

SOME USES AND ABUSES OF LANGUAGE

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SUMMARY: A CRITICAL VIEW OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Silence is made to be broken, it is an unnatural and unwelcome phenomenon wherever people are together. Communication is positive in most circumstances. However, it can have negative aspects which surface occasionally, which this article highlights. Communication, especially mass communication, is a two-edged sword that may inform or deceive. This article, drawing on four recent studies of language and society, shows how apparently neutral texts, for example in school textbooks and government circulars, turn out to be riddled with ideological content; how governments, democratic in name and appearance, claim moderation and civilization to be on their side while at the same time perpetrating unspeakably barbarous acts, and how the media play into their hands; finally, how language policy itself, carried out by governments expressing the best intentions, often turns out to be full of self-interest. We have, perhaps unfairly, pointed out deceptive language on only one side of the political spectrum, for which we apologise. Our references are usually to the English language but parallels could be drawn with others.

LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

Gunther Kress¹ claims that linguistic and social processes are totally connected. Many social processes are argued about and take place through language, and Kress argues that linguistics cannot talk solely about texts without reasoning about why texts are written, what motivated them. All discourses are interpretations of reality, not reality itself, based on the social position (meant in its widest sense) of the writer/speaker. Discourses, that is, "systems of meanings arising out of social institutions" determine both the form and meaning of texts. Kress () minimizes the individual elements there might be in any act of reading or writing, while stressing social ones. Writers, whether they realize it or not, "find themselves in certain social/discursive positions which structure their writings to a greater or lesser degree". While enjoying apparent freedom to construct the text he/she wishes "the writer of the text finds that he or she occupies a writing position with respect to any particular text which guides, influences, determines her or his writing" (p68).

Kress claims that a reading, like a writing, is never merely "my personal opinion" but a compounding of our social class, race, age, sex and professional position. One would like to see people able to step outside themselves, as it were, when reading a text, to be "resistant readers", as he says, but it appears to be utopian to hope for such a thing to happen. We often lack a healthy cynicism, or rather a critical spirit of enquiry compelling us to suspend belief in the ideological framework established.

¹ "Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice" by Gunther Kress. Oxford University Press. 1990.

Kress illustrates his argument with sources as far apart as geography textbooks and radio interviews. In the former, he shows that what is painted as neutral is often nothing of the kind, but betrays the ideological viewpoint of the writer:

“The environmental conditions of this region mean that it is poorly suited to most forms of agriculture.....the natural savanna woodlands vegetation and grasslands have few nutrients for intensive grazing, the soils are poor, the region is a long distance from markets, and transport facilities are poorly developed. Thus, the land is used for little else except for extensive beef cattle grazing.....Another land use, mining, is now of greater value than beef grazing.”

His comment on this passage is that it displays a mercantilist approach to land use which is easily absorbed by the young reader the passage is aimed at. “The major concern is “suitability to agriculture”, a concern which comes from a certain ideology: that of thinking about nature as merely being part of the economy, “of utility in relation to production, in short a certain kind of capitalist ideology.” No other value for the land is mentioned other than the use of it, presumably by some shadowy investor or farmer figure, for money. The environment itself is given no value at all as a place where aboriginals and animals have coexisted for centuries. That is, it gives “poor returns”, is “poorly developed”, “worthless” etc. by the writers’ unstated standards. So the social and the linguistic mingle in the same passage, probably without the authors’ being aware that this is the underlying message they are conveying.

Another example given is that of a circular passed to the Heads of schools from the Director General of Education in his native Australia. The letter begins by stating that the Heads and teachers have freedom to do whatever they like: “I have been asked to define what is meant by the freedom you and your staff have been exhorted to use in the schools”. But reading further the circular goes on to severely limit, not to say contradict, this supposed freedom, not so much by prescribing formulas but by introducing educational universals under the cover of the Passive Voice without the Agent, as happens in scientific English. Under this scientific disguise, all sorts of ideologically charged statements are introduced. As we comment later in this article, if a government says that certain proposals are “unacceptable”, it means that the government itself does not accept them, but by stating it in this way shields itself behind a mask of impersonality. In the same way, the letter under consideration talks about “acceptable schemes of organization” “(the general wellbeing) must be the prime concern” “it is expected that the motive is to meet more effectively the needs of students” “the same privileges should be extended to your staff” “Methods are best left for the schools to work out”. These are all unjustified universal value judgements included and, one fears, read uncritically by the Heads who receive them, and in fact severely restrict the supposed freedom claimed at the outset, a freedom they had been “exhorted to use”, that is a limited freedom.

