly.

Marshall Poe

So you point out that markedness, if we can use that word, varies according to situations and you give some examples: Black Lives Matter; All Lives Matter, things like this. Can you talk a little bit about how it varies according to situations?

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes, for example, several years ago, I visited India and most of the restaurants that I entered-- Indian restaurants, of course---had on the menu a section at the end of non-vegetarian dishes. The idea of marking "non-vegetarian" had never occurred to me because I'm used to living in a society which marks "vegetarian." Another thing that I noticed in India is that what we call "arranged marriage," they call "marriage." What we call "marriage," they call "love marriage." In America the concept of "love marriage" makes no sense because you assume that a marriage that is not arranged is a marriage of love. You don't have to say it; that's the point. So there is Black History Month. What's Black History Month? Where is White History month? Well the assumption is that all the months that are not called Black History Months are White History Months and that's because of the semiotic asymmetry between whiteness and blackness. This is what I meant about Barack Obama being perceived as a black man whose mother was white rather than a white man whose father was black. Blackness is marked; whiteness at least until relatively recently, used to be unmarked. And the exception would be in white supremacist circles, and ironically, since I wrote the book and published it in 2018, whiteness has been much more marked because of the whole Trump phenomenon in the last few years.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I've seen this in my own reading, but things are now marked as white that were not marked as white before. So that's a very interesting shift and it's a nice segue into the next question I have and that is about the politics of marking and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that. I mean you point out something like andronormativity....

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes. There is a term heteronormativity which many of us are familiar now with. If you don't say

that someone is gay then you assume they are straight. So there's an asymmetrical relationship between gayness and straightness.

So this is about gayness and straightness but I like the notion of normativity in the suffix of the word and introduce also the notion of andronormativity, which suggests that femaleness is marked and maleness is unmarked. And by the way, this is one of the few cases where it has nothing to do with statistics, because statistically, there are a few more females in the world than males. Nevertheless, maleness is assumed, taken for granted, by default much more than femaleness. And then the same thing with whiteness and blackness. So I talked about gluco-normativity—"gluco," like in leukemia, having to do with whiteness. It's the Greek for "white." And the same thing I talk about able-bodied normativity which suggests unless I tell you that I have a disability, you will assume that I'm able-bodied. So this is why the buildings that are marked as wheelchair accessible buildings. I've never seen a building that is marked as foot accessible.

Marshall Poe

That's a very good point. Um, you have another striking line in the book, which I liked again. Again in wonderful English, "Unmarked identities are not even considered identities."

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes, so I haven't really addressed yet what I think about the politics....I was going in that direction. Part of political dominance is the privilege of not having to mark yourself, not having to be marked, in staying unmarked. So in the case of whiteness and blackness very clearly, you know, there is a book about Obama called PRESIDENT WHILE BLACK. It never occurred to you to make such a statement about a white president. And by the way, the fact that as soon as Obama became president the birthers, Trump, and others started to ask for his birth certificate. I was thinking, you know, which other president in American history would have been asked by these people to show his birth certificate? The point is that prior to Obama presidents came from either English-stock, from Dutch-stock. And so, Theodore Roosevelt, for example, was a Dutch American the time. I'd be very surprised to see Donald Trump asking Theodore Roosevelt to show his birth certificate. So part of the privilege of not being marked is that you're assumed by default, and that's part of what dominance is. Dominance is, for example, think about the term "alternative medicine." So there's "alternative medicine" and "medicine," okay? There is a medicine that is unmarked. It's normal. So it's about normality and then there is the alternative medicine, alternative lifestyle. What about non-alternative lifestyle? Does it have a name?

Marshall Poe

I just interviewed a fellow who wrote a book about science and pseudoscience and the same kind of name-calling goes on there. Because it turns out that a lot of things that were pseudosciences are now sciences, as a lot of things that were sciences are now pseudosciences. So it's about boundary drawing and there's always a kind of plus or minus and evaluation that goes along with the marking process.

