



Language, Power, Politics and Conflict: Issues Pertaining to Language and Identity

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ABSTRACT

Language exercises a power in the very way that it operates. Words are imbued with a strength that has the potential to carry histories and subsequently create futures. Reality is essentially constituted in the symbolic interpretation of this language. This paper endeavours to discuss this feature of language paying close attention to its facets which serve to influence the creation and circulation of reality that is fundamentally biased. It examines the creation of binaries in this system of discourse which is the primary means through which it demarcates reality and constructs identities. The paper, also, further, looks into the different dimensions of power exercised by language, and scrutinizes the multiple voices housed in a text.

“I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word.”

Emily Dickenson

Language, perhaps, serves as the most important faculty for one's communication with the world. The power of language can be discerned by considering that a combination of words has the ability of transforming thoughts and producing great emotions, creating immense power for those who deploy them, be it politicians or advertisers of any sort. Language enables one to express feelings and is the means which informs ideas of the outside world. It has been argued by Susanne Langer that human beings through their ability of signification, for the purpose of systematisation and management, differentiate themselves from other species and produce “symbols” (Nahrkhalaji, 2011). The use and misuse of these symbols is what constructs our ideas of language and truth.

Linguistic power operates in two ways which are mutually independent: “pragmatic power” (Kadt, 1991) which comprises of power language holds as a means of communication. “For a language to attain significant

pragmatic power, its speakers will have to have significant political and economic power so that their language will be used for public purposes” (Kadt, 1991, p. 5). The other is the symbolic power which elucidates the regard which is attributed to a language and is largely based on the symbolic interpretation of the language. For example, fluency in English is many times seen as indicative of a good education and higher social status. The privileging of one language over another is symptomatic of acceptance of a particular understanding of the world.

Language plays a major role in creating and affecting our understanding, emotions and discernments. It is what constitutes our reality, for it constructs that reality for us. This constitutes a third aspect of the power of language, namely “signitive power” (Kadt, 1991). It determines our process of choice-making, by labelling certain options as reasonable and others as nonsensical, and in this way is continuously engaged in the creation of binaries. These binaries which are characterised by an opposition, create hierarchy, demarcating certain notions as constituting a lack or generally as negative, and its opposite, the preferred idea as complete in itself,

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positive and unchallenged; for example, good/bad, male/female, white/black, reason/passion, presence/absence, etcetera.

Language, operates through a discourse, which contributes to the construction of an ideology, Ideology determines social and cultural representations and truths, and in this manner “helps naturalize economic inequality and oppression” (Nayar, 2010). Consequently, language which comprises the text which is at the micro-level, through interpretation and discursive practices, determines power relations at the macro-level. It is, in this way, that language exercises power. It has been argued by many critics that the power exercised by language comprises of three different dimensions: the first being in discourse. This refers to the tussle over meanings and understanding of discourses and includes preference of linguistic symbols, codes of interaction, etcetera. It basically includes subjects in power controlling the meaning making contributions of non-powerful subjects. The second dimension of power exercised by language is over discourse, by determining the access of subjects to public. Finally, the third dimension of power of discourse manipulates the rules of the language and historically matured meaning amidst which subjects are placed. However, it becomes imperative to emphasise here that these relations of power are hidden and operate without making themselves conspicuous.

This power is always possessed by that fraction of the population which belongs to the upper class and upper caste. Gayatri Spivak (1988) in her famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” argues that the subaltern which lies at the boundaries of the culture is not given a voice and is hence spoken for, thus, shoving them further into silence. She contends that their speech “is understood and interpreted within structures that will only afford particular meanings” (Nayar, 172). Their lived experiences are, therefore, negated and their identity is formed by this negation. This can be further understood by Elizabeth de Kadt’s claim that it is “specific languages located in specific societal contexts which exercise power...which is largely function of the particular roles these languages fulfil in ‘their’ society” (1991, p. 4). Language, thus, has a dialectic relationship with ideology, being shaped by it, and also shaping it.

Having established the power of language on the social conditions and representations, it can further be stated that language also plays an important role in the construction of identities, for identities are related to meanings and meanings are always produced in context. It employs inclusionary and exclusionary means for the same, meaning that the definition of oneself always takes place by the definition of the other, for any construction of an identity presupposes similarities and differences.

Raymond Williams looked at language and literature as reflecting social reality. Pierre Macherey (2012) in *A Theory of Literary Production* develops this further by negating the existence of ‘Literature’ and validating a history of the text as

separate from the text’s function of representing social reality. He further insists on all texts as being incomplete because they contain ‘silences’ in some way. “Thus, an industrial novel that highlights the industrial nature of capitalism might not, however, highlight the gendered angle” (Nayar, 2010).

Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) regards language as the site for contestation of multiple voices and for violation of authority. He develops this idea in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* stating that a literary work functions as a site “for dialogic interaction of multiple voices, or modes of discourse, each of which is not only a verbal but a social phenomena” (Abrams, 2012). He further states that a person’s character emerges through the dialogue which includes languages from different societal contexts. His idea of the ‘carnavalesque’ in *Rabelais and His World* (1968) explores the temporary inversion of authority and hierarchies and serves to demonstrate how language can be subversive.

A discussion on the politics of language cannot be complete without an examination of the gender facets of the same. Virginia Woolf famously talked about language as being gendered, patriarchal and sexist. It is a language that caters to the male and has no place for the female experience. Whatever is promoted as ‘truth’ in language is all a construction by the male. Further, building on the power and politics of language, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) argue in their work *The Madwoman in the Attic* that “all women’s texts are palimpsests” (Nayar, 2010) that “mark secret subtexts of desire, politics and meanings” (Nayar, 96). These texts have a surface meaning conforming with the ideology of the time, but on closer analysis reveal to be subversive.

Marking a breakthrough in the 1970s and 1980s, Robin Lakoff and Dale Spender looked at woman’s language as “deferential, passive and apologetic” characterised by indirectness, while man’s as “aggressive, imperative and declarative” (2010). Language, therefore, became an important marker of the hierarchy operating between the two sexes in the social context. Feminists like Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray developed a women’s language known as the ‘Ecriture Feminine’ which in being fluid and not linear, focussed on disrupting the pre-established notions of form, organisation and narrative. It employed sexualised imagery and was also partly autobiographical. The development of this form of language indicated a major denial of the social hierarchy operating between the sexes and can be seen as an act of appropriation of discourse.

Words are, therefore, never neutral for they carry an implicit reference and have histories. The act of naming, because of this reason, comprises of political and social consequences. The words of the powerful are sanctioned as “self-evident truths” (Nahrkhalaji, 1991) and the words of the powerless are rejected as immaterial. In the words of Elizabeth de Kadet, “language empowers and disempowers; and any talk of a ‘better society’, any hope for emancipation, requires as a precondition informed knowledge about the mutual

dependency of language and power” (1991).

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