Language, Ideology and Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT: The system of signs that we use every day and that we call language is what defines our existence and our ability to think about this very existence (Bignell, 2002, p. 07). This idea simply means that though reality exists, independently from human beings, it (reality) and the human awareness of it are shaped by language. This also means that regardless of what reality is, humans can only see what their linguistic system allows them to see. Consequently, the total power that language has over the human consciousness can be used either positively to achieve a better understanding of reality, or negatively to achieve mutilated awareness that may facilitate its use by politicians to shape public opinion. In this sense, "Aristotle makes a connection between man's political nature and the power of speech" as he "characterizes speech as 'serving to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust'" (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 19). Hence, for Aristotle, the human ability to use language is related to his being a political creature that is capable of shaping reality using political discourse.

KEYWORDS: Language, Ideology, Politics, Political discourse

I.   INTRODUCTION

The system of signs that we use every day and that we call language is what defines our existence and our ability to think about this very existence (Bignell, 2002, p. 07). This idea simply means that though reality exists, independently from human beings, it (reality) and the human awareness of it are shaped by language. This also means that regardless of what reality is, humans can only see what their linguistic system allows them to see. Consequently, the total power that language has over the human consciousness can be used either positively to achieve a better understanding of reality, or negatively to achieve mutilated awareness that may facilitate its use by politicians to shape public opinion. In this sense, "Aristotle makes a connection between man's political nature and the power of speech" as he "characterizes speech as 'serving to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust'" (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 19). Hence, for Aristotle, the human ability to use language is related to his being a political creature that is capable of shaping reality using political discourse.

II.   LANGUAGE

One of the main questions that has boiled debates in the field of linguistics and in the field of philosophy is 'what are the origins of language?' These debates have gone mainly into two directions; namely, whether "it was a gift from a divine source or a unique accomplishment of the human mind" (Danesi, 2004, p. 94). However, such explorations have usually led to dead ends, and no evidence could be brought to defend any of the two hypotheses. A gift from a divine force would normally be the same everywhere, and it is obviously hard to imagine people sitting around for the first time deciding to create language. Therefore, this controversy did not remain at the center of the two fields, and its "intractability has sometimes led to its prohibition by linguistic societies as a topic for discussion" (Cobley, 2001, p. 10); specifically, by "the Paris Linguistics Society in 1866" (Chilton P. , 2004, p. 16).

The relationship between language and thought may be the second philosophical inquiry in the field of linguistics. The main problem here has been whether we think then acquire language or we think only through language. This has become a really perplexing issue, as thinking logically about it leads to dilemmas like, how can we think before learning a language, if our thinking depends on language in the first place; but then, how can we speak a language before we acquire the ability to think? Unlike the discussion of the origins of language, this discussion has led to some reasonable assumptions; namely, by Edward Schiappa (2003) who claims that language is not the only way through which we think (Schiappa, 2003, p. 15). To support this claim, he argues that "at a remarkably early age, infants are able to distinguish the facial expression of "happy" from "surprise" (…) a specific female face from female faces in general" (p. 15). In this sense, infants can recognize their mothers at an age in which they do not show any linguistic skills. In addition, he asserts that in a

multidimensional experience, like riding a rollercoaster, language can never suffice to describe all the thoughts and feelings that occur simultaneously, which leads to the conclusion that thinking can be broader than language (Schiappa, 2003, pp. 16-17).

Despite the fact that the way brains understand meaning is not always dependent on language, "the fundamental goal of language is to convey meaning" (Miles, 2004, p. 01). From such a perspective, language exists only to respond to one human need, which is "the necessity of intercourse with other men" (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 49). In addition to its primary role, many scholars believe that language serves other purposes besides communication (Chilton P. , 2004, p. 25; Deely, 1990, p. 56). In this sense, language can be used in language games that do not really communicate anything or in many forms of creative writing in which communicating ideas is not the main goal. In brief, language is seen as an organized system that serves many purposes, but that primarily helps human beings communicate.

On the other hand, Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) concisely argues that language is "a system of signs that express ideas" (p. 16). This system of signs is normally based on the binary relationship between the "signifier" and the "signified", in which "something (a signifier) stands in for something which it represents (a signified)" (Bignell, 2002, p. 75). This direct relationship between words and their meanings is not as simple as it appears, as it has been at the center of another heated debate about the way a specific signifier is chosen for any specific signified. As the debate has been whether this relationship is arbitrary - just occurs in time - or conventional - affected by social conventions, De Saussure opted for a middle ground in which he saw language as "a product of both the social force and time" (De Saussure, 1959, p. 76).

Despite the fact that "there is no consensus on what language actually is", most linguists agree about some of its common characteristics (Cobley, 2001, p. 05). On one hand, language does not reflect reality as it is. Elizabeth H. Jones (2007), for instance, argues that:

> "Language is no longer seen as a transparent medium through which the world can be represented unproblematically. On the contrary, language is now commonly recognized to be utterly problematic, capable of weaving unintentional meanings and subconscious references into any statement" (p. 61).