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yes. So the irony is that the higher up you are in their political hierarchy--and I'm talking about not individuals, but groups--the more likely you're going to stay unmarked.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, yeah. I see what you mean.

You talk about the process of foregrounding and I've seen this happen a couple of times. We mentioned it in a second ago, in the sense of things being now marked as white that were not marked as white. I studied Russia and I saw this happen in Russia in the 1990s when Soviet, well, in the 1980s, really, when Soviet really meant "Russian" and everybody knew that that's what it meant until nationalists started to point out that Russian meant Russian.

Eviatar Zerubavel

It's a very good point. Yeah. So so I have a whole chapter in the book about what I call assumption reverses, where you are trying to defiantly reverse what is the assumed relationship between the marked and the unmarked. For example, there's a term that was introduced some time ago called "cisgender" and if you're familiar with the term, it's almost normal to use it. A lot of people and especially when I wrote the book three, four years ago, never heard of that term. And when they ask, what does it mean? They say, it means that you identify yourself as the gender that you are assigned when you were born. And the answer is usually "Duh! What do you expect?" And the whole point of those who introduced the term cisgender was to actually defy the abnormality of transgender-ness by actually marking this cisgender. So there was no term for not being trans. There was "trans" and there was "normal." Now there's "trans" and there is "cis." So in a way, semiotically speaking they're on the same footing. The same thing happens with neurological disorders. That there's an assumption that you, if you're on the Autism spectrum, you're going to be marked. If you are not, then there's no name for you. But now there is a term for you, "neuro-normality," and the reason that you have such a term is to stick it to those who aren't like the conventionalist image. So this is a very political way of doing it, but it's also done, you know, in humor. I'm quoting a comedian who said, "Why do we talk about corn on the cob? The corn is naturally on the cob. You should talk about "corn off the cob!"

Marshall Poe

It's very funny.

Eviatar Zerubavel

And actually, it's very interesting, in one of the debates of the Democratic Party in 2008, the three who stayed in it by the end of January in the race were Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John Edwards. And Obama was asked if he thinks that the 2008 election is going to revolve around race. And part of his answer said, "Well, you have to admit that [in] this election the Democratic side is bringing the first black person, the first woman, and.... John Edwards." And he waited, and the timing was perfect because when he said, "John Edwards" everyone burst out laughing because John Edwards is the most white name that you can think of, yes? So what are you going to say, that "this is the first white candidate," right?

Yes, so this is humor, but in the book I also talk about assumption reverses like this that are done artistically, like a lot of the admiration that we have for pieces by someone like Maurits Escher, for example, or an [unclear] are about these reversals in poetry. The same thing in photography, those photographers who insist on taking pictures of quote-unquote "everyday people" rather than the sensational. And finally, in academia, I was a student of the person Erving Goffman who introduced into sociology what's called "Sociology of Everyday Life," which

is the sociology of that which is unmarked. So it's a very radical epistemically and it can be radical politically too.

Marshall Poe

I was going to say, I don't think I've ever met anyone who met Erving Goffman. So that's a plus for me, somebody I admire very much. So the opposite of foregrounding is backgrounding and that's where you're "unmarking the marked?"

Eviatar Zerubavel

Right...throughout the book I use the metaphor of scale where you have basically two parts: one, which is high, one which is low. If you talk about this symmetry, the marked is low because it's very weighty. It has a lot of significance neurologically, so it's weighty. And then there is a part that is unmarked doesn't have any. And what I'm saying is that there are three ways to defy them: one is to mark the unmarked, to take the [thing?] that is higher and move it lower; the second is to unmark the marked, okay? For example, this point about the corn-on-the-cob. Don't say corn-on-the-cob, say "corn," then we have corn-off-the-cob. Don't say, you know, the Women's National Basketball Association because you don't have the Men's National Basketball Association. Morgan Freeman made this attack on the idea of the Black History Month, says "You don't have a white history month." So why do you need Black History Month? And academically it's also been seen. So in the third one is to actually create a symmetry instead of asymmetry. These are the three ways of doing it.

