

MANIPULATION OF THE READER IN INTERNATIONAL NEWS

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1. THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE PRESS

In an article about "reality" and the press, Gunther Kress, in 1983, made the following observations: "The media perform a function which is both ideological and political. On the ideological plane the media constantly process materialsso as to integrate them into consistent ideological systems. This process involves the deletion and classification of events and their restructuring, reclassification, and evaluation in the reports which the media present...Their political effect arises from the fact that the media attempt to make sense of the world for others, namely the consumers of media products."

José Oneto makes the same point about the "Sensationalist" press, which he claims provokes "...la manipulación de la verdad, la confusión premeditada entre información y opinión, el sesgo y hasta la invención de las noticias, ..cierta clase de información que muchas veces, por escandalosa y manipulada, apenas merece tal nombre." Even the prestige newspapers are not free of this "vice" of selecting only certain kinds of news. Oneto quotes James Reson: "En el mundo del periodismo, en el que unos hombres tienen que leer dos millones de palabras diarias y seleccionar 100.000 para ser publicadas, todo queda reducido al juicio humano." Which is the same as saying that we read, not what happened, but what the newspapers want us to believe happened!

Often the manipulation is extremely subtle, and can be exercised by the substitution of one word by another. Imagine one day we read:

(A) "The prime minister explained that the measures were necessary." The effect which comes over to the reader is very different from that conveyed by:

(B) "The prime minister claimed that the measures were necessary."

Sentence (A) implies that what the prime minister said was true, while sentence (B) implies that it is open to serious doubt.

A recent example, heard on the BBC news, was: "To-day's stabbing of an Israeli policeman can only add to the tension in the area." The implication here is that it was wrong to use violence against the "security forces" as they are euphemistically named. In a context where some 400 Palestinians had recently died at the hands of the "security forces", however, the stabbing of one policeman may not seem to have much relative importance unless the correspondent wishes to colour his/her report to that effect. The labelling of people as "insurgents", "terrorists", "freedom fighters", "moderates", "fanatics", "radicals" and "extremists" is an entirely subjective matter, but these terms often find their way into even the "respectable" press.

The central message of this article is the claim that the press uses a series of misleading words and expressions, on an international level, which, far from throwing

light on the facts, introduce us to a world far removed from reality. The fact that most of these terms are introduced into Spanish from English-language press agencies compounds the helplessness of the average Spanish reader, who sees his own language actually modelled for him / her. In Kress's words: "The paper's task is to process reality in a manner appropriate to its ideological and political function." To what extent the newspaper is successful depends very much on the level of critical awareness of its audience, and their predisposition to be convinced. When the Conservatives won the 1991 General Election in Britain, Rupert Murdoch, owner of a large part of the British press, raised his arms in the air and shouted "We've won!". The British people were obviously predisposed to listen to the message contained in his papers.

2. AN EXAMPLE OF MANIPULATION USING LANGUAGE: THE SUEZ CRISIS

In the summer of 1956, the president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal, a vital link between Europe and Asia, used by petrol tankers and merchant shipping from all over the world. Although Nasser guaranteed freedom of navigation for all, he was vigorously opposed, firstly by Britain and France, then by Israel, politically, economically, and finally militarily. The United States, for once, did not intervene, for a variety of reasons, and in Britain there was considerable opposition to armed intervention, though French public opinion was unanimously in favour. Spain, whose foreign minister at that time was Sr Martín Artajo, took an active part in attempting to work out a compromise solution. The network of strategic, economic and military interests involved is clear for all to see. Nasser attempted to involve those who were interested in embarrassing "the West", ie the USSR and some other Arab states, who were fearful of committing themselves too far, however.

Reading reports of the period, however, one has a rather different impression. Britain and France are "protegiendo" their "intereses estratégicos" in the area (protecting their strategic interests). The use of "protector" or "defender" is emotionally loaded. Not content with this, they went further and talked of defending "nuestra civilización milenaria", "la civilización occidental" and "la civilización moderna", (western civilization, modern civilization) implying that the other side was either not "modern" or not even "civilized". The West are defending "la libertad de navegación", "la libertad de paso" or "la libre navegación", (freedom of navigation, freedom of passage) against "el Hitler del Nilo" as Nasser is called in the "Daily Mail". The Egyptian leader's action in nationalizing the Canal was "una flagrante violación del derecho / la ley internacional", (a flagrant violation of international law) which can only "agravar la situación" in the Middle East. His action is "una amenaza", "un peligro manifiesto para la paz mundial / la seguridad internacional", (a threat / a danger for world peace / international security).

Of course, the West is not the only side to use language to deceive us. Nasser talked of "los privilegios de las potencias occidentales" (the privileges of the western powers). He is defending his country's "soberanía", its "derechos soberanos" (its sovereignty / its sovereign rights). He calls on his people's "patriotismo", for its "autodefensa", for "voluntarios" to flock to the front line, to defend the country against "agresión militar" or "política de fuerza" of Britain and France, (translations all of these of patriotism, self-defence, volunteers, military aggression, policy of force). Nasser tried to play the Soviet card. The USSR did not aid Egypt directly, sending only "asesores militares" (military advisers), another widespread euphemism. The West of course did not intervene immediately. Before having to "adoptar medidas", there were "intentos

de llegar a un compromiso”, “consultas con los aliados / países amigos” (adopting measures / taking steps., attempts to reach a compromise, consultations with their allies / friendly nations). They used Israel to harass Egypt and Jordan. But of course, according to Israel, these were only “represalias” for previous “agresiones”, or merely “incidentes fronterizos” (reprisals, aggressions, border incidents). They used their diplomatic muscle to look for “apoyo”, “solidaridad europea” etc. and preferred to use “presión económica” or “sanciones económicas” (support, European solidarity, economic pressure, economic sanctions).

3. CONCLUSION

All the misleading terminology we have seen used in the Spanish press of 1956 is a direct translation of its English equivalent, whether or not the ultimate root of the words is Latin. Some of these terms only exist in Spanish as a result of the English equivalent, or are reinforced by them. In 1956 the balance of power in the world was not so overwhelmingly in favour of the West as it is at the moment, and certainly the Spanish press maintained a far more critical line than that displayed nowadays. In the 1990's the same or similar terminology is used, euphemisms which cover up the crude and cruel reality of the situation. At least in 1956 they were more honest in one way: they had “Ministros de Guerra” instead of “Ministros de Defensa”!

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All other words and expressions between speech marks are taken from “La Voz de Galicia” between July and September of 1956.