This argument means that though reality is a fixed and stable entity, the human conception of it depends on the perspective and context from which he approaches it. In other words, what is real for someone is not necessarily real for everyone else. Hence, when humans use language to express that reality, their language reflects their own version of reality and not reality as it is.

The fact that language changes according to discourse patterns and that many types of language exist means that language is affected by context; namely, social context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 129; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 12). The root of this connection between language and society is simply that language cannot exist beyond society, because language itself "is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity (…) it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community" (De Saussure, 1959, p. 14). As language exists only in social contexts, "socially oriented theories of language" argue that "the variation of language" is related to "the variation of social context" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 13). In this sense, to correspond the ethnic and cultural specificities of each social group, both the terminology and the grammatical systems of the corresponding language endure substantial changes (Oswell, 2006, p. 21; Wodak, 2001, p. 08).

This instability of language and the fact that it shapes societies' views of the world as much as those views change it make language a great source of power, especially in political terms. In this vein of thought, Paul Chilton and Christina Schäffner (2002) believe that "language is functionally structured, either wholly or partly, to fulfill sociopolitical goals" (p. 24). To fulfill these goals, language has the ability "'(a) to produce reality, (b) to cancel reality, and (c) to turn reality inside out'" (Chilton, Ilyin, & Mey, 1998, p. 260). In short, to gain power or to resist power in the fields of politics, political actors rely on language's power to change the public's perception of reality.

III.   IDEOLOGY

A euphemism for the existence of 'different perceptions of reality' is the existence of 'different ideologies', while a dysphemism for ideology can be that it is the opposite of reality. Similar to language, a fixed definition of ideology can be hard to reach; yet, in broader terms, it can be argued that:

> "Ideologies are basic frameworks of social cognition, shared by members of social groups, constituted by relevant selections of sociocultural values, and organized by an ideological schema that represents the self-definition of a group. Besides their social function of sustaining the interests of groups, ideologies have the cognitive function of organizing the social representations (attitudes, knowledge) of the group, and thus indirectly monitor the group-related social practices, and hence also the text and talk of members" (Van Dijk, 1995, p. 248).

According to Teun A. van Dijk, ideologies are the basic lenses through which individuals see themselves as members of a social group and through which the group defines itself. Moreover, Van Dijk

believes that the selection of ideologies is based on the groups' shared cultural values and is used basically to sustain those values. Hence, ideologies can be defined as the rules of practices, discourses, and thought systems that stem from the local socio-cultural values, and that aim at maintaining societal norms.

The idea that ideology reflects the socio-cultural values of a given society seems reasonable in its broader sense, yet a closer look might trigger questions about who has enough authority to decide those cultural values, and who benefits the most from their preservation. Louis Althusser, for instance, believes that "all aspects of the social are controlled by ideology, which functions through 'the repressive state apparatus' (e.g. the police) and 'the ideological state apparatus' (e.g. the mass media)" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 15). Therefore, for Althusser, the state imposes ideologies that serve its interests and it does so either directly, by relying on its coercive apparatus to intimidate dissenters, or indirectly through its mass media outlets to gain supporters.

A similar idea can be found in historical materialism, which argues that the base structure, which is the economic system, is what decides the superstructure, which is the ideology of the given society. In other words, Karl Marx divides the capitalist society into an upper class that exploits and a lower class that is exploited; and for him, it only makes sense that those who benefit will do everything to maintain the *status quo*. Therefore, the bourgeoisie mobilizes its ideological resources to spread a 'false consciousness' among the proletariat, preventing it from seeing reality as it is (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 444; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 31).

This determinism of historical materialism was debunked for contradicting its own assumptions. The inconsistency was in the impossibility of change or revolution against a social organization where the economic factor decides the winners, the losers, and the ideology of the two. In other words, in such a society, it was impossible for the proletariat to be aware of its exploitation, or to revolt, as long as the same economic structure that brought the previous superstructure persisted (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 32). As a way out of this dilemma, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci introduced the cultural and ideological factors as decisive elements in shaping and changing ideologies. To support this idea, Gramsci argues that:

> "Political subjects are not - strictly speaking - classes, but complex 'collective wills'", that are equally affected by the dominant culture and that can only revolt through "a "cultural-social" unity (…) with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 67).

Therefore, the main argument of Gramsci is that as long as society accepts the status quo because of the spread of a strong hegemonic discourse, the only solution is a unified counter-discourse that changes the dominant as well as the dominated ideologies.

Besides these views of ideologies as broad tools of manipulation, the current understanding of the term has become narrower, as it refers to specific ideologies within the same social structure. These ideologies are usually divided along the principle of mere difference in which almost everyone is classified as either belonging to one ideology or the other, whether it is a belief, religion, or even a sentiment of hatred and love. In this sense we can have "'ideologies of hate' such as racism, or 'ideologies of love' such as some religions" and we can have "feminism, environmentalism and liberalism" (Van Dijk, 1998, pp. 21-67).

Andrew Mason (1993) argues that the current political disagreement is usually rooted in this multiplicity of ideologies. His justification is that, even at the level of communication, "a political term used by a person who accepts one political ideology has a meaning partially different to the meaning of that same term used by someone who accepts a different ideology" (Mason, 1993, p. 92). Therefore, contemporarily, instead of clearly distinguishing ideologies that either preserve power or resist it, society has become divided along micro-ideologies that base their differences merely on difference.