So, academically, the interesting thing is that starting in the early 80s, they started a study of masculinity, which is very interesting. So, today Masculinity or Men's Studies sounded very, very popular but it wasn't prior to their early eighties because when you said "gender," just like you said about Soviet and Russian earlier, when you said "gender," the assumption was that you're talking about women. It's not about gender, but men are gendered, too. Those studies in the eighties and very soon after that came Whiteness Studies and Straightness Studies. So, to talk about straight, I mean, think about the concept of straight. What a strange concept! You can say that "gay" is a strange concept too, but gay has been accepted as part of a social reality that you mark, whereas one wouldn't think to identify oneself as "straight." You can't imagine that 50, 60 years ago.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I've seen this in my own academic life. I was a professor for decades and I remember learning about Women's History. And then Women's History sort of fell out of fashion. I still exists, but it became Gender History?

Eviatar Zerubavel

Right. Exactly and the whole point is to put male and female here on an equal footing semiotically. Yeah, that's the assumption reversibility I talk about.

Marshall Poe

Can you talk a little bit about pronouns? Because it seems to me that this relates directly to what you're saying and the current effort...attempt, I don't know... "gropings" toward gender-neutral pronouns.

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yeah. So this was part of the same attack on the “let’s try to unmark what was marked and mark what was unmarked.” So we had the terms such as “chair” and then became “chairman.” I remember when I was introduced to English when I was in my teens, this is the concept that I learned, “chairman.” But then you started to hear about “chairwoman,” which came, you know, with the women's movement and then came the “chairperson,” that just neutralizes gender. So the same thing if you talk about a firefighters, I was introduced to English word for firefighters as “firemen.” And it's the same thing that it's an explicit semiotic attack on the asymmetry between whiteness and Blackness/maleness and femaleness its own.

And the point is if you assume one of them by default, why don't you assume also the other? So, you know, I use this wonderful example of Serena Williams saying, “I'm sick and tired of being called “the best female tennis player in the world.” There's no male best tennis player in the world.

So, it's a very interesting, the politics of attacking semiotic asymmetry. So, for example, one of the things about gay marriage, I remember that it was said “let's stop calling it gay married and just call it marriage.” Because when you call it gay marriage it stigmatizes, pathologies it. So the book is really about the sociology and politics of normality and my big message, of course, is that normality is socially constructed. Things are not just normal; they're made to appear normal when you talk about social reality.

Marshall Poe

What's interesting is when the process of making that reality becomes conscious, and I go back to this Women's History to Gender History that was a very conscious effort on the part of people in academia to do that. Mostly my impression is these things happen kind of behind the scenes, or they're not as well thought out; they're not intentional; they just kind of evolve. But in modern times, they're very explicit.

Eviatar Zerubavel

I agree. And if you look at the history of a term such as sexual harassment, I find it a fascinating concept because there was a lot of sexual harassment before there was a concept. So, the question is: what changed? Collective attention was put on it and you start noticing a phenomenon that you didn't notice before collectively. Of course people know about it, but it wasn't a thing because it didn't have a name and, you know, I keep thinking of George Orwell whose 1984 featured the language “newspeak.” And the point of newspeak is that you have to remove a lot of words from vocabulary, not because specific words are problematic, because there were too many words. Because there were too many words, you could express many ideas, which Big Brother and company didn't like, so you shrink the vocabulary.

The whole point about markedness and unmarkedness plays right into this.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, it's very good point. We've taken up a lot of your time. I want to close with a kind of speculative question; it touches on a big topic.

You mentioned Benjamin Whorf at the beginning of the book. And I read Benjamin Whorf when I was in college and the question really has to do with whether language structures thought, and

that's what Whorf thought, or whether it's kind of the other way around--that is, experience structures language.