Both texts used so far exemplify what is called “distancing”, that is, “the retreat into individual invisibility” (p57). “Individual subjects are absent...Instead there are abstractions, states rather than processes..the texts are monologic rather than dialogic...the tenses are timeless..”. Such pseudo-scientific language is more easily swallowed, rather like the message of traffic signs. They make an appeal to some undefined authority and impose their will on the reader subtly. So widespread is this convention in some societies that it has become the only accepted way of giving instructions, but for that very reason it is more dangerous. In some societies the

exercise of power through language is seldom obvious. Kress says "In Anglo-Saxon middle class social groups..there is a "politeness" convention which suggests that the powerful should not normally openly assert their power." In fact, the explicit use of language to exert authority is seldom necessary. All that may be needed is a circular saying "This amount must be paid by the 31st of December" or a road sign saying "No Parking", unchallengeable and beyond dialogue, appealing to a vague nameless authority, that people must obey. There is no answer to these except possibly tearing them up or down respectively !

MANIPULATION OF LANGUAGE IN THE MASS MEDIA

Turning from internal circulars and textbooks of limited readership to the press, radio and television, with millions of readers, listeners and spectators daily, we find the truth of Kress's remarks borne out: what is broadcast and printed is not so much the facts as a version of the facts, coloured, selected and sifted beforehand by those whose interests are directly involved in maintaining the status quo. What is conveyed is the attitude of the "manufacturers of consent", as Chomsky has called the media. The means used by those who control what is published can be quite insidious and at the same time alarming. It is often pointed out that the western press is at present in the hands of comparatively few individuals, such as Rupert Murdoch, who according to Noam Chomsky controls 70% of the Australian press, as well as Sky Channel and the most influential newspapers in Britain, respectable "quality" newspapers such as "The Times" and popular ones like "The Sun". Far from being neutral, this individual is reported to have raised his arms in the air after the Conservative victory in the last British election, and to have shouted "We've won !"² There is a difference in subtlety and in the length of words between the respectable and popular press but in essence the message is largely the same: the world is divided into US and THEM, the civilized and uncivilized, the moderates and the extremists. It is just as alarming to see how the press and media in general are tamed, it being unnecessary to impose censorship, as they exercise a kind of self-censorship, as happened in England in the seventeenth century after the Restoration: "Opinion formers censored themselves. Nothing got into print which frightened the men of property"³. In that way perhaps society has not advanced all that much.

One is interested to see how the West, as it is known, as a political and economic entity, publicly as through the media, has pretended to be doing the exact opposite of what is in fact occurring, without the vast majority of people realizing the contradiction between its actions and words. To do this requires a considerable amount of skill in language, the ability to paint black as white, and to remind the audience only of what it is in our interests they should remember. The job of convincing the world is in the hands of speech writers, news agencies (most of them in the hands of western governments and multinationals), television channels (likewise) and newspapers of mass circulation. It is achieved by taking advantage of the fact that most of us have very short memories, are uncritical of what we read and hear, by censorship (using omission and selection of material), by smear campaigns against those brave enough to speak out, using labels such as "troublemakers", "extremists", "radicals" etc., and by our lack of a sense of history, in that events seem to occur in an isolated way without

² "The Guardian", London 1992.

³ "The World Turned Upside Down" by Christopher Hill, Penguin, 1975

pattern or reason, we are given snapshots of the news: we know that some Arabs are anti-American, or anti-Israeli but we are not often told why, we know that the price of raw materials is falling, that there are wars, famines, coups etc., but are not told whether it is a deliberate policy of some countries to provoke these phenomena. This manipulation of language manages to smooth over unpleasant matters, call them by different names, make the majority of us feel comfortable and above all restrained and moderate in our western homes, while those who do not have access to the majority channels of information are restricted in their audience. Kress notes that "In the face of superior power, the status of knowledge becomes inferior...knowledge is not valued in the hands of the young, the very old, females, the poor, non-whites, workers or the unemployed." To this list we may add that the knowledge of those who criticise the Establishment is not thought worthy of much front page attention either.