Overall, ideologies in the broader and narrower terms are distinctive ways in which people perceive the world. In broader terms, they are used by the most powerful to control the least powerful, and they can only be resisted via collective counter ideologies. In the narrow uses of ideologies as tags of difference, the only path towards resistance can be, again, the adoption of unifying perceptions of the world.

IV.   POLITICS

The first step towards an appropriate definition of political discourse is the definition of the word politics itself. According to the "*Dictionary of Politics and Government*", politics is "the theory and practice of governing a country's local politics or national politics" and "the practice of governing a local area, or of governing a country" (Collin, 2004, p. 183). This definition resonates with the general view of politics as the process of theorization about or involvement with the organized government of the interests of a group of people who share a common territorial belonging. Therefore, whether it is a tribe, a city, a state, a country, or even the agglomeration of many countries, politics is the government of the affairs of these territorial entities and the people who inhabit them.

Another definition that relates politics to the government of certain territorial entities can be found in "*A Glossary of Political Theory*". In this glossary, John Hoffman (2007) argues that politics is mainly about "the resolution of conflict" (p. 143). In fact, Hoffman tries to differentiate states from politics by claiming that states

can resort either to armed conflicts or to peaceful solutions, while politics never involves the use of force. Therefore, for him, politics "must involve compromise, negotiation and arbitration" while the use of force means the end of politics (Hoffman, 2007, p. 144).

Not everyone shares a clear definition of politics or a clear understanding of where it starts and ends. For Paul Chilton and Christina Schäffner (2002), it is hard to attribute politics to certain activities at the expense of others, and the definition of the term can only be a political one that "varies according to one's situation and purposes" (p. 04). In broad terms, politics can be seen as "a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it"; while at a micro-level, it can be seen "as the practices and institutions a society has for resolving clashes of interest" (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002, p. 05). Consequently, politics is either the struggle for power itself, or the tools and practices that are involved in that struggle and that can range from state institutions to the act of producing political discourse.

V.   POLITICAL DISCOURSE

As the word politics is too broad to be contained by a single definition, political discourse cannot be expected to be less problematic. The perplexing aspect of the definition of political discourse can be primarily related to the lack of a definite delimitation of political actors themselves. According to Teun A. van Dijk (1997), it is not accurate to limit political actors to "the group of people who are being paid for their (political) activities, and who are being elected or appointed (or self-designated) as the central players in the polity" (p. 13). The logic behind his argument is that they are not the only people who affect and are affected by what happens in the political arena. Therefore, the "political activity and the political process also involve people as citizens and voters, people as members of pressure and issue groups, demonstrators and dissidents, and so on" (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 13).

The problematic side of this assumption is in the fact that though political activity includes all these actors, the assumption that all their discourses are political is not accurate. In other words, though most citizens and all government officials might be considered political actors, they are not always talking about political issues, and their discourse cannot always be referred to as a political discourse. Hence, they can be considered "participants of political discourse only when acting as political actors" (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 14). In brief, political discourse can be defined as any discourse that is uttered by political actors while they perform a political activity.

For the national or international elites to secure their positions and possessions, they need the cultural elites to forge ideologies, symbols and notions in which the public should believe so that the elites' interests can remain safe. In this sense, Harold Lasswell (1935) gave the example of the notion of "nationalism" that was coined by the French "orators, journalists, poets, novelists, essayists, and systematists" to secure the interests of the bourgeoisie and as "a means of nullifying proletarian challenges from within" (pp. 48-49). In brief, Lasswell believes that, besides coercion and intimidation, the strength of autocracies and democracies lies in their ability to misinform the publics and to coin or use terms that form ideologies, which serves their interests. In this sense, politicians do not only use language to inform or misinform the public, to reshape existing beliefs and ideologies, they also use it to create new ideologies, new labels and new affiliations. They use it create new realities, to highlight specific aspects of reality, and to hide other aspects that do not serve their interests. Hence, political discourse relies on the fact that language is the medium through which people see the world, and perceive reality, to form ideologies that create further restraints on the public's future political actions and reactions.

VI.   CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is safe to assume that language is what shapes ideologies, and that political discourse is the good use of language by political actors who aim at shaping ideologies to serve their strive for power. Human beings who mainly make sense of the world through language are barely independent in choosing the ideologies in which they are born. Moreover, as language is a collective system that exists beyond individuals, and as their use of language is what determines their initial views of the world, the elaborate use of political discourse may be misleading enough to make the public aim for goals that actually serve their oppressors. However, these formed ideologies, that are controlled by the mainstream discourse, can remain stable only if the public is exposed only to discourses that confirm it. Individuals who are exposed to counter discourses or at least to conflicting discourses more often, are more capable of altering some, or most, of their societies' ideological conventions. Consequently, those who benefit from a given situation should opt for the spread of discourses that maintain it and fight discourses that contradict it. On the other hand, those who do not benefit from that situation should seek the spread of a contradicting discourse.

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