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yeah, I think it's both. I think it's both. I actually wasn't introduced to Whorf in college, so you're actually lucky. I discovered him by myself after I graduated and I couldn't believe my eyes, my brain. No thinking about these ideas. Now, Whorf himself was not a determinist, but I think that his theory was taken to be linguistic determinism and I don't believe that Whorf thought that all thought comes from language, but he did make the point that language gives you the tools to think about things that you might not have thought without it, you know. I make I make a point in the book about the concepts such as "white trash." When I came to America and I first heard the term, I couldn't believe that I heard it and I started asking, people, "How do people use this term? Such a racist term. And English-born speakers said to me, "what are you talking about?" So I said, "so what's white trash?" And they say, "Well, it's a poor person who lives in the trailer and blah, blah, blah." Like the people we see in Nomadland now. Yeah, and I said, "wait a second but what are you highlighting? The fact that he is poor or the fact that he is white?" Because what I hear is the surprise is that this poor person is white? Because if that poor person were black, would you say black trash? It would be semiotically superfluous and racist, that word.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, there's definitely a hidden assumption behind white trash.

Eviatar Zerubavel

Yeah, the same thing, you know, was with the notion of domestic rape, i.e. marital rape. What's marital rape? Why do you use the term marital rape? And when it started the first people who used it, used it to make a political point that [there's] rape of course in marriage too. That women are not property of their husbands. Wives are not properties of the husbands, and so on. Okay. But today, when I hear "marital rape," I hear it differently. I hear it, kind of, this is "rape-lite." It's not "real rape." It's "marital rape" and it defeats the purpose, of course.

Marshall Poe

Well, thank you very much. It's been a fascinating conversation. We have a traditional final question on the New Books Network and that is, what are you working on now?

Eviatar Zerubavel

So, what I'm working on now is actually at a very, very, early stage, but I'll tell you what I was working on and completed after TAKEN for GRANTED.

So I published a book in November called *GENERALLY SPEAKING: An Invitation to Concept-Driven Sociology* (Oxford) and it's a methodology book. But what I mean by methodology is a how-to book on how to do concept-driven research that doesn't begin with data; it doesn't begin with big theory; it begins with concepts. Concepts, such as conspiracy of silence. Concepts such as genealogical relatedness. Concepts such as background. Concepts such as default assumption and so on. Concepts such as distinction or boundary. And I wrote a number of books that started like that and developed in a way that people found very idiosyncratic and were very interested in. So how do you do it?

So I actually wrote a book on how I've done it and I'm not the first person who has been using concept-driven thinking in sociology and, you know, we mentioned [Erving] Goffmann before obviously, one of the kings of it. But no one had ever written about how to do that. And that book is a book about focusing. How to notice; how to focus; about how to use examples; how to transcend context, meaning how to look at comparisons that are cross-cultural, that are cross-historical, that are cross-domain, across level, and so on. So I arrive at an analysis of patterns that are trans-contextual, that transcend context. And so these are big words to talk about what actually the book is about, which is how to identify parallel patterns in different domains and different cultures, different historical periods. And so on.

So, for example, in *THE ELEPHANT in the ROOM*, as I say, we wrote about conspiracies of silence. Well, conspiracies of silence where? Anywhere, because to my understanding the conspiracy of silence that a family exhibits around the drinking of one of its members is very similar to the silence that an organization exhibits by the corruption of one of its leaders. Everyone knows it. No one talks about it publicly.

And so, I talk about things like sex, like the Holocaust, you know, a lot of the stuff that developed into euphemisms. Why euphemisms? Because you can't say a certain thing and the euphemisms appear about the Holocaust and appear about sex. What's the connection between the Holocaust and sex? It's actually almost sacrilegious to compare them. But deep down there's going to be certain patterns such as avoiding something, using a euphemism to talk about "during the war" to want to talk about the Holocaust or talking about "down there" about sex, they're very similar to my mind.

Marshall Poe

Well, that sounds absolutely fascinating and maybe we can have you back on the show to talk about that book. Let me tell everybody that we've been talking to Eviatar Zerubavel about his terrific book, *TAKEN for GRANTED: The Remarkable Power of the Unremarkable*. It came out from Princeton University Press in 2018. I encourage you to go out and buy a copy of it. Eviatar, thank you very much for being on the show.

Eviatar Zerubavel

Thank you so much.