Cognitive systems, humans in particular, often make assumptions based on the information provided to the system by its senses. I argue that three such assumptions humans make are the assumptions that we are mortal, that others around us are conscious, and that we accurately represent words as others pronounce them.

One assumption that we make every day is the assumption that we are mortal beings. We look both sides before crossing the street, invest time and effort into maintaining healthy lifestyles, and do our best to avoid dangerous situations. This is because we assume that if we were subjected to certain experiences, they could result in our death. This is a reasonable assumption however, because we observe through experience that everyone must die, and that certain physical traumas lead to death. It remains an assumption however, because until we die, we cannot know for sure that we are capable of death.

Humans also assume that the people around us are conscious subjects, and not “zombies”. Though there is no way to definitively prove that any subjective experience exists beyond our own, we still assume this to be the case. We love others, and go to great lengths to protect them from harm, based on the assumption that joy, sadness, and pain are all experiences they are capable of. This is a reasonable assumption, because it allows us to create a functional society and codependent society.

In linguistics we make crucial assumptions to bridge the gap between our sensory input and the interpretation of this information. Just like any other physical action undertaken, spoken words are not pronounced in the exact same way each time they are reproduced; the muscles involved in speaking introduce slight variability. These variations are ignored, however, assumed to be irrelevant. This is reasonable, because in most cases words of any language are distinguishable enough that the slight variation in the pronunciation of one word will not lead to it being interpreted as another word entirely. Therefore, any inconsistencies in how the same word is pronounced by the same speaker are ignored, or assumed to be irrelevant.

To perceive the world around us in a more stable and consistent way, we rely on assumptions to reinterpret sensory information. While they are usually reasonable, and sometimes necessary for life in modern day society, we should still be aware that some of our knowledge is based on subconscious assumptions.