The use of language to delude and confuse is so widespread that we shall only cite a few instances found in our sources⁴ and⁵. They belong to the process called by Walter Lippmann "the manufacture of consent", and are common to most languages. The process has been justified by Reinhold Niebuhr, one of President Kennedy's mentors, in the following terms: "Rationality belongs to the cool observers, who must recognise the average man, who follows not reason but faith...and must provide the emotionally potent oversimplifications which will keep up the necessary illusion." Of course there will be examples like the following in every country and under every political and economic system, for example the rival during the Cold War, the Soviet Union, was given to calling its satellites "peace-loving countries". Those given are especially glaring as they are frequently used terms in journalism, reporting speeches by spokesmen, ambassadors, politicians, and foreign ministers of western governments throughout the Cold War period and after:

balanced reporting = non-critical reporting

Noam Chomsky points out how the media in America stress the issues made news by the White House. Noriega was ignored or was ruling "with a firm hand" until he became a nuisance for US foreign policy, when suddenly he turned into a monster, as happened with Saddam Hussein some years later. He shows how certain victims of human rights abuses are systematically ignored, for example in client states of the USA in central America, while others were coddled and given VIP treatment, like those in the ex-USSR and Eastern Europe.

one-sided reporting = critical reporting

A journalist should never criticize the system without offering the other point of view, but if he/she is lauding the government this rule of balanced reporting does not hold.

⁴ "Deterring Democracy" by Noam Chomsky, Vintage Books, London 1992.

⁵ "Distant voices" by John Pilger, Vintage Books, London 1992.

allies = countries bribed or blackmailed into compliance
satellites = countries bribed or blackmailed by the other side

“We” do not compel anyone to aid us in our foreign policy, or form part of a coalition unlike our enemies, but if they do not they will find it harder to get loans from the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. On the other hand, a leader with a doubtful human rights record (President Assad of Syria for example), can be washed as white as snow by changing sides at the right moment, and his country freed of the yoke of a national debt.

an tragic incident = an allied massacre
an unfortunate mistake = an allied massacre
war crimes = massacres committed by our enemies

In terms of a “tragic incident” the Western press described the air attack on Iraqi troops fleeing from Kuwait without air cover at the end of the Gulf War.

a modern Hitler = a dictator not in our interests
firm leadership = what a friendly dictator provides

John Pilger describes the different treatment handed out in the British press to Pol Pot, whose Khmer Rouge forces, partly trained by the British SAS, massacred one fifth of the population of Cambodia, but who was fighting against the Vietnamese and so was in “our” interests, with that given to Saddam Hussein, but only after he had attacked Kuwait, not when he was fighting Iran.

destabilization = terrorism by our friends
terrorists = people who attack our interests
freedom fighters = terrorists on our side

Thus, Ronald Reagan described the Contras in Nicaragua as “freedom fighters” while the Palestinian PLO, or the FMLN in El Salvador were “terrorists”.

national security = the interests of the West

In the British press it was said that the war in the Gulf was fought for “national security”, but how a war on the other side of the world can be interpreted as in some way responding to national security, when one’s frontiers are not even remotely threatened was not explained.

nuclear threat = nuclear weapons in the hands of Pakistan, Iraq, Iran etc.

nuclear deterrent = nuclear weapons in the hands of Western Europe and America.

naïve = honest

liberation = introduction of a free market system

free enterprise/market forces = invasion by multinational companies

The economic process in the ex-USSR is referred to as “reform” and a “liberation of the labour market”, while it is seldom referred to as chaos and a condemnation of 30% of the population to poverty. “Free enterprise” would not be the word used to describe an American or other business trying to invest in Cuba or Vietnam, however, which would be “sanctions busting”.

unpatriotic = critical of the government

anti-American = critical of the United States government

unacceptable proposals = proposals WE do not accept

The use of the impersonal passive form makes it appear as if the proposals could not be accepted by any reasonable person, not that we reject them because they are not in our interests.

Another device used by politicians is the use of “we” to involve all the citizens in a common cause, a cause chosen beforehand by their leaders, of course, eg. “We cannot allow this aggression to go unanswered” = “You and I, your leader, are all in this together, we have the same interests in responding to this aggression.” The use of “we” was especially common in the speeches of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

civilized countries = friendly countries

Thus Turkey, being part of NATO, although it has a dreadful human rights record, is favoured with this status, while other countries are called dictatorships and uncivilized.

stability = the status quo

normalization = the status quo restored

Or, as a State Department note would have it “stability means security for the upper classes and large foreign enterprises.”

spineless appeasers = opponents of war

In this way "The Sun" attacked those in Britain opposed to the Gulf War.

moral crusade = an allied attack

weapons of mass destruction = what the enemy has

smart bombs = what we have

collateral damage = killing civilians

This terminology was first used by the Americans in the Vietnam war. John Pilger describes how he had to ask three times in a Press Conference before the army spokesman finally admitted he was referring to civilian victims.

friendly fire = killing allies

air support = bombing

coercive diplomacy = bombing

security forces = government-paid killers

security zone = a buffer state, for example that created in southern Lebanon to protect Israel from terrorists, though its Lebanese equivalent in the north of Israel to protect them from Israeli invasion does not exist.

moderate Arab country = a country that sells cheap oil

fanatics/extremists = people opposed to Western interests

A government may forbid women to drive cars or have a divorce, may cut off the hands of petty felons, may commit genocide against ethnic minorities, but if it fulfils the most important requisite of the West it becomes a member of this exclusive club. A country, on the other hand, that has democracy, ensures its people are fed, provides them with education and medical care but is opposed to Western interests is "extremist".

denying the enemy an infrastructure = bombing water supplies

This meaning of the term was employed by General Schwarzkopf during the Gulf War.

stumbling into war = the American invasion of Vietnam

In the same way as the mainstream historian in Britain refers to his country as having obtained an empire "in a fit of absence of mind", so America is always

pictured in the American and British media as “responding to aggression”, never as initiating it.

global responsibilities = reasons for intervening anywhere

It is a useful expression to make actions of a world power appear selfless, even threatening that one day they may “tire of being the world’s policeman”, thus apparently leaving the rest of us in a chaotic situation, without protection.

the peace process = ensuring our aims are achieved

internal aggression = what the Vietcong committed
response to aggression = a Western invasion

The American media constantly refer to “responding”, never to “initiating” a conflict. If the status quo, which serves Western interests, is threatened, then of course the terminology is accurate.

terminological inexactitude = a lie
different version of the facts = a lie

We never tell lies deliberately, we are only misinformed, if in spite of everything we are proved wrong.

Western oil needs = Western oil imports

This is preferred to the expression “oil wants” which would not convey the idea that we live frugally and do not waste a drop.

internationalization = control by the West

In these attractive terms the denationalization of the Suez Canal was supported in 1956 by Britain, as against the more negative-sounding nationalization by Egypt. The result of internationalization is control by those who have inter-national power.

propaganda = how our enemies control public opinion

aid to the Third World = business efforts to enhance market penetration

Pilger and Chomsky show how even during years in which, with great publicity, there were concerts and active efforts to help relieve the famine in Africa, the Third

World was paying in interests on its national debts to the West many times more than it received in "Aid", which is always given anyway in exchange for concessions to the Western business community.

Western civilization = countries within the capitalist system

Thus, countries which condemn half of their people to lives of drudgery and poverty escape international economic sanctions and intervention if they are on our side, while others may have to be bombed into "negotiations". A typical sentence in this kind of propaganda war could be: "The United States is concerned about the build-up of tension in X, which could lead to the destabilization of the area." Looking behind the words, what it means is a warning to whoever is involved that they will be punished for disturbing the status - quo, ie there may be armed intervention. Noam Chomsky, being a linguist, is extremely sensitive to the use and abuse of language, especially official language, and has turned into one of the leading critics of the system, which he claims is essentially the same in spite of the Cold War having ended. His critique is more a linguistic one, having much in common with John Pilger, though the latter, as a roaming reporter, has the advantage of having seen at first hand the horrors produced by Western actions in such countries as Cambodia, Vietnam, East Timor and the Phillipines. We could say that the difference in their approaches is that Pilger is more inspired by what he has seen and experienced, Chomsky by what he has thought and analysed.

LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

To conclude this brief study of the uses and abuses of language, it is interesting to notice the nature of decision-making with regard to language itself and the world of language education. If "aid" is an ambiguous term, to say the least, usually meaning a way to open markets for our products, then the choice of language is a crucial one. If we can persuade the leaders of the world to speak our language, then we are half-way on the road towards their having a positive attitude towards our country. Apart from that, selling English is in itself an industry, both for language schools and publishers, reduces unemployment in the metropolis by sending teachers abroad, attracts tourists to Britain and the United States in large numbers, and ensures that the world's leaders of tomorrow will speak our tongue. We find the same double use of language employed in this field too, shielding policy-makers' real aims and interests. While the official line is that English is a language without frontiers, representing no country's interests in particular, and that for many people it represents "modernization", "international understanding" and enables specialists from all over the world to understand the same texts, the truth is that there are no British Council offices in the Sahara Desert, but many in large centres of population and thus of money and power. Cultural "aid" is in fact an extension of government policy, seeking profitability and power, as was in fact admitted openly by one Chairman of the British Council ():

"Of course we do not have the power we once had to impose our will but Britain's influence endures, out of all proportion to her economic and military resources. This is partly because the English language is the lingua franca of science, technology, and commerce; the demand for it is insatiable and we respond either through the education systems of "host" countries or, when the market can stand it, on

a commercial basis. Our language is our greatest asset, greater than North Sea Oil, and the supply is inexhaustible; furthermore, while we do not have a monopoly, our particular brand remains highly sought after. I am glad to say that those who guide the fortunes of this country share my conviction in the need to invest in, and exploit to the full, this invisible, God-given asset."

To speak of a language in these mercantilist terms is a mark of the eighties in Great Britain, but is not unique to that period or to that country. At least this Director spoke clearly enough without trying to deceive his audience. Language has always followed the flag from time immemorial; what has changed is the ability to reach millions of people, have them listening to news from your point of view as captive audiences, with Anglo Saxon attitudes being conveyed as well as the strictly informative and other textual elements, and selling the products "English" and "Britain" or "The United States" at the same time. The Drogheda Report right back in 1954 linked the two things, national interests and language, in no uncertain way:

"The aim of the Information Services must always be in the long run some definite political or commercial result. Overseas propaganda which meets a demand without producing some ultimate political or commercial benefit for this country represents so much public money wasted."

In his study of linguistic imperialism, from which the two above quotations are taken, Robert Phillipson () says that senior officials in the British Council are usually senior Civil Servants, ie. they come from circles close to government policy-making. He talks of the devastating effect the British empire had on minority tongues in India and Africa, where many have actually disappeared under the pressure of English, and says the process continues although the empire has passed away. While it is true that official British policies have become more enlightened and respectful recently, and that there has been a linguistic "snowball" effect fomenting the use of English not attributable to deliberate government actions, whereby English is used as a compromise language (in Belgium for example, to avoid conflicts between the French and Flemish speaking communities), there are nevertheless unavoidable parallelisms to be found between earlier colonialism and a kind of linguistic neo-imperialism. While official papers talk of "strengthening the bonds of understanding", "nation-building" "aiding communication", claiming that "our object is to assist the largest number possible to appreciate fully the glories of our literature" etc. the real though often unstated aims are for a language policy which will go hand in glove with the rest of foreign policy.

Phillipson also denounces a linguistic attitude and policy towards other languages. English is often said to be "modern" and "flexible", for some reason never made clear, in many authoritative works. It is said to contribute to "efficiency", containing all the necessary words of science, technology and economic progress which other languages are said to lack, while it is never explained why other languages should not adopt neologisms just as well as English does. All languages are flexible, and all can incorporate new terminology. He denounces the way official propaganda talks of English teachers in some way respond to other countries' linguistic "needs", but needs are created, often deliberately, by those who potentiate consumption of their product.

CONCLUSION

The authors quoted have in common that they go behind the public utterance and posturing, and search for the social, economic and political dimension. They show how

the process of using half-truths, lies, and “diplomatic” language to manufacture public opinion has been widely employed and continues after the Cold War has finished. While our review has been perhaps unbalanced by the need to stress a point, and we may have fallen into the error of exaggerating some aspects of the question, we feel strongly that the way has been opened by these and other pioneers for us to explore how our own prejudices and interests are served by language, and to make us wonder if we read and listen uncritically to what others, under the disguise of “informing” us, may in fact be “selling